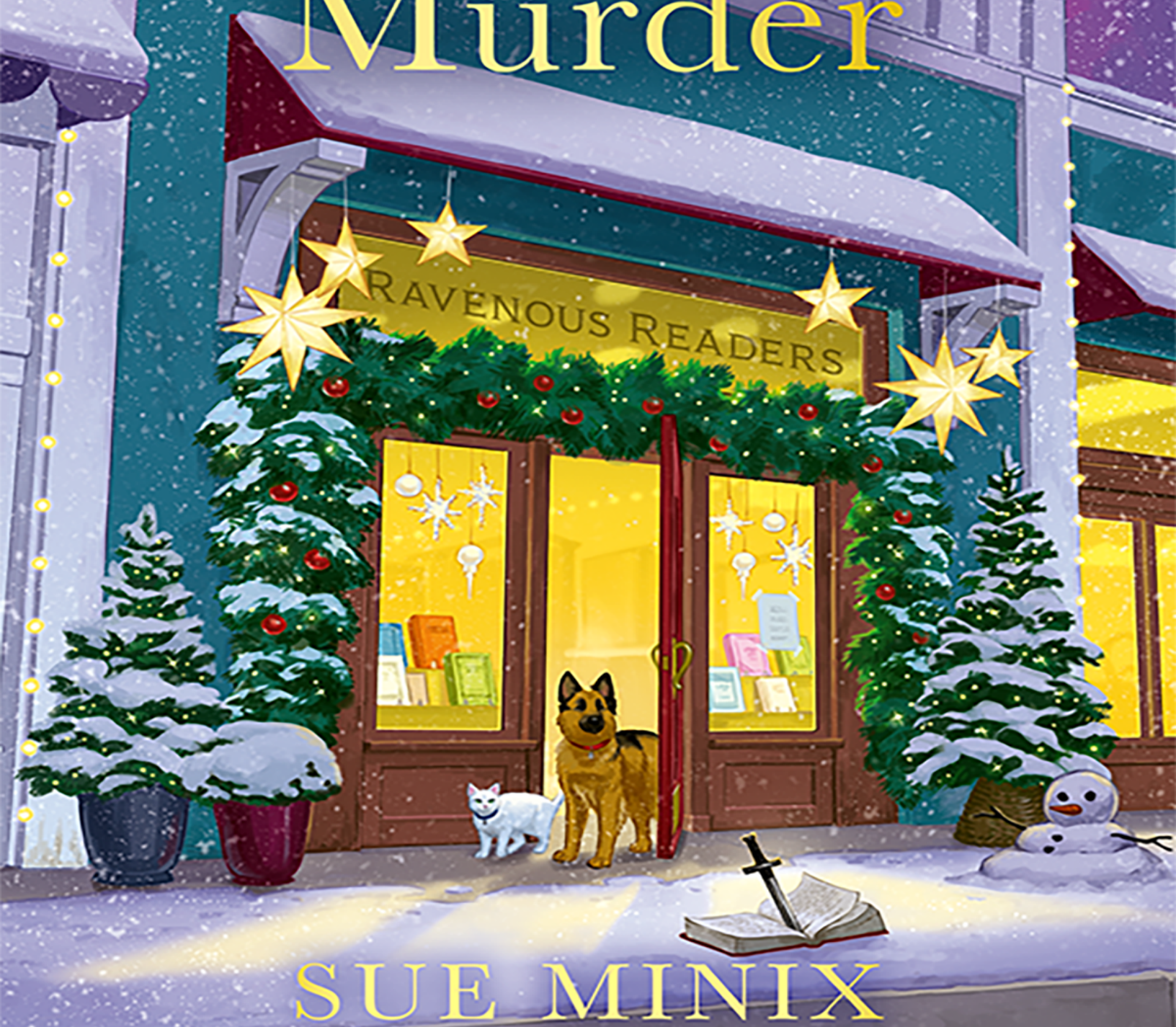


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Dedication

To Julie Hollister, who stuck with me through it all

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CHAPTER ONE

The Riddleton Community Center appeared as if Christmas had exploded, and no one had cleaned up the aftermath. A festive dandruff of glitter drifted through the air. Paper snowflakes hung at wildly different lengths, giving the ceiling the vibe of a craft project losing its will to live. A cardboard fireplace, with red and white stockings displaying names like John and Sara, leaned against one wall at a precarious angle, praying the wind would stay outside.

The noise blistered my eardrums. Kids shrieking. Bells jingling. An instrumental version of “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree” fighting for its life through blown speakers.

“This,” I said as my boyfriend, Detective Eric O’Malley, and I stepped inside, “is what happens when sugar achieves sentience.”

He flashed his Opie grin, playing the male lead in a Hallmark movie. Orange buzz cut, freckles, and all. “It’s perfect, Jen.”

“It’s humid,” I corrected, peeling off my jacket. “Why is it humid at Christmas?”

“Because Riddleton, South Carolina, is always humid, Christmas included.” He draped an arm around my shoulders. “Apparently, holiday enthusiasm has a dew point.”

“Must have something to do with all those stagecoach horses running through town on their way to Blackburn or Sutton in the old days.” I laughed, then caught the expression in his eye. Gentle, hopeful, a little vulnerable.

“It’s our first Christmas living together,” he continued. “That means traditions. New adventures. Meaningful stuff.”

Things I had no experience with. “I want that too. I just need you to remember, December is bookstore chaos. Thirty percent of our annual sales come in the weeks leading up to Christmas. Plans might have to stay flexible. That’s all I’m saying.”

He nodded, but a tiny sigh slipped out before he could stop it. “I don’t want ‘flexible’ to turn into ‘we never actually do anything.’”

“Flexible can still be meaningful,” I said, bumping my shoulder against his.

“Okay, but we should at least decide on some basics. Like Christmas morning festivities. That’s sacred.”

“Sacred how?”

“Presents at dawn. Pajamas. Cinnamon rolls. No one allowed to shower first because that wastes prime excitement time.”

“Dawn?” I stared at him. “Like the sun just came up, dawn?”

“That’s when Christmas happens,” he said with the confidence of someone whose assertion had been vetted and written into law.

I pushed a short breath through my nose. “Yeah, that’s not how it worked in my house.”

“What did you do, noon? Afternoon? Were you monsters?”

“We did Christmas Eve.”

“What?”

“Presents, big dinner, the whole thing. Christmas Eve.”

“Why?”

I hesitated, trying to come up with a good story, then finally gave in with the truth. “Because my stepfather liked to say, ‘There ain’t no damn Santa Claus, so what’s the point?’ and then sat in his recliner drinking beer and watching basketball on Christmas Day.”

Eric’s jaw dropped.

I went on, aiming for light and landing somewhere near light heavyweight, “So, we moved it. My mom tried to make it feel special. Candles, music, the works. But basically over by midnight, and Christmas Day was another Tuesday, except with fancy leftovers.”

“That’s deeply upsetting.”

“You get used to it.”

“No, you don’t. You only think you do.”

I shrugged. “It was fine. I mean, it’s not like we had a choice. Giving Gary what he wanted was the only way to keep the peace.”

“Jen.”

My hand shot up to stop him. “It became normal. Now, I’m used to it.”

He ran a hand over his buzz cut. “Okay. Well. That’s not happening.”

“What’s not?”

“Christmas belongs on Christmas morning. That’s the point. You wake up, it’s magic, you’re half asleep, the tree’s glowing—”

“And someone’s already three beers in by tip-off.”

“That’s not funny.”

“It is a little.”

“Jen!”

“What?” I spread my hands. “That’s how it went. In my house, anyway.”

“Well, that doesn’t have to be how it is forever.”

My chest tightened. “You don’t just overwrite people’s traditions because yours have better lighting.”

“It’s not about lighting, it’s about ...” He stopped, frustration reddening the skin around his freckles. “It’s about making it feel like Christmas.”

“It *felt* like Christmas,” I said, more sharply than I intended. “Just earlier.”

“At night. On the wrong day.”

“No such thing as Christmas police, Eric.”

“There should be.”

I laughed once, but there wasn’t much humor in it. “So, what, my entire childhood gets filed under ‘incorrect procedure’?”

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

“It kind of is.”

He exhaled hard. “I don’t want our kids—”

“Our *what*?”

He stopped.

The word hung there between us, fragile and way too big.

“Future hypothetical,” he said quickly. “I only meant I want Christmas morning. The whole thing. Not pre-gaming it the night before because some guy wants to shotgun Budweiser and yell at a ref.”

I folded my arms. “Well, Christmas Eve is what feels Christmassy to me. That’s when the lights mattered. When my mom tried. When it felt like something to my family. And me.”

“And morning is when it feels like something to me.”

We stood there, each holding on to versions of the same day that didn’t overlap at all.

“So, what, we split the holiday in half?”

“That’s not how this is supposed to work.”

“No,” I agreed. “It’s not.”

Neither of us reached for the other. And for the first time since we’d started talking about cohabitating as if it would be a fun little experiment, it

didn't feel like we were building a future together. Guess we'd stumbled into a wall we hadn't known existed.

Before I could sort through my emotions, a voice boomed across the room.

"HO! HO! HO! Who told me they want peace on Earth *and* a drum set for Christmas?"

We turned.

Angus Halliburton, draped in a Santa suit that had attended one too many Christmas parties, stood near an armchair covered with a reindeer blanket. The outfit stretched over his ample midsection, but sagged off his shoulders, while his beard rested off-center, and wire-framed glasses tiptoed down his nose in a valiant escape attempt.

The children mobbed him before he could ease onto his North Pole throne.

A tiny girl in a red tutu attached herself to his leg. "Santa, I need a cat, but Mama says not a pooppy one."

"Ah," Angus said, his eyes twinkling as he lifted her onto his lap. "A non-pooppy model. Premium line, but I bet I can find one that's perfect for you."

A boy in reindeer antlers squeezed in beside Tutu Girl and saluted him. "I brushed my teeth without being told."

Angus gasped. "Promote this child this instant. And give him anything he wants for Christmas!"

The two scrambled down as another kid climbed directly into his lap from the side. Angus made an "oof" sound that had definitely not been North Pole approved. "Welcome, little boy," he wheezed. "And what do you want for Christmas?"

Eric and I carried our hot chocolate closer, trying to catch every word of the mayhem. Lacey Stanley, my business partner and bookstore manager, slid in beside us, grinning at her own children lining up to meet Santa.

Before we reached Santa's throne, a woman with glossy brown hair and a green sweater covered in sequined snowmen latched on to Lacey's arm.

"Lacey and Jen, right? From the bookstore?"

Lacey turned to face her. "Ravenous Readers. That's us."

"I'm Lila Patterson. My daughter's in second grade with Mrs. Carver. You helped me find that dragon book series? The one with the sarcastic lizard?"

“Blaze of Glory,” Lacey said. “Although the lizard is technically a fire drake with emotional damage.”

“Yes! That one. She hasn’t glanced up from that book in a week. I had to threaten to hide it so she’d brush her hair.”

“Best compliment I’ve had all month. Weaponized literacy.”

She laughed. “Do you have a holiday sale going? I still need gifts for my nephews, and if I walk into that big-box place one more time, I’m going to scream into my poinsettia pillow.”

“Ten percent off all kids’ books through Christmas Eve. And free gift wrapping if you don’t mind paper that may or may not have been cut by someone running on nothing but caffeine and ignorance.”

“That’s perfect.” She squeezed my arm. “We’re so glad your shop is here. The town needs it.”

Something warm and tender bloomed in my chest, dangerously close to feelings. “That means a lot. Thank you.”

She got swept away by a passing relative wielding a juice box, and I turned straight into Ted Winslow, who smelled of pine cologne and life-changing responsibility. Ted was the defense attorney who saved me when I’d been falsely accused of murder a while back. He was also married to Riddleton’s mayor, Veronica Winslow.

“Jen, Lacey, how’s business?”

“Seasonal pandemonium,” Lacey said. “If one more person asks me to ‘just check in the back’ for a book published in 1983 and out of print since the Clinton administration, I may start bringing a thermos of Irish coffee to work.”

He chuckled in the careful way of a man who’d practiced being approachable in a mirror. “Foot traffic looks good when I pass by.”

I laughed. “That’s because we bribe people with free coffee. Then, you put a giant cardboard kraken in a Santa hat next to the Mystery section, and people come inside out of either curiosity or fear. You never can tell.”

His wife appeared at his elbow, encased in a white sheath dress with a red scarf, as if the party was being held at the White House instead of a dinky community center in an even dinkier town. “I told Ted we should’ve done something like that for the Harvest Festival. The Scarecrow from Hell. Or maybe a sea monster.”

“Never too late,” I said. “I’m pro-kraken in most civic situations.”

“If you ever want to host a town book club night in your store, let me know. I’ll put the word out. I’d love to see more community events downtown.”

That one hit me square in the dream goals. “I’d love that. Truly.” I exchanged a glance with Lacey, who nodded. “After Christmas, when we remember what sleep is.”

“Deal,” she said.

