



You Can Leave Your Hat On (Dressed to Kill #3)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Another vision. Another crime. And the millions behind it.

Reluctant and (unfortunately) well-known psychic Maisey Friedman is in dire need of a break—a little rest and relaxation. Going on a girls trips for the weekend will help her decompress and forget all the turmoil shes been embroiled in. After all, fancy dresses, Derby hats, and mint juleps with her friends can cure the blues.

But when she mistakenly places the wrong flowy hat on her head, Maisey regrets all of her weekend frivolity. Seeing a middle school teacher being thrown from a bridge to her death catapults Maisey and her husband, Aaron, into yet another murder investigation. This time, the key players just might be a little too powerful for Maisey and Aaron. A well-connected and corrupt murderer is one enemy the Friedmans dont want to tangle with. Can they find justice for the innocent teacher before time runs out?

Total Pages (Source): 6

CHAPTER ONE

“N o comment.” Maisey hung up the phone once again and sighed. “They just won’t stop.”

“At least it’s over. They’ll forget soon enough,” Aaron assured her.

“Doesn’t feel like it. Feels like it’s going to go on and on and on.”

He rose from the sofa, walked around behind it to massage her neck and shoulders, and Maisey sighed with relief. “No. They’ll forget. You did something good. If you’d done something bad, they’d never let you forget.”

“That much is true.”

“Want something to drink?” he asked as he walked away.

“Yeah. I’ll take one of those cooler things with vodka in it.”

“What flavor?”

“Berry.”

“Comin’ right up.” A minute later, he was back with an open bottle, which he handed to her. His other was occupied with a beer. “Here ya go. Drink up.”

“Thanks, babe.”

The house was quiet, and Maisey was relieved. Murielle was down for the night, the washer and dryer were humming along, and she could hear the water swishing in the dishwasher. They sat there for about ten minutes, neither speaking, until Aaron asked, “So, Derby week is coming up. You got any plans with the girls?”

“Yeah, actually, we do. There’s a Derby tea that Carly really wants to go to, and we thought it would be fun. You know, dresses, heels, hats, the whole thing.”

“Where is it?”

“It’s actually at the Greenbrier Club in Louisville.”

“Ooooo, fancy! Staying the night and all of that?”

“Yeah. Ross will have the weekend off, you’ll have Murielle, and Shaw can take care of the girls. If you or Ross need help, Candace and Maya are plenty old enough to pitch in. We’ll drive up the night before, stay at the hotel, have their continental breakfast, pack up, go to the tea, and be back that evening.”

“Sounds like a plan, and something that you three need to do to get away. Cherilyn’s got her hands full, and so does Carly, between work and the baby. And you’re juggling home and a child and work and...” He stopped for a second, then turned sideways on the sofa to look at her. “We haven’t talked about it in a while, but where do we stand on having a baby?”

Maisey shrugged. “I’m good with it. Just waiting for you to tell me when.”

“When. When already. I’m good with it too.”

“Okay. I’ll stop taking my pills as soon as I finish this round, and we’ll do the waiting and condoms until it’s time.”

“Sounds good to me.” Aaron reached for her hand and gripped it in his. “I love Murielle, but having a baby with you... I love you, Maisey. I hope I show you that with everything I say and do.”

“You do. I love you too. We have such a great life here, and I can only imagine how much better it’ll be with a baby of our own. I love Murielle too, but I’ll always be her ‘new’ mommy. Not that I want her to forget Bailey,” she was quick to add, “but to have one who calls me Mommy from the start? That will be awesome.”

“Okay. So I guess you need to get a checkup before all of that takes place, huh?”

“I just had one two months ago, and Dr.Powers said I’m fine.”

“Good. Wanna get in some quality practice?” Aaron asked, wagging his eyebrows up and down.

“Sure! Let’s go!”

An hour later, Aaron dropped to the mattress beside her and threw his arm across his eyes. “Lawd, girl, you wear me out in the best way possible.”

“Yeah? Same here, stud.” Maisey curled into his side and, as always, his arm wrapped around her. She loved lying there with him after they’d made love, listening to his even breathing and taking in the scent of his cologne. No matter what happened, she always felt safe in Aaron’s arms.

When the sun came up, Maisey was awake before the alarm went off, thinking about everything that would go on that day. In a couple of hours, everybody was up, dressed, and out the door, and Maisey sang along with the stereo in the car as she drove toward the office. She was almost there when her phone rang and she answered the familiar ringtone with, “Hey! Good morning!”

Her friend's chipper voice sang back, "Same to you! You headed to work?"

"Yep. You hard at it?"

"Oh, yeah. Got Maya and Candace off to school and I just dropped Lara off at her school." Lara attended a special needs school near Williamsburg, and Cherilyn dropped her off there every morning and picked her up every afternoon. "So I was wondering... Wanna go dress shopping tomorrow evening?"

"Yes! That'll be so much fun! I've got to get something new."

"Do you want to start at the Thrifty Wench or?"

"Absolutely not !" Maisey shouted. "No more used clothes for me! Nope! All new from now on!"

"Okay, okay!" Cherilyn answered, laughing. "I get it!"

"You're evil, you know that?" Maisey pretend-snarled.

"So I've been told! Okay, I'll call Carly and we can make an evening of it."

"Great! Looking forward to it. Thanks, hon. Shoot me the deets later."

"Will do. Have a great day. Bye."

"Bye." Maisey smiled. An evening of shopping! How great would that be?

Pretty damn great.

"Ohhhh, that one is sooooo you!" Carly singsonged when Maisey came out of the

dressing room.

“You think so?” She twirled in front of the full-length mirror in the ladies’ department, and the skirt of the white dress with red polka dots spun and billowed.

“Absolutely,” Cherilyn said with a nod. “It looks beautiful on you.”

“I like yours,” Maisey said and pointed to the garment bag Carly had hung up nearby.

“I love blue. I think it’s probably my best color. What about you, Cher?”

Cherilyn was prowling through racks. “I’m just not finding anything I really like.”

“Oh, come on. That red one you picked out was classy.”

“Yeah, but I don’t think it fit right. I need boobs,” Cherilyn muttered.

“You have boobs,” Carly pointed out.

Cherilyn sighed. “Okay, I need more boobs.”

“No. Trust me, you don’t. I have more boobs, and I’d like to give some away,” Carly groused.

“I’m with you. You can have some of mine,” Maisey offered.

“Wish that worked, but it doesn’t.” Cherilyn prowled through the racks. “I need...”

“You need this one!” Carly chirped and held up a dress.

Cherilyn’s eyebrows shot up. “The bodice is a corset!”

“Yeah, it’s a bustier bodice! You wanted more boobs, you got ’em!” Maisie added and pointed at the dress.

“Oh, lord. That would probably be a mistake,” Cheryl said and rolled her eyes. “I’d never get out of the house. Shaw would corner me and carry me off to the bedroom.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Carly whispered.

“No. It’s just that we spend so much time in there now since we decided to…” And Cheryl stopped.

Two pairs of eyes swiveled toward her. “Since you decided to what?” Maisie whispered.

She leaned in as though she was about to divulge the combination for the bank’s vault. “Since we decided to try to get pregnant.”

“Us too!” Maisie almost screamed. “Oh my god! That’s amazing! How great would that be? Us having kids at the same time? It would be amazing!”

“Yeah, and it’s not like Belle would be that much older by the time they were born. They’d all be instant friends,” Carly pointed out.

“Yes! Oh my god!” Cheryl stared at the dress. “Maybe I should buy that.”

“Oh, now I definitely think you should,” Carly said and thrust it toward her. “Go try it on.”

“Okay.” They watched as the slight blond disappeared into the dressing room.

“Compared to her, I look like a Teletubby,” Carly murmured.

“No you don’t! You’re beautiful! Compared to her, I look like one of Snow White’s dwarfs.”

“No you don’t, Maisey. You’re gorgeous. And that dress... Wonder if you can find some shoes to match the belt?” Carly reached out and stroked a finger over the wide red patent leather. “Red patent shoes and a big red hat!”

“A fascinator,” Maisey said.

“No. An actual hat. Wide brim. Oh, god, you’ll look like a forties glamour girl! Maybe with some white flowers and a white hat band and?”

“No. None of that mess. Just a plain red hat band. That’s all. And a red patent leather purse.”

“Small bag. With a brass snap top,” Carly said, still looking at the dress.

“And red heels. Pumps. Not stilettos.”

“Why not stilettos?”

“Because I want to have fun, not die from falling off of my shoes,” Maisey insisted.

“Okay. But I’m wearing stilettos,” Carly informed her.

Maisey grinned. “Great. Nobody will see us for ogling that ass of yours. They’ll all be watching you swish past.”

“Doesn’t matter. I spend my weeks in black leather oxfords with my uniform. I wanna look like a woman.”

“Oh, you’ll look like a woman. We’ll have to carry fire extinguishers for any men and lesbians we see. They’ll spontaneously combust when they take a look at you in that dress, woman. Up in flames in zero point six seconds.”

Carly laughed. “You’re so funny.”

“I’m not being funny. You’re hot.”

“Well? Whaddya think?”

Maisey and Carly turned to find the voice and gasped. The dress Cherilyn was wearing did everything right, and she had beautiful cleavage to boot. “Wow. Somebody needs to get a hose. I’ll have to assign deputies to you to keep the guys off you,” Carly answered.

Maisey nodded. “That’s... You have to get it, Cher. It’s perfect.”

Cherilyn pivoted in the mirror and took in her image. “It does look great. I actually look like a woman and not some stick figure in an oversized sweatshirt and leggings.”

Carly patted her friend’s shoulder. “When you guys first met, you were emaciated, honey. You look healthy now. Your skin glows and your hair is shiny. Being with Shaw, being secure, has done wonders for you and you know it.”

“I do. He’s the best. I love him and he says he loves me, but I never expected to feel loved, and I do. It’s pretty amazing, really,” the slender woman said, her eyes misting over.

Maisey smoothed Cherilyn’s hair with a soft hand. “He adores you, Cher. Just like Ross adores Carly. His face lights up every time she walks into the room,” Maisey said with a soft smile.

“Nothing like the way Aaron looks at you. Anybody who watches him looking at you knows you’re his whole world,” Carly pointed out.

Maisey shook her head. “Not true. Murielle’s in there too.”

“Yeah, and that’s natural. But he worships the ground you walk on, Maise. He’d do anything for you,” Cherilyn announced.

Maisey’s heart was full, listening to her friends talk about the way Aaron loved her. And he did. There was never a moment when she doubted it. Even when he was angry or irritated with her, he was still clear that he was looking out for her and keeping her best interest in mind. She’d never had that before.

And it felt wonderful.

“Well? Did you get something nice?”

“I’m going to slip it on and let you tell me.” Maisey headed for the bedroom with the dress. She wondered what his reaction would be when she stepped out.

It only took a minute to find out. “Holy shit. What kind of return policy do they have for damaged items? Because I think I’m gonna rip that thing to shreds getting it off you.” Aaron’s face was lit up like the Fourth of July.

“Like it?”

“Like it? Honey, you have no idea how sexy that dress is on you. Crazy sexy. Amazingly sexy. Even barefoot.”

“Oh, I’m getting shoes to match this belt. And a bag, and a hat.”

“Yeah? What kind of hat?”

“Carly and Cherilyn said they think it should be a wide-brimmed one. I dunno. I’m going looking tomorrow between appointments.”

Aaron smiled and reached for her. The heat from his hands through the dress as they wrapped around her waist made her want to melt into him. “You’ll find something perfect. You’re a beautiful woman, Maisey, and every time I look at you, I can’t believe you’re mine.”

“Oh, I’m yours all right. I don’t have the energy to train another one,” she said and laughed as she ruffled his hair playfully.

“Hey, now! I was already pretty much trained when you got me. Have you ever had to squeal in the night because I left the toilet seat up?”

“Well, not that?”

“No. You have not. I put the toilet seat down. I wash my hands. I take out the trash without having to be asked. I grab the mail as I come in every afternoon. I unload the dishwasher. You have to admit, I’m not a bad catch,” he said with a chuckle.

“No. You’re not. I got lucky when I found you.”

“As I recall, I found you ,” he pointed out.

“Okay. I’ll give ya that one.” Maisey had already rested her forearms on his shoulders, and she threaded her fingers together behind his neck. “I love my life here with you and Murielle.”

“I love my life here with you and Murielle too. And hopefully a little Maisey or

Aaron. Wouldn't that be great? A little girl with your beautiful eyes?" Aaron kissed the tip of her nose and smiled.

"Or a little boy with your dazzling smile," she breathed out and leaned in to find his lips.

The kiss he gave her did more than turn her on. It brought her a level of joy she'd never known before, and she wanted to keep that forever. Even when they were old and tired, she wanted to be right beside him, holding his hand and looking into his eyes, even if they were dim and weary. Being there with him was everything. Nothing else mattered when they were together.

Nothing.

"Do you have any idea how long it's been since I've sat in a hotel bar?" Carly asked.

"I've never sat in a hotel bar," Cherilyn clarified.

"It's been a long, long time for me," Maisey threw in. "I never liked them."

"Yeah, but we're here, no husbands, no kids, just relaxing and taking it easy. Okay, I've got my bag. You guys got yours?" Maisey and Cherilyn nodded. "Then here we go." Carly held out the little box, and the other two women drew numbers out. "Oh, shit. I got my own. Put them back in," Carly said, then shook the box. "Okay. Try again." Maisey and Cherilyn pulled a scrap of paper apiece from the box, and Carly took the last one. "Not this time. Anybody else got their own?"

"Nope," Cherilyn answered.

"Good. Who's got one?" Carly asked.

Maisey held up her hand. “I do.”

“Here’s yours.” Carly handed her a bag with sparkles all over it.

“Then you must have two,” Cherilyn said and handed Carly the bag she’d brought in.

“And you’re three,” Maisey said and handed Cherilyn the bag she’d toted in with her.

Carly grinned. “Dig in, everybody!” They’d had a dollar value, and all three of them knew they’d gone way over it, but nobody cared. “Oh my god! Look at this!” From deep in the bag Carly took out a cut crystal jar of bath salts and a candle in the same kind of container. “Night blooming jasmine! Ooooo! Wait, there’s something else...” She pulled out a flat cellophane-wrapped card. “A mask! Avocado and lemon! It’ll feel soooo good! Whatcha got in yours, Maise?”

Maisey dug around in the tissue paper and pulled out a bottle. “Oh! Champagne bubble bath!” There was a small, flat box covered in gold foil next. “What is... Oh, god, truffles! I love truffles! And I never buy them for myself. And there’s a tiny little bottle of Prosecco! I’m gonna feel like a queen!” Maisey cooed. “Open yours, Cher!”

Maisey watched as Cherilyn prowled around in her bag. “Oh my god. Skin Drenchers! I’ve heard of this stuff!”

“Yeah, you rub it all over you and then get into a hot tub. It feels so good when you get out,” Maisey said. “I do it once a week and it’s fabulous. And I love the pomegranate scent.”

“And what else is... Masks for my face, hands, and feet! Cucumber and mint! And what is this... Oh my god, a satin kimono!”

“It’s just a generic one-size-fits-all, but I thought it would be fun and luxurious,”

Maisey explained. She always thought she gave the worst gifts on the planet.

“Oh, god, I’m going to feel like a princess. Thank you, Maise!”

“You’re welcome. Yeah, thank you, Carly,” Maisey said.

“You’re welcome. And thank you, Cherilyn,” Carly said with a smile.

“You’re very welcome. Thank you both for including me in everything. I never really had girlfriends before. This is fun!”

“We’re the Three Amigas from now on, sisters,” Carly said and patted their hands.

Maisey frowned. “Don’t you wish your sister was here?”

“Yeah, but she’s not. She’s still got Mom and her friends back there. I was pretty much alone here until you guys came along, except for Ross’s mom and some of his cousins. And some of the deputies. But I think their wives would’ve had a problem with them having a girls’ night out with me.” Carly smiled. “I love you both and I love spending time with you.”

“Same for me,” Cherilyn added.

Maisey nodded. “Me too. And now, I’m going to finish my drink, go soak in my champagne bubble bath, drink my Prosecco, and eat my truffles.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Cherilyn said and lifted her glass. “To the Three Amigas. May we never get into more trouble than we can get out of.”

The three ladies clinked their glasses, downed their liquor, and headed to their rooms. They’d originally discussed getting a suite, but they decided they wanted their own

separate rooms. No husbands, no kids, and no sharing a room or a bed. It sounded like heaven.

Maisey soaked until her skin was shriveled and the water was getting cool, then got out, dried off, put on her pajamas, and threw out the empty truffle box and Prosecco bottle. She crawled into bed but once she was there, she picked up her phone and shot off a short message.

Having fun but I miss you. Love you.

She got one back almost immediately.

I miss you too. Love you, beautiful.

Maisey turned off the light by the bed and curled up under the covers. The next day would be so much fun.

But in that moment, she longed for Aaron's arms and their big bed. Nowhere was as comfortable as that.

They had bagels, a waffle maker, cereal of all kinds, and omelets made to order, so Maisey had them do a western omelet for her, and she carried it and a bagel back to her room. The little coffee maker on her countertop was more than adequate, and she drank her coffee and ate her food at her little table and chairs in the room while she watched the morning news. As soon as it was over, she showered, put on her makeup, and got dressed. They'd agreed to meet downstairs because Carly said she had a surprise for them, and she was ridiculously excited.

Cherilyn was already there when she stepped into the lobby, so Maisey sat down in one of the chairs there and they both waited.

There was no way of knowing who'd let out the long, low whistle, and they both turned toward the elevators. One look told them who the whistle was for. Carly swished and swayed toward them, her electric blue stilettos tapping the marble tiles, and her blue dress hugged every curve. Not only that, but her blond hair was a sweep of long curls, elegant and chic, and even for a straight female, it was hard not to gasp. Damn, she was gorgeous. "Good morning, ladies!" she singsonged as she stepped up to Cherilyn and Maisey.

"Holy hell, you're a head-turner!" Maisey whispered.

"Of course, there's gotta be a Neanderthal who whistles," Carly grouched.

Cherilyn snickered. "I think he was just wheezing out his last breath because you knocked him dead."

"You two are looking pretty drop-dead gorgeous yourselves." Carly plopped down in a chair by Maisey. "So I told you I have a surprise."

Cherilyn perked up. "Yeah?"

"Ever been to a horse farm?"

"No," Maisey whispered in excitement. She'd always wanted to see one and had never been able to.

"Well, I got us an invitation to a farm out on Midway Road. It's beautiful. Wanna go?"

"Of course! Lead the way!" Cherilyn cried out. Maisey was almost hyperventilating. A horse farm! Carly had no idea how special the idea was to Maisey. She was so excited that she could barely stand it.

They stepped out of Cherilyn's van and stood in the courtyard of the big house. To Maisey, it was more like a palace or a castle. The front door opened and a very ordinary-looking woman appeared in a pair of jeans, muck boots, and a tee. "Hi! You must be Carly and company! Any McEvers is a friend of mine. I'm LyraMcCutcheon." She extended a hand, which Carly took first.

"Thank you so much for letting us look around! When my mother-in-law said she knew your family, I couldn't believe it. I've always wanted to see one of these farms. This is my friend, Cherilyn," Carly said and swept a hand toward the blond, "and my friend Maisey," she said, indicating the smaller brunette. The women both shook hands with Lyra, and Maisey's face hurt from smiling.

"Come this way. So welcome to Angel Acres Farms! We've got somebody new for you to meet. Just got here yesterday." They followed Lyra toward a smaller barn near the house, and when they arrived, she slid one of the huge doors open and strolled down the concourse. Of course, smaller was relevant. The barn was enormous, but not nearly as huge as the others across the pastures. Lyra stopped at a stall door. "This is Winged Peace. She has a new little one. His name is Winged Fury."

From deep in the stall, a large mare appeared, and she stuck her head out the open half of the door and nickered. Lyra rubbed her nose. "Good girl. Where's your boy?" Maisey could hear a rustling sound, and in a few seconds, he appeared beside his mother, a little wary of the visitors.

"Oh my god, he's adorable," Maisey whispered.

"He is. And he's our farm's next great hope. Remember Pickle Thief, the horse that won the Derby and Belmont a few years ago?" All three women nodded. "Pickle is his daddy. We're hoping that with Peace's bloodlines thrown in, he'll be a winner."

"I bet he will!" Cherilyn said with a smile.

“So let’s go on down to one of the bigger barns. Glad to see you all have on decent shoes,” Lyra said, looking down at their athletic shoes.

“Yeah, thought we’d better change out of our heels to come here,” Maisey said with a grin.

“Good call. It’ll help that we’re going to take the cart.” The woman stopped at a large six-seater golf cart-type vehicle. “Climb on and watch your head.”

They bounced down the walkways toward the big barns, and Maisey was in heaven. The rolling green hills, the gentle breeze, and the trees rustling all spoke to her. It was so peaceful there that she couldn’t imagine any pain or strife ever touching that land, and yet she knew horses had died there, gotten hurt there, cattle and buffalo had probably grazed there, and even sheep might’ve called it home. They stopped in the concourse of an enormous barn. “We have fifteen horses in this barn.”

“How many do you have on the whole farm?” Carly asked.

“About a hundred. This is one of the biggest farms in the region. We have a lot of horses here. This is Asher’s Delight,” Lyra said as she walked up to a stall. “He loves having his face scratched, and I have treats for him.” As soon as the woman pulled the bag of treats from her pocket, Maisey held out her hand. She wanted to feed him and feel those velvety lips on her palm. The minute he took the treat, Maisey scratched his blaze and, to everyone’s surprise, he pressed his face into her shoulder. “He likes you,” Lyra said with a gentle smile.

“I like him too. He’s a good boy.”

“He is. He’s one of our old studs, and he’s very well-behaved. Looks like you made a new friend.”

“I hope so.” Maisey wanted to cry. She’d always dreamed of being that close to one of the big beasts, but she’d never known anyone who had a horse. She’d been a city kid, even though she lived in a small town, and she loved the idea of her kids being able to experience farm life.

After an hour and a half, they headed back to the house, then climbed back into the van to go to the tea. Maisey was on a cloud. It had been the best morning ever. The restaurant was packed, but they had a reservation, so they headed straight on in.

But on the way to their seat, Maisey’s hat kept clipping people’s faces and knocking off other people’s hats. “I’m sorry.” “Excuse me.” “Oh, I’m so terribly sorry.” “Pardon me.” “I’m sorry.” By the time they got to the table, she’d uttered those phrases a dozen times.

They’d no more than placed their drink orders when she stood. Carly gazed up at her. “Where are you going?”

“I saw a coat and hat rack out in the foyer. I’m going to put my hat on it. Damn thing’s bugging me. Be right back.” It took her a hot minute to get back to the foyer because the place was so packed, but when she did, she hung her hat on a peg. Apparently several other women had the same idea, because there were at least five more hanging there.

Lunch was wonderful. They served traditional English tea cakes and finger sandwiches, along with a choice of several different hot teas. A guitarist and flutist played and sang traditional British and Scottish tunes, and it was all very grand. Everything in the place was dark, highly-polished wood and brass, and it felt for all the world like an old Scottish pub, but with floral china on the tables. Before their meal was over, they ordered a bottle of Prosecco and enjoyed it. It had been a very, very long time since Maisey had such fun, and she was overwhelmed with gratitude for her friends and the way they included her in everything.

“Oh my god, this is delicious,” Cherilyn mumbled with a full mouth as she took a bite of her dessert.

“British sticky toffee pudding. One of the most delicious things on earth,” Carly agreed with a smile. “I love it. Ross’s mom makes it from time to time. I can’t tell you how often I dream of this stuff. I have to learn to make it.”

“Oooo, I want the recipe!” Maisey exclaimed after she swallowed the bite she’d been chewing. “It’s incredible.”

“You learn to make it, you teach me. I’m no cook, but I’d make this,” Cherilyn told her.

Maisey nodded. “I know, right? It’s so amazing.”

They finished their dessert, paid the tab, and headed out. Just as she was climbing into the van, Cherilyn asked Maisey, “Where’s your hat?”

“Oh! I almost forgot it! Thanks!” Not wanting to keep her friends waiting, Maisey was very nearly running as she headed back into the building, and she grabbed the hat from the rack, then ran back out. When she was buckled into her seat, Cherilyn took off for the hotel so they could collect their cars.

“Be sure and get all your stuff,” Cherilyn reminded Carly and Maisey, so Maisey started gathering stuff up. She had a few things that Lyra had given her from the farm—a small trophy that all the visitors received, a printed invitation back with a number to call to schedule, a small bottle of merlot with the farm’s label on it, and a scarf with their racing colors. She was really excited about getting to wear the scarf at some point. Then there was the gift bag the restaurant had given all the women who’d attended—sampler bags of tea, a packet of scone mix, a charm to commemorate the event, and a small booklet with the history of the pub. And it had the recipe for the

sticky toffee pudding on the back! But altogether, it was a lot to carry.

“Damn hat,” she mumbled as she tried to pick everything up. It was too much, so she plopped the hat down on her head. At least she wouldn’t have to carry that.

Blackness dropped, a darkness so deep that it was terrifying. Out in the distance, she could see a little bit of light, but very little. A voice was saying something, and then she heard one inside her head: “Oh, god, please, no! I don’t know where he is! I swear, I don’t!” More of another voice, and then the one in her head spoke again. “I swear, if I knew, I’d tell you!” More of the unintelligible voice before the one in her head said, “It won’t. He doesn’t love me anymore, so if you think this will get him here, you’re wrong! Please! Please don’t! I...” The sensation of falling was so acute that Maisey could feel every muscle in her body tense.

The next instant, she was lying on the pavement, staring up at the sky, with Cherilyn on one side of her and Carly on the other. “Maisey? Maisey! Are you okay? Hey, Maisey, honey, are you all right?” Carly was yelling, as though Maisey were deaf.

“You don’t have to scream. I can hear you,” Maisey whispered, groggy. She lay there for a minute before she managed to say, “Oh, no.”

“Oh no what? Are you sick and didn’t tell us?” Cherilyn barked.

“No. It’s happening again.” How, she wasn’t sure, but it was.

“What’s happening?” Carly asked.

“I saw... somebody. And something. But I don’t understand. I bought this hat new. It shouldn’t...” When she’d struggled to sitting, she picked up the hat, and her heart fell into her shoes. “Oh, shit.”

“What?” Cherilyn demanded.

“This isn’t my hat. I picked up somebody else’s hat. It’s not mine. See? It’s got a really, really narrow ribbon for a band. Mine had a wide grosgrain ribbon. Shit, shit, shit. This is somebody else’s hat, and somebody died while they were wearing it.”

Carly planted her hands on her hips and rolled her eyes. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I wish I were.” Maisey struggled to stand, so Cherilyn and Carly helped her. On her feet, she looked around and reminded herself that she was in Lexington. “Damn it. I have no way of knowing whose hat this is. No way. I’m not even from here. What the hell do I do?”

Carly shrugged. “Go back and see if you can swap it? Maybe find the person who had it?”

“No! They might be the killer.”

Cherilyn’s eyes went wide. “So you’re saying this one belonged to somebody who was killed too?”

“Fraid so,” Maisey said with a nod.

“How does this keep happening to you?” Carly asked. “It’s not like you want it to.”

“I told Aaron last time, these things are seeking me out. I’m not seeking them out. I wish they’d quit. I bought the coat. I accepted the boots as a gift, so it’s not about things that I buy. And I didn’t even get this hat as a gift. I accidentally picked it up. This thing was looking for me . Don’t you see?”

“I don’t know that I believe all that stuff, but it sure looks that way,” Carly said.

“Me too. I think somehow, something or someone knows you’ll fight to find the truth, and it homes in on you and won’t let go. That’s why it keeps happening,” Cherilyn said in agreement.

“Great. Now I’ve got quite the souvenir to take home to Aaron. He’s gonna be super unhappy.” Maisy brushed the dust off the back of her dress and sighed. “Oh, well. I’m heading home. See you guys soon.”

“Yep. You too, honey. Aren’t you going into the hotel restroom to change before you get on the road?” Carly asked.

“Nah. I’ll just drive on.” Maisy didn’t care about changing clothes, or anything else, for that matter. All she wanted to do was drive home, break the bad news to Aaron, and take her lumps.

And then she’d have to get busy trying to find a killer.

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CHAPTER TWO

“ W hat did you do? Where did you go? What did you see?” Murielle was full of questions.

“Well, let’s see, first we went to a horse farm!”

“A horse farm? With real horses?” the little girl asked in a near-whisper, her eyes wide.

“Yes, ma’am. A real horse farm with real horses. We saw a new baby horse. They’re called foals, and when they’re a boy horse, they’re called a colt.”

“Oooo, what was his name?”

“Winged Fury. His mom is named Winged Peace. His dad’s name is Pickle Thief.”

“Pickle Thief?” Murielle asked, laughing. “That’s a funny name for a horse!”

“Yeah, it is! And then we went to the other barn and I met other horses. Ms.Carly took my picture with a horse named Asher’s Delight. They call him Ash for short.”

“Was his nose soft?”

Maisey nodded. “Very soft.”

“I want to meet a real horse and be its friend and rub its nose. Can I go there

sometime maybe?”

“Actually, she gave me an invitation to come back sometime, so I’m sure we could do that.”

“Can we go tomorrow? Please?” Murielle whined.

“I don’t think so. Sunday is probably pretty busy for them.”

“But Sunday is a day of rest!” Murielle announced, echoing everything her grandparents had taught her.

“Not for folks on a horse farm! But we’ll go, I promise. Now, finish your dinner,” Maisey said and pointed at the plate, “and I’ll tell you about everything else we did.”

By the time Maisey had exhausted her recount of the day’s activities, Murielle’s plate was clean. “May I be excused to watch TV?” the little girl asked.

Aaron nodded. “Sure. Just remember to stay on your channel.” Aaron had subscribed to a streaming service that was just for kids ten and under, and that was all Murielle was allowed to watch.

“I will, Daddy. Thank you. Thank you, Mommy.”

“You’re welcome, bug. Love you,” Maisey called after her.

“Love you too.” The little girl skipped down the hallway and disappeared into her room.

“Sounds like you had a very good day,” Aaron said as he helped Maisey clear the table, but something about his tone set her on edge.

“It was a very good day. Great fun, great friends, great food. I loved the horse farm. Everything was wonderful.”

There was silence for a full minute before Aaron said, “Then why do I get the feeling there’s something you’re not telling me.”

Well, shit. How the hell does he... Oh. Carly. I’ll have to remember to thank her for that , Maisey groused internally. “You’ve talked to Carly, haven’t you?”

She turned just in time to see his face, and he wasn’t lying when he said, “No. I haven’t talked to Carly. Did you girls have a falling out or something?”

“No, no. Nothing like that.”

“Then what?”

“Who says anything happened?”

Aaron stopped, turned to lean back against the countertop, and folded his arms across his chest. “Maisey Maureen, I know you as well as anybody ever has, and I know when you’re not telling me something. And you’re not telling me something. Spill it.”

The look on his face told her there was no point in fighting it. He was right, he knew it, and he wouldn’t give in until she’d told him. “Okay, fine, but let’s get this cleaned up so we can sit down and talk, okay?”

“Okay. But I won’t forget.”

Maisey sighed. “Don’t worry. Neither will I.”

They worked along in silence, scraping the plates, putting away the leftovers, and

loading the dishwasher. When they were finished, Aaron glanced over at his wife. “Glass of wine?”

“Yes, please.” I probably actually need a bottle of whiskey , she told herself. She’d for sure need one after she finished telling him. He was going to be mad. Of that she was sure.

By the time Maisey was settled on the sofa, Aaron had appeared with a glass of wine in one hand and a bottle of beer in the other. Maisey took the glass, downed a big swig, and set it on the coffee table. She waited until Aaron had gotten a swallow of his beer down and set the bottle by her glass. He turned to her and asked, “What happened?”

“Just what I told Murielle. We went to the farm, then the restaurant, and then I came home.”

“Okay, but there’s a detail somewhere. What happened at the restaurant?”

Get it over with, idiot , she told herself. “It’s what happened as we were leaving the restaurant.”

“Okay.” And he said nothing else.

Maisey wanted the ground to open up. “Okay, so you know how big that hat was?”

“Yeah.”

“It was in the way, so I hung it on the hat rack in the foyer while we ate. And then when we left, I picked it up and went to get into the van. And when we got back to the hotel for me to pick up my car, I didn’t have enough hands to carry everything, so I put it on. Figured that would be easier than carrying it.”

“Okay.”

“One problem.” He waited, one eyebrow hiked up, and she felt trapped. It took her a second before she whispered, “It wasn’t my hat.”

“What do you mean, it wasn’t your hat? You took someone else’s hat?”

“It looked almost exactly like mine, but the band was a little different. It wasn’t my hat.”

Aaron just stared at her, and somewhere deep inside, Maisey heard a voice say, Wait for it... wait for it... it’s coming ... “So it wasn’t your... No. Oh, no. No, no, no. Not again. Maisey, please tell me...”

“I wish I could, but I can’t.”

Aaron hopped up off the sofa and started to pace. “Maisey! Oh, my god. Seriously? A hat? You can’t go to a tea at a restaurant without bringing home bad juju?”

“I can’t help it! It was an honest mistake! The girls thought it was my hat too!”

“Did you go back and try to find the owner?” he bellowed.

“No! I didn’t want to come face-to-face with a murderer!”

“Did you even call?”

“No! Whoever has my hat probably doesn’t even realize it’s not theirs. And they probably got this one at some consignment store like I did with my coat, and they’re not the murderer, and they’d think I was a lunatic for asking about it. I’m sorry, babe, really, I am. I don’t want this either.”

“Where’s the number for the restaurant?” Without getting up, Maisey pointed to the gift bag sitting by the door.

Aaron cleared the room in three strides, prowled through the bag’s contents, and pulled out the brochure, then held it up. “This it?” Maisey nodded, and she watched as Aaron pulled out his phone. “Yes, hello. My name is Deputy Sheriff Aaron Friedman. My wife was there earlier today with some friends and she picked up the wrong hat by mistake on her way out. Have you had anybody... Red. Wide-brimmed. Otherwise... Sure. I’ll hold.” He didn’t even turn to look at Maisey as he waited, and she felt sad and alone. He was angry, but it wasn’t her fault. None of it had been done on purpose. Hell, neither had the first two. She was jolted from her thoughts when she heard him say, “Oh? Okay. Well, if they do come in looking for it, could you please give them my name and number and ask them to call me? We’ll swap out with them. It’s...”

As he rattled off his name and number, Maisey shut down. Why did it keep happening to her? Why didn’t these dead people find somebody else to reveal themselves to? She didn’t really want that responsibility, and she certainly didn’t want the danger it had led her into. Engrossed in her thoughts, she finally looked up to find Aaron standing there, looking down at her. “Okay. They’ll call me if somebody shows up looking for the hat.”

Maisey didn’t know what to say, so she just whispered, “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” In a few seconds, he sat back down on the sofa beside her, took another draw off his bottle, and sighed. “I suppose you’re going to want to pursue this.”

“Somebody died, Aaron. That’s important. I feel like if I can help, I?”

“You have to. I get it. But you don’t even know where it took place.”

“I know. I don’t know where to start. There’s only one way to find out.”

Aaron side-eyed her. “Yeah. I know.”

“But not tonight, please? I’m exhausted.”

Aaron nodded. “Yeah, you are. You need to get some sleep. And babe?”

Maisey couldn’t even look up at him. “Yeah?”

“I love you. No matter what, we’ll put this to bed. Everything will be okay.”

There was no holding back. Maisey sobbed, and she was relieved when Aaron’s arms wrapped tightly around her. “I didn’t mean for this to happen!”

“I know, baby. I know. None of this is your fault, and I know it. It’s just frustrating, that’s all. I hate what it does to you, but I know you don’t invite it. It’ll be okay. We’ll make it through. And from now on, if it can be taken off your body in public, put your name in it, okay?”

Maisey let out a little chuckle through her sobs. “Yeah. Got it. Don’t worry. It’ll never happen again.”

“Never say never. Never’s a long time.”

Aaron was right. If there was anything Maisey had learned, it was to never say never.

Sunday was long and hard, and in none of the good ways. There was plenty of laundry, and Aaron mowed the grass. Maisey scrubbed the bathrooms, cleaned out the refrigerator, and mopped the kitchen floor. When all of that was done, they went to the store, bought some groceries for the next week, and stopped for burgers so no

one had to cook.

It took thirty minutes to help Murielle pick out clothes for school the next day, primarily because she kept saying, “I just wore that. I don’t want to wear it again.”

“No, you wore it week before last,” Maisey told her.

“No. I wore it two days ago.” She hadn’t, but Maisey knew there was no point in arguing with her. She was a kid and, as such, had zero perception of time. “I want a new skirt. One of those flowy things with pockets.” Maisey had no idea what she was talking about. “And a shirt with kittens on it.” Well, glad you’re not terribly specific, Maisey told herself as she thought about what that ensemble would look like. Dreadful.

“Well, we can’t do anything about that tonight. You’ll just have to wear something else tomorrow.”

“But when I get out of school, can we go get them? The kitten shirt and the poofy skirt?”

“I don’t know, but we’ll try, okay? What about this?” Maisey held up a top that was pink and blue striped.

Murielle huffed. “Well, okay. And these pants.” She reached into the closet and pulled out a pair of orange pants.

“Oh, I don’t think so. How about these?” Maisey found a pair of denim capris in the closet and held them up with the shirt. “This is nice.”