A dad in a fleece vest leaned in next, half-shouting over the din. “You the bookstore ladies?”

“That depends,” Lacey said with a smile. “Do we owe you money?”

He shook his head. “You got books for boys who don’t like reading?”

“We specialize in tricking those boys into it. Graphic novels, survival stories, gross science facts, anything involving explosions or bodily functions. Works every time.”

He pointed at his son, who was currently trying to feed a wrapped candy cane to an enthusiastic golden retriever in a reindeer bandanna and a support-animal vest. “I’ll be in.”

“Bring him along. I’ll convert him personally.”

I glanced over to check on Angus. One little girl handed him a folded piece of paper. “This is my list and also a picture of my hamster’s feelings.”

Angus unfolded it with deep respect. “Strong emotional range. I see that.”

A boy leaned in and stage-whispered, “My brother says you’re just Mr. Halliburton from the diner, but I don’t believe him.”

Angus froze, then slowly turned his head. “Your brother is bucking for a stocking full of coal. You, on the other hand, are still on the ‘nice’ list.” He winked at the boy. “For now.”

I snorted hot chocolate up my nose. Eric slapped my back as I struggled to cough it back out.

At one point, Santa tried to stand and immediately got mobbed by three kids. Angus windmilled, almost went down, then clung to his armchair as a life preserver.

Eric leaned toward me. “This is elite holiday content. Wish I’d thought to record it.”

Angus, safely back on his throne, fist-bumped a solemn kid who’d confessed to “accidentally” chucking his broccoli under the table for the dog when his mom wasn’t paying attention.

I slid my arm through Eric's. "Yeah, this part's good."

Once the sugar fully took hold, the party entered its feral phase. A toddler sobbed because Santa had "the wrong laugh." Two boys sword-fought with candy canes. Someone spilled punch, and a dad skated through it in dress shoes. Intentionally or not, I couldn't be sure.

I discovered Santa had gone missing when a little boy in a red bow tie, sporting a protruding lower lip, tugged on my sleeve.

"Excuse me. I never got to tell Santa what I wanted for Christmas."

I glanced toward the stage. The throne sat empty. "I'm sure he'll be back soon. Even Santa needs to take a break sometimes."

"Maybe ..." he whispered, expression doubtful.

Angus reappeared near the back door, minus the hat, wearing his beard shoved onto his forehead. A defeated cloud. His face had turned Rudolph's-nose red, hair plastered down, jacket open with suspenders hanging at his sides. He gave one passing kid a thumbs-up but didn't stop, scrambling for the exit like a man fleeing Mongol hordes.

I glanced at the clock on the wall—8:17 p.m.

The door clicked shut behind him.

I waved to Eric, who was chatting with Veronica and Ted. He lifted his eyebrows, and I pointed at the back door, mouthing, "I'm going to check on Angus."

He nodded and gave me a faux salute.

I stepped outside. Cold air cut through the leftover heat clinging to me. Angus stood a few yards away, hands on his knees, dragging in breaths. Steam rose off him. He wasn't alone.

The man facing him didn't belong to the glitter-and-hot-chocolate world I'd just left. Tall and narrow, drawn tight, he wore a dark jacket not heavy enough for the temperature, zipped halfway up, and jeans that'd gone out of style in the Eighties. Dull brown hair, cut short with a machete, stuck up in the back as if he'd slept on it and decided to call that a style.

A cigarette burned between his fingers, but he didn't appear very relaxed. His red face had twisted into a scowl, and the smoke vibrated into the darkness around his hand.

I almost smiled at the absurdity—Santa on a smoke break without a smoke—until Angus straightened. The warmth he'd shown the kids had deserted him. No gentleness. No joke waiting in his mouth for a chance to

escape. His jaw was tight, eyes intense and furious, his voice shaking when he spoke.

“You don’t deserve to live after what you did.”

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CHAPTER TWO

Saturday mornings in Riddleton Park belonged to runners, dog walkers, and the cheerful-beyond-all-reason retirees power-walking in matching windbreakers. The kind of people who believed that forty-two degrees counted as bracing rather than a personal attack.

Savannah disagreed. My German shepherd trotted beside me on her leash, ears half back, giving me the long-suffering expression of a creature who believed, like her mother, mornings should not legally exist before breakfast. Her breath puffed in white clouds, tail swaying low but steady as her nails ticked lightly against the paved path.

“Don’t judge me,” I told her between breaths. “This is character building.”

She flicked an ear, intimating she had opinions about that as well. None of them particularly supportive.

The park air carried the aroma of wet grass and pine sap, and a thin layer of mist hovered over the wide stretch of lawn dotted with pine trees, softening everything into muted greens and grays. We passed the two Little League fields first. The empty bleachers had aluminum seats shining damp in the early light. Chain-link fences rattled when the breeze kicked up, faded pennant flags left from last season still flapping along the top.

Savannah’s nose worked the whole time, head swinging left to right, patrolling the grounds to provide security. Her primary mission. She fired an interested glance toward the outfield fence, where some rabbit with a death wish must be meandering through.

“Not today, kiddo,” I muttered, tightening my grip when she veered in that direction.

On the other side of the park sat a line of picnic shelters with heavy timber roofs, concrete pads, and long wooden tables bolted down against the prospect of a hurricane or toddler-driven riot. One grill still held a drift of cold ash. A plastic fork lay abandoned beside a half-eaten drumstick. I tried not to think about how long it’d been there.

Savannah slowed. Nose down. Intent.

“Absolutely not,” I said, tugging her along. “We are not doing trail treats today. Remember how sick you got last time? I didn’t think I’d ever get the vomit out of my shoes.”

She huffed her disappointment.

The playground stood empty, swings moving only enough to make their chains tick. Keeping time for a concerto only the park itself could hear.

The Riddleton Runners moved in a loose pack in our usual formation. Eric and Lacey set the pace up front, talking in easy bursts. Ingrid Kensington—town doctor, part-time pathologist, and British ex-pat—stayed with them, a streak of neon pink in the mist. Angus and I trailed a few yards behind. Savannah trotted between us, occasionally drifting toward Angus to see if he offered better snacks.

I’d been waiting for this stretch. Far enough from the others we could converse without it turning into a group discussion. “You good to talk?” I asked between already labored breaths.

Savannah glanced up at us, ears twitching at the change in tone.

“So far. What’s up?”

I peered at him, his forehead damp from the moist air and exertion, expression already guarded. “You and that guy. Last night.”

Angus let out half a laugh. “Yeah. I figured this subject would come up sooner or later.”

Our shoes hit the pavement in a steady slap-slap-slap. For a short while, the only sound between us. Savannah’s stride matched mine, her shoulder brushing my leg every few steps, checking in.

I finally broke the silence. “What was the argument about?”

“Stupidity. At first.”

“They’re always stupid at first.”

“I stood outside the community center, taking a break. He comes out to smoke. We do the whole ‘hey, don’t I know you’ thing. Then I realize who he is. Henry Smith. We grew up in the same town. In New Hampshire.”

Across the field, Eric waved. I waved back without thinking, then gave Angus my full attention again.

“What’s he doing here in Riddleton?”

“Said he came down for a job interview at the resort. In IT, I think.”

“Huh. Did he get it?”

“Doesn’t know yet. Said he’s flying home this morning, and they’ll call him Monday.”

We rounded the curve by the first ball field again. The edge of the grass near the path was torn up, muddy where people had cut the corner. Savannah hit it first. Her front paws slid, back legs scrambling, doing her best to take me down with her.

I swung my free arm wildly. "Whoa!"

Angus grabbed my arm and Savannah's leash at the same time, keeping me from landing face-first in the mud. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I need to watch where I'm going." I pointed at the dog. "Or she does."

He grinned. "Why should today be different from any other day?"

My elbow found his ribs. "Smart aleck."

We clomped along for a moment, then I prodded him again. "So, that all sounds pretty civilized. What were you two arguing about?"

Angus pressed his lips into a line. "I'd really rather not talk about it."

My German shepherd's ears flicked back at the tension. Her pace slowed half a step.

The Gossip King didn't want to talk? Now, I *had* to know. "Maybe you should. Anything that upsets you that much needs to be cleansed. Know what I mean?"

His brows took a nosedive. "I'm as clean as I need to be, thank you very much."

Okey-dokey. "Well, if you change your mind, I'm here for you. Any time."

"Thanks."

"That's what friends are for, right? Besides, you've listened to me whine often enough. Least I can do is return the favor."

Angus slowed. "Hey."

Savannah slowed with him. Then she stopped. Not the stubborn "I'm done walking" stop. The alert one. Ears up. Body still. Nose lifted.

The tone of Angus's voice made my skin prickle. I followed his gaze. Near the third picnic shelter, past a cluster of pines, a large object lay on the ground behind one of the wooden tables, just off the concrete slab.

The dog pulled forward, drawn by a scent only she could smell.

"Someone sleeping it off?" I said.

"Doesn't look like it. They'd be on the bench."

We stepped off the path. My Nikes sank slightly, fresh mud sucking at the soles. Each step made a wet sound that felt too loud in the early

morning tranquility.

Savannah pulled her leash taut, then slowed, hackles lifting in a subtle ridge along her spine. A sound started in her chest. Not a bark. A low, confused rumble.

The shape resolved into a man on his back.

I stopped so fast my calves tightened, sending a jolt through my knees.

His jacket was soaked dark across the front. His eyes were open, unfocused, the gray sky reflected flat in them. A thick black handle jutted from his abdomen. The blade of the knife disappeared into his body, buried to the hilt.

For one second, my brain refused to understand. I forced my eyes to the man's face. I recognized him now. The guy smoking outside the community center last night.

"Your friend?" I whispered.

"Yeah," Angus said, voice thin. "Henry Smith."

Savannah tried to edge closer.

I pulled her back hard. "No. Stay."

She obeyed, but her body trembled against my leg, eyes fixed on the still form, nose working fast, trying to solve a problem that didn't make sense to her yet.

I dragged my gaze down, away from the knife, and noticed the ground. Mud everywhere. Footprints layered over each other. But one set stood out. Deeper. Wider. Each step sunk hard, edges distinct and defined.

"Those aren't ours," I said.

"No." Angus swallowed. "Those're from a big guy."

On her way to lapping us, as usual, Lacey's voice drifted closer. "Why'd you two—" She saw what we were gawking at. "Oh, my God."

Eric reached me first, his hand firm on my arm, pulling me back. "Don't go any closer."

"I'm not," I said, but my body seemed to lean toward the scene without my telling it to. Odd, since my legs wanted to run as fast as they could the other way.

"I'm calling 911," Ingrid said, already on it.

My dog pressed against my thigh, seeking contact. Watchful. Uneasy.

Angus didn't move his gaze away from Henry. "I just saw him. Last night."

Eric morphed into detective mode and took Angus by the elbow to steer him toward a picnic table away from the body.

Ingrid snapped photos of the area around the body with her phone, moving with a kind of focused calm that didn't fit with the turmoil humming through the rest of us. She squatted beside Henry, careful, deliberate, her running shoes avoiding the deep indentations that overlaid the other prints.

"Ingrid—" Eric began.

"I'm not touching anything," she said, voice steady. "Just observing."

I realized then I was holding my breath. Up close, the morning felt different. Colder. I'd encountered this kind of metallic smell in the air before. It didn't belong to pine trees or damp soil. It emanated from the blood pool beside Henry's body.

Ingrid leaned in a bit, hands braced on her knees. Her eyes moved the way mine do when I'm reading tiny print on a label at the store. Methodical, detail by detail. She pulled up the recording app on her phone and began to speak. "Single visible wound. Abdomen. Knife still in place." She tilted her head, studying the angle. "Handle's clean. No obvious blood on the grip, but a test for occult blood might reveal something."

Angus made a tight sound in his throat.

She glanced briefly at Henry's face, then at his hands. "No defensive cuts that I can see. Palms are relatively clean except for blood transfer."

"You mean he didn't fight back?" I asked, my voice coming out shaky.

"Either didn't get the chance, or didn't expect it. Might've been someone he knew."

A chill slid under my skin.

She moved her gaze to the ground around him. "There's a lot of disturbance in the mud, but deeper impressions overlap the others." She turned to me, pointing. "Those came after most of the lighter ones. Edges are well-defined. Whoever made those was here after the ground got churned up."

"The big guy."

"Appears that way." Her eyes tracked the line of prints a few feet away. "Stride's long. Weight centered. Not stumbling. If I had to guess, I'd say size-ten shoe."

Ingrid studied Henry again. "Clothes aren't heavily disheveled. Jacket's still partially zipped. That suggests this didn't start as a prolonged struggle."

She drew in a slow breath. “Another guess? He was upright when someone stabbed him. Possibly close quarters. Definitely in his personal space.”

I wrapped my arms around myself tighter.

“When did he die?” Angus asked, voice rough.

She narrowed her eyes. “Ballpark only. Skin tone, lack of full rigor from what I can see in his jaw and hands, the temperature ...” She glanced at the mist, the damp grass. “Sometime overnight. Not long before dawn.”