“Basic,” Murielle declared the outfit with a frown. Where the hell does she come up with this stuff, Maisey asked herself. Finally, the little girl nodded. “Okay. For now.

But I've got to step up my fashion game."

"Who told you that?" Maisey asked, dumbfounded.

"Margreeth."

Oh, "suck a dick" girl? Maisey wanted to ask, but she didn't want to bring up that phrase. If she did, Murielle would want to know what it meant, and then... The thought made Maisey shudder. Instead, she countered with, "Since when is Margreeth the fashion icon of second grade?"

"When she told everybody she's going to be a model when she grows up."

"Ah. I see. And how is this going to happen?"

"She says she's gonna be discovered. So I guess that means it'll happen."

Wow. Wish it were that simple so I could be the queen of England, Maisey wanted to say, but she didn't. "Well, good luck to her in all of her endeavors."

"What's a deavor?"

"Nothing. Just something silly that adults say. Now, let's get ready for bed, okay? It's about time."

"Okay." Murielle grabbed the cute little pajama bag lying against her pillows and started pulling them out. "Why do we wear pajamas?"

"I'm not really sure. But aren't you glad you do? That's why you have a pajama bag that looks like a giraffe."

“Yep. I’m glad.” Maisey helped the little girl pull off her tee and get her pajama top on. “Mommy, am I ever going to get a brother or sister?”

Did she hear us talking? Maisey wondered as she scrambled for an answer. “Someday when the time is right, maybe you’ll get a little brother or sister.” For all anyone knew, Maisey couldn’t have kids. She didn’t know. And if she told Murielle that one day there would be a sibling... Well, she didn’t want to lie to the child. They hoped, but they couldn’t promise. That was up to Mother Nature.

“I hope so. It’s hard being the only kid.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. We’ll see. Now, time for bed. Go brush your teeth and hair and I’ll go get your daddy.”

“Okay, Mommy.” Murielle scampered off, and Maisey watched her go, her heart filled with love for the little girl. Murielle might be the only child she ever had, and that would be fine. But it would be great to have a little one.

Prayers said, kisses shared, and the light turned out, Maisey headed for the living room with the sound of Aaron’s footsteps right behind her. Once she’d taken a seat, he sat down beside her. “So, we doing this thing tonight?”

Maisey nodded. “I feel like I need to. I need an idea of who she is, where they were, who the person with her is. I’ve got nothing at this point.”

“Right. So are we doing what we’ve always done? Deck?” Maisey nodded. “Okay. Get the hat and let’s go.”

Three minutes later, Maisey was seated on the outdoor furniture’s ottoman and Aaron behind her on the settee. “Ready?” she asked.

“Ready.”

“Okay. Here goes.” After a quick glance at it, Maisey set the hat on her head and pressed it down.

Darkness engulfed her, but there was a light source from somewhere. She wasn’t sure what that was. Something hard and cold pressed against her back, behind her waist and also behind her shoulders, like... bars? But horizontal. Even though she could feel the fear, Maisey tried to keep her wits about her. “Oh, god, please, no! I don’t know where he is! I swear, I don’t!” More of another voice, and then the one in her head spoke again. “I swear, if I knew, I’d tell you!” More of the unintelligible voice before the one in her head said, “It won’t. He doesn’t love me anymore, so if you think this will get him here, you’re wrong! Please! Please don’t! I...”

“Tell me where he is!”

“I told you, I don’t know where he is!”

“I can’t take a chance on you telling him I’m here and looking for him,” a menacing voice growled.

“I’m not going to tell him anything! I don’t know where he is! Just let me go. I don’t know you. I don’t know who you are or where you’re from.”

“Yes, you do.”

“I don’t! I’m no threat to you! If you’ll just?”

“One last chance. Where is he?”

“I told you, I don’t know! I... No! Please! Please don’t! Please...”

As she felt herself falling, the visions and sounds faded from Maisie's consciousness, and she found herself leaned back against Aaron, staring up at the sky. "Babe, you back?"

"Uh, yeah. Yeah, I'm back. Sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for. Learn anything?"

"Yeah." Maisie sat up and stretched her neck back and forth. "Whoever he is, he's looking for someone. And she doesn't know where he is."

"The person being looked for?"

"Yeah. She keeps telling him she doesn't know, but he says she has to be gotten rid of because he can't take a chance on the person he's looking for knowing he's there and looking. Which she tells him won't matter, because she doesn't know where that person is and they're not together anymore. But he doesn't believe her."

"No sign of who she is or where they are?"

"No. Weird light source. And there was something pressing into her back."

"Like a pole or something?"

"No. Like horizontal bars. Or beams. I'm not sure."

"Anything else? Like temperature? Or wind?"

Maisie thought about it for a second. "Yeah. There was a breeze. A stiff one."

"Hmmm." She could see the gears turning in Aaron's mind. "But it was dark, right?"

“Yeah. You know what the old folks say. ‘Evil does its work in darkness.’ That sure seems to be true.” Maisey sat for a minute, thinking. There were no other details she could recall. Aaron asked her something, and she turned. “I’m sorry. What?”

“I said, another hoodie?”

She thought about it for a second. “Actually, no. This time it was a ball cap.”

“Well, that’s a new twist.”

“Yeah. It is, isn’t it?” It was the only new twist, but it was something. Maybe with another couple of tries, she’d have more. But right that minute, all that mattered was sleep.

Fun as it was, it had been an exhausting weekend. Too bad the end wasn’t as great as the beginning.

“I’m going to the Garrisons’ house. Probably be back by two thirty,” Maisey said as she picked up all of her paperwork and stuffed it into her messenger bag.

“Okay. If Blair asks, I’ll tell her where you are,” Christa told Maisey and waved her out the door. Christa had been their case manager coordinator for as long as Maisey had been there, but as a boss, Blair was fairly new as the office manager. Still, she and Blair got along, and as long as she got her work done, Blair didn’t seem to care what Maisey did.

She set out for the Garrisons’ house, but not before she stopped at a fast-food place and gobbled down a child’s-size sandwich and a small drink. Back in the car, she turned on the stereo and cranked it up. Nineties rock. She loved it. The sun was out, it was pleasant and not too hot, and the morning had gone well. She’d managed to get a young mother enrolled in a program that would help pay for childcare while she

worked, and found an adult learning program for a father coping with a grown disabled daughter. The drive to the Garrison house wasn't long, and she sang along with the songs as she drove.

Dinner was in question, and she was thinking about what kind of meat to have when she suddenly slammed on the car's brakes in the middle of the road. The car behind her skidded too, and the sound of the horn blaring brought her to her senses. As they pulled around her, the passenger popped her a bird and yelled something, but Maisey didn't really pay attention. Her focus was elsewhere.

It was as though she couldn't go forward. There was nothing in the road; there was nothing wrong with her car. But Maisey was frozen. She glanced around, frantic to figure it out. There was no one behind her and no traffic coming toward her. But dead ahead was the bridge over the Laurel River. As soon as that thought registered, a sense of nausea overwhelmed her. What the hell was going on? She tried to pull off to the side of the road, but the car wouldn't go forward, so she slipped it into reverse, backed up for about fifty feet, and pulled off. That worked fine.

Once she was parked, Maisey got out and looked around. There was nothing unusual there. A car whizzed by, and it didn't even slow, just powered on down the highway, so she walked in that direction. But when she got to the same spot as the car had been, she stopped. Her feet just wouldn't let her move forward. "What the hell is going on?" she asked herself aloud. There was no explanation. None. It didn't make sense. When she got back in the car, she pulled forward, but the same thing happened ?the car stopped cold. That was the moment when she realized her foot was on the brake, but try as she might, she couldn't move it onto the accelerator.

Maisey sat there behind the wheel, staring ahead. What was it that was stopping her? She backed down the highway again and onto the shoulder, then sat there, looking around. There had to be a clue there somewhere. Several cars passed her as she sat there, and they seemed to have no problem at all. Whatever it was had to do with her .

But what was it? And how the hell was she going to explain it to her supervisor?

The ringing of her phone startled her, and she pulled it out. “Hey, babe.”

Aaron’s voice was chipper. “Hey, honey! Having a good day?”

“Actually, no. I’m not.”

It was quiet for a few seconds before Aaron said, “I had this weird impression that something’s going on. What’s up?” Maisey took a couple of minutes to explain what had happened.

“Where are you now?”

“I’m sitting in my car, pointed toward the Laurel River bridge over on Keavy Road.”

“I’ll be right there.”

She was thankful for his interest and willingness to help, but she felt awful about him giving up part of his afternoon for her. “Oh, honey, you don’t have to?”

“Nonsense. We’ve talked about increasing patrols out that way. I’ll be there in just a minute. You sit tight, beautiful.” And he hung up.

Maisey was mystified. What the hell was happening? She got out of the car twice more and tried to walk down the highway, but both times, the same thing happened, so she went back to the car and sat there, thinking. The car was warm, she was comfortable, and her eyelids drooped. Sleep had almost found her when she felt something on the car and checked her rearview to see Aaron’s cruiser behind her. That handsome, familiar face filled her window. “Hey, babe!”

“Hi.”

“Get in the cruiser and I’ll take you to your appointment.”

“Okay.” Maisey let him open the door and help her out, then grabbed her bag and her messenger bag and walked back to his cruiser.

Once she was in and her seatbelt was buckled, he looked at her and smiled. “Ready?”

Maisey nodded. “Yep. Ready.” Aaron pulled out onto the highway, passed Maisey’s car, and kept going.

As soon as they passed the point where she’d felt forced to stop, a wave of anxiety and nausea broke over Maisey. “Oh, god.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I feel sick.”

“Sick? Like ...”

“Like physically ill! Like I’m going to puke! Oh, god, Aaron, this is horrible!” Her eyes were watering and she could taste bile in her mouth.

“Let me get you to the other side! Hang on!” Aaron stepped down on the gas and the cruiser shot ahead. Once it rolled out past the other side of the bridge, he glanced over at Maisey. “You okay?”

Maisey sat there for a second and took stock. “Uh, yeah. I’m... better. I feel better. Honestly, I do.” There was still a nasty metallic taste in her mouth, and sweat beads still stood on her forehead, but she did feel better. “I’m okay.”

Aaron kept driving. “Tell me where I’m going. I’ll take you to your appointment and then drive you back to your car.”

“You don’t have to?”

“I do. Stop it. Let me do this. It’ll be fine. Tell me where I’m going, Maisey, or I’ll drive around in circles all afternoon.”

Ten minutes later, they were at the client’s house. Before she climbed out of the cruiser to go to the door, she leaned over and kissed Aaron on the cheek. “Thank you,” she whispered to him.

“You’re very welcome. I’ll be right here when you finish. Love you, baby.”

“Love you too.” Maisey headed to the client’s door, then spun and gave him a little wave before ringing the doorbell.

She was only there about forty minutes and, sure enough, when she came out, Aaron was sitting right there. “Thanks for doing this. You didn’t have to,” she said as soon as she’d strapped herself into the car.

“Yes I did. Otherwise, you would’ve sat there on the side of the road, unable to go anywhere. At least this way you got your appointment finished.”

“True.” Maisey pulled the paperwork out of her messenger bag and as Aaron drove, she worked on the forms. There were at least three she had to fill out, so she busied herself with the questions asked and coming up with the answers that would explain what she’d seen and what they’d talked about.

Halfway through the second form, it felt like someone had slapped the papers from her hand, and they went flying. That horrible nauseous feeling passed over her again,

and she gripped the door handle. “Oh, god, no. Ugh. I feel...” Words wouldn’t come. And just when she thought it couldn’t get any worse, Aaron stopped right in the middle of the bridge. “Oh, god, Aaron, keep driving! Oh, uhhh, I feel?”

“Get out,” he ordered.

“What?”

“Get out. Let’s see if we can figure this out.” He closed his car door, came around the back end of the cruiser, and opened her door. “Come on. I’ll help you.”

“Oh, god, Aaron, I’m gonna throw up! Oh, please,” Maisey whined with her hand over her mouth.

“Here. Stand right here and take a deep breath.” He spun her until she was standing with her back against the railings.

“Oh my god!” Maisey shrieked so loudly that she startled even herself.

Aaron jumped a little. “What?”

“This sensation!”

“Being sick?”

“No! The railings of the bridge! That’s what was up against the woman’s back! It was either this bridge or one similar to it.”

Aaron stood there for a minute. “I’ll look at some pictures of the other bridges in the area and we’ll see which ones have railings like this one. But I’m confused about something.”

“As though I’m not?”

The smile he flashed at her was gentle. “I get it. But look, the hat... You accidentally picked that up in Lexington. And here we are on this bridge. Do you think it’s possible that the woman was from here?”

Maisey thought for a second, and then a sense of peace fell over her. “I told you, I’m not looking for this. These things are seeking me out. So yes. I think it’s likely. Highly likely, matter of fact.”

“Good. So tonight you can put the hat on again and we’ll see what happens. And Maisey?”

A sadness fell over her as she looked up at him. “Yeah?”

Aaron took her hands, and her heart lightened. “I love you. We’ll get to the bottom of this. Hopefully, this will never happen again.”

“But if it does?”

“If it does, I’m not going anywhere. I’ll still be right here. I’m your partner in crime. Um, crime solving. I’m your partner in crime solving . We can do this, Maise. I know we can.”

Maisey leaned in and pressed her forehead to his chest, their hands still clasped. “I can do anything as long as I know you’re in my corner.”

“Then prepare for your world to be crowded, babe, because we’re in this corner together.”

That was all Maisey needed to know.

Murielle had fought tooth and nail to stay up. There was some show on that her friends watched, and she insisted she had to see it too so she'd know what was going on and could talk about it with them. But Aaron had looked at some of the episodes and decided it wasn't a good idea. "I really don't think I want a TV show teaching my daughter about birth control," he said when he realized one of the episodes was about a small girl finding her sister's pills.

"I don't want a TV show teaching my second-grade daughter about birth control. If a TV show teaches my sixth-grade daughter about birth control, I haven't done my job well," Maisey added.

"Agreed. No show for Murielle. If her friends don't like her because of that, she needs new friends." Maisey wanted to agree, but Aaron didn't understand the world kids lived in. If push came to shove, she'd sit down with Murielle and watch it?with Aaron's approval, of course. She wouldn't let her child become a social pariah because of their bugaboos, but she still thought he was right.

They waited until Murielle had been down for at least two hours before Maisey picked up the hat and they headed out the back door. Once they were on the deck, she sat down on the ottoman and looked at the hat. It was funny... The thing was very ordinary-looking. Just a big red felt hat with a super-wide brim and a ribbon for a band. Nothing elaborate. Nothing noteworthy. Sort of plain except for its color and size. "Okay, you ready?" Aaron asked when he'd taken a seat behind her.

"I think so." Maisey took a deep breath, held out the hat, then lifted it, held it above her head, let it drop, and pressed down on the crown.

Instead of the total darkness she'd experienced before, it was still dark, but there was light here and there. There was still some kind of light source, and Maisey tried to take note of the surroundings, even though she was looking through the woman's eyes. The hard and cold sensation against her back was still there, but she could smell

something too?water. Maybe it was a bridge. “Oh, god, please, no! I don’t know where he is! I swear, I don’t!”

“I think you need to tell me the truth. Where’s he holed up?”

“I swear, if I knew, I’d tell you!”

“Maybe knowing I have you will make him a little more amiable to showing his filthy face,” the male voice growled out.

“It won’t. He doesn’t love me anymore, so if you think this will get him here, you’re wrong! Please! Please don’t! I...”

“Tell me where he is!”

“I told you, I don’t know where he is!”

“I can’t take a chance on you telling him I’m here and looking for him.”

“I’m not going to tell him anything! I don’t know where he is! Just let me go. I don’t know you. I don’t know who you are or where you’re from.”

“Yes, you do.”

“I don’t! I’m no threat to you! If you’ll just?”

“One last chance. Where is he?”

“I told you, I don’t know! I... No! Please! Please don’t! Please...”

“You could’ve been more helpful, Hazel.” The sensation of falling started, then

ended abruptly. That was a curiosity.

A voice cut through the haze. “Maisey? You with me?”

“Uh, yeah.” Maisey sat there, stunned. Why did the falling sensation stop so fast? Was she really on a bridge? Then she remembered the very last thing the man had said. “Oh, fuck.”

“What?”

Maisey jerked upright and spun to look at Aaron. “Her name. It was Hazel.”

Aaron gripped her upper arms and grinned. “Thatta girl! That did it! We have a name! And with a name, we can find her.”

“Where do we start?”

“We start with the sheriff’s department to see if there were any missing persons reports filed or bodies recovered with that name. And we go from there.”

“Sounds good.” As excited as Maisey was at the prospect, she was scared too. Every time they found a victim, they found a suspect.

And the suspect always found her.

The next day yielded nothing. That was what Aaron found?nothing. Not a whiff of anybody who was missing. No one suspected to have been a victim of foul play. “I don’t understand. Somebody has to have missed her,” Maisey said quietly, thinking about how sad it was that no one seemed to.

Aaron shrugged. “I’ve got two more aces in the hole, and those are the ones I’ll play

in the morning.”

“What are they?”

“Checking in Laurel and McCreary counties. Might be something in one of those. If she went over the side of the bridge where we were today, her body might’ve drifted down there.”

“That’s a long way, and a lot of twists and turns,” Maisey pointed out.

“One thing we’ve learned is that the time of year and temperatures play a role in things like that. We have no idea exactly when this took place or what conditions were at the time.”

“Okay, yeah, right. That’s true.” A little spark of hope kicked up in Maisey’s brain. Maybe that would yield something. Maybe not, but maybe.

“There’s just one thing I don’t understand. The hat. How did it wind up in somebody else’s hands if it went into the river with her?”

“Maybe it didn’t. Maybe it fell off. I mean, I never experienced her actually hitting the water, just falling, and then suddenly, it was over.”

“Okay. So on the way down it fell off,” Aaron said.

“Or the wind blew it off before she went down and it landed on the bridge,” Maisey offered.

Aaron nodded. “That sounds plausible. Do us a favor. Call the restaurant again tomorrow and see if anybody returned your hat and asked about their own.”

Maisey nodded. "Okay." At least it was something she could do to feel like she was actively working on finding the woman and the killer, and it beat sitting on the road, trying to cross a bridge and being unable to.

"It's been a weird, unsettling day. Let's go to bed," Aaron suggested, and Maisey nodded without a word. She'd had three clients cancel on her that day, and she'd found herself sitting at a desk in the office, staring at the walls. And she hated that. When she wasn't busy, the day went much, much slower and she was even more tired in the evening than she would've been if she'd run and run all day.

As they were getting ready for bed, Maisey let out a giggle. Aaron spun to look at her. "What's so funny?"

"Did you know Cherilyn and Shaw are trying to get pregnant?"

"No! Seriously?" Maisey nodded and giggled again. "Well, I'll be damned. Wonder what they're doing right now?" he said with a laugh.