So, while we slept. While I still dreamed about annoying Christmas plans.

Sirens wailed in the distance now, growing louder.

Ingrid rocked back on her heels. “No obvious signs he was moved. Blood pooling appears consistent with him going down right here.”

I scrutinized the picnic tables, the empty shelters, the half-eaten drumstick by the path. Birthday parties. Potlucks. Kids running through sprinklers in summer. Now this.

Ingrid stood carefully. “Okay,” she said, more to herself than us. “That’s as much as I’m saying before I get the chance to open him up.” She met my eyes. “This wasn’t random.”

Red and blue lights smeared through the mist, turning the muted morning harsh and unreal. Not the first time I’d stood in this park, watching emergency lights pull in.

Here we go again.

I hugged my arms around myself while uniformed officer Zach Vick took my statement and crime scene techs swarmed the area, taking pictures and retrieving scraps that might or might not mean anything. Savannah sat glued to my side, leaning into my knee as if she could physically hold me together.

“You saw the victim last night?” Zach asked.

“Yes.” I scratched behind Savannah’s ear, more for me than her. “At the holiday event at the community center. He stood out back, smoking. Angus argued with him, but he was very much alive when we returned to the party.”

“Argued how?”

“I’m not sure. I came out at the tail end of it.”

I glanced toward Angus. He was talking to Eric’s partner, Detective Havermayer, shoulders tight but steady.

“And this morning?”

“We found him near the picnic shelters. And deep footprints in the mud. Like someone big had been on the scene. Heavier than any of us here right now.”

Zach nodded, scribbling notes. “Anything else?”

“Not that I can think of.”

When Zach moved away, Angus came over.

“Hey,” he said in a low murmur. “You holding up?”

I nodded, though my hands shook. Savannah leaned into him, too, as if she couldn’t decide who needed comforting more.

He rested his hands on my shoulders. “By the way, happy birthday.”

I blinked. Oh. Right. In the commotion, I’d forgotten. “Thanks.”

“You doing anything later?”

I glanced at Eric. He hadn’t said a word about it this morning. No birthday wishes. No old lady jokes. Nothing.

“Doesn’t seem like it,” I said with a shrug. “Besides, even if Eric planned on surprising me, which doesn’t seem likely, he’ll be too busy working the case now.”

CHAPTER THREE

The bells over the door of Ravenous Readers gave their usual bright jingle, as if the planet hadn't just tilted off its axis. I stood there with my hand still on the doorknob, cold air curling in around my feet, and considered backing out. Pretending I'd forgotten something. Any reason to delay stepping into normal life while everything around me felt anything but normal.

Savannah made the decision for me. She nudged past my leg with quiet determination, nails scuffing against the carpet. Her solid weight brushed against me as she crossed the threshold, head held high, projecting her belief she had every right to be there. Which, to be fair, she did. And she was more popular than me on most days.

No Casper today. The three-month-old menace—otherwise known as my German shepherd's kitten—had stayed at home. The pre-Christmas rush had turned the bookstore into a minefield of boots, bags, and distracted shoppers. One misplaced step, and he'd be flattened into a tragic holiday anecdote.

The shop appeared the same. Sunlight streamed through the front windows, catching the suspended dust motes and turning them into twinkle dust. The air held its usual mix of espresso, old paper, and the cinnamon biscotti Charlie insisted on calling "emotional support cookies," as if branding could eliminate the unnecessary calories.

Christmas had arrived in layers. First subtle. Then persistent. Now unavoidable.

Evergreen garlands looped along the tops of the shelves, woven with tiny white lights that cast a warm glow over the spines of thrillers and cookbooks alike. Lacey had insisted on tucking in red satin ribbon every few feet, so the whole place appeared gift-wrapped. Paper snowflakes dangled from the ceiling at varying heights, spinning lazily whenever the door opened, some meticulously cut and others victims of rushed scissor work and too much peppermint mocha.

The front display table had been transformed into a holiday shrine to curated optimism. Stacks of hardcovers were wrapped in holiday paper and ribbon with handwritten tags reading *Christmas Eve with a Book*. A ceramic

bowl overflowed with candy canes. Battery-operated candles flickered between piles of staff picks, their fake flames valiantly trying to compete with the late-morning sun.

The brightness didn't comfort me. It pressed in, insistent. The place refused to acknowledge that anything ugly existed beyond its walls. That someone had died. That Angus—nosy, secretive, frustrating Angus—could soon be standing at the center of it.

A seven-foot artificial tree balanced near the Mystery section, why in that particular spot remained a mystery to me, decorated entirely in bookish ornaments. Miniature typewriters. Tiny stacks of faux leather-bound classics. A glitter-dusted magnifying glass. And front and center, a dramatic black mask ornament contributed by Charlie. Another mystery.

Savannah slowed as we passed the tree, her ears angling forward. She gave the lower branches a long, suspicious sniff.

"I know, little girl. Trauma lingers."

Last year's tinsel incident had ended with an emergency vet visit and a very long, very delicate extraction process the next morning. Savannah had never forgiven the tree. Or me, for that matter.

Lacey had strung colored lights along the coffee bar counter, and they blinked cheerfully around Charlie's espresso machine, reflecting off stainless steel and coffee spills. The whole place hummed with warmth and sugar and manufactured joy.

The bell jingled again behind us, and a gust of cold December air swept in, making the hanging snowflakes dance wildly and setting the tree lights trembling, so they resembled flashers. Christmas, in all its sparkling stubbornness, carried on.

Two women stood near the new releases table, each holding a copy of the same book upside down. Props they'd forgotten how to use.

"I heard they found him near the picnic shelter—"

"My sister's neighbor said there was blood all over—"

They lowered their voices when they saw me, which somehow made it worse. The look followed. Half pity, half excitement. Using tragedy for premium entertainment, and they'd scored front-row seats.

I held their gaze for a beat longer than most would consider polite. Long enough for them to turn away first. My jaw tightened. I wanted to believe it would be different if anyone here had actually known the guy, that familiarity might slow the gossip, add some reverence. But deep down, I

knew better. Small towns like Riddleton needed rumors to survive. Otherwise, the boredom would be lethal. An unfortunate fact of life. I kept walking.

The espresso machine shrieked and hissed behind the pastry counter, steam blasting, imitating an old-timey locomotive embarking on a cross-country journey.

“Jennifer Dawson,” a deep voice intoned, heavy with drama. “You enter under a shadow.”

I turned and almost walked into a display of Christmas-themed bookmarks.

Charlie Nichols stood behind the coffee bar, dressed the way vengeance would if it decided to pick up a part-time job. Black leather pants. Black silk shirt. Cape tied at his throat. Wide round hat with a feather tucked in the band. And a black eye mask. Zorro had taken over the espresso machine.

Despite myself, I smiled and shook my head. “Guess we’ll have to break down and get you a sword one of these days. Plastic, of course. I don’t trust you not to decapitate the next customer who complains the free coffee isn’t hot enough.”

He leaned one hand on the counter, cape sliding with the motion. “The town is in mourning. I am a symbol of justice.”

“You’re a barista who still owes me twenty dollars for that poetry slam you swore would ‘awaken the town’s artistic hunger.’”

“A financially compromised symbol.”

A laugh almost escaped me. Almost. The sound caught in my throat. My body remembered how, but my mind refused to cooperate.

Lacey came out from the back room with a box balanced on her hip, her ponytail slipping loose the way it always did when life went crazy. She paused when she saw me, eyebrows lifting in a silent *you okay?*

I tipped my head in a nod that probably fooled no one. Especially not Lacey.

She set the carton down in front of Charlie. “We’re almost out of powdered creamer again. As far as I can tell, half this town has developed lactose intolerance overnight.”

“Add it to the list of modern miracles,” I said.

A woman, cheeks flushed from the cold, drifted up to the counter. Her puffy gray jacket was unzipped over a red sweater with a decorated

Christmas tree stitched across the front. She approached with a death grip on her phone, prepared to make an emergency recording on a moment's notice.

"Is it true?" she asked, not bothering with hello. Her eyes flicked between me and Lacey. "About the park?"

Charlie opened his mouth.

I beat him to it. "Coffee first. Rumors after."

She hesitated, then reached for a cup beside the "free" urn.

Not quite the double espresso I had in mind.

Lacey reached under the counter for her mug, then handed me mine. She leaned close and lowered her voice. "People have been asking all morning. Like this is information central."

"Didn't you see the new sign? *Ravenous Readers. Books, Coffee, and Local Tragedy.*"

The woman added cream and sugar she didn't need, since her hands already shook a little. "So, you won't say?"

I met her eyes, recognizing she came from the resort. Temporary. Passing through. She'd take the story home with her and leave the consequences behind. "I will say this is still a bookstore, not a station on the nosy parker line."

That earned a tight smile. She took her cup and lingered for half a second. She wanted to ask something else, but turned and found a table instead.

Lacey let out a breath. "I miss the days when our biggest crisis involved the espresso machine screaming like the devil himself possessed it."

Patting her shoulder, I said, "Give it time. The day's still young."

The bells over the door rang again. The room stilled, conversations dying mid-sentence, as if someone had flipped a switch. A lead ball settled in my stomach. I didn't have to look to know who'd come in. But I did.

Eric stepped inside, carrying cold air and tension with him, his presence pervading the room without him saying a word. His eyes scanned the shop automatically, cataloging, assessing. A cop habit, but when they landed on me, his face tightened.

I hated that expression. The careful one. The "I'm about to ruin your day" look. I moved toward him before he could say anything. "What's up?"

He didn't answer right away. Only stared at me, searching my face. Trying to decide where to start. Or even whether to.

“Eric.”

He exhaled. “Can we—”

“No. Just tell me.”

His gaze flicked to the people nearby. To the ears pretending not to listen. Then back to me. “We arrested Angus.”

The words floated in my mind, defying reality. “What? When?” My voice sounded far away. Not mine. Someone else’s.

“A little while ago. Havermayer insisted on bringing him in for questioning. It’s heading toward charges.”

One of the women behind me, by the bookmark display, gasped.

My pulse pounded in my ears. “On what basis? They can’t just—”

“He knew the victim. He argued with him last night, and this morning, the man’s found dead in the park. By Angus.” Eric scrubbed a hand over his face, a tell he probably didn’t realize he had. “It’s enough to move things forward.”

Heat flooded into my face. “He hasn’t seen the man in years. Didn’t expect to see him now, so he reacted badly. You think that’s a motive?”

“I think it’s a start.”

“That’s not a start. That’s convenience.”

Eric’s jaw tightened. “We’re not building a case on convenience.”

“Then what are you building it on?”

He hesitated again.

“What aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing.”

“That’s not true.”

“Jen—”

“Eric.”

Silence stretched between us.

Finally, he ran a hand over his hair. “We found blood on his jacket.”

The words hit harder than the rest. “What?”

“They found it on the floor of his closet when they searched his place.”

My mind scrambled to catch up. “That doesn’t—” I stopped. Tried again. “That doesn’t mean anything. You have no idea whose blood that is or how it got there.”

“I *know* what it means and what it doesn’t mean. Either way, it’s enough to bring him in. To hold him until we get the test results back.”

“To build a narrative, you mean.”

“To follow the evidence.” Eric fastened his eyes on mine and took my hand. “This is what I was worried about.”

My spine went stiff. “Meaning?”

“You care about him. You’re already too involved. And now you need to stay out of it. You’re a witness to the argument.”

“Stay out of it? They arrested my friend.”

“All the more reason.”

“You think I’m going to stand here recommending holiday reads while you build a case against one of the gentlest men I’ve ever met?”

“I think you’re not a detective. And the last time you ‘looked into something,’ you nearly got killed by a lunatic who’d already murdered two other people.”

“That was *one minor incident*. A long time ago.”

“A few weeks ago. And it involved a gun.”

The espresso machine hissed again, loud in the quiet.

The panic in my chest shifted. “Angus is a lot of things. Nosy, gossipy, annoyingly private about his past life. But he is *not* a killer.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do.”

“Jen—”

“No. I’m not standing back and letting you railroad Angus for a crime he didn’t commit.”

“Believing that doesn’t make it true.” Eric’s expression cracked into frustration tangled with worry. For me. That scared me more than the rest of it.

I held his gaze. “I’m going to prove he didn’t do this.”

He stared at me, his expression telling me I’d stepped onto thin ice, and he couldn’t reach me without falling in too. “You might get hurt. Again.”

“Maybe. But I’m not letting you decide he’s guilty because it’s easy.”

“Easy isn’t the issue. We have a job to do, and we’re going to do it, no matter how it turns out. You might not have a choice.”

“I always have a choice.”

“And if you’re wrong?”

For a fraction of a second, doubt slipped in. What if there was information I didn’t have? Something Angus hadn’t told me? I drew in a breath. “If I’m wrong, I’ll deal with it when the time comes.”

A long pause filled the air. Silent except for the customers chattering behind us.

Finally, Eric spoke. “Then be careful, because if Angus *is* innocent as you believe, and you start digging, someone out there might not appreciate it.”

For the first time all morning, my insides fell into place.

“Good. Let *them* be nervous for a change.”

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CHAPTER FOUR

The bell over the door hadn't stopped ringing since Eric left. It'd taken on a frantic, metallic *ding ding ding*, as if thrilled about the sudden rush of humanity and not at all concerned that most of them had come for true-crime gossip.

"Okay!" Lacey called from the front register, already scanning a stack of hardcovers with machine-gun efficiency. "If you're here for Christmas gifts, the holiday sale table is to your right. If you're here for crime updates, we do *not* work for the Riddleton Police Department."

A ripple of laughter moved through the line. That didn't stop anyone from craning their necks toward me. I was elbow-deep in espresso foam, working beside Charlie slash Zorro, if Zorro had picked up a side hustle in artisanal beverages.

"Triple peppermint mocha!" he sang, sliding a cup toward me. "And try not to come across like you're withholding critical evidence, Boss. It makes people suspicious."

"I *am* withholding critical evidence. From them, anyway."

"My point, exactly."

The smell of cinnamon biscotti and espresso hung thick in the air, battling the scent of pine from the wreath Lacey had attached to the front counter. The store was packed with half the customers clutching shopping lists, the other half clutching their phones, all holding their breath for breaking news.

I passed a latte across the counter and offered my most neutral bookstore-owner smile.

A woman in a red puffer coat leaned in. "*You* found him, right? In the park?"

My stomach tightened. Word traveled way too fast in Riddleton. Faster than police press releases. Interesting since the resident Gossipmonger-in-Chief, Angus, was currently in police custody. Someone must've slid into his temporarily vacated place.

"I didn't *find* him. I happened to be there when he was found. That's all."

Her eyes widened with morbid delight. "Was it—"

“Terrible? Yes.”

Her disappointment in my lack of grisly detail showed through the fake smile pasted on her face.

Behind her, a man in a flannel shirt spoke up. “They arrested Angus from the diner.” He shook his head. “I can’t believe he’d do something like that. He seems like such a nice guy.”

Charlie gasped theatrically. “Spoiler alert, sir. Some of us were enjoying our morning.”

Flannel shrugged. “Everyone’s saying he did it.”

Everyone. The most powerful investigative agency in any town. Large or small.

I wiped down the steam wand harder than necessary. “Everyone also said the high school principal was running an underground poker ring last year.”

“He wasn’t?” someone asked.

Puffer-coat lady chimed in with: “I think it had to be the wife. Definitely the wife.”

Lacey’s voice cut in from the register. “Focus, people! Books first, rumors later.”

Savannah lay near the end of the counter, head up, chocolate eyes tracking the movement. She’d appointed herself official security detail. Every time the door opened, her ears flicked, assessing. Alert. Watching. Maybe she understood our sleepy little town had shifted and had yet to shift back.

Charlie leaned closer to me as he frothed milk. “You okay?”

“Define okay.”

He glanced at the crowd, then back. “Your pulse is visible in your neck.”

“I’m fine.” *Not really.* The image of the body in the mud kept flickering at the edges of my vision, a glitch rebooting over and over again.

A teenager stepped up to the counter. “Can I get a hot chocolate? And also, did you see the blood?”

Lacey barked out a laugh from the front register. “Drink order only!”

The girl flushed. “Sorry.”

I softened my voice. “Hot chocolate, coming up.”

As I reached for the cocoa, another customer edged closer. “My sister walks in that park every morning. Do you think it’s safe?”

That question landed with a thud. Especially since this wasn’t the first dead body found in the park. I met her eyes. “Yes. The police are handling

it.”

Not a lie. Just incomplete. They were handling it in a manner that led them in the wrong direction. Which didn’t make Riddleton Park any safer.

Charlie slid pastries onto paper plates, lining them up for waiting customers. “Two cranberry scones! One gingerbread loaf! And a partridge in a pear tree!”

Despite everything, I laughed.

The line snaked through the holiday display, weaving past stacks of thrillers that, at the moment, seemed less entertainment, more field manual or how-to guide. Lacey moved fast, efficient, bright, unfazed. She recommended titles, gift-wrapped with crisp corners, and quashed speculation with a raised eyebrow sharp enough to cut glass.

At one point, she caught my eye and mouthed, *You good?*

I nodded.

Savannah stood, stretched, and weaved her way toward the door as it opened again. A blast of cold air swept in, along with three more customers.

“Is it true he was stabbed?” one of them whispered loud enough to be heard over the shrieking espresso machine.

Charlie clutched his chest. “Ma’am. This is a bookstore, not a true-crime podcast.”

The whisperer blushed, but didn’t retract the question.

I set down a cappuccino. “I can’t talk about the investigation.”

Which only confirmed to them that there was a reason to talk.

The bell jingled again. And again. And again.

For two solid hours, we were slammed. Coffee orders piled up. Gift cards ran low. Lacey started a running commentary. “If your aunt loves romance but hates spice, table three. If your brother only reads books with dragons, the Fantasy section. If you’re buying a cookbook for someone who burns water, try takeout instead.”

The crowd laughed. They relaxed. They bought things. But every few minutes, someone leaned in close and lowered their voice.

“Did he suffer?”

“Was it random?”

“Do you think Angus really did it?”

I kept my answers steady and minimal. “I don’t know.”

“The police are investigating.”

“I’m not involved.” Not yet. Not officially.

Around two, the rush began to thin. The line shortened. The espresso machine finally stopped doing its best angry cat imitation. I leaned both palms on the counter and exhaled.

Charlie removed his hat and fanned himself with it. “Well, nothing boosts business like a homicide. Works every time.”

“Don’t,” I warned, remembering how often “Jen solved another murder” had saved the bookstore from bankruptcy in the past.

He softened. “I know.”

Lacey walked over, counting cash from her drawer to secure in the office. “We sold out of the mystery hardcovers.”

“Of course we did,” I said. “Do we have more coming in?”

“Yup. Should get a shipment on Monday. Which won’t help for the rest of the weekend, but it’s better than nothing.”

Savannah returned to my side and pressed against my leg. Through the front windows, I could see Main Street humming. People moved in tight clusters, heads bent together. The town felt different. Charged. A storm cloud had camped out above our rooftops and nowhere else.

Angus arrested. I replayed Eric’s expression when he’d told us. Controlled. Careful. But the whole situation didn’t sit right with me. No way Angus killed anyone. For any reason.

Charlie nudged my “Writer in Residence” mug toward me. “Drink this before you keel over.”

“What is it?”

“Peppermint mocha. Heavy on the peppermint. You appear to need clarity.”

I took a sip. It burned my tongue on its way down.

Out on the sidewalk, two women paused to peer into the store, debating whether to come in for coffee or information.

“Place your bets,” Lacey murmured.

“They’ll pretend they need stocking stuffers,” Charlie said.

“Five dollars says they ask about the blood before they order.”

The bell jingled. All three of us glanced up. Savannah’s ears perked. The women stepped inside. And the questions started all over again.

The first woman—blond bob, wool coat the color of wet cement—made a show of examining the display of boxed journals by the door.

“Oh, good, you’re open.”

We’d been open for four hours.

“Last-minute Christmas shopping,” the second one added, clutching her oversized purse to her chest, protecting the state secrets contained within. “You know how it is.”

Savannah didn’t move from her spot beside me, but her gaze tracked them. Her tail gave one slow sweep against my calf.

The blonde drifted toward the counter. “Two lattes, please. And ...” she lowered her voice, though not enough “... we just came from the park.”

What a surprise. “Medium or large?” I asked.

“Medium.” She took a breath and leaned conspiratorially on the counter. “So, I heard they’ve arrested someone.”

“Yes.” I handed Charlie two cups to fill. “That’s public information.”

The second woman joined her friend. “Angus Halliburton.”

Charlie poured coffee with exaggerated solemnity. “We are but humble purveyors of caffeine and plot twists, ladies.”

“But you were there,” Blondie pressed, glaring at me. “You saw it.”

Savannah’s ears twitched.

I kept my tone even. “I was running with my dog, and we found the body. The police arrived quickly.”

“That park used to feel safe,” Purse Lady said. “Now it’s ...” She made a vague circling gesture with her hand. “You know.”

“Yes, I know.” Because this wasn’t the first body. Because the mud and frost and stillness still lodged in my head.

Blondie hesitated. “Do you think they got the right person?”

The question I’d been asking myself since Eric broke the news.

Charlie slid the coffees toward them. “That will be six eighty.”

They didn’t move to pay.

I met her gaze. “I think the police are doing their job.” The words left a cardboard taste in my mouth.

Blondie searched my face, trying to detect a coded message in my blinking pattern.

Savannah stood. Not aggressive. Not even tense. She simply rose to her full height beside me, the movement smooth and deliberate.

Both women stepped back a fraction. “She’s very ... attentive,” Purse Lady said.

“She doesn’t like gossip,” Charlie said, struggling to hide a smirk.

I almost smiled. She loved gossip. She just didn’t like them.

Blondie fumbled for her wallet. “Well. They’ve arrested the killer. Let’s hope that’s the end of it.”

End of it. Right. It never worked out that way. And, in this case, I was glad.

They left with their coffee full and their curiosity only half fed.

The bell jingled again. This time it was Mrs. Denning from Walnut Street. Silver curls, red lipstick, retired librarian, and full-time intelligence network.

“Jennifer,” she said, the only person in town who called me anything but Jen. “You look pale.”

“Holiday cheer. As in, not enough of it.”

She set a mystery paperback on the counter. “I assume you’ve heard.”

“It’s been mentioned.”

Her eyes flashed. “Angus is many things. A gossip. A meddler. But he is not violent.”

My pulse kicked. “I agree.”

“People are already rewriting his entire personality.”

That was the thing about this place. The narrative shifted fast. One arrest, and suddenly a man’s whole history was rearranged to fit.

Charlie rang her up. “We prefer our character assassinations strictly fictional.”

Mrs. Denning’s gaze lingered on me. “Be careful, Jennifer.”

Not a question. A warning. Savannah pressed closer to my leg again. “I’m always careful.” A lie so old it barely registered anymore.

Mrs. Denning left. The store exhaled in the rare lull. No line. No whispered questions. Only the low instrumental Christmas music Lacey insisted was “festive but non-threatening.”

She reappeared from the office. “We’re going to need more peppermint syrup soon.”

“Add it to the list,” I said, but my mind wasn’t on syrup. It was on Angus in handcuffs. Eric’s careful tone. The way the questions kept circling back to the same place—

Do you think they got the right person?

Charlie leaned his hip against the counter. “You’re doing that thing.”

“What thing?”

“The internal monologue where you decide whether to mind your own business.”

I stared at him, knowing there was no way I could stay out of it this time. He sighed. "You realize every time there's a body within a ten-mile radius, we sell out of mystery novels, and you lose sleep."

"That's not funny."

"I'm not joking."

Savannah stared at me, waiting.

Lacey crossed her arms. "Tell me you're not thinking about inserting yourself."

"What choice do I have? We all know Angus didn't do this."

They both watched me.

Charlie pinched the bridge of his nose. "That's how it starts."

The bell jingled again, mercifully pulling us back into motion.

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CHAPTER FIVE

By late afternoon, the rush thinned from frantic to manageable. The bells over the door rang less often, no longer a constant, jangling demand for attention. The espresso machine, having spent the morning screaming through an exorcism, subsided into discreet, resigned hisses.

Even Charlie dialed himself down from “full theatrical menace” to something closer to a normal human being. Well, normal as Charlie ever got, that is. He still wore the cape. The mask, too. But the flourishes had softened. Fewer dramatic wrist flicks or ominous pauses before handing over a latte. *Progress.*

Lacey reorganized the holiday table for the third time in forty-five minutes, muttering about *visual balance* as she shifted a stack of hardcovers a fraction of an inch to the left, then stepped back, head tilted, evaluating. We’d moved past crisis mode into basic retail coping mechanisms.

Translation: no one panicking, but everyone pretending not to think about the man none of us but Angus had ever seen before, who’d turned up dead. But that part refused to stay buried no matter how much cinnamon-scented denial we layered over it.

Savannah, who’d spent the day conducting perimeter checks and accepting the kind of adulation usually offered to a visiting dignitary, lifted her head when I touched her collar.

“Office,” I told her.

Her ears perked. *Work mode.* She rose in one smooth motion, stretching briefly before falling into step beside me like we’d rehearsed it. Which, in a way, through repetition, we had.

We slipped down the back hallway and into the small office that served as the bookstore’s command center, storage closet, and occasional emotional refuge. The sounds of the shop softened behind us—voices fading, the espresso machine muting into background noise.

The office door clicked shut, and the overhead light flickered once or twice before settling into a steady glow that did nothing to hide the fact that the fixture probably had many more years on it than I did. I relaxed into the smell of toner, old paper, and the lemon cleaner I bought in bulk whenever I

felt like pretending I had my life together. The illusion helped. Sometimes. Amazing how lemon scent could whisper “Everything is fine,” even when nothing at all seemed fine.