"I have no idea, but I know what I want to be doing right now." Maisey rose up on her knees and knee-walked to the edge of the bed, stopping right in front of where Aaron stood. "And it has nothing to do with them and everything to do with you."

"I like the sound of that!"

Thirty minutes later, Aaron kissed her deeply and Maisey sighed into him. Making love with that man was everything to her. There were no two people in the world who belonged together more than they did, of that she was sure. He pulled back and stared into her eyes. "Think we need more practice? Because I have to say, I thought I did pretty good."

"You did excellent, sexy guy. And yeah, we need more practice, but maybe not

tonight.”

“Yeah. We’ll start again with the search tomorrow and maybe I can come up with something more than just Hazel.” Aaron rolled to his back and Maisey settled into his left side, her cheek resting on his pec. “In the meantime, why don’t you try posting on some community social media pages, see if you can find out whose hat you have.”

“Good thinking. I’ll do that. And babe?”

“Yeah, cutie?”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Maisey Maureen. You’re the answer to all my prayers.”

Maisey wanted to ask him why he’d pray for craziness and chaos, but she didn’t. She just sighed and thought about the next day. There had to be more information out there.

Now to find it.

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CHAPTER THREE

After a few tries, she had what she thought she needed to post.

I attended the Derby tea at Greenbrier Club and accidentally picked up the wrong hat. If you have the hat that looks like this one but realized it's not yours, please DM me. It has sentimental value. Thank you.

As soon as she read it one more time, she posted it, with a picture, to groups in Louisville, Lexington, Shelbyville, Taylorsville, and a lot of points in between there and Corbin. All she could do was wait. After that, she called the restaurant again, but they hadn't had anyone call to inquire about the hat.

Ten minutes later her phone rang, and she picked it up, smiled, and sang out, "Hey, babe!"

"Hi. Whatcha doin'?"

"Posting about the hat on the community social media pages. What are you doing?"

"Looking at a coroner's report for a HazelPuckett. Two years ago."

"Really?" Maisey was excited. They finally had a name!

"Yeah, from LaurelCounty. That's why we couldn't find her initially. She traveled a long way. Her body was spotted down on the CumberlandRiver by a commercial fisherman."

“On the Cumberland? Good lord! No wonder we couldn’t find her! That’s a long way from where she went in, if it really was the bridge on Keavy Road.”

“I looked at other bridges in the area and none of them had those kinds of railings. It had to be that one. So yeah, she traveled a long way, or at least her body did. Still doesn’t explain the hat though.”

Maisey sighed. “Yeah. That’s still a mystery.”

“Yeah, well, so is the guy who killed her. So now I guess it’s time to delve into HazelPuckett’s life and see what we can find out. I’ll bring it all home with me.”

“Thanks. Let me know.”

“Okay. Later, baby.” And the phone went dead.

Maisey sat there and thought. How could she find the person who’d had the hat? There was only one way, and if Aaron found out, he’d be furious. But she couldn’t come up with another way to get the information she needed.

All of her morning appointments were finished and she stopped by a diner in town to have a little bit of lunch. She’d only been sitting there for a minute when a deep voice said, “Maisey?”

As soon as she spun to identify it, she smiled. “Oh, hey, Morgan! How ya doin’?”

“I’m great. Having some lunch?”

“Yep. Wanna join me?”

“Don’t mind if I do! I’ll just put in my order and I’ll be right back.” Maisey watched

him stroll across the room with an appreciative eye. Morgan Watters was eye candy extraordinaire. She was surprised a woman there in town hadn't managed to snap him up. In a minute, he was back. "So, what's up with you these days? Got another murder mystery on your hands?"

Should I tell him? she wondered. "Um, matter of fact, we do."

"Oh? Who's the victim this time?"

"Her name is Hazel Puckett. Aaron just found it today."

Morgan's brow furrowed. "I don't remember that name."

"That's because they found her in Laurel County."

"Oh! Well, that makes sense then. Anything I can do to help?"

"I don't think so, but thanks for offering. Might have to ask you to look over the coroner's report and explain stuff to me."

"Wouldn't mind at all." Morgan relaxed into his chair. "How'd you come about this one?"

"Picked up the wrong hat at a Derby event and put it on."

"Yes, I can see how that could happen. Where was this?"

Maisey frowned. "Louisville."

"Oh. Yeah, that's bad. Did you try posting about it on any of the social media community pages?"

“I did that this morning. Just kinda waiting. Called the restaurant again. Nobody’s asked about it. They probably haven’t even noticed that they have the wrong hat.”

“That much alike, huh?” Maisey nodded. “Well, if you want, you can bring it to me. I’ll go over it and see if I can find any forensic evidence that might still be clinging to it.”

Maisey grimaced. “It was two years ago.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah. I would think it would all be gone.”

A voice from the counter area called Morgan’s name and as he rose, he said, “Yeah, but it never hurts to look.”

“Agreed. I’ll bring it over.” He probably couldn’t find anything, but it wouldn’t hurt to have him look it over.

They ate and talked and before she knew it, lunch was over and it was time to get back to work. “This has been fun!”

“It has. You’re a very pleasant person to be around, Maisey. It helps that you’re not knocking yourself out to try to get into my pants,” Morgan said matter-of-factly.

“Uh, yeah, no. Not doing that.”

He let out a sarcastic chuckle. “Then you’re one of the few women in town who aren’t. I’m not all that, and you would think I was BradPitt or something.”

Maisey laughed. “It’s the accent!”

“Oh, yeah. That’s probably it.” They were still laughing and chatting when they carried their wastepaper to the bin and tossed it. Morgan held the door for her, and once it closed, he smiled. “Thanks for a thoroughly enjoyable lunch, Maisey.”

“You too. It was very nice. See you soon.”

“Yes. Just bring that hat on over anytime.”

“Will do. Thanks again! Bye.” Maisey slid into her little sedan and watched as Morgan did the same with his Range Rover. The guy had no idea how gorgeous he was, and to Maisey, that made him even more attractive.

The little car stopped in the parking spot of the lot outside her office, and Maisey climbed out. Just as she reached into the back seat to grab her messenger bag, a tone sounded on her phone, and she pulled it from her purse to check it. It was a direct message, and she felt a measure of hope when she saw it.

Hey, I saw your post on the community site. I think I have your hat. Is this it?

There was a picture and, sure enough, Maisey was pretty sure it was hers.

Yes! I think that’s my hat! How can we swap? Where are you?

Dots wiggled on her screen and then the message popped up.

I’m in Somerset.

At least it wasn’t too far away. Maisey thought for a minute before she messaged back.

Can we meet to swap?

She waited for the reply to pop up.

Don't see why not. Public place. Maybe the courthouse parking lot?

Maisey typed as fast as she could.

Sure. Sounds great. When?

The reply only took a few seconds.

Tomorrow?

Maisey pulled up her calendar and checked it.

I'm free after 10:00 in the morning, and it takes me about an hour to get there from Corbin.

In no time, she got the reply.

Great! I'll be there at 11:15 standing in front of the entry doors. Don't want to go through the metal detector if I don't have to.

That made Maisey chuckle as she replied.

That makes two of us! See you then.

"Shit! I haven't gotten the hat to Morgan yet!" A quick look at her schedule and she decided she had time to grab it and run it over to him if she went right then, so she took off for home without even going in the office. He'd pull trace evidence from it and it could be returned to its rightful owner.

But that would be the end of wearing it. She had to think of something so the owner wouldn't want it back. And she would. After all she had all evening. And she had Aaron. He'd help her figure something out.

One way or another, she'd get a chance to ask the owner what they knew about the hat, and maybe they'd be one step closer to getting an answer for Hazel.

"I'm so nervous."

Aaron patted Maisie's thigh as he drove. "No reason to be nervous. I'm with you. It'll be fine. Did Morgan have time to work on the hat?"

"Yeah. He pulled everything from it that he could. Did you get a coroner's report for Hazel?"

"I've requested it, although I had to list a reason why I wanted it. I'm not a very good bullshitter, so I hope they bought it."

"Why did you say you wanted it?"

"Told some story about how we think we're on the trail of somebody who's defrauding insurance companies, and her name came up."

Maisey shrugged. "Sounds pretty plausible to me. Morgan told me he'd be glad to translate the report into layman's terms for us if we needed his help."

"That's good."

As they drove along, they chatted about a lot of things, and one subject kept coming up?an addition to the house. They'd kicked around a dozen different ideas and hadn't come up with a concrete idea. She knew Ross had done a little construction on the

side, and she thought she might ask him for his opinion.

They pulled into the courthouse parking lot and Maisey sighed. “I dread this. You coming with me?”

Aaron stared at her like she’d lost her mind. “Are you kidding? No way would I let you walk over there by yourself to meet this person. They might be the killer!”

“I doubt it. If they killed her, they would’ve gotten rid of the hat. They wouldn’t want it around,” Maisey pointed out.

“That’s true. Well, here we go. Let’s get this over with.”

The parking lot was across the street from the courthouse, so they hit the crosswalk and started up the sidewalk. As soon as Maisey got close enough to look around, she knew who she was looking for because she remembered the woman from the tea, plus she was the only person standing around with a big red hat in her hand. “Hey! I’m Maisey!” the little brunette said and held out her right hand.

The taller woman took it and gripped it firmly. The energy Maisey felt from her was strong and positive. “Hi! I’m Terra. We’re the only two people here with red hats, so I guess that means we’re looking for each other!” she said, laughing.

“I guess so. And this is my husband, Aaron,” Maisey said, and Aaron extended his hand. After Terra shook it, he glanced at Maisey, and she knew he’d gotten the same impression of Terra. “So, could we sit for a minute? We need to talk to you about something.”

Terra looked a little surprised, but she nodded. “Sure, I guess so.” There was a bench at the edge of the sidewalk, so the two women took a seat and Aaron stood by.

“Okay, first off, Aaron’s a deputy sheriff in WhitleyCounty, but you’re not in any kind of trouble.”

The woman seemed surprised. “Oh! Well, I guess I’m glad about that. Can’t imagine that I am.”

“Well, you’ll understand why I said that in a minute. So we discovered that this hat, the one I’m holding, was involved in a murder.”

“What?” Terra jumped to her feet and stared down. “You think I killed somebody?”

“No, no! Not at all! Please!” Maisey waited until Terra had calmed down a little. “Please, just let me ask you some things. We’re trying to track down the killer, and you might be able to help us.”

“I don’t see how I can. I don’t know anything about this.” Terra finally sat back down, but she side-eyed Maisey. “I don’t even know where it came from.”

“That’s what I was going to ask you. Where did you get the hat?”

“My girlfriend found it. She was fishing with her grandpa and it was lying on the riverbank, on the rip rap. She brought it home because she thought it was something I’d like. Actually, when she brought it home, it was filthy. I took it to the dry cleaner to get it cleaned up.”

Well, there goes any hope of evidence from Morgan , Maisey told herself. “And where was this?”

“Below some bridge on the LaurelRiver. Her grandpa lives over that way, and they were out in his boat.”

“And do you remember when that was?”

Terra shrugged. “Maybe a year ago? I mean, she brought it home, I had it cleaned, and I put it in the closet. It wasn’t until I decided to go to the tea that I remembered it and took it out. Bought a dress to go with it and decided to wear it to the tea.”

“The woman that the hat belonged to fell from the bridge. She was wearing it when she died.”

“Oh, lawd! I don’t want that thing back!” Terra shrieked. That was what Maisy had hoped.

“You’re welcome to keep mine. Since all of this has happened, I really don’t want it either.”

“Thanks, but I don’t think I want it either. I think I’d rather forget about this altogether.” Terra looked flustered, and Maisy couldn’t blame her. “And to think I became a woman to go through this shit. Who would-a thunk it?” Terra was beautiful, but Maisy had suspected she was transgender, and her guess had been confirmed.

“It’s a fluke, really. It’ll never happen again in a million years, I’m sure,” Maisy said, but that sounded hollow even to her own ears.

“It’s odd though. You look familiar.”

Uh-oh , Maisy thought, wondering if Terra would connect the dots. “Probably saw me at the tea.”

“No, that’s not it. Have you been in a TV show or something?”

Shit. Shit, shit, shit. She’s gonna figure it out , Maisy’s brain screamed. “No. Not

me. I'm a social worker for the state. Child protective?"

"Oh my god! You're the woman who sees dead people!" Terra almost shouted.

"Please, shhhh," Maisey whispered. "Oh, god, no, please don't tell everybody."

Terra stared at her for a second before she said, "I can see why you wouldn't want anybody to know."

"You don't know the half of it," Aaron muttered.

Terra's face was pure compassion. "That bad?"

"Yeah. People kept leaving boxes on my porch with things that belonged to their relatives, wanting me to tell them things. They all had relatives who'd completed suicide, and they wanted me to tell them it wasn't so. Unfortunately, it was true in every case, and it really took its toll on me. It's been hard."

"I can understand, honey." Terra laid a soft hand on Maisey's forearm to comfort her, and it really did make Maisey feel better. "So you put on the hat..."

"Yeah. I hear her talking to the person who killed her and feel her flying over the rail on the bridge. But it disappears before she hits the rocks or water, so the hat must've flown off as she was falling."

"At least you don't have to go through that final horrible moment," Terra said.

"Exactly. So you don't mind if we keep the hat? Because it might help us more," Aaron asked.

"Mind? Keep that thing away from me! I don't want no dead woman's hat on my

head!” the tall woman said with a smile. “It’s all yours.”

“Thanks. And thanks for responding to my post. At least now we know a little more. I won’t keep you,” Maisey said, standing, and Terra rose too.

“It’s quite all right, and if I can help you more, please let me know. If you need her, I’m sure my girlfriend would be glad to show you exactly where she found the hat.”

“That might be really helpful.” Maisey smiled. “It’s really been nice meeting you.”

“Same here. And you too, Aaron,” Terra said and nodded toward him. “I hope y’all get whoever it was. And if I can help, just let me know.” She handed Maisey a business card, and Maisey gave her one. Aaron did the same.

“Will do. And we’ll let you know if we solve the case.” Maisey started to put the card in her purse, but then glanced at it. “Wait. You’re an interior designer?”

Terra smiled. “Among other things.”

“I don’t know if you could help us... We’re trying to figure out how to add onto our house. Do you?”

“I used to be in construction when I was Terrence,” Terra said and winked. “I’d be glad to take a look and give you my opinion.”

“Oh, that would be awesome! We’d pay you, of course,” Maisey added.

“Look, you’re trying to find the killer of the woman whose hat I unwittingly wore on my well-coiffed head, I ain’t gonna charge you nothin’. I’ll be glad to look around and tell you what I think. You just let me know.”

“I will! Thank you so much!”

“Hope to hear from you soon,” Terra called after them, and Maisey turned to give her a tiny wave.

“Awww, she’s so nice!” Maisey whispered to Aaron.

“Yes, she is, and that handshake told me she’s a good person,” Aaron said with a smile.

“I felt the same way. So, what’s our next move?”

“Let’s find out what Hazel actually died from first and go from there. The coroner’s report should be in pretty quickly.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Maisey was hopeful. They had a little more information, and their guess at the location had been right. If they could just keep piecing it together, they’d eventually have the whole picture.

Or at least enough to know what they were up against.

“Morgan called. He’s finished looking at the coroner’s report and wanted to know if we could come by.”

“I can. I’ve got two hours before my next appointment,” Maisey said as she talked to Aaron on the phone the next morning.

“Okay. I’ll head that way and you can meet me.”

“Sounds good.” Maisey grabbed her bag on her way to the door.

Aaron's car was already there when she pulled up, and she stepped inside. "And did you see that homer?" she heard his voice say.

"Yeah. Man, he hit that ball like a freight train! Did they clock it?"

"Yep. Eighty-eight miles an hour."

"Wow. That's pretty damn... Hey, Maisey!" Morgan said with a smile when she came into view.

"Hey! Sorry I'm interrupting your baseball talk," she said with a laugh.

"You're a good interruption," Morgan said. "So I guess you guys are wanting the information."

"Lay it on us," Aaron announced.

"Okay. Here goes. According to the report, she fell from a height onto something hard and irregular."

Maisey and Aaron looked at each other. "Rip rap," Aaron said.

Morgan nodded. "That would do it. A lot of damage to the body, but it deteriorates much quicker where there are injuries, so that would account for it. My question is, how did it get into the water?"

"That's for me to find the answer to, and I start with the Army Corps of Engineers. They can tell me the water levels for the river under the bridge in that time period. My guess is that the water came up and it floated away, or something dragged or knocked it in, like a dog or coyote, or it rolled after it hit the rip rap. Or maybe something with a considerable wheel wash caused it to drift into the water."

“All of those are possibilities, but wouldn’t somebody on a vessel of some sort notice it lying on the bank?”

Aaron shrugged. “They probably would. I’m guessing the water came up. Didn’t we have some significant storms during that time?”

“I’m not sure, but it’s amazing how fast water can rise after a heavy rain,” Morgan pointed out.

“Right. Hmmm. I’ll let you know what I find out. Was there water in the lungs?”

“Not the amount that there would’ve been from drowning, although it’s hard to tell, what with the amount of decomp,” Morgan said to clarify.

“Got it. Well, thanks for the help. We’ll see what we come up with and I’ll let you know.” Aaron turned from Morgan to Maisey. “Sound good?”

“Sounds great. And thanks, Morgan. I really appreciate you doing this. I know you’ve already got plenty of your own work.”

He shot Maisey a gorgeous smile. “Oh, I don’t mind at all. It’s more interesting than Mr. Gordon falling asleep and never waking up.”

By the time they both got home that evening, it was time to scramble for dinner and head back to the school. Murielle had a school play that night, and she’d been practicing her lines every night. Maisey’s mom had made her costume?she was a sunflower?and it was adorable. When it was over, they stopped for ice cream to celebrate her stage debut, then drove home. By the time they got there, she was sound asleep in the back seat, so Aaron carried her in, and Maisey helped him dress her for bed and tuck her in.

But it was still early, so Aaron dragged all of the files in, spread them out on the table, and he and Maisie started reading through them. HazelPuckett had been a middle school teacher in KnoxCounty. According to her file, she'd never had so much as a parking ticket. Interviews were conducted with her friends. Then Aaron picked up another document and murmured, "Well, this is interesting."

"What's that?"

"It's an interview with one of her coworkers. Woman named ReginaFields. She said Hazel drove a Porsche Cayman."

"Porsche Cayman? Don't you mean a Cayenne?" Maisie asked. She'd seen those around town.

"No. A Cayman. It's a sports car. And a GT4 at that. We're talking in excess of a hundred grand."

"What? A hundred-thousand-dollar car for a teacher?"

Aaron shrugged. "That's what it says. Don't know how old it was, but it was pricey." When he put that report down, he picked up another one. "Oh, this is really interesting."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. This interview is with a realtor. Said he was contacted three months before she disappeared and asked him to list her house. Said she was having trouble making the payments and was afraid she'd go into foreclosure."