My desk dominated the space. A hulking, metal monstrosity painted battleship gray sometime during the Eisenhower years. It’d survived at least three previous owners and bore the scars to prove it: scratches, dents, a burn mark from a long-ago cigarette incident that no amount of scrubbing had ever erased.

The top was a chaotic landscape of stacked invoices, brightly colored barnacles of sticky notes clinging to the surface, a chipped mug filled with pens that may or may not work, and a legal pad already crowded with names connected by arrows and question marks. A leftover from my last investigation.

Apparently, I didn’t clean up emotional debris any better than physical.

Against one wall stood two tall file cabinets, equally gray and equally stubborn, their drawers labeled in fading tape: *Vendors, Events, Taxes, Miscellaneous Doom*. The last one wasn’t technically official, but accurate most times. A bulletin board hung above them, cluttered with flyers, delivery schedules, and a postcard Eric had tacked up months ago, reading “Keep Calm and Read On.”

I’d never taken it down. Maybe because I liked the reminder. Or maybe because taking it down would mean acknowledging that “calm” hadn’t exactly been my brand lately. Or ever.

Savannah circled twice before settling onto her oversized dog bed beside my chair. It was navy blue, thickly padded, and permanently dusted with enough hair to be counted as a third member of our furry family. From there, she could see both the door and me. Security detail in position.

Sometimes I wondered what she thought about my investigative phases. Probably something along the lines of: *Uh-oh. Mom’s at it again. Get the first-aid kit ready.*

I sat, cracked my knuckles, and opened my laptop. The screen glowed to life. “Let’s see who you are, Henry Smith.”

The name felt extraordinarily ordinary. A name that disappeared into the crowd of spreadsheets and email chains. A name that didn’t make headlines or belong attached to a body in the mud. *And yet here we are.*

It took a few variations—middle initial guesses, narrowing by state—before I found him in *Hew* Hampshire. *Hew* not *New*. I blinked at the typo

in the Wikipedia entry again before double-checking. No, it was supposed to be New Hampshire. Somewhere between panic and paperwork, someone had fat-fingered the “N” and didn’t care enough to proofread.

I moved on to social media. Henry Smith, aged forty-three. *Forty-three*. Old enough to have a history. Young enough to still have had plans. His profile picture showed a clean-shaven man with brown hair carrying an almost invisible trace of gray at the temples, smiling into the camera with the tentative cheer of someone who preferred being behind it.

He stood in front of a white clapboard house with dark green shutters. Early fall leaves flamed red and gold in the background. He seemed decent. Approachable. Not a man who’d end up lying in the mud in Riddleton Park with a knife sticking out of his belly.

Married to Mary Smith, whose picture featured her with two kids—one boy, one girl—both hovering in that awkward early-teen stage where limbs were too long and smiles tried too hard to be casual. The girl had braces and a fierce expression, daring the world to comment on them. The boy wore a Red Sox cap and held up a fish nearly as long as his arm, pride radiating through the camera lens.

Savannah’s head lifted when I sighed. “I know. They seem normal, too.”

Henry’s page wasn’t public in its entirety, but there was enough to build a shape of his life. Posts about youth soccer games. A shared article about property taxes. A photo of him shoveling snow with the caption: *Cardio I didn’t ask for*. Photos of a backyard barbecue featuring plastic cups, a grill overloaded with burgers, and Mary caught mid-laugh at a comment made out of frame.

I considered that one longer than I meant to. There was something intimate about a face frozen in laughter at a joke the world would never hear.

A Fourth of July snapshot: sparklers in the kids’ hands, smoke drifting through the image. Henry’s caption read, *Wouldn’t trade this chaos for anything*. I swallowed hard. People always said that right before the chaos traded *them*.

Another post. Snow piled high on a driveway. *First storm of the season. Kids already asking about sledding tomorrow. Pray for my back*.

Ordinary. Painfully ordinary. No angry rants. No mysterious absences. No dramatic relationship updates. Only suburban New Hampshire life unfolding in tidy squares followed by banal comments.

There were pictures of a small lake in the summer. The kids on a dock. Henry standing ankle-deep in the water, jeans rolled to the knee, holding a canoe steady while his daughter climbed in. A tagged location placed them in a town outside Concord.

His employment history listed a regional construction company. IT manager. Fifteen years in the same place. That spoke of stability. Routine. Roots.

So why did he come here?

Mary's posts were more frequent. School concerts. Science fair ribbons. A photo of what appeared to be a birthday cake shaped like a mountain—*For my favorite climber*, she'd written, tagging Henry.

That snagged my attention. Climber. I leaned closer to the screen. "Why does that matter?" the Dana Davenport part of my brain asked. I scrolled farther. Two years back. An album titled *White Mountains Weekend*. Henry in hiking boots and a bright orange jacket, grinning at a summit marker. A little windburned. A little more alive than in his profile picture.

Mary commented, *Next time I'm coming too*. A friend replied with a string of mountain emojis.

So, he hiked. Or climbed. Whatever.

I tried to picture Angus in hiking boots. Failed immediately. Nope. Not exactly the outdoorsy type these days. Which didn't mean anything. People changed. Maybe he'd done the hiking and climbing thing when he was younger. Either way, he'd left New Hampshire years ago. It couldn't be relevant now.

Savannah shifted, resting her chin on her paws, eyes never leaving me.

No mention of Angus anywhere on Henry or Mary's pages. No shared photos. No comments from anyone with his name. No cryptic arguments. No political rants. No dramatic life upheavals. If Henry had known Angus in the present day, they'd kept it off the internet. Which meant it was either unimportant or *very* important.

I opened a new tab and started searching both names together. Henry Smith + Angus Halliburton. Nothing. Different combinations. Different filters. Still nothing. No shared organizations. No overlapping events. No business connections. No photos. No comments.

No digital footprint tying them together at all.

I leaned back in my chair, which protested with a metallic creak. "Okay," I whispered to the ceiling. "So how does an IT manager from New

Hampshire end up dead in Riddleton, South Carolina? And more importantly, why did Angus look so vicious when they argued?”

I could still see it. The tension in his shoulders. The way he avoided eye contact afterward. The way he shut down when I asked him about it. Subtlety had never been one of Angus’s more obvious traits. If he disliked someone, you knew. If he was irritated, you heard about it. But that argument hadn’t been irritation. It’d been pure anger. Real anger. The kind that came from history. Or fear.

I exhaled slowly. *Which one?*

Savannah’s ears twitched, and she let out a low huff.

“Soon, baby. I’ll be done soon.” I reached over and scratched her neck.

Henry’s last visible post came three days ago. A photo of a packed suitcase on a neatly made bed. Caption: *Quick trip. Back before you know it.*

Mary had commented with a red heart, and *Be safe and good luck!*

Clearly, Mary’s wish didn’t come true. On either point. I stared at the smiling man in the profile picture—the house, the shutters, the autumn leaves. A wife named Mary. A boy and a girl on the brink of high school. Snowstorms and soccer games and mountain weekends.

What’s the connection? Because there had to be one. People didn’t argue the way Angus and Henry did over nothing.

Savannah snorted, as if dissatisfied as I was with the lack of answers.

“Yeah.” I stroked her head. “Me too.”

The eyesore of a desk felt colder beneath my arms as I leaned forward again, digging deeper into search results that yielded the same barren conclusions. The room felt smaller suddenly. Quieter. The hum of the laptop fans louder than they should’ve been.

I glanced at the legal pad. Pulled it closer, pen in hand. “Okay, let’s start simple.”

I wrote:

Henry Smith — NH — IT manager — Married — 2 kids — hiker/climber
Trip — planned — ‘good luck’ — destination not mentioned
Argued with Angus. Why?

I tapped the pen against the paper. Once. Twice. Three times. People didn’t argue that way over nothing. Which meant there was something missing. Something buried. And if Angus wouldn’t tell me, I’d have to find it myself.

I studied Henry's profile picture. The innocuous scene. A whole life, intact and still untouched by what came next.

Henry Smith had lived a seemingly normal existence. But somewhere, his path had crossed Angus's. And the collision caused the argument I'd witnessed last night. The one Angus refused to talk about.

Now, I only had to figure out where they collided and what happened when they did. *Piece of cake*. I flipped the pen in my fingers and stared at the words until they blurred together. Nothing. No, not nothing. That was the problem. Too much nothing. Too much clean space where a mess should be.

People left traces. Especially people who lived their lives online in neat little squares and captions. Even the most boring lives had overlaps. Friends of friends, tagged events, some random comment thread that spiraled into a revelation.

Henry Smith had edges. Defined, contained, carefully ordinary edges. And Angus didn't fit anywhere inside them. Unless he fit somewhere that wasn't public.

I shifted forward, fingers already moving before the idea fully formed. Private connections didn't show up in casual searches. You had to come at them sideways. I clicked into Henry's friends list. Limited. Not completely locked down, but curated.

Scrolling slowly, I scanned names, faces, locations. A lot of New Hampshire. A few in Massachusetts. One or two scattered farther out. No Angus Halliburton. No Angus anything. Or variations thereof. But Henry had reposts on his home page from the construction company where he'd worked for fifteen years.

I clicked into the company page. It was regional. Modest. A place that didn't bother much with social media beyond the occasional *Employee of the Month* post and holiday hours announcements. I scrolled anyway. Came across a group photo from last year's company picnic. People clustered together in folding chairs and branded T-shirts, holding paper plates and red Solo cups.

Henry stood near the middle. Smiling. Same smile as his profile picture, but a little more relaxed. I leaned closer. "Okay, who are you standing next to?"

A man to Henry's right—tall, broad-shouldered, wearing sunglasses and a Boston baseball cap pulled low. Half-turned away from the camera. His

face mostly shadowed. Could've been anyone. Probably nobody related to Henry's death.

But something about the posture snagged in my brain. Familiar in a way I couldn't immediately place. I clicked the photo, zooming in until the pixels started to break apart. The man's face didn't resolve, but his shirt did. A dark polo with a small embroidered logo. Not the construction company's.

I squinted, angling the screen, hoping that would somehow help. The logo was partially obscured by a fold in the fabric, but a few letters peeked through.

... rb ... Rb what? My pulse ticked up a notch. I pulled back, scanned the caption.

Annual Summer Picnic! Great to see everyone outside the office!

Tagged employees dotted the image. I hovered over Henry. Tagged. Good. Then I moved to the man beside him. No tag. Of course not. That'd be too easy. Still, unready to let it go. I right-clicked, opened the image in a new tab, and zoomed again. Focused on the shirt. The partial logo. The letters.

... rb ...

Carbs? Curbs? Derby?

No. Kirby. As in Kirby on the Lake. The thought slid in so subtly I almost missed it. I leaned back in my chair. No way. Too much of a stretch. Except it didn't feel that way.

Kirby on the Lake. The same resort that brought Henry Smith to Riddleton in the first place. The same place circling the edges of everything that'd happened.

Savannah leaped to her feet. Alert. Not reacting to the name, obviously, but to me. To the shift in my breathing. The way my body had gone still.

I swallowed hard, pushing back the lump forming in my throat. I was on the verge of jumping to a huge conclusion. But jumping was how I usually ended up in the wrong place, with a broken ankle. But ignoring it? That felt wrong, too.

I turned back to the screen, heart beating a little faster than it should've been for a blurry logo and a half-formed idea. Time to verify. Because that was the rule. Trust but verify. And for once, I'd choose to follow the rules.

A new tab blinked open. My fingers hovered for half a second before I typed it in. *Kirby on the Lake. Lake Dester, South Carolina.* The home page

loaded, carefully showing only the main building. Of course, only the folks who lived in the surrounding area knew that the building on display was the only completed portion of the resort.

I clicked the main site. Packages. Events. Seasonal retreats. Scrolling until the section called *Corporate Bookings* appeared. My pulse ticked up. I clicked.

Host your next team getaway ...

Skimming fast, my eyes caught on the phrases that mattered.

... customizable packages for small to mid-sized companies ...

leadership workshops ... outdoor team-building ...

I went back to the construction company website. This place would absolutely book a gathering once a year and call it a morale booster.

Savannah had moved closer without me noticing, her shoulder brushing my leg. Or maybe she knew when my brain started running ahead of me and chose to provide a necessary distraction. As usual, it didn't work.

I clicked into the photo gallery and scrolled back to the year before the company picnic. I found photos of the resort. Lake Dester at sunrise. A long table under pine trees, paper lanterns strung overhead. People laughing, bottles raised mid-toast.

Henry Smith. Same easy smile. Same posture. Comfortable, like he belonged exactly where he was. I leaned closer, scanning the rest of the image. Faces blurred slightly at the edges as I searched for something I couldn't quite name yet. Something that didn't fit. The way you notice a wrong note in a song, even though you've never heard it before.

My gaze snagged on a figure to Henry's immediate right. Half-turned away from the camera, again, but close. Too close to be a coincidence. I zoomed in. Pixels broke apart, but details held just enough. The same dark polo. Embroidered logo. Worn by the same guy in the company picnic photo. My breath slowed into the strange, suspended feeling I got when my subconscious brain started lining things up faster than my conscious mind could process.