"Should've gotten rid of her car and gotten something cheaper," Maisie said, then felt judgmental. Who was she to decide what was right for the young woman?

“Oh, I don’t think that would help. The realtor valued the house at one point five million.”

“What?” Maisey couldn’t believe what he’d just said. A million and a half for a house on a teacher’s salary?

“Yeah. That’s what it says. Something’s fishy here. On her salary, this woman should’ve been driving a ten-year-old Camry and living in an apartment. She wasn’t even making fifty thousand a year.”

“Then how was she affording all of this?”

“That’s what we’ve got to find out. I see nothing in here about financials, and that’s odd. You’d think they would’ve studied all of that. Finding out where the money came from could clear the whole thing up and give us a suspect.”

“How do we get those?”

“I request them. Might have to make a few phone calls to get them turned loose, but it can be done.” Aaron dropped the report, leaned back, and stretched his arms above his head. “It’s late. I can get back on this in the morning. I think it’s bedtime.”

“Am I putting on the hat tonight?” she asked quietly, hoping he’d say no.

Relief swept over her when Aaron answered, “No. I think we both need some rest. This is getting weird real fast, and I want to be rested so I can actually make a plan in the morning to pull all of this together. You can put on the hat tomorrow night.”

“Agreed.” It had been a long day, and Maisey was really tired. HazelPuckett had been driving an expensive sports car and living in a mansion on a teacher’s salary. That wasn’t normal. Something was wrong, and it was up to them to figure it out.

No one else had found her killer, and Maisey wanted justice for her. Hazel deserved at least that much.

Maisey had just stopped in front of a client's house the next day when her text messaging app pinged, and she peeked at her phone screen.

Boy oh boy, this is ripe.

She shot him back a quick reply.

Sorry, babe. At an appointment. I'll call as soon as I'm finished. Love you.

Aaron sent back heart and thumbs-up emojis, so Maisey shoved her phone back into her purse and knocked on the door.

An hour and a half later, she was back in the car, and she hit her hands-free unit as soon as she'd pulled away from the curb. "Hey, beautiful," that deep, warm voice purred from the phone.

"Hi, sexy guy. Sorry I couldn't talk."

"No biggie. But what I found this morning... Real biggie. You need to see all of this."

"You at the office?"

"Yep."

"I'll be there in five." Maisey took off toward the sheriff's office. She could barely wait to see what he'd found.

Cup of coffee in hand, she followed Aaron down the hallway and into the conference room. There were papers everywhere, and it was obvious he'd been hard at work all morning. "Got an awful lot of stuff here," she said, looking around.

"Have a seat. You won't believe this. So the house she was living in?" Maisie nodded. "It belonged to the father of one of her students."

"A middle school student?"

Aaron gave a quick nod. "Yep. Alan Vanderboegh."

"What does he do for a living?"

"Data mining."

Maisie was unsure about that. "You mean like bitcoins?"

"Exactly."

"In Knox County?" That seemed incredible.

"No. Here. In the old Howard Brothers Plumbing warehouse."

"Oh, yeah! I remember. They were trying to get more electricity into the building."

"Yeah, the city was all excited about it. Said it would be a great opportunity. But it never really got off the ground."

"Then I don't understand. How did he make money?"

Aaron grinned. "The city doesn't want anybody to know that they bought a pig in a

poke. I should say, bought into a pig in a poke.” Maisie squinted at him. “He borrowed a bunch of money to start this thing.”

“How much is a bunch of money?”

“About thirty million dollars.”

Okay, I heard that wrong, Maisie told herself. “You didn’t just say thirty million.”

“Oh, but I did. He borrowed it?from banks, from investment firms, from the city. And then made off with it.”

“Holy shit,” Maisie whispered under her breath.

“Exactly. That means when the murderer kept asking where ‘he’ was, he meant Vanderboegh.”

“So does that mean she was seeing Vanderboegh?”

Aaron nodded. “I would think so. That could explain where the car, the house, and her cash flow came from. And if he disappeared, that could be why she would panic and try to list the house.”

“Right. But who would be looking for him?”

Aaron reached over and rested his hand on top of a huge stack of papers. “Behold, the list of suspects.”

Maisie could feel her brow wrinkling. “What? What do you mean?”

“I mean, this is paperwork from all the people he owed, people he borrowed money

from for the business.”

Her jaw dropped. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Nope. All of them. Dozens. And somewhere in this stack is somebody who was mad enough to come looking for him. We’ve just got to figure out who.”

“How do we go about that?”

“It’s got to be one of two kinds of people. The first is somebody he borrowed an enormous amount of money from. And the second is one he borrowed money from, not necessarily a large amount, but it was all they had in the world, and now they have nothing.”

Maisey grimaced. “You forgot the third kind.”

“Who?”

“Somebody who loaned him somebody else’s money and they’re in deep, deep shit over it.”

Aaron nodded. “Yeah. That makes sense too. So I guess we just start going through all of this stuff until we figure out who the most likely suspects are.”

“Good luck with that,” a voice said from behind them, and Maisey turned to find Carly standing there in the doorway.

“Hey! How’s it going?”

Carly stepped into the conference room, pulled out a rolling chair, and plopped down into it. She huffed out a long sigh and said, “It’s a bad, bad day.”

“What happened?” Aaron asked.

“I just got back from an arrest.”

Aaron and Maisey both looked up at her from under furrowed brows. “You?” Aaron asked. “What were you doing at an arrest?”

Carly pointed at the door, so Aaron got up, closed it, and sat back down before she would speak. When she opened her mouth, Maisey and Aaron’s jaws dropped. “The mayor.”

“What?” Maisey fairly shrieked.

“He and his wife got into a knock-down drag-out that spilled out onto the lawn. A neighbor called nine-one-one, but the city cops wouldn’t touch it, so they called us. When the deputies got there, it was such a fracas that they called me and asked what to do. I arrested both of their asses. I don’t care if he thinks he’s my boss. He’s not. The county judge executive is, and I called him. He gave me the go-ahead. But the two of them are going to try to rip me a new asshole.” She pressed her hands over her face. “This is the part of my job that I hate. People who think they’re above-the-law big shots.”

“Wow. So what happened?” Aaron asked. “What were they fighting about?”

“What do married couples fight about? Money, sex, kids, in-laws, jobs, cheating... They were fighting about money, but I think they mentioned a little bit of everything. Apparently wedded bliss isn’t high on their lists of accomplishments.”

“Sounds like it,” Maisey said.

“So now we’ve got to sort all of that out. But she did say something about him

embarrassing her, so I'm not sure." Carly looked around. "You making progress on this?"

"A little. We've found out Hazel was in bed with a student's father?literally," Aaron responded.

"Oh, wonderful. That'll be fun. Well, chase it down. I don't have to worry about that. My arrests were pretty clear cut, although I'm fairly certain a judge is going to just cut them loose," Carly said and stood. "Guess I'd better get on it. Good luck to the two of you and if I can help you with anything, let me know. But give me forty-eight hours, okay? I'll need that long to recover."

"Will do!" Maisey answered, laughing, as Carly shot her a backhanded wave. "Wow. Eventful day."

"Yeah. For all the wrong reasons. And I think I know where to start."

"Yeah?"

"I'm going to the middle school."

Maisey grinned. "Can I come with you?"

"I'll be disappointed if you don't!"

They were together. Butch and Sundance. Cagney and Lacey. Turner and Hooch. Jonathan and Jennifer Hart. Throw in Carly and they could be Charlie's Angels, but no. She liked it better when it was just her and Aaron. They made a great team.

The best.

CHAPTER FOUR

Aaron pulled his car into a space in the visitor's parking at Alfred C. Wyman Middle School in Barbourville and shut off the ignition. "Have your questions ready for the Vanderboegh kid?" Maisey asked.

"Yep. Remember, we're here as part of the investigation into the alleged embezzlement over in Whitley County. You're a social worker with the state investigating the welfare of the child."

"Right," Maisey agreed with a nod.

"Okay. Here we go." Aaron opened his door, so Maisey threw hers open and climbed out to join him on the sidewalk. They didn't even have to stop for the school resource officer—one look at Aaron's badge and weapon and they walked right in. "Oh, he'd be in so much trouble in Whitley County for letting a deputy from another county just walk right past," Aaron said.

"But?"

"But nothing. He has no idea why I'm here. I could be a disgruntled parent or the husband of a teacher who's going through a divorce. He has no idea who I am or why I'm here, and he didn't ask." Aaron held the office door for Maisey, then followed her in.

A small woman behind the counter looked up and smiled. "Welcome to our school! May I help you?"

“Yes, ma’am. We’re here as part of an embezzlement investigation in WhitleyCounty. I was wondering if I could speak to a student by the name of MarshallVanderboegh.”

“No, sir. You can’t. He’s not here. He doesn’t go to school here anymore,” she said quietly.

“I see. Do you know where he is?” The woman glanced at Maisey, so Aaron quickly added, “This is my wife. She’s a social worker with CPS, and she’s checking on the child’s welfare.”

The woman seemed to bristle, and that puzzled Maisey. “Could I see some identification, please?”

“Sure.” Aaron pulled out his wallet with his photo identification and Maisey did the same. As soon as the woman looked them over, Aaron asked, “Could we get that information now, please?”

“Certainly. Let me look it up.” She piddled around on the computer for a few seconds, then turned back to them. “He’s in the school system in ButlerCounty, Ohio.”

“Oh! Do you by any chance have contact information for him?” Aaron asked.

“No, but I have a phone number for the school we transferred his records to. I’ll be glad to give that to you.”

Aaron nodded politely. “Thank you. That would be very helpful.”

Back in the cruiser, Maisey glanced over at Aaron as he pulled out of the parking lot. “Are we actually going to Ohio?”

Aaron shook his head. “I’ll get Carly to call the sheriff in ButlerCounty, see if he can get in touch with the Vanderboegh woman and maybe we can do a video conference. But if he wants me to, I’ll drive up there. One way or another, I think talking to her and the kid could unravel part of this mystery.”

“What about me?”

“We need to find out more about Hazel’s personal life. Maybe you could talk to her family. They might be able to give you some insight or some idea of who we’re looking for.”

“Okay. I can do that.” Dread filled her chest. She really didn’t want to talk to the dead woman’s family, but at least maybe she’d find something that would make the case move along. Solving it was a priority.

But the biggest priority was trying to have some kind of normal life, and that wouldn’t happen until they knew who had killed Hazel Puckett.

Maisey had made a copy of the coroner’s report to take with her, and after telling Aaron where she’d be, she set out toward Miracle, Kentucky, deep in the mountains. She wasn’t actually going to Miracle; she was going somewhere even more remote, a little spot just north of the Hensley Settlement. Once she’d put the address in her mapping system, she tried to sit back and enjoy the ride.

But the farther she drove, the more apprehensive Maisey became. Something seemed very unsettling about the whole trip, and she couldn’t shake that feeling. It was only about an hour away, and she couldn’t believe she’d never been down there before. The pictures she’d seen of the Hensley Settlement site were interesting enough that she thought it might be a good trip for her and Aaron to make at some point. Murielle would love it. Maybe the McEvers and Harrison families would come with them and make a day of it. Everything about the pictures she’d seen had left her with a feeling

of peace and tranquility.

But when she turned onto a small county highway to head out of Miracle and toward the state line, that sense of peace and tranquility was nowhere to be found. The farther she drove, the more unnerving it seemed. What was wrong? Why was she feeling so weird about the trip? There was another turn to make, so she took that one.

As soon as the car straightened, Maisey felt her heart thud even harder. The one-lane dirt and gravel road was narrow, with no room for two vehicles to pass unless one pulled off the road. Trees grew right along the edges and their branches intertwined above the roadway, almost like a tunnel. Brush so thick that she couldn't see through it grew along the tree line, and seeing what was on the other side was impossible. It was as though she was driving through a chute. She was ascending a rise and when she reached the top, there was a break in the trees, and to the right was a mailbox with the number "409" on it. That was the address on the form, so Maisey turned, and her car began an immediate descent. Weeds grew up in the space between the tire tracks of cars, brushing the undercarriage, and it looked like no one had been there in decades. Were her family members gone? The mailbox hadn't been brand new, but it wasn't falling apart. It looked as though it might still be in use.

There was a curve in the drive, and when she slipped over yet another small rise and started down again, it was all laid out before her. In something that sort of lent itself to the term "clearing" was a house, and a dilapidated one at that. An old truck sat to one side, wheels missing and on blocks, and in front of the porch was some kind of derelict appliance. A skinny old dog stood there, its mouth partly open and tongue hanging out, panting, and she wondered if it would run to the car and try to attack her, but it just stood there. Several smaller trees were growing here and there, all with bottles neck-first over their branches, and a large cast iron kettle sat out front. Unlike most of the ones she was accustomed to seeing, this one had nothing planted in it. There were things hanging all around the rickety front porch, like spoons and forks, wine glasses by their stems, aluminum pie pans, and what looked like bones.

Maisey parked and waited to see if the dog would advance, but it didn't. With careful steps, she moved around the front of the car and gave the dog a once over before she said, "Hey, boy. You doin' okay?" Tail wagging, the old mutt wandered up to her and waited until she scratched behind his ears. He turned and followed her as she headed toward the house, and with the first step on the lopsided stairs, she glanced up. There were three or four god's eyes hanging along with the rest of the stuff on the porch, and their crosspieces were made of animal bones. Great. I've stepped into the seventh circle of Hell, she told herself. Only the sounds of birds chirping and the wind rustling the leaves fell on her ears. Otherwise, it was silent. She reached up to knock on the door when it flew open and a voice said, "I wondered when you'd get here."

Maisey peered into the darkness and saw a tiny, grizzled little woman standing there, her calico dress and grayed apron looking shabbier because of the sunlight outside. "I'm sorry?" Maisey said in barely over a whisper.

"We've been 'specting you. Mammy, she's here." With that, the woman turned and shuffled into the depths of the house. Maisey pondered it for a few seconds, then marched right on in.

What greeted her was a scene reminiscent of the early twentieth century or possibly even the late nineteenth century. Sparse, stark furnishings sat about, and many pieces looked to be hand-hewn. The curtains at the windows were obviously made of flour sacks, and a large, black potbelly stove sat in the middle of the room. One glance told her there was nowhere for a visitor to sit, and she couldn't imagine that they even had any visitors anyway. She'd been standing there for a few seconds, scoping out her surroundings, when she heard a sound.

In the doorway to the next room hung a curtain of sorts, not of beads, but of bones strung together with twine. Maisey wasn't sure what kind of bones they were, but they were from smallish animals, most certainly raccoons, possums, chickens, squirrels, and other things like that. The strands parted and a chair was pushed out

into the room where she stood, a regular chair without wheels but containing a woman, and if she'd thought the one who'd answered the door looked old, well, she was a teenager compared to the woman in the chair. Her skin was so thin that Maisey was sure she could see the relic's blood thrumming in her veins, and her hair was in tufts here and there. Once the chair was situated a few feet from Maisey, the first woman, younger than the second but still not young, said again, "We been 'specting you. This is 'bout Hazel, ain't it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"She dead, ain't she?" the woman asked.

There was no easy way to say it, so Maisey just replied, "Yes, ma'am. I'm afraid she is."

"I knowed it." The woman started to pace, and it made Maisey very nervous. "I tole Mammy here, I said, 'Hazel done got herself killt.' I knowed this was gonna happen."

Here we go , Maisey told herself. "I'm sorry, ma'am. Was she in some kind of trouble?"

"Naw, not that I knowed of. But she were hangin' 'round with some bad folk. I coulda tole her that if'n she come 'round from time to time, but naw. She was too good for the likes a-us."

"So she didn't come around, but you knew about the people she was hanging out with?"

"A-course we knowed. We knowed it all."

"So the sheriff's department contacted you about her death?"

The woman stared at her, a piercing glare that was almost painful. “No. Ain’t nobody tole us nothin’. They don’t give a damn ’bout us. We’s just trash to them city folk.”

“Then how did you know she’d died?”

The woman looked to the crypt keeper in the chair and back at Maisey. “We know all of it.” With a huff, she asked, “Thowed off a bridge, weren’t she?”

The floor seemed to tilt, and Maisey felt nauseous. How had the woman known that if no one told her? “Uh, yes, ma’am. From what we can tell.”

She watched as the old woman turned to the older one, almost as though she was listening intently, then turned back to Maisey. “She says Hazel didn’t drown. It was the fall what killt her.”

What the hell is happening here? Maisey’s brain shrieked. “That’s right.”

Again, the woman turned to the older one, stared, and then asked, “It were the man, weren’t it? The mean one, the important one, who lost all his money.”

“Um, we’re not sure, but we think it had something to do with money.”

“Had somethin’ to do with that fancy man she was havin’ im-pure re-la-tions with, ain’t that right?” the old woman asked, emphasizing every syllable.

“If you mean the man she was dating, then?”

“Datin’? She was lettin’ him roll around on her like a bull on a heifer. They was fornicatin’ like a pair o’ horny rabbits.” She turned back to the older woman, then looked back to Maisey. “Why was she all dressed up for?”

What the hell? Maisey almost yelled, but she managed to stay calm. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

A sound like two sticks being rubbed together came from the oldest woman, and in a second Maisey identified the noise. She was laughing. It wasn’t a hearty laugh?there was nothing hearty left in that old woman?but it was indeed a laugh. The woman doing the talking watched her for a few seconds, then looked at Maisey again. “You know what she’s askin’ ’bout. You seen her.”

Maisey hadn’t been truly afraid until that moment. “What? What are you?”

“You! You the same, you and her!” the old woman said, pointing at the frail old skeleton of a human with one hand and Maisey with the other. “You both seers! Don’t try to deny it, girl. The three-a us here, we know it’s true. You seen her. You seen her bein’ murdered!”

“How do you know that?” Maisey shouted, ashamed that she couldn’t keep control of her voice, that her fear was seeping out and everyone in the room could hear it.

“We can feel it, silly girl! You got the gift!”

“It feels like a curse!” Maisey wanted to cry. And while it was terrifying, it was also... curious.

“I’m shore it do, honey, but it ain’t. Devil didn’t give it to you. Angels did. You gotta make the most of it.” The woman turned back to look at the oldest one, stared for a few seconds, then pivoted back to Maisey. “Okay, I’m-a tell ya what ya come here fer. When Mammy over here,” she said, pointing to the ancient woman, “had me, she were fourteen. When I had my girl, I was fourteen. When she had her girl, she was sixteen. And when that girl had her baby at sixteen, it were Hazel.” Before Maisey could speak, she added, “Yes, yes, Mammy here is Hazel’s great-great-grandma.”

Maisey did the math quickly. Knowing that Hazel was forty-three when she was killed, the old woman was at least one hundred and three years old. “I think the very first words outta Hazel’s mouth when she was old enough to talk were, ‘I’m leavin’ here and I ain’t never comin’ back.’ She hated this place. Didn’t want nothin’ to do with it.”

“So when did she leave?”