I scrolled farther. Another photo. A group at the lake's edge, shoes kicked off, jeans rolled, water catching the light. Henry again. And again, the same figure. Not posing. Not engaging the camera.

I dragged the cursor down until I found the caption beneath the gallery.

Kirby on the Lake—Fall Corporate Retreat

Two years ago.

My eyes moved back to Henry's last post in my other tab. The packed suitcase. The too-casual caption: *Quick trip. Back before you know it.*

Mary's reply: *Be safe and good luck.*

"You came down here," I said, staring at Henry's face on the screen. "For a job? Why? You had a job. A good one from the look of it."

The office felt smaller suddenly. The hum of the laptop louder. The overhead light a little too harsh. I glanced at the legal pad and pulled it closer, pen already moving.

Kirby on the Lake — corporate retreat — two years ago

Henry present

Returned recently — why?

The question sat there, heavier than the others. Because this wasn't a coincidence anymore. Henry hadn't just ended up in Riddleton. He'd come back to something. Or someone.

And somebody killed him for it.

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CHAPTER SIX

I sat at my desk with my laptop open, three legal pads spread out as if I were preparing to defend a thesis titled “The Mysterious Death of the Man Nobody Ever Posted a Bad Word About.”

Savannah lay in her bed, chin resting on the edge, watching me with the long-suffering patience of someone who’d expected to be released an hour ago, but hadn’t been paroled yet. Her ears twitched every time I sighed.

“I’m aware,” I told her. “We’ll go in a minute. After I uncover the secrets of a guy murdered for no apparent reason. By a man who doesn’t have a malicious bone in his body.”

I believed that about Angus. I did. But belief wasn’t evidence. And evidence was all anyone else cared about.

She bounced her tail once, unconvinced but willing to take her chances.

I’d started with the obvious—social media. Nothing useful. No connection to Riddleton other than Angus, who hadn’t seen the guy probably since long before he left New Hampshire. No recent moves. No digital footprint suggesting anything that gave someone a reason to kill him.

That part bothered me most. Where were the bad days at the office? The parking tickets. Petty arguments in comment sections. Exes who overshared. There’s always a digital trail of minor embarrassments and major mistakes.

Henry Smith had none of it. He had to be the most boring man in America.

I rubbed my eyes and leaned back in my chair, staring at the notes I’d made. Nothing jumped out at me. Nothing even twitched. No motive. No money trail. No angry former business partner. No scandal. Just a dead man in the park and a suspect I couldn’t picture committing murder if you handed him instructions and a flowchart.

I blew out a sigh and reached for my phone.

Brittany answered on the second ring. “If this is about hanging out tonight because Olinski and Eric are working, I can’t. I have plans.”

Plans? My brain stalled. “What kind of plans?”

“Just plans. I don’t have to tell you everything, you know.”

Excuse me? “Since when? We always tell each other everything. Since kindergarten!” When *plans* meant popsicles and riding bikes in circles until we got dizzy. Not mysterious evasiveness from my best friend. The one who told me every time she had a hangnail or a zit.

“Things change. We all have to grow up sometime, Jen.”

“Says you. I’m never going to grow up.”

“I believe you.”

“Guess I’ll have to find someone else to discuss my problems with.”

She sighed in the resigned way only a best friend can. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t find anything solid on Henry Smith,” I said, pacing now because sitting still was making my brain itch. “No arrest record that made it onto the internet, no social media trail that makes killing him make sense. It’s like he dropped in for a visit and someone killed him for it.”

“That’s not comforting.”

“No. It’s not.”

What if I was wrong? What if Angus *had* made the leap out of character? What if I clung to my version of him because it was easier than accepting that people can be surprising in the worst possible ways?

“Come on, Britt. Can’t you work some magic with your super-secret library databases or something? You know you can find anything when you put your mind to it.”

I hated that she probably thought I needed her to fix this. Even though I did. I didn’t have to like it, though.

“Okay,” Brittany said finally. “I can’t promise miracles, but I’ll dig into it for you. Tomorrow. Not tonight. That good enough for you?”

Relief flooded through my chest. “Absolutely. You’re my research guru, and I love you.”

“I know. The only question is, do you love *me*, or my research skills?”

“Can’t it be both?” I smiled in spite of myself. “You sure you can’t come over tonight? We can compare notes. I’ll make pasta.”

“I’m sure. And your idea of making pasta is opening a can and introducing me to your new friend, Chef Boyardee.”

“Ha ha. I’ll have you know I can boil water with the best of ’em.”

“True, but you have to put the spaghetti in sometime.”

I sent her a raspberry, spitting all over my phone in the process. It was worth it, though.

“Very mature, Jen. I’m still not coming over tonight.”

I struggled to keep the disappointment out of my voice. “Okay. Have fun with whatever you’re doing tonight that’s so important you can’t spend the evening with me.”

She laughed. “Passive-aggressive much? It’s one time. Get over it.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

We hung up, and I stared at my reflection in the dark cell phone screen for a second. Why did it bother me so much? Just because the boys were working didn’t mean Brittany owed me her evening. Or any evening for that matter. I clipped Savannah’s leash to her collar.

“See?” I told her as we waved to Lacey and Charlie and stepped outside into the cool evening air. “You survived.”

She trotted ahead, as if she’d discovered the clue that solved the case.

By the time I got home, the sky had shifted into that dusky lavender that makes everything feel peaceful. I fumbled for my keys while Savannah etched claw marks in the door, trying to get to her baby we’d abandoned inside.

So much for our deposit.

The door opened into a dark house, which was normal. No pint-sized Casper doing figure eights around my feet? Definitely not normal. I froze. The kitten always materialized within seconds, demanding acknowledgment of his feline superiority.

A flicker of unease skittered down my spine.

The lights exploded on.

“SURPRISE!”

I screamed.

Actually screamed.

Savannah’s leash slipped from my hand, and she charged in, barked once, then immediately began wagging. In her mind, someone had relocated doggy Disneyland to our living room, and the treats were all her favorite flavor.

Brittany stood by the dining table, a smirking criminal mastermind. Eric stood beside her, holding what suspiciously resembled a party popper and wearing the world’s most satisfied expression. Half of Riddleton had gathered, complete with party hats and grins.

The table was covered in streamers. Balloons floated everywhere. It took my brain a full five seconds to catch up. “What’s going on here?”

Brittany lifted an eyebrow. “Happy birthday?”

My mouth opened. Closed. It was my birthday. I'd forgotten again.

Eric stepped forward carefully, the same way he approached a potentially volatile witness. "In your defense, you've been busy trying to interfere in another homicide investigation."

I eyed the cake, which had my name on it in looping blue icing. There were candles, the number discreet. I appreciated that. Thirty-two of them required permission from the police and a special dispensation from the fire department. Not much of a problem, though, since a large contingent of Riddleton cops and firefighters were already here.

"You didn't think we'd let it slide, did you?" Brittany asked.

I stared at the two of them. At the decorations. Eric watched me closely. Not amused now, not teasing. Watching to make sure I was okay.

My throat tightened. "I thought you all forgot."

"Yeah, right," Brittany said. "Like we could possibly forget your birthday."

Savannah weaved between them, accepting birthday-level adoration from both conspirators.

I laughed, the sound shaky at first. "You're ridiculous."

"Correct. Now come here." Brittany pulled me into a hug, smelling of flowery shampoo and familiarity. Safe. Her hugs stitched up little invisible wounds I didn't know I had. I squeezed her back, tighter than usual.

"You lied to me," I accused into her shoulder.

"Not really. I said I had plans. I never said what they were." Her grin crinkled the skin around her eyes. "Besides, the deception was for a noble cause."

I stepped back, blinking too fast. I refused to cry. Not over cake and balloons and the fact that I'd forgotten my own birthday because I was too busy trying to fix someone else's tragedy. Again.

Eric waited, hands in his pockets. Watching me. He did that to calibrate his emotions before stepping in. So he wouldn't overwhelm me. Or himself.

Once upon a time, it would've annoyed me. Now, it made my chest feel too small to hold my heart.

When he stepped forward, his arms went around me carefully, afraid I might bolt or fight back. Or both.

"I had help," he murmured near my ear, his warm breath raising gooseflesh on my neck and forearms.

"You made a spreadsheet, didn't you?" I whispered back.

“Maybe.”

Hah. More like Brittany made the spreadsheet. She’d always been organized beyond normal comprehension.

But Eric had coordinated the whole thing. That much I knew. He didn’t do things halfway. If there was a surprise party, there’d been planning. Logistics. Endless text threads. Probably a backup cake in case the first one collapsed or the icing smeared. He might not love chaos, but it seemed he loved me enough to orchestrate some. His hand rested lightly at my waist, and I leaned into him.

My brain had been spinning all day. Henry Smith’s innocuous history, Angus sitting in a holding cell, the way doubt crept in when fatigue kept me from fighting it. I could be wrong about him. Had I built my certainty on nostalgia and stubbornness? What if the police were seeing facts I refused to acknowledge?

Eric’s thumb moved in the smallest arc against my side, absentminded and warm.

I hadn’t realized how tightly I’d been wound until that tiny movement made my insides loosen a bit.

He leaned forward enough to peer into my eyes. His expression not amused now. Not teasing. “You okay?”

I swallowed. Nodded. Then shook my head a little because lying to him felt harder than lying to myself. “I thought you all forgot,” I said again, instead of revealing my inner turmoil about Angus. About everything that’d happened today.

His mouth curved, gentle but not mocking. “We’d never forget. We love you.”

The certainty in his voice spread warmth through me.

The front door opened. Lacey and Charlie slipped in with a smile and a wave. They’d known about the party all along and never said a word. I shook my head, already planning payback in my mind.

Across the room, Veronica Winslow shushed Brittany during a discussion about candle placement, like they were wrangling over the best way to defuse a bomb. Savannah had rolled onto her back in the middle of the dining room, milking the attention for all she could get out of it. Even Casper had emerged from wherever he’d been hiding, swiping extended claws at balloons hovering just out of reach. *Too bad.* I would’ve loved to see his reaction when he caught one.

I looked around the room and smiled. My life, now. Loud and ridiculous and warm. And I wouldn't trade it for all the bestsellers in the world.

For that moment, Henry Smith didn't matter. The missing pieces didn't matter. The creeping fear that I might be wrong about Angus didn't matter.

What did matter was that Brittany had lied to me for a surprise cake and balloons. That a big chunk of the Riddleton population had shown up in party hats. That someone had remembered the exact flavor of icing I liked on my chocolate cake.

What mattered was that when I forgot my own birthday because I'd been too busy chasing answers and defending someone who might not deserve it, the people who loved me didn't forget.

And then there was Eric.

Especially Eric.

"Okay," Brittany announced, clapping her hands together, calling the meeting to order. "Enough emotional vulnerability. It's making everyone uncomfortable. Cake time."

"That's not true," Veronica said without glancing up from her candle arrangement. "I thrive on emotional vulnerability. It's the poor candle spacing that's stressing me out."

"You've moved them three times." Charlie pointed from the doorway, where he'd stationed himself. The bouncer for baked goods. "At this point, the candles are going to unionize. Then she'll have to blow harder to put them out."

"They're crooked, and there weren't enough of them," Veronica snapped. "I refuse to believe Jen's only seventeen years old. I have shoes older than that."

"They're melting," Charlie countered. "Time is a factor."

Savannah barked once, as if in agreement with Charlie's stance on candle urgency.

"See? Even the dog gets it."

"The dog just wants her share of cake."

I laughed again, steadier this time, and let Eric's hand slip from my waist as Brittany grabbed my wrist and dragged me toward the table.

"Sit," she ordered, pointing to the chair at the head as if she'd assigned seating weeks ago. Which, knowing her, she probably had.

I dropped into the seat, still trying to catch up with everything happening at once. Balloons. People. Noise. The sweet smell of frosting, with

something chocolatey underneath.

Casper leaped onto the table, investigating the cake with the focused intensity of a tiny, furry health inspector.

“Absolutely not.” I scooped him up before he could stick his face in the frosting. “The last thing we need is a kitten on a sugar high.”

He blinked at me, unrepentant, and tried to bat at a candle.

“Menace.” I deposited him on the floor.

“He gets his inquisitiveness from you,” Brittany said.

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Not really,” Eric cut in, taking up a position behind my chair. Not crowding me, but close enough that I could feel the heat of him, the uncomplicated steadiness. Crazy how much that helped.

“Okay!” Brittany sang. “Make a wish.”

Everyone leaned in. Charlie. Even Veronica, who’d finally declared the candle number and placement acceptable, folding her arms. A general overseeing a successful campaign.

I peered into the flames. Thirty-two small points of light flickering back at me. *Make a wish*. Right. I could wish for answers. For Henry Smith’s death to suddenly make sense. For a neat, clean explanation proving Angus couldn’t have done what they were saying he did.