“She done so good in high school that she got one-a them... what they call ‘em?”

“Scholarship?” Maisey offered.

“Yep. One-a them scholarship things. Got outta here right away after she graduated,” she said, and Maisey wasn’t about to correct her. “Got a job in town near the university, shared a lil’ place with friends. Didn’t want no part of the hicks out here in the sticks, know what I’m sayin’?”

“I think all kids feel that way about where they grew up,” Maisey said.

“I reckon you’d be right ‘bout that. We was so proud-a her, but she didn’t even invite us to her graduation. Just ignored us like we ain’t people, like she were raised by some animals or somethin’ out in the woods and didn’t have no family. Hurt, ya know?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m sure it did, and I’m sorry for that.”

“So we didn’t see her much. Just ever once in a while. When her mama died with that heart attack all sudden-like, I was glad. At least she didn’t linger and suffer only to know her baby girl weren’t interested in seein’ her in her last days.” Maisey nodded in understanding. Hazel might’ve been eager to get away from where she’d grown up, but she’d totally turned her back on her family, and even though Maisey’s mom had given her grief over her gift, Maisey could never turn her back on Molly.

“You asked me what she was doing all dressed up.” The old woman nodded. “I really don’t know. Dinner maybe? I’m not sure.”

“Uh-huh.” The woman nodded and stood there, almost like she was trying to figure out what to say next. “So did they at least give her a Christian burial? Like put her in the ground and pray over her? ’Cause nobody ever come ’round here to ask us what we thought or wanted.”

That made Maisie’s heart sad. “I think so. I’m not sure, but I can definitely find out and let you know.”

“Would you? We’d ’preciate that.”

“I will. Oh, I never did tell you my name. I’m Maisie Friedman and I’m?”

“A social worker,” the woman interrupted.

Maisie was taken aback. “How’d you know that?”

“Tole you, we know things. I’m Zora, and this is my mammy, Beulah. You best be runnin’ on now. Yore husband gonna be lookin’ for ya.”

“How’d you know that... Right, right. You know things.” Maisie felt like some kind of trick was being played on her, but she wasn’t sure how or why. As she stood to leave, she was struck by the desire to stay and talk to these women. “If I learn anything, I’ll let you know.”

“Thank ya. I know ya didn’t have to come out here to talk to us, but I’m glad ya did. You take care drivin’ home now,” Zora told her, and Maisie smiled. But when she reached for the woman’s hand, Zora pulled hers back. “No shakin’ hands.”

“Oh, sorry,” Maisey said. She’d broken some kind of rule and she hadn’t meant to.

But Zora cleared that right up. “Nothin’ to be sorry ’bout. Just managed to live this long and don’t want no germs, ya know?”

That made sense to the younger woman. “I get it. Y’all take care, okay?”

“We will. Mammy says goodbye too,” Zora said. To Maisey’s surprise, Zora stopped right at the threshold, and a shiver ran up Maisey’s spine.

“Sure is a pretty day out here,” Maisey told her with a smile.

“Yep. Wish I could... Take care now,” Zora said and slammed the door, then opened it right back up and yelled out, “And that there baby’s gonna be a boy.”

Maisey stopped dead and spun. “I’m not pregnant.”

She could hear the very, very old woman laughing again in the background when Zora said, “No. Not yet.” Then the door slammed and it was silent.

Maisey slid behind the wheel, started the car, and headed out. The whole thing had been unbelievably weird. She was four miles down the road before she finally had enough of a signal to make a call, and her favorite deputy’s phone only rang once on her end before he said, “Hey, gorgeous, did it go okay?”

“Yeah. Very weird, but fine. I’ll tell you when I get home. But suffice it to say, they knew nothing. Hadn’t talked to Hazel in a long time. She’d pretty much shunned them.”

“Aww, that’s a shame. I hate to hear of kids doing that to their families.”

“Me too. At least we have a little better picture of who Hazel was, and I’m not impressed.”

She could hear Aaron snort on the other end of the phone. “Based on what you’ve just said, I’m not either.”

“I just know one thing for sure. I’m putting the hat back on tonight.”

“Okay. I can roll with that. Just be careful coming home.”

“Will do. Oh, and the younger of them told me the baby would be a boy.”

There was silence for a few seconds before Aaron asked, “You’re pregnant?”

“No! I told her I’m not pregnant and she just said, ‘Not now.’ But apparently... I don’t want to think about it anymore. I’ll be home in a little while.”

“That’s weird, but okay. See you when you get home.”

“Bye, babe.”

“Bye, beautiful girl.”

Maisey drove along, deep in thought. That had been the strangest encounter she’d ever experienced, and she’d had her share of strange encounters. What would that evening bring? She’d know soon enough.

Before she could get all the way back to town, Aaron had sent her a text.

Come straight to the office.

She pulled up in front of the sheriff's office to find his cruiser sitting there, so she hopped out and powered inside. "Hey, Maisey!" one of the guys yelled.

"Hey! Aaron back there?" she asked, breezing through the outer office toward the back.

"Yep."

"Hey, doll," Aaron called out just as she stepped into his office.

"What's up?"

"I'm about to make a video call. We are. You're sitting in on it."

"Okay. Who are we calling?"

"Alan Vanderboegh's ex-wife, Marsha Chester."

"Oh, she's remarried?"

"Yep. The ButlerCounty sheriff handed her information right over to Carly. I was going to try to contact the kid, but I think I'd rather start with the parent. He said he'd tell her to expect our call." Aaron pulled the paper closer, started tapping on his keyboard, and said, "Here we go."

The funny sound started and it was answered by a woman who looked like she was talking into her cellphone's screen. "Hello?"

"Mrs.Chester? This is Deputy Sheriff Aaron Friedman from the Whitley County Sheriff's Office in Williamsburg, Kentucky. Is this a good time for you?"

“Yes! Oh, god, please tell me you’ve found Alan!”

Maisey knew Aaron could feel her looking at him. “Uh, no. Is he missing?”

“Yes! Please! We need to find him!”

“Mrs.Chester, my wife is here with me. She’s a social worker for the state. Is it okay if I include her in the call?”

“Of course!”

“Hi, Mrs.Chester. My name is Maisey. I’m helping Aaron with this case. So you’re looking for your husband?”

“Ex-husband,” the woman corrected.

“Oh, of course. I’m sorry. Ex-husband,” Maisey repeated.

“Yes. That’s why Marshall is here with me. He wanted to stay there, stay at his school, so we made arrangements for him to stay with Alan most of the time. But then one day he called me and said that he’d been alone at home for three days. Alan had stopped coming home, and then Alan’s girlfriend had disappeared. The only person in and out had been the housekeeper, and when she’d realized the second day that Marshall had been home all night by himself, she stayed because she didn’t want him to be alone. On the third day, she told him he had to call me, so I came down and picked him up. I went to the police station in Barbourville and told them he hadn’t come home, but they didn’t seem to care. Marshall’s been with me ever since, and Alan has never called. He’s never answered his phone.”

“Can you give me that number?” Aaron asked.

“Sure.” They could see her scrambling around on her phone and then she read it off.
“That’s it.”

“We’ll see if we can find the phone. Maybe that will tell us where he is. What do you know about the woman he was dating? HazelPuckett?”

“I know she was a teacher at the school. I know they were living together.”

“Did Marshall say anything about her?”

“No. He liked her okay.” She hesitated for a second, then asked, “Would you like to talk to him?”

“That might be helpful.”

They waited while Marsha yelled for the boy and in just a few seconds, a young teen came into view. “This is a deputy from WhitleyCounty and his wife; she’s a social worker. They’re trying to find your dad and they’d like to talk to you.”

“Okay.” The child looked into the camera and waited.

“Hi, Marshall. I’m Aaron, and this is my wife, Maisey.” Maisey gave him a little wave. “What can you tell us about your dad before he disappeared?”

“He was upset. I don’t know what he was upset about, but he was upset.”

“Anything in particular that you remember?”

“Yeah. A couple of days before he didn’t come home, a man came to the house. He was yelling and screaming and asking for money, but Dad said he didn’t have any. And the man said he’d pay for what he’d done, whatever that meant.”

“Did you recognize the man?”

“No. I’d never seen him before.”

“Okay. What about Ms.Puckett?”

“She cried a lot.”

That’s certainly interesting , Maisey wanted to say, but she didn’t. “Do you know what she was crying about?” Aaron asked the boy.

“No, but I think it was money.”

“Were they fighting and arguing and things like that?”

“No. She just cried. A lot. And Dad kept telling her it would be okay.”

“When was the last time you saw your dad?”

“I don’t know. I don’t... Wait. On the first night that he didn’t come home, I got upset because I had a field trip with Mrs.Conseco’s class the next day and he’d never signed the permission slip. Mrs.Fields signed it for me.”

“Mrs. Fields?”

“Yeah. Our housekeeper. She felt sorry for me so she signed it. So whatever day that was, it was the day before. Hazel couldn’t sign it because she’s a teacher, not a parent.”

“And when was the last time you saw Ms.Puckett?”

“A few days after Dad stopped coming home. She brought me home from school and said she had some errands she had to run, but she never came home. The whole thing was super weird.”

“Why did you think that was weird?” Aaron asked, but Maisey knew.

“Because it seemed strange that all of those things happened just boom-boom-boom . Too coincidental. Does that make sense?”

“It makes perfect sense. If we could come up with a picture, do you think you could identify the man?”

“I think so. It was dark, but he was standing right under the porch light. I could probably recognize him from a picture.”

“Good. If we find out anything, I’ll give you a call back. In the meantime, if you or your mother,” Aaron said, and Marsha waved from behind Marshall, “think of anything else, please, please call me. You have my number now. I really appreciate you taking time to talk to us.”

“Yes, we really do appreciate it,” Maisey added.

“You’re very welcome,” Marsha called out. “Thank you for doing this.”

“You’re welcome, ma’am. Take care, both of you,” Aaron told her and ended the call. Then he sank back into his chair. “Well, that was really interesting.”

“Sure was. What now?”

“I find out when that field trip was. That gives us the beginning of a timeline. We can count forward from that and figure out when all of these things took place. If they

jibe with what we know from the coroner's report, then we've got two issues on our hands?finding the murderer and finding AlanVanderboegh."

"Do you think the man screaming at Hazel was asking about Alan?" Maisey asked, already knowing the answer.

"Absolutely. It only makes sense. I don't think Alan's dead, or if he is, it happened after Hazel's death."

Maisey's mind was running a million miles a minute. If Alan had disappeared first, and that was what Marshall said had happened, where had he gone? Did Hazel know where he was? Or was she as clueless as the man who'd murdered her? Aaron interrupted her reverie. "I've got to run this phone number and see if it pings anywhere."

"Okay. I'm going home to start dinner. I only did one appointment this morning before I went down there, so I lost a whole day of work today," Maisey said, standing.

"You said you'd tell me about the trip," Aaron reminded her.

Maisey shook her head. "Too long. It'll have to wait. Right now, I need to go home where everything is peaceful and quiet. I'll pick up Murielle on the way by."

"Sounds good. See you when I get home. Love you, babe." Aaron leaned over and gave her a light kiss.

"Love you too. See you shortly."

Maisey wandered out of the office and to her car. She needed to pick up Murielle, go home, and do something to relax. But even after Murielle was in the car with her, she

could still hear Zora's voice in her head.

And it just wouldn't go away.

"Is pasketti made from glue?"

Aaron chuckled. "No, baby. It's made from flour and water," Maisy explained.

"But it looks like dried glue," Murielle insisted.

Aaron grinned. "It doesn't taste like dried glue."

Murielle made a horrible face. "Well, no. But maybe kinda."

"Have you been eating dried glue?" Aaron asked, one eyebrow peaked.

"No." He kept staring at her. "Okay, maybe once. BartGorman dared me."

"Don't let people dare you into doing things. It's always things they won't do themselves because they know they're stupid things to do. So they get somebody else to do it instead."

"Well, all I know is pasketti don't taste nothin' like that."

"Spaghetti doesn't taste anything like that," Maisy corrected.

"That's what I said. Don't taste nothin' like that," Murielle repeated.

Maisy let out a sigh. "Just eat and don't worry about what it tastes like. Looks great to me. Its only purpose is to find a way to get the sauce into your mouth." She twirled her fork in the pasta and stuffed a mouthful in. "See? No glue."

Murielle giggled and ate a big bite herself. “You’re right, Mommy. All I taste is the sauce anyway and it’s yummy.”

Maisey smiled. “Thank you.” Hearing Murielle call her Mommy always made her smile. For Maisey, it was the biggest compliment the child could give her.

When dinner was finished, cleaned up, and Murielle was snug in bed, Maisey retrieved the hat from the closet shelf and stepped back into the living room. “Am I doing this?”

Aaron sighed. “I think you should.”

“Okay. Let’s do it.” With Aaron trailing behind her, Maisey led the way out onto the deck. As soon as they were both sitting, she took a deep breath, let it out, and whispered, “Here goes nothing.”

The void was a deep blackness that she hated. Within it was something new, a man’s voice. “I’m the laughingstock of the entire place! Did I deserve that? No, I did not!”

The voice Maisey recognized as Hazel’s chimed in. “I had nothing to do with that!”

“Yeah, but you knew about it!”

“Not really. He did all of that himself. I didn’t help him at all.”

“You helped him spend it,” the man’s voice growled. “My wife’s bugging the hell out of me for a new car and he took all my money and left me with nothing !” the man screamed.

“I’d give it back to you if I had it, but I don’t! And I don’t have access to his accounts!”

As menacing as anything she'd ever heard, the man's voice snarled, "Yeah, well, I think it's time you tell me where he is!"

The sensation of metal bars crossing her back hit her senses. "Oh! Oh, no! Please! What do you want from me?"

"I want to know where he is!" the man bellowed. "Tell me now or I swear I'll?"

"Oh, god, please, no! I don't know where he is! I swear, I don't!"

"You have to know where he is! You can't make me believe that you haven't talked to him!"

"I swear, if I knew, I'd tell you!"

"Maybe he'll care if he finds out you're missing."

Hazel was crying. "It won't make a difference. He doesn't love me anymore, so if you think this will get him here, you're wrong! Please! Please don't! I..."

Maisey could feel herself falling just as before, but it stopped abruptly, and she knew that meant the hat had flown off. A voice seeped into her consciousness. "Babe? Maisey?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm okay. I'm fine." As her eyes opened, she was thankful to see Aaron in her line of vision. "I'm okay."

"Anything new?"

"Yeah. I could see the top half of his face, his eyes, but that's all. And he was definitely looking for Alan. That's why he killed her, because she wouldn't tell him

where Alan was. And she claimed Alan didn't love her anymore and wouldn't come back even if he knew she was in trouble."

"So we're no closer than before." Aaron's voice carried a measure of defeat.

Maisey gave him a tiny smile. "Maybe not."

That made Aaron perk up. "How so?"

"I may not know who it was, but I can tell you this?I recognized his voice. I don't know who he is, but it's someone I've heard talk before. I just don't know who."

"Hmmm. Think on that and maybe it'll come to you."

"Maybe. But at least it's somebody who's probably from around here. Or somebody who's an international celebrity," Maisey said with a giggle.

"Oh, yeah. There's an international celebrity here and they're pushing women off bridges. Because, you know, nobody would ever notice an international celebrity here in town, right?" Aaron had started to laugh. "I mean, they wouldn't stick out like a sore thumb!"

"Nope, of course not!" Maisey laughed too, but deep inside, she felt an uneasiness. Someone she knew, or at least ran into occasionally, had murdered HazelPuckett. That was deeply troubling.

Not to mention totally terrifying.

CHAPTER FIVE

“How goes it?”

“I put the red hat on again last night.”

“And?” Cherilyn posed the question as she and Carly both leaned in toward Maisiey.

Maisiey shook her head as she wiped her mouth with her napkin. “I recognize the voice. I just can’t figure out whose it is.”

Condensation dripped from beneath her fingers as Carly lifted her tea glass. “Maybe you’ll figure it out.”

“Someone from around here?” Cherilyn asked before taking another bite of her panino.

“I don’t know. I really can’t put a finger on it. All I can do is pay attention when I’m out and maybe?”

“That’s what you always say! ‘It’s not my fault!’ Well, it is your fault!” a female voice barked from the booth behind them, totally interrupting Maisiey’s train of thought. There was a low, mumbled response from a voice that Maisiey assumed was male before the woman said, “Why can’t you just be a decent human being? Why do you always have to be up to something? How illegal is it this time, hmmm?”

“Oh, holy shit,” Carly leaned in and whispered to Maisiey and Cherilyn. “I really

don't want to arrest anybody at lunch. Can't I just eat in peace, just this once?"

There was more low mumbling, and then the woman shouted, "I just can't take it anymore! Carry on with your cheating and swindling and hideous bullshit by yourself! I want a divorce!" There was rustling around, and then a well-dressed lady stormed by their table and took off out the door.

Carly tipped her head back and rolled her eyes. "I should've guessed," she murmured.

Maisey was confused. "Should've guessed what?"

"I've gotten called out there half a dozen times in the last two weeks, and it's getting?"

"Hello, ladies," a man's voice purred, and Maisey's heart froze. She'd heard that voice before.

"Good afternoon, MayorCurtis," Carly answered. Maisey was finding it hard to breathe. She knew where she'd heard that voice, and the knowledge paralyzed her with fear.

"Aren't you going to introduce me to your two friends here?" JeffCurtis asked in a tone like honey dripping from his lips.

"Oh, sure. This is CherilynHarrison. Her husband is ShawHarrison, one of the state conservation officers. And this is MaiseyFriedman, Deputy AaronFriedman's wife."

"It's very nice to meet you ladies. You're keeping dubious company. This one here," he said, pointing at Carly, "likes to arrest people for absolutely no reason."

"If I make an arrest, Mr.Mayor, I assure you it's for good reason," Carly answered,

her tone sweet but her words biting.

“I suppose we’ll let the court figure that one out.” He stopped and smiled. “Friedman... Aren’t you the woman who put on the coat and...”

“Yes, sir,” Maisey mumbled, barely able to speak.

“Ah-ha. What’s next? Slippers? Scarves?” He hesitated just a moment before he added, “A hat, perhaps?” The smile he directed at Maisey made her stomach churn. “Pleasure meeting you, ladies. SheriffMcEvers,” he said, dipping his head, and he walked away without ever looking back.

It wasn’t until the door closed behind him on his way out that Maisey took a breath. Her heart was pounding out of control, and she knew her hands were shaking. “Boy, he’s an arrogant sumbitch,” Cherilyn whispered.

“An arrogant, eavesdropping sumbitch.” That was the moment that Carly got a good look at Maisey. “Honey, what’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“That’s him,” Maisey whispered.

“Yeah. Mayor Asshole. He’s arrogant and crooked as the day is long. I wish I could?”

“That’s him,” Maisey whispered again.

Carly tipped her head and her brow furrowed. “Yeah?”