I could wish for certainty. Instead, what came to mind was much simpler.

Please let me not be wrong.

Not about Angus. Not about the people I trust. Not about any of it.

I blew out the candles in one breath.

Cheers erupted immediately, loud enough to make me flinch and then laugh again as Savannah added her own enthusiastic barking to the mix.

“Same wish as last year?” Brittany asked, narrowing her eyes at me. An attempt to extract it from my brain through sheer force.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” I shot back.

“I would, actually. That’s why I asked.”

“Too bad.”

“Rude.”

I stuck my tongue out at her.

Charlie leaned in with a knife. “Before this turns into a full-blown squabble, I’m cutting the cake.”

“Careful,” Veronica warned. “Even slices.”

“Mayor, it’s birthday cake, not a geometry exam.”

She didn't appear convinced.

I watched them bicker, watched Brittany hover to make sure I got the first slice, watched Casper attempt a second infiltration mission, and felt my gut settle. The worry was still there. The questions. The unease that'd been building all day. But it wasn't suffocating anymore. It finally had a little space around it.

Eric set a plate in front of me. Chocolate cake buried under a thick layer of white, vanilla-flavored icing, exactly the way I liked it. "Thank you."

He nodded once. Nothing to it. Nothing to organizing a surprise party while knee-deep in a murder investigation. Just a normal Saturday.

"You did this." I kept my voice low so it didn't carry over the noise.

"I told you I had help."

"Mm-hmm." I took a bite of cake. It was perfect. Of course it was. Brittany wouldn't allow anything less. "You coordinated it, then."

A slight pause. "I made a few calls."

I smiled, shaking my head. "You're unbelievable."

"So I've been told. Mostly by you."

There was a flicker of softness in his expression again. Not teasing. Not guarded. "You've been in your head since this morning. Figured you could use a break."

I stared down at my plate, tracing the edge of the frosting with my fork. "I can't make it fit," I admitted, still keeping my voice low. "Henry Smith. There's nothing there. No reason for someone to—" I stopped myself, remembering where I was. Of those who hovered around us. "It doesn't make sense."

"It's a party," he reminded me. "I'm not workshopping theories over birthday cake."

Before I could respond, Brittany plopped into the chair next to me with enough force to rattle the table. "Are you two talking about murder at my party?"

"No," we both said at the same time.

Her rosebud mouth twisted. "That was suspiciously synchronized."

"We're just appreciating the cake." I took another bite to prove it.

"Good. Because you are both off duty tonight. No murder. No suspects. No brooding over mysterious men with ridiculously ordinary internet histories."

I choked on my cake. "Wow. Disturbingly specific."

“See?” Eric said. “I’m not the only one who thinks you should let it rest for a while.”

I shot him a look. But he was smiling again.

And Brittany was already launching into a story about something that’d happened at the library, complete with dramatic reenactments and at least three different voices.

Around us, the room buzzed. Laughter. Conversation. The gentle thump of Savannah’s tail against the floor. The faint pop of a balloon meeting Casper’s claws and losing. The corresponding screech and hiss.

For tonight, the questions could wait.

Henry Smith would still be dead tomorrow.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Sunday morning arrived like punishment.

Not stretched on a medieval rack punishment. No thunderbolts or karmic reckoning. The dull, persistent throb of a hangover. The very real possibility someone had filled the inside of my skull with tiny construction workers armed with jackhammers.

I groaned and rolled onto my back, squinting at the muted gray light filtering through the curtains. The slanted ceiling of our bedroom angled down toward the far wall, giving the space the cozy charm of an attic and the airflow of a decompression chamber. One window faced the trees behind the house, another out toward the road, both letting in the kind of pale light that felt downright judgmental at this hour.

Casper planted his paw against my jaw to ensure I didn't encroach on his share of the pillow. My pillow. Or so I foolishly believed. The three pounds of chaos wrapped in marshmallow fur blinked at me with pale green innocence, then kneaded my cheek. One claw caught my lip.

"Ow!" I pulled his paw off my face.

He responded by flopping sideways, sprawling over my mouth and nose.

Terrific. Now I had to decide between suffocation and laceration. At one time in my life, I imagined my Sundays would involve sleeping late, unlimited coffee, and *Gunsmoke* reruns. Instead, here I was negotiating with a kitten for the right to breathe.

I lifted him down to the floor and sat on the edge of the mattress. A lightning bolt shot through my head. I froze, eyes squeezed shut, breathing through it.

You are never drinking three glasses of wine again.

I'd said that to myself before. And yet ...

The bedroom always smelled a bit of old pine with a hint of mildew. One of the perks of living in a creaky A-frame rental with questionable plumbing. The pipes clanked in protest every time someone showered too long. Which didn't happen often, since the hot water ran out long before the serenade began.

We were already thinking about a better place. Something with insulation. And plumbing not auditioning for a percussion ensemble. Still, I'd grown fond of the place. It creaked. It shifted. It felt alive in a way new construction didn't. And it was ours. Mine and Eric's. Our first joint experiment. Living together, pretending to be grown-ups.

My mouth tasted like I'd licked the floor of a winery, and my head pulsed in time with my heartbeat. Somewhere in the house, silence reigned. Way too peaceful for the zoo I lived in.

I glanced at the clock—8:42 a.m. flashed at me in red.

Eric always left early when working a case. I reached across the bed to feel the mattress. Cold. He'd been gone a while.

A small, irrational flicker of disappointment flared in my chest. I'd half hoped he'd be there, hydrated and annoyingly functional, ready to deliver an "I told you so" about that third glass of wine. Instead, the other side of the bed was smooth and empty.

Savannah lifted her head from my thigh, ears pricked.

"You let him leave without me?" I scratched the back of her neck.

Her tail whacked against the bed in what I interpreted as, *You were unconscious, Mom. I made an executive decision.*

"Traitor," I muttered, but without conviction. She loved him almost as much as she loved me. And I suspected the "almost" was wishful thinking on my part.

Pushing myself upright one creaking body part at a time, I waited to see if the room would tilt. Nope. No more than usual. I staggered to the bathroom for morning ablutions and a quick shower to clear my head. The pipes rattled when I turned the water on, then coughed like an asthmatic dragon before finally spitting out lukewarm liquid.

I stood under the spray longer than I should have, hoping clarity might descend along with the hot water. It didn't. Instead, my mind replayed yesterday's events. Angus's face. The confusion there. The fear.

I shut the water off before it betrayed me with a blast of cold. Almost made it, too. I toweled off and threw on some sweats, then headed downstairs for coffee.

The steps groaned under my weight as I made my way down, but held together the way they always did. When I glanced back up at the landing, the hallway stretched out in both directions. Wallpaper peeled, revealing

layers of floral patterns from decades past. We lived in a time capsule buried sometime mid-last century.

Layers upon layers. Nothing ever really went away. It got covered up. Buried. I shuddered. Too close to reality for comfort.

The scent reached me halfway down the staircase. Coffee. Real, life-affirming, freshly brewed coffee. I stood on the step and drew in the intoxicating scent. Eric might not have woken me, but he'd left the elixir of life. Which was, in our relationship, the equivalent of flowers and candy on Valentine's Day. Or a surprise birthday party.

I shuffled toward the kitchen, one hand trailing along the wall for balance. The scuffed hardwood floorboards in the living room bore scratches, dull patches, and the faint outline of where rugs had sat for what must've been decades. The fireplace dominated the far wall, its brickwork filled with gaps in the mortar, resembling a Jenga tower mid-game.

Not perfect. Then again, neither were we.

The house was tidy. The dishwasher hummed in the kitchen, competing with the refrigerator's steady drone in E-flat. The fridge had been old when Truman was president. Ditto the linoleum, yellowed at the edges and patterned in a way that suggested mid-century optimism that never panned out.

The curtains had been left open. Eric did that when he wanted the house to feel brighter. And there, on the kitchen counter, I found a folded piece of paper propped against the coffeemaker, my name written across it in his almost illegible scrawl.

I filled my "Creativity Begins with Coffee" mug first. Priorities.

Then, I picked up the note.

Jen—

You were out cold, so I didn't wake you. Breakfast is in the oven on warm (eggs, toast, and bacon, of course). Coffee's fresh. I walked Savannah. She did her business and tried to chase a squirrel, but I saved it. Fed the kids. Don't forget to hydrate. I'll bet your headache's a whopper!

Love you—

Eric

He'd drawn a crooked little heart at the bottom. "You're setting the bar high, buddy," I muttered to the empty kitchen.

Savannah appeared at my elbow, eyes hopeful.

"You've already eaten. Don't even try it."

Her gaze shifted to the oven.

I opened it to find a plate covered in foil sitting on the center rack. Steam rose when I peeled it back to reveal eggs over medium, buttered toast, and bacon arranged according to a plating guide he'd consulted.

He'd taken time. Time he probably didn't have. Guilt pricked at me. He was out there dealing with real consequences. Real danger. Real accusations.

And I was here nursing a hangover.

Casper wound around my ankles, tail flicking, offended that I hadn't yet acknowledged his existence.

"I know he fed you."

His tiny mew sounded a whole lot like "Liar."

I ignored him and sat at the table to eat. The food helped. So did the second cup of coffee. By the time I carried the third cup upstairs to my desk, the pounding in my head had downgraded from a riot to a peaceful protest.

The second bedroom, officially dubbed "our office," sat at the end of the hall. The floorboards had warped in the middle over time, creating a slow-motion wave that dipped just enough to make you feel drunk even when completely sober. My desk sat at the crest of it, a little tilted. My laptop waited, accusing and patient.

Book Four.

The fourth installment of the *Davenport Twins Mysteries*.

When I balked at having to write another one so soon, my editor called it "momentum." I called it "misery." Nothing about writing a mystery came easy to me.

I opened the working document. "Untitled Manuscript" stared at me. The cursor pulsed. I leaned back in my chair, listening to the faint creak of beams adjusting, the distant hum of the refrigerator downstairs, the whisper of wind along the A-frame roofline. I cradled my mug and tried to summon a fictional disaster.

The Davenport twins, Dana and Daniel, needed a body. Not too gruesome, but dead nonetheless. A mystery with heart and the right amount of danger to keep readers flipping pages without having to sleep with the lights on.

Small town. Secrets. Murder. My fingers hovered over the keyboard.

What if the victim was someone who didn't officially exist? Or better yet, seemed way too good to be true?

I stilled. No, too close to real life. Poking around a wound that hadn't scabbed over yet. Hadn't even stopped bleeding yet. But that was the story pressing at me. A man with little significant digital footprint. No clear history.

I stared at the blank screen, and instead of seeing Dana and Daniel standing in their charming fictional downtown, I saw the park. The flashing lights. The way everyone started whispering before we knew all the questions, let alone the answers.

The way Eric's jaw tightened when he thought I wasn't paying attention. The way Angus looked at me with the hope I might somehow confirm this was a mistake. Like I could fix it with a wave of my magic wand. I had bad news for him. I couldn't even fix my opening paragraph.

Focus, Jen.

I typed the all-important first line.

The body appeared the same week the town council voted to tear down the old Davenport Opera House.

My eyebrow lifted. Opera house? Since when did we have an opera house?

Highlight, delete.

I tried again.

When the twins received an unsigned letter warning them to "let the past stay buried," they assumed it was a prank.

Better. I sipped my coffee and let the idea expand. Anonymous threats. A decades-old scandal. Something hidden in plain sight. And yet, my mind kept drifting back to real timelines. Real motives. Real fear in Angus's eyes.

What if he's telling the truth?

What if he isn't?

What if Eric is wrong? The thought that he might not be made me shiver.

In my novels, I controlled everything. I decided who lied and why. I planted clues with mathematical precision. Every loose thread tied into a satisfying bow in the end. Real life didn't work that way. Real life left notes unfinished. Questions unanswered. People in jail for crimes they didn't commit. People who should be in jail, walking around free.

Casper clawed his way up my leg into my lap and curled up, purring. Savannah woofed and rested her chin on my knee.

"I'm working," I told her.

She stared at me with soulful reproach.

"I am. I swear."

I forced myself to type again.

Dana Davenport had always believed that secrets were like splinters. Ignore them long enough, and they festered.

I paused. That one hit a little too close to home, too. Maybe that was the problem. The line between my fictional town and my real one felt thinner than it should. The mystery outside my office door breathed down my neck, nudging at my not-so-carefully plotted outline.

After another sip of coffee, I straightened. Fine. If my brain insisted on circling the real mystery, I could at least learn from it. What made it so compelling? Uncertainty. Missing pieces. Someone I thought I knew, but maybe didn't. So, how to relate that to my writing? *Beats me.*

Another thought surfaced. What if the twins' investigation put strain on their relationship? What if wanting answers came with a price tag they'd never had to pay before? They'd always gotten along well. What if this one became personal somehow? Set them against each other?

My fingers moved faster now.

Dana hesitated before knocking on the door. Some mysteries, once opened, refused to close again.