“He’s the one I saw. His voice... That’s the voice I heard while I was wearing the hat.”

“Him?” Carly almost shrieked, and Maisey threw up a finger to shush her. “Sorry.

Him? He's the one?" Maisie nodded. "Holy shit. How am I ever going to prove that?"

"He's not the crispiest chip in the bag," Cheryl answered. "He's arrogant enough that he'll offer you the rope to hang him with if you're patient."

"I'm not that patient. If he threw a woman off a bridge, what else is he capable of?" Carly asked. "I'll sic Aaron on him and see what we can find out."

Something about that made Maisie shudder. She didn't want Aaron anywhere near the murderer. "Please, Carly, can't you let somebody else do it? Can't one of the other deputies..."

"Aaron's in line for a promotion to detective because he's good at it. This might be the case that lets me go ahead and move him up. Now don't you worry. Your husband can take care of himself. He's proven it dozens of times, and he's got the smarts and know-how to get the job done. He'll be fine, I promise."

Maisie wasn't convinced. Somehow, that turd in a mayor's suit had managed to kill a woman and get away with it. And she didn't want her husband to be his next victim.

"Finally got a court order for the phone data," Aaron announced at dinner that evening after Maisie had told him what happened during lunch.

"And?"

"It has big gaps in it, so I think he has it turned off most of the time. But when it's on, it's out near the airport somewhere."

"What's out there?" Maisie asked. It wasn't like their airport was much of anything, and being in a rural area, there wasn't a lot around it either.

“I’m not sure. But it’s in the vicinity of the old cement plant, according to some of the guys.”

“I know where that is. It’s on the old road, the portion from before they made the four-lane.”

“If you say so. I don’t know where that is, but it shouldn’t be too hard to find.”

“It’s not.” Maisey spent a minute describing the area to Aaron. There were only a couple of houses in the general vicinity, and they’d been abandoned for years. “I have to believe if he’s hiding out, it would be in one of those houses.”

“Guess we’ll find out tomorrow. Oh, wait?I’ve got court tomorrow.”

“Court?”

“Yeah. A guy I arrested a while back has his trial tomorrow. Caught him red-handed trying to load an engine block on a flatbed trailer, and he claims he didn’t know it wasn’t his. I still can’t believe the court will hear the case, but he’s been screaming and yelling about his innocence since the very beginning.”

“People are fools,” Maisey mumbled, stirring her fork around in her mashed potatoes.

“I meet a lot of them in this job. I miss the FBI sometimes. At least the ones I dealt with when I was with the feds were typically pretty smart. These people... Bunch of idiots.”

She nodded. “Yeah. Same in my job. It’s like, ‘No, how could you ever think locking your eight-year-old in a dog crate and feeding her nothing but wet bread is okay?’ But some of them seem to be completely dumbfounded by the idea that kids aren’t pets. Makes me sick.” She placed her fork on her plate. Then she remembered

something. “By the way, I could’ve sworn somebody was following me this afternoon.”

“Why?”

“Why were they following me?”

Aaron shook his head. “No. Why did you think someone was following you?”

“There was a car behind me in traffic. I mean, like three cars behind. But every time I turned, it turned.”

“Could’ve just been going to the same place. Where were you going?”

“To the grocery for this stuff,” she said, gesturing to the table. “And then when I left the store too. And I thought I saw it across the street just a little while ago.”

“Is it there now?” Aaron asked, so Maisey got up and headed to the window. She pulled the curtains back and peered out, but it was dark and hard to see. “Well?”

“If it’s out there, I don’t see it.” As she made her way back to the table, she asked, “Am I putting on the hat tonight?”

“That’s totally up to you, babe.”

“I want to. I want to see if I can get a look at his face, know for certain it’s him.”

“Okay. As soon as Murielle gets home from Richard and Jackie’s and we get her down, we’ll do it.” Maisey wanted to scream, What’s this we business? but she didn’t. He was being supportive, and that was more than most people in her situation could hope for.

It was a little past the usual time when Murielle got home?Richard had stopped for gas?and it took another thirty minutes to get her into bed. When she was finally tucked in, Maisey and Aaron sat and talked for almost an hour, giving her plenty of time to get soundly to sleep. While they sat, Aaron told Maisey to drink a glass of wine. “That might loosen you up a bit.” She had to admit that it wasn’t a bad idea.

She was getting a little drowsy when Aaron came back from checking on Murielle. “Okay. She’s sawing logs. I think we’re in the clear.”

“Good. I’ll get the hat and meet you on the deck.”

It made her smile to see that, instead of the usual vintage string lights, Aaron had lit a couple of candles. “You ready?”

“Yep. Let’s get this done.” Maisey plopped down on the ottoman, took a deep breath, and pulled on the hat.

Unlike before, the darkness wasn’t quite as threatening, and the man’s voice was just as clear as it had been the previous night. “I’m the laughingstock of the entire place! Did I deserve that? No, I did not!”

Hazel’s voice came next. “I had nothing to do with that!”

“Yeah, but you knew about it!”

“Not really. He did all of that himself. I didn’t help him at all.”

The man’s voice was pure fury. “You helped him spend it. My wife’s bugging the hell out of me for a new car and he took all my money and left me with nothing !”

“I’d give it back to you if I had it, but I don’t! And I don’t have access to his

accounts!” Hazel announced loudly.

And there it was?his face. Illuminated by the low light, she could still make out his features as he growled, “Yeah, well, I think it’s time you tell me where he is!”

The metal bars were cold against her back, and Maisey knew what came next. “Oh! Oh, no! Please! What do you want from me?”

“I want to know where he is! Tell me now or I swear I’ll?”

Hazel’s panicked voice shrieked, “Oh, god, please, no! I don’t know where he is! I swear, I don’t!”

“You have to know where he is! You can’t make me believe that you haven’t talked to him!”

“I swear, if I knew, I’d tell you!”

“Maybe he’ll care if he finds out you’re missing.”

“It won’t make a difference.” Hazel was sobbing. “He doesn’t love me anymore, so if you think this will get him here, you’re wrong! Please! Please don’t! I…”

There it was again, the feeling of falling, but as she looked up, she could see that face peering down at her over the bridge railing. Then it stopped, just like always, and Aaron’s familiar voice whispered, “Babe, you okay?”

It took a few seconds for Maisey’s heartbeat to calm. When it did, all she had energy for was a breathless, “It was him.”

“Okay. Now I’ve got to catch him somehow at something. I don’t know what. But

something. I'll think on that. Maybe day after tomorrow I will have come up with something concrete."

Two days. She'd have to wait for two days to possibly get an answer on where Alan Vanderboegh was.

Or maybe not.

They left at the same time the next morning. The only thing Aaron had mentioned during breakfast was his court appearance, so Maisey wasn't too worried. He'd be busy, and she'd be able to carry out her plan without him ever knowing, unless she found Alan. Then she'd have something to crow about?the social worker who beat out the deputy sheriff to find the missing person and flush out the person of interest.

But first, she had two appointments to go to, and she wasn't looking forward to either of them. The first one went exactly as she expected, with the mom swearing that she prepared three meals a day and the child looking like he hadn't had anything to eat in weeks. While Maisey was there, he tried to climb onto the cabinet to reach a box of cereal, and when he hit it with his little fingers, a roach ran out from under it. She offered the mom additional counseling, but she knew she'd be talking to her supervisor about the situation later.

But the second was a surprise. The lady opened the door, and Maisey could smell cinnamon. When she stepped inside, it was like being in a completely different apartment than the one she'd visited two weeks earlier. Instead of the mess she'd seen on her earlier visit, the apartment was neat and straightened up, and every surface was clean. The woman was beaming as she showed Maisey around, pointing out the clean bathroom, then took her to the child's bedroom. In the middle of the floor, the little girl was playing with plastic blocks and dolls, and she was clean. Even though her clothes didn't match, they were clean too, and her unmade bed had clean sheets on it. It was a far cry from the shape it had been in two weeks earlier. When Maisey

questioned the mom, the woman said, “I was just so depressed, but I cleaned up the living room and I couldn’t believe how much better I felt, so I kept going. Now I’m excited to get up in the mornings, it only takes about an hour to maintain, and I feel healthier. And I feel like a better mother.”

Maisey told the mom that she’d be back in a few weeks to see if there were any services she could offer them, and asked the woman to make a list of things she could use to make her life and parenting easier. When they parted, Maisey slipped behind the wheel of her car, drove two blocks, parked, and sobbed. Most days, her job was harder than anyone could imagine, dealing with people in poverty and filth. This woman had taken the initiative to make her life, and the life of her child, better. That was rare. Most just blamed everything on someone or something else, but she’d shouldered the responsibility, and for the first time in a long time, Maisey felt like she’d actually made a difference in someone’s life.

When she’d finished with her crying jag, she pulled out onto the street, stopped at the fast food restaurant down the block, and got herself a milkshake. Then she headed for the area she’d been hoping to get to all morning.

The roads out near the airport were quiet, and there was no traffic, so she had no trouble slowing down to look around. Based on the location Aaron had explained to her, she looked at the two little houses. Neither of them looked like anyone had been around them in ages. She’d learned a lot from Aaron, and she scrutinized. There was no grass pushed down anywhere as though someone had walked or driven on it, and there didn’t seem to be a back way in, so no one had come in that way. She was about to pull away when her phone rang, and she smiled just before she hit DECLINE . Why was he calling her? He was supposed to be in court. Had he forgotten something? If she declined his call, he’d just assume she was with a client, so when it rang a second time, she did the same. He’d be furious if he found out where she was and what she was doing.

Maisey kept driving, but there was very little else out there. The old cement plant loomed up ahead, and she drove straight toward it. There was a parking spot across the road, so she stopped there and took a good look around.

Weeds were everywhere, and there were no signs of life. As she surveyed her surroundings, she noticed that there were no other structures anywhere... except about a hundred yards from the cement plant. There, almost invisible, was a shed of some kind, and something about it made her want to go and take a look inside. Before she could stop herself, she was out of the car and headed toward it on foot, looking around as best she could as she walked.

The door to the shack wasn't on the front, so Maisey quietly skirted it, then stepped up to the door on the back. A broken padlock lay a few feet away, and the door was scratched and scarred from where someone had worked to cut the lock. It only took a few seconds for her to make her decision, and she grabbed the handle on the door and peered inside.

Instantly, a hand grabbed her hair, fingers winding tightly into it, and dragged her inside. She heard the door slam behind her, and a male voice hissed, "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"Wait! Wait! It's okay! I'm not going to hurt you!" Maisey cried out, and he let go of her hair. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to scare you."

"Who are you?" the man demanded. It was dark, and Maisey was having trouble seeing his face.

"My name is Maisey. I'm trying to find Alan Vanderboegh."

"What do you want with m... him?"

“I just want to talk to him. Just for a minute. Do you know where he is?” she asked, knowing full well it was him. Even with the scraggly beard, the unkempt clothes, and the dim light, it was obviously him. Maisey willed her heartbeat to calm. “I just want to talk. That’s all. I have news of his girlfriend.”

“Hazel? Is Hazel okay?” he whispered, and she could tell he was afraid of the answer just by his tone.

“No. Hazel’s not okay. Hazel’s dead.”

“What? How? When?”

Maisey was feeling bolder. “The mayor killed her.”

“What? Are you serious? Why Hazel?” Alan whined.

I’m not sugar-coating this bullshit , Maisey told herself. He needs to understand the ramifications of his actions. “Because he was looking for you and she couldn’t tell him where you were.”

“Oh, god. No. No, I never meant for that to happen. I knew he was angry, but not that angry.”

Play stupid , she thought. “Why would he be angry?”

“Because I took all that money. It wasn’t supposed to happen like that. I really did intend to open the data mining operation! Really, I did! But it kept getting more and more expensive to do, and cryptocurrency rates were growing more volatile, and I finally just decided to cut my losses and run with the money. Hazel was supposed to join me, and I wondered what happened to her.”

“How in the world are you living out here?” Maisey asked.

“I wait until it gets really dark and I go to the convenience store about twelve miles away. Plus I gave a guy my car in exchange for his old beater, so nobody knows what I’m driving. I was waiting for Hazel, hoping she’d be here any day... Now what do I do?”

“I think you should turn yourself in to the police, because the mayor is looking for you, and he already killed Hazel. If he?”

Bright light flooded the little building and a menacing voice said, “Uh-huh. Thought I’d find you here.”

Maisey wheeled toward the voice, but before she could say anything, she heard Alan ask, “How did you find me?”

“Followed this psychic wannabe. I knew she’d lead me straight to you. Before you say anything, stupid,” he said, pointing toward Maisey, “let me tell you that I checked and your husband is in court today, so there’s no way out of this. And now, Alan, you’re going to tell me where my money is.”

“I don’t have it!” Alan yelled.

“Of course you don’t. Where’d you put it?”

“It’s in a safe deposit box.”

The gun the mayor was holding rose as he pointed it toward Alan. “Where?”

“At First National Depository in Corbin.”

Mayor Curtis stared at him for a few seconds before he exploded. “And where’s the fucking key, Alan? Give me the key!”

“It’s in the console of the car out there.” Alan’s hand went to his pocket.

“You’d better be careful, Alan,” Jeff murmured.

“I’m just getting my car keys! Here.” Alan pulled the keys from his pocket and tossed them toward Jeff. “It’s on a Linley Motors keyring. Box twelve eighty-one.”

“I didn’t see a car.”

“It’s out past the weeds by the airport fence.”

“Okay. And you’re coming with me,” Jeff told Maisey as he pointed the gun at her. “Try anything funny and I’ll shoot you. And if you try anything funny,” he told Alan, “I’ll shoot her and it’ll be on your conscience. Come on.” He opened the door and waved the gun between Maisey and the opening. “Let’s go get this key.”

When they got to the car, Jeff handed Maisey the car keys and made her retrieve the safety deposit box key. As soon as they got back to the shack, he grinned. “Here. Put these on, but through that pipe there,” he said as he tossed a pair of handcuffs to Alan. Maisey watched as Alan handcuffed himself to the pipe. “Now we’re going on a little adventure, Mrs.Friedman. Let’s go.” Maisey didn’t see a car anywhere, so it didn’t surprise her when he marched straight up to hers. “You got a cell phone?”

“Yeah. In the car.”

“Get in and turn it off.” Maisey did as he said. No one would be able to find her without the phone’s signal. She felt doomed. “Now, you’re going to drive to that bank and you’re going to open that safe deposit box. What did he say the number

was?"

"Twelve eighty-one," Maisey answered. She knew once they had the money, he'd bring her back out to the shack and kill her and Alan. There was no doubt in her mind.

They drove into town, and Maisey cursed the fact that Aaron was in Williamsburg, but if he'd known what she was up to, he would've been furious. As they drove along, she tried to think of ways to get away. Maybe she could tip off the people at the bank somehow. Problem was, she didn't bank there, and no one knew her. If she knew someone who worked there, she couldn't think of who it could be.

They pulled up to the bank and parked in the side parking lot and climbed out of the car. "Remember, I'll be right behind you," MayorCurtis said. "Everybody knows me, so if I tell them you're with me, they won't think anything about it. But I'll still have this pistol trained at your back, so don't buck me, Mrs.Friedman. I fully intend to get my money back today." With that, they stepped inside the front doors.

"Hello, Mr.Mayor! Can we help you with something today?" an older gentleman asked.

"Yes. I need to get into my safe deposit box, and I require a witness, so Mrs.Friedman agreed to be my witness. She's a family friend." Maisey gave the man a weak smile.

"Certainly! Come right this way. Let's just step into the vault. What's the number?"

MayorCurtis looked at Maisey. "Twelve eighty-one."

"Yes, yes. Right here. Your key?" Maisey handed the gentleman her key, and he pushed it in with his own, turned them, and pulled out the box, then placed it on the marble-topped table in the middle of the room. "Here we go. I'll give you all some

privacy. Let me know if you need any help.”

“Yes, sir, we sure will.” As soon as he was out of sight and the privacy door was closed, Jeff opened the box. “Oh, my. Look at all the thousand-dollar bills. I’ve never seen so many! Put these in your bag, and don’t try anything funny.” Maisey picked up the money with shaking hands and started stuffing it into her bag, with Jeff holding the gun, pointed toward her, the whole time. When it was all in there, she closed the box. “Uh, I’ve never done this before,” he mumbled. “Do we call him back in to put it back? Or do we put it back? Or what?”

Maisey shrugged. “I have no idea.”

“Uh, sir,” Jeff said, cracking the door open. “We’re finished.”

“Good, good! I’ll put the box back. You have a pleasant afternoon, and if we can help you with anything else, just let us know.” He breezed past Maisey and Jeff, so the mayor gave her a little shove to send her out toward the entrance. As soon as they reached the car, he turned toward her. “If you do anything stupid, I’ll start shooting and innocent people will get hurt.”

“I’m not well-known for doing stupid shit,” Maisey grumbled. Except for this. This was stupid, she griped internally. Why had she gone looking for Alan alone? Because she was stubborn and headstrong, and she knew it. But those were things Aaron loved about her, right? Except that if Jeff didn’t finish her off, Aaron would. She was pretty sure of that.

She kept trying to figure out a way to signal someone, but she couldn’t think of anything. When they reached the little shack, Jeff got out with the gun still pointed at her. “Get out and get inside. Now.” Maisey grabbed her bag and headed for the building with Jeff right behind her.

They stepped inside and the mayor closed the door. “This is where we part company. I have my money?”

“You have more than your money. You have everybody else’s too. Are you going to return their money to them?” Alan asked forcefully.

“Are you kidding? For all they know, you took it all and ran off. I’m not giving anybody anything except a bullet to the two of you. It’ll be over, and I’ll be done with ?”

“Ooooo, this looks like the perfect spot! Come on, baby!” a female voice rang out from somewhere outside.

“Did you bring the weed, babe?” a male voice asked.

“Uh, yeah. You think I’m totally useless? Of course I brought the weed!”

“Who the fuck is that?” Jeff whispered.

“How should we know? It’s obviously not us,” Alan answered with a grimace.

“This tree over here looks perfect. Let’s do a little smokin’ and a lotta lovin’,” the female voice said, laughing. For some reason, it sounded familiar, but Maisey wasn’t sure why. “Come on! We’re burnin’ daylight!”

“I guess I’ll have to get rid of them too,” Jeff said, tucking the gun into the back of his waistband.

“No! Just wait them out,” Maisey said, hoping he’d leave the two young people alone. They hadn’t done anything wrong except to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“You think I’m hanging around with the two of you? Not a chance.” The mayor opened the door, and Maisey held her breath.

She could hear laughing and squealing, and then JeffCurtis’ voice. “Hey! Hey, you two, can you get the hell outta here? This is my place where I come to think and meditate, and you’re screwing everything up. Too loud. Get your pot and your booze and get the hell outta here.”

“No! We have as much right to be here as you do,” the woman shouted, and Maisey cringed as she crept to the door to peer out.

“Oh, is that so? Well, I don’t think?”

“This is Deputy Aaron Friedman. Put your weapon down and you won’t be hurt,” a voice boomed from somewhere extremely near the shed, and Maisey couldn’t believe it. From the crack of the door’s opening, she could see a woman and a man standing under the tree?DeputiesBeverly Yeager and RodneyVickers were standing there, guns drawn. Before she could blink, Aaron appeared, jogging past the corner of the building straight to the mayor and forcing his hands behind his back. “JeffCurtis, you’re under arrest for the murder of HazelPuckett and the abduction of MaiseyFriedman. You have the right to an attorney. If you?”

Maisey didn’t hear the rest. She crumpled to the shed’s dirt floor in tears. Before Aaron could finish reading the mayor his rights, Beverly was opening the shack’s door. “Maisey! You okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m fine. Just shook up. And Alan over here... I found him in the process.”

Beverly grinned as Alan whined, “Could you please take these cuffs off me? They’re cutting off my circulation.”

“Oh, I’ll take them off all right, and I’ll put my own right back on you. There’s a host of charges waiting for you back at the department.” Beverly reached down a hand and helped Maisey to her feet.

“How did y’all find me?” Maisey asked. “My phone was turned off.”

“Aaron has one of those programs installed on his phone that tells him where you are. The last place was here, so that’s where we started looking. Good thing too. And what are you doing out here by yourself?”

“That’s a really good question. I’d love to hear the answer to it,” a deep male voice said, and Maisey turned to find Aaron glaring at her.

“I, um, I knew you couldn’t come out until tomorrow, and I had some time, so?”

“We’ll talk about this at home. Right now, get in the car and go there. Take a shower and try to relax.”

“I’ll pick up Murielle on the way and?”

“No. I called Cherilyn. She’s taking Murielle home with them. And Carly told me to take the rest of the day off. So go. You’ve done enough for one day.” With that, he turned back to his cruiser and took Jeff with him. An embarrassed Beverly led Alan out to her cruiser, and Vickers left with her. Maisey stood there in the middle of what minutes earlier had surely been her last stand, thankful to be alive but a little afraid of what lay ahead for her that evening.

She was sure it wouldn’t be pretty.

The drive home had been miserable. All the way there, she could see Aaron’s face in her mind, the hurt and anger and fear there, and it cut her to the core. Why had she

done that, gone out there by herself?

Then it hit her?she'd very nearly been killed. She cried all through her shower and as she dried her hair. Wrapped in her big fluffy bathrobe, she sat on the sofa with a sense of dread. She'd almost gotten herself calmed down when the front door opened, and a fresh torrent started. Instead of sitting down beside her and wrapping his arms around her, Aaron walked right past her, poured himself a glass of bourbon, then sat down in an adjacent chair. When she worked up the courage to look at him, he was frowning. "Maisey, what the fuck did you think you were doing?"

"I wanted to find Alan! I wanted to do what I'm supposed to, find the person who killed Hazel!"

"By very nearly getting yourself killed? What would that have accomplished? Even though she drove me crazy and she was my ex, it was hard enough losing Bailey. What if I'd lost you? Where would that leave me? And Murielle? And your parents? I swear, Maisey, don't you think of anybody but yourself?"

It would've been more merciful if he'd taken a knife and stabbed her in the heart. Hearing him say those words hurt unlike anything else she'd ever experienced. "No! I was thinking of Hazel!"

"Hazel's dead, Maisey! And you'd leave all of the living behind to avenge her death? What kind of trade-off is that? It tells us that you don't value our relationships at all. Not at all. And that really, really hurts."

"That's not true!" Maisey couldn't get to him fast enough, and she fell to her knees in front of him, her hands on his knees. "Please! Don't say that! You and Murielle are the dearest things in the world to me! Don't you see? Having a murderer out there, someone who could potentially hurt other people, who could hurt the two of you? I couldn't stand the thought!" She was blubbing, and she didn't care. Aaron had

never been as angry with her as he was in that moment, and she was scared.

“He wasn’t going to hurt us, Maisey. You can’t justify it that way. I love you and I want a life with you, but I can’t go through this again. You need to decide what’s really important to you.”

“But I have! There’s no decision!”

“From where I sit, that’s not true.” Aaron stood and looked down at her. “Think about it. We’ll talk in the morning.” Before she could say anything, he set his glass on the table and walked out the front door.

Maisey was horrified. She’d ruined her marriage chasing after a killer for a dead woman. The man was being brought to justice, but what about her? How would she pick up the pieces of her life? And where was Aaron going? Was he coming back?

Day turned to evening, and then to night, but Maisey didn’t turn on a light. She didn’t move. She sat on the floor, arms hugging her knees to her chest, crying. She didn’t know how long she’d been sitting there when the front door opened and his voice questioned, “Maisey?”

“I’m right here.”

The light nearest the door snapped on, and she could hear him moving into the room, then the sound of his jeans on the sofa as he sat down. “Babe, come up here.”

It was hard to get up from sitting on the floor for so long, so it took her a minute, but she managed. When she reached the sofa, she stood there, unsure if she should sit down, until he patted the cushion beside him. Maisey sat, afraid to reach out to touch him, just waiting, eyes down. She’d made a grave mistake, and she understood that.

“First, I told you I’d get to it tomorrow. And I would’ve. I had every intention?”

“I know! I’m sorry!” she cried out.

“Don’t interrupt me. Let me say what I need to say. I had every intention of following up on it tomorrow, and I could’ve taken care of it in no time without endangering anybody else. Second, I tried to call you and you rejected my calls. Two of them.” Maisey wanted to explain, but she knew better. “That’s a trust-buster if ever there was one. Third, you drove straight into harm’s way with no thought for anybody else, just you and a dead woman. Fourth, you made me miss court, which could’ve gotten the whole case thrown out. Thank god JudgeBeacon was on the bench today and he was understanding. Next time I doubt he will be. And speaking of next time, that’s fifth?there can’t be a next time.”

“There won’t be a next time. I promise. I absolutely, positively promise.”

“There’d better not be. That’s going to be a deal-breaker for me. If there’s a next time, it’ll be the last time. Period. I can’t do this again. The thought of losing you...” To Maisey’s shock, a tear rolled down Aaron’s cheek. “I love Murielle, but without you, I’m worthless. You’re my whole world. Murielle will grow up and go her own way, but you’ll still be here with me, and I don’t want that to disappear on me, not because you’re stubborn and bullheaded.”

“It won’t. I’ll never do anything like that again. And I made a decision.”

He perked a little. “What’s that?”

“I will never, never, never buy another piece of used clothing. Won’t try any on. Won’t take any from a friend. If it looks like it was bought and returned because the original tags aren’t on it, I’ll pass. I’ll check the bottoms of shoes before I try them on. I won’t wear anything I haven’t bought brand new from a store. And I won’t put

down anything that's mine and walk away in case it gets swapped out like the hat. I'll be careful. I promise."

Aaron let out a heavy sigh. "Good. That's a good step."

Maisey trembled with fear as she asked, "Are we good?"

"Yeah. We're good. I love you, Maise. You're the only woman I want to spend my days with, but you drive me crazy sometimes."

Something flashed across her mind. "I've just got one favor to ask."

Aaron's eyes widened. "From where I sit, you're not due any favors!"

"It's not bad. I'd just like to be the one to tell Hazel's family that we got the guy." Aaron frowned. "That you got the guy." He smiled. "I feel like I owe them that."

"Okay. I think I can make that happen. But I take you, okay?"

"Okay. That's fine. Can we go tomorrow?"

Aaron rolled his eyes. "Yes. We'll go tomorrow and it'll be over."

As far as Maisey was concerned, that was the end.

CHAPTER SIX

“I have to go in here and tell the sheriff what we’re doing. Carly wasn’t there to call him, and I feel like I owe him that, to be coming into his county in uniform in a cruiser.”

“I agree,” Maisey said with a nod.

“I’ll be right back.” She watched as he disappeared into the Bell County Sheriff’s Office’s building and thought about how she’d tell Hazel’s folks. What should she say? And how should she say it? She figured it would come to her when she got there.

But when Aaron came back to the car, he had a strange look on his face. “What? What happened?” Maisey asked. “Did he tell you no?”

He sat there for a few seconds, then turned to face Maisey. “You actually talked to them?”

“Yeah. Two old women. Her great-grandma and her great-great-grandma. That woman is older than dirt.”

“You’re sure that’s who they were?”

“Well, if not, who were they?”

Aaron stopped for a second, and Maisey wondered what he was about to say. When

he finally spoke, she felt faint. “Maise, the deputy in there said nobody’s lived there in over thirty-five years. Nobody. Those women died long ago.”

“That’s not possible! I talked to them!” Maisey almost shouted. What the hell? Why would the deputy say that? “Take me out there! I’ll show you!”

Aaron snapped on his seat belt. “Well, okay then. Let’s go.”

They drove along, and Maisey enjoyed the scenery. It really was a beautiful part of the state, and the trees were full and majestic. They turned down the little lane just as Maisey had, but when they came out of the trees at the top of the hill with the drive there on the right, the mailbox that had been there when she’d visited was on the ground and crushed, plus it looked like it had been that way for a while. “What the hell?”

“What?”

“The mailbox. It was on the post, and it sure didn’t look like that.”

“That mailbox hasn’t been on a post in twenty years, babe. Down this way?” he asked and pointed.

“Yes.” The weeds between the tire tracks were much higher than they had been before, and Maisey waited, holding her breath.

There sat the house, but it didn’t look the same. There was no glass in any of the windows, and the curtains had rotted away. And the house... It was impossible that anyone lived there. The roof was partially caved in, and most of the things that had been hanging from the porch were either on the porch floor or gone. The dog she’d seen before greeted them, even skinnier than he’d been earlier. Maisey crept toward the house, Aaron right behind her, and knocked on the door. When no one answered, she turned the knob, and the door swung open.

Nothing. The things that had been in the house were mostly gone. Only the chair the old woman had sat in remained, and she couldn't believe her eyes. There were a couple of broken dishes on the floor, and what few cooking utensils remained were scattered about. The mattress on the old bed was rotted and the center had pretty much disintegrated. "Holy shit."

"Did it look like this before?"

"No. I mean, it was filthy and pitiful, but it was lived in."

"Babe, nobody's lived here in years. That's clear."

"I don't understand! I checked out what they said, and everything they told me was true. I just don't get it." She turned to find that Aaron had wandered outside, and she followed him as he walked toward the tree line.

There, in the shade of a large oak, was a small family cemetery. "What were their names?"

Maisey stood there in shock. Near the back was a small stone that read, BeulahPuckett , and her birth and death dates. Nearer to the front was another, ZoraPuckett , and the same, a birth and death date. And they'd both been dead well over twenty-five years. "Hazel was a little girl when they died."

"I take it those two were them?" Maisey nodded. "How..."

"I have no idea. Let's go. This is giving me the creeps."

"Okay, but hang on. I've gotta go."

"Seriously?"

“Yeah. I’ll just step back here into the trees...” Maisie shook her head as she watched him go, then turned back toward the house.

And there was Zora, on the porch, waving at her.

“Aaron! Aaron, get out here! There she is! Aaron!” When he didn’t answer, she turned toward him. “Aaron! Zora’s on the porch! You’ve gotta see! She’s?”

Aaron stepped through the tree line. “Where? I don’t see anything.”

Maisie whirled back around and... nothing. There was no one there. “I just saw her! I swear, I did! You don’t believe me!”

“I do. Maisie, if there’s anything I’ve learned from being married to you, it’s to believe you. Because if you saw it, then you saw it. It was really there. I’m just the one who’s not talented enough to see it.”

Maisie started back toward the house. “You don’t believe me. I know you don’t.”

“But I do!” Aaron started to laugh. “Why else would I have driven all the way out here?”

But Maisie had reached the porch again, and she stopped and gasped. “Look!”

On the porch’s old rickety deck lay a feather, a rock placed carefully on top of it to keep it from blowing away. Tied around its hollow shaft was a narrow red ribbon. “I’ll be a son of a gun,” Aaron whispered.

“Believe me now?” Maisie almost crowed.

“I never doubted but, wow.”

“They’re thanking me.” Something touched her hand, and she looked down to find the bedraggled old dog standing there. Maisey turned her head toward Aaron. “We have to take this dog with us. He’s starving.”

Aaron looked at the pitiful beast for what felt like a full minute to Maisey before he finally said, “Okay. Put him in the back of the cruiser and we’ll take him to the vet.”

“Thank you! Come on, boy. Let’s get you fixed up.”

The drive back was uneventful, and when they stopped at the vet’s office, the poor dog had trouble even walking because he was so weak, so Aaron picked him up and carried him inside. The vet told them he’d give them a call to apprise them of the dog’s condition and see what he could do to help the animal.

By the time bedtime rolled around, Maisey was exhausted. It had been a weird day, and she only had one more request. Then she’d be done with all of it for good.

She absolutely, positively would.

It had taken a lot of time and effort, and not a small amount of money, which Maisey had insisted on contributing herself. They followed the van down the little road until it crested the hill, then headed down toward the house. When they reached it, the van continued, but Aaron parked his truck up by the house and he and Maisey walked on down.

The diggers had been there three days earlier, so the ground was a little damp, but it was firm enough to support the van. When it stopped, the two men got out, and between them and the Friedmans, they carried the simple coffin to the grave, laid it on the straps, and between the four of them, lowered it into the ground. “Thank you all so much for helping,” Maisey told the men.

“Thank you for asking us. We knowed the Pucketts. They was good folk, and she

deserves to be out here with them,” one of the men said quietly. Maisey and Aaron watched as they climbed back into the van, then they each picked up a shovel and started shoveling.

It took them a couple of hours, but they got the dirt back into the grave, including the mound on top, and they were done. “There. All finished,” Aaron said and wiped his hands on his jeans.

“Thanks for helping, babe,” Maisey said, then picked up the flowers she’d brought with her and placed them on the grave. “The monument company said they’d bring out the stone in a couple of days and that’ll be that.”

Aaron stopped and smiled at his wife. “You’re an extraordinary woman, Maisey. Not many people would’ve gone to these lengths to make sure she was laid to rest out here with her family.”

“It was the least I could do. Now she’s back with her family.” Her phone rang, and she slipped it from her pocket and looked at it. “Vet.” As soon as she hit ACCEPT, she chirped, “Hello!”

“Hi, Mrs. Friedman?”

“Yes?”

“This is Dr.Jernigan’s office. The dog is doing great. Got fluids into him and he’s really perked up. The doctor says he thinks the dog is about four years old, but it’s impossible to tell. Anyway, he’s almost ready to be released, so where is he going from here? Shelter? Rescue?”

Maisey cut her eyes toward Aaron. She knew he understood her unspoken question. Just as she was about to come right out and ask, he nodded. “He’s coming home with us. We’ll come this afternoon and pick him up.”

“Great! He’s a really sweet guy. Everybody here loves him. See you this afternoon.”

“Yes, and thank you.” Maisy shot Aaron a shy smile. “Thanks.”

“You have a bond with that dog. You and that dog are the only ones who could see his mistresses, and that means something.” Aaron stepped toward her, then held out his hand. “Come on. Let’s go pick up our dog and go home.”

“I have some clothes I kept. You’re welcome to them if you want them,” Carly said with a smile.

“No. I promised Aaron that I’d never, never wear anything that wasn’t brand new again. But thanks. Oh! I’ve gotta get going! We’re finding out the sex this afternoon!”

“Ooooo, how exciting!” Cherilyn called out. “Let us know!”

“We’ll have a party. Nothing over the top. See you guys later.” Maisy headed for the door and straight to the car. Aaron was meeting her at the doctor’s office, and she couldn’t be late.

As soon as she was on the table and the ultrasound technician came in, she smiled at the tech. “It’s a boy.”

“Oh, has somebody already done this for you?” she asked.

“No. I just know.”

The lady laughed. “I get that all the time! Let’s just see.” The wand was cold, and Maisy sucked in a breath. “There it is. Healthy little bugger. Looks like about four and a half months.”

“And?” Aaron asked, gripping Maisey’s hand tightly.

“See that right there? That’s an outie, not an innie. You’re right, Mrs.Friedman. You’ve got a little boy here!”

“I told you! I told you it was a boy!”

“What made you so sure?” the tech asked.

“A couple of ghosts told me it would be a boy.” She heard Aaron chuckling beside her.

The tech gawked at her. “A... couple of... ghosts told you?”

“Yep. Sure did.”

She watched the tech glance at Aaron. “Hey, she’s not lying. They really did.”

“Okay. Well, I’ve never had anybody say that to me before, but okay. You sure knew, so I’ll give you that! You can wipe off and get dressed. You two have a nice afternoon, and congratulations,” she told them as she stepped out of the room.

Maisey grinned at Aaron. “Happy?”

“I’m in a room with the most beautiful woman in the world, looking at my little son on a screen. The only way I could be happier would be if I was holding him in my arms.”

“Agreed. And now I want a milkshake.”

“We’ll get one. What do you think Murielle will say when we tell her it’s a boy?”

“I think she’ll say to make it stay in there until it changes its mind and comes out a girl,” Maisey said, laughing.

“I’m pretty sure you’re right.”

Damn, it was cold out! Maisey curled up into the corner of the sofa, little Joseph in her arms and sucking away at her left nipple. “We’re gonna have to move you to the other one. You’re wrecking that one,” she mumbled as she gazed down at the perfect baby.

“Can we watch The Blueberry Brigade?” Murielle whined.

“Sure. I don’t care. Where’s your dad?”

“Getting out of the shower.” The words were no more out of Murielle’s mouth than Aaron walked into the room in his fleece lounge pants and a long-sleeved tee. “See? There he is.”

He grinned at her as he sat down. “Hey, babe. Is he asleep?”

“No. Wanna hold him?”

“Sure!” Maisey handed the baby off to Aaron, then buttoned the front of her gown and stood. “Time to feed Bruno.” At the sound of his name, the big dog stood and headed straight for Maisey. He’d gone from skin and bones to a healthy, sleek fifty pounds of muscle, and he’d become a great family dog. She loved having him there, especially when Aaron was out working.

After she’d fed him, Maisey sat back down on the sofa and looked around. Murielle was watching the TV show and singing along with the songs. Aaron was playing with the baby, who smiled occasionally, even though Maisey was sure it was just gas. And the big dog was curled up on the rug next to Murielle, waiting for her to pat him

occasionally. She never disappointed him.

Her family. Her world. Maisey thought about the coat, the boots, and the hat. A few more boxes had shown up on their porch, but she'd had Aaron take them straight back to the sheriff's department so their owners could pick them up. No more of that stuff for Maisey. She'd leave sleuthing to the professionals. Everything she'd ever looked for in her life was right there in that room. There was nothing more she could ask for.

But maybe someday she'd have one more adventure. Her brain chuckled at the thought. There was a new consignment store on the other side of town, and that sure was a cute sweater they had in the window...