There. That felt real. Which could be the solution to my problem. Not ignoring what was happening around me, but distilling the emotion of it. The unease. The way it hovered at the edges of ordinary life.

The coffee warmed my hands. The house felt steady again. Savannah sighed and curled at my feet. Casper claimed the sunny patch by the window. A monarch surveying his kingdom.

I probably wouldn't solve the real mystery today, but I could build one. And for now, that had to be enough.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Eric called as I was rearranging the same three sentences on my laptop for the tenth time. Not revising. Not improving. Moving words around like furniture in a room that would never feel quite right.

The cursor blinked at me, patient and judgmental, as if it knew I wasn't going to get it perfect no matter how many times I shifted the words. I leaned back, exhaled, then leaned forward again, dragging one sentence above another, then back again. Solving some kind of literary sliding puzzle.

Sometimes, the past refuses to stay buried.

I stared at it. Deleted a comma. Put it back. That one stayed. For now. My phone buzzed across the desk, rattling against a stack of notebooks, making me flinch. Eric's name dominated the lit screen.

A tiny knot formed under my ribs. Calls from Eric while he was working a case almost always meant serious business. He didn't call to chat about dinner plans or ask if we needed milk. He called when something happened. Something bad.

I let it ring once more before picking it up, bracing myself without quite admitting that's what I was doing. "Hey."

"Jen." Background noise flooded the line—voices overlapping, a door slamming somewhere in the distance, the low mechanical hum of a building that never slept. Bedlam held in check by procedure. I maxed out the volume on my cell phone and pressed it tighter to my ear. "What happened?"

A brief pause. "Angus asked for you."

My hand tightened around the phone. "For me?"

"Yes. Specifically." Another beat. "He wouldn't tell us why. Just said he won't talk to anyone else."

I leaned back in my chair, eyes drifting up to the ceiling. Maybe I'd find the answer inscribed in the faint cracks in the paint. "I'm not his lawyer."

"I know."

"I'm not family, either."

"I know that, too."

“And pretty sure I’m not on the official list of *People Who Should Be Involved in Active Murder Investigations*.”

“Jen.” That tone. The one that meant there was more underneath the words. A thought he wasn’t saying outright.

I closed my eyes. “What aren’t you telling me?”

The background noise faded a bit. He’d found a private corner. “He’s not doing well. I’m worried about him.”

I opened my eyes, stared at the ceiling again, without really seeing it anymore. Angus not doing well? That didn’t fit.

The Angus I knew was easygoing. Jovial. A man who laughed too loudly at his own jokes and somehow made you laugh with him anyway. He brought store-bought cookies to potlucks and insisted they were a “family recipe,” daring anyone to call him on it. He knew everyone’s business and shared it with cheerful confidence. To him, gossip was another form of community service. That man didn’t unravel.

But I’d seen him Friday night. Seen the anger. Raw. Unfiltered. Sharp enough to cut through the music and chatter of the party. People were already building a story around that moment. I’d seen the headlines this morning. Words like *rage*. *Revenge*. *Crime of passion*. The comment sections were worse, filled with people debating not whether Angus had killed Henry Smith, but whether he’d been justified if he had.

That chilled me more than the accusation itself. I couldn’t imagine any scenario in which Angus Halliburton murdered Henry. Or anyone else. “I’ll come.”

“I figured you would.”

Relief slipped into Eric’s voice, subtle but unmistakable. That bothered me. Relief meant he thought Angus needed me. Or that I needed to hear whatever Angus had to say. Either way, it probably meant trouble for me.

“Jen,” Eric added, before hanging up, “Just listen to what he has to say. Don’t interrogate. Don’t investigate. Just listen, okay?”

“I can do that. I don’t understand why he wants to talk to me, though. What does Ted Winslow say about it?”

“No idea. We’re not privy to conversations between a suspect and his attorney.”

Of course not. I nodded, even though he couldn’t see it. “All right, I’ll head over.”

We hung up, and I set the phone down on my desk and reached for my coffee, swallowing the last lukewarm mouthful. Bitter. Forgettable.

Casper stirred beside me, stretching with exaggerated elegance before planting both front paws into my thigh, and kneading the way he'd work out a particularly stubborn piece of dough.

"Fantastic. Exactly what I needed," I said, wincing as one claw punctured the light fabric protecting my leg.

He ignored me, as usual, turning in a slow circle before settling back down, tail flicking once in mild satisfaction.

I stroked him behind the ears, firing up the motorboat. The purr rumbled through my leg, and if contentment had a sound, it would be that. "You're useless, you know that?"

He flicked an ear, unimpressed, and yawned, displaying a full set of tiny white daggers.

Must be nice. Sleep when things got complicated. Ignore the noise. Let the world sort itself out without you. My mind, unfortunately, was doing the opposite of purring. I leaned back in my chair and stared at the ceiling, again, replaying Friday night whether I wanted to or not.

Henry outside the community center, a cigarette burning between his fingers. Angus closing the distance between them, anger radiating off him in waves. Furious.

You don't deserve to live after what you did.

Furious enough to kill Henry, though? No way. That kind of anger burned hot, but it burned fast. It was explosive, not calculated. Murder required more. A shift. A moment where impulse hardened into decision. Planning. Deliberation. Follow-through.

Who else had gained from Henry's death?

The motorboat purred louder. Feline encouragement.

"Okay," I whispered, more to myself than the cat. "If I were the real killer ..."

Casper's tail flicked.

"... I'd let the angry guy take the fall."

The idea dropped into place with unsettling ease. If someone else had killed Henry, Angus was the perfect shield. A ready-made narrative. Motive wrapped in anger. And people loved a story that made sense.

No way I'd allow Angus to lose the rest of his life to a tale the real murderer was only too happy to let us believe. I stood, carefully dislodging

Casper, who opened one eye in mild annoyance before resettling himself on the chair. "I'm going," I told the kitten.

He went back to sleep.

The police station carried the smell of disinfectant layered over something more sinister underneath. Not blood. Despair, maybe. Regret. The metallic tang of consequences.

I checked in with the duty sergeant, gave my name, and tried not to think about how out of place I felt standing there. A civilian. A writer. Someone who made things up for a living. Once again stepping into a very real, potentially dangerous situation.

The visitation area was ten degrees colder than the rest of the building. Angus sat in one of the orange plastic chairs, elbows on the table, hands clasped so tightly his knuckles had gone pale. His shoulders curved inward, trying to appear to take up less space. No sign of the anger I'd observed outside the party Friday night.

In its place was something visceral. Raw. I'd never seen him like this. Never encountered anything but his smiling face and relaxed disposition. I had no idea how to react to this version of Angus. This version of him felt wrong. The Angus I knew filled rooms. The one in front of me barely seemed to exist outside himself. Eric's words echoed through my head.

Just listen.

He glanced up when I sat down. Emotions flickered across his face. Fear? Shame? Or both tangled together so tightly they couldn't be separated.

"You came," he said.

"Of course." I pulled out a chair and sat across from him. "You asked."

Silence settled over us. Thick. Waiting. The questions lined up in my head. Where were you, who saw you, what happened next? I swallowed them back.

Just listen.

"I didn't kill him," Angus said with no preamble. No hesitation. No buildup. Just the statement, dropped like an anchor between us.

"I know." Not sure why I'd said it so quickly. Instinct, maybe. Or stubborn refusal to let the police decide someone's guilt for me.

His eyes lifted to mine, searching. "You're sure?"

I held his gaze. "I don't think you did it." It was the truth. Not certainty. Not proof. But instinct mattered.

His shoulders slumped, and he audibly exhaled. Relief? Gratitude? Either way, he could be secure in the knowledge I had his back.

"Did you see Henry again after the argument?"

"No."

"Did you follow him?"

"No."

"Did anyone see you leave the community center?"

"Yes. Half the damn party."

"That's all good, but it's not enough." I reached over and took his hand. "Angus, why did they find a bloody jacket hidden in your closet?"

He sighed. "A couple of weeks ago, I was home, decorating my house for the holidays, and I heard a thud accompanied by a dog's yelp in the street outside. I ran out the door in time to see a car speeding off and my neighbor's dog bleeding in the road." He swallowed back the tears filling his eyes and continued. "I knew they weren't home because they both worked in Blackburn, so I threw on my jacket, grabbed the dog and tore off to the vet."

I swiped tears from my own eyes, imagining Savannah as the dog. "Did he make it?"

Angus shook his head. "It was too late. Quincy did everything he could, but there was too much internal damage."

"I'm sorry you had to go through that, Angus." I pushed back the lump in my throat. "Did you tell this story to the detectives?"

"I did, but I don't think they believed me. Well, maybe Eric did, but Havermayer? No way."

"It should be easy enough to check, though. I'm sure Quincy will back up your story. And your neighbors, too."

"You believe me?" he said after a minute.

"Yes, of course."

He nodded. More to himself than me. "I need you to do a favor for me."

"Anything."

"I need you to find who really killed Henry. Everyone already has me on the way to death row."

I thought of the headlines. Comment sections. Easy narratives. He wasn't wrong about public opinion. Even Detective Havermayer. But I knew my

boyfriend. “I understand why you believe that, but Eric’ll never settle for an assumption. Don’t forget, he’s known you even longer than I have.”

“Maybe, but his partner would be plenty happy to tie this up in a pretty bow and call it Christmas shopping done.”

I flinched at the truth in his statement. “Eric isn’t Havermayer. And she isn’t his training officer anymore. He gets a vote on what they do. Or don’t do. And he’ll never agree to assume you’re guilty without hard evidence to back it up.”

“I hope you’re right.”

I stood to leave. “I’ll talk to Eric. Make sure he won’t let Havermayer push him into taking the easy way out.”

“Jen,” he said, voice tight with tension.

I paused, turning back.

His eyes were glassy now, but steady. “I swear I didn’t kill him.”

The cold slapped me in the face as I stepped out of the police station. The sky was brittle blue, making everything appear crisper than it felt. I sat in my car for a long moment, hands on the steering wheel, not starting it right away. The desperation on Angus’s face clouded my vision.

I started the engine, and the Jeep rumbled to life. I pulled away from the curb, knowing Eric wouldn’t be happy about my involvement in his case. Even at the request of the accused. Because I wasn’t just listening anymore. I was thinking.

And once I started thinking, I couldn’t stop.

CHAPTER NINE

The Dandy Diner looked like Christmas had detonated across its roof. Garlands framed every window and wrapped the door in a green, glittering chokehold. A red bow the size of a throw pillow clung to the door handle. And Angus had outdone himself with this year's window painting. Snow-dusted pine trees, a cheerful snowman with uneven coal eyes, and a sleigh mid-flight that seemed so fast Santa had to be fleeing a crime scene.

Savannah whined from the passenger seat as I pulled into a parking spot near the door.

"I know, kiddo. You want to go, but you can't," I told her. "It's going to be too busy in there for you to come along this time."

She blinked liquid brown eyes at me, unimpressed, ears angling back to communicate her professional disagreement.

"You'll survive."

Her tail punched once against the seat. Judgment rendered. Guilty as charged.

I stepped out into the cold, the air bitter enough to bite at the inside of my nose, and made my way toward the diner. The second I pushed inside, warmth hit, and the familiar scent of coffee and frying bacon wrapped around me. The diner was nowhere near as hectic as I'd expected. Quite the opposite, in fact. The news of Angus's arrest had gotten out.

A plastic sleigh and two lopsided reindeer hung from the ceiling over the entrance, their glowing noses blinking a plea for rescue in Morse code. Tinsel lined the counter. Miniature Christmas trees had been wedged beside every napkin dispenser, and stockings hung along the front counter. Bright, festive, and absolutely doomed. I gave them twenty minutes tops before bumping elbows knocked them off.

Behind the counter, assistant manager Marcus Jones spotted me and lifted a hand. He was already moving, starting a fresh pot of coffee with the kind of efficient calm that made it seem easy. A couple of years ago, I never would've believed this version of Marcus existed.

Tall, broad-shouldered, pencil-thin mustache perched over his upper lip, he carried himself with an unobtrusive confidence he hadn't had when I

first met him in Blackburn. Of course, he'd been a murder suspect then, and not long out of prison. His newfound poise showed in the way he moved, the way he spoke, the way the staff orbited him without even thinking about it.

"Morning, Jen," he called. "Savannah staying in the car? You know she's welcome anytime. Angus would have a fit if he thought I'd banned his favorite dog."

"I figured you'd be slammed, what with it being Sunday during Christmas and Angus gone. I didn't want her underfoot."

"Makes sense, but unfortunately not today." He came around the counter, wiping his hands on a red-and-green checked dish towel. "You here for coffee or questions?"

I smiled. "Is it that obvious?"

"It's been that kind of weekend."

We moved toward the far end of the counter, away from the few regulars who dared grace the establishment of an accused murderer, pretending not to eavesdrop with the subtlety of a marching band.

I propped my elbows on the counter, cupping my chin with both hands. "I wanted to ask you about the knife."

Marcus's expression darkened enough to take the warmth out of his face. "Figured that was coming."

"Have you seen it? Did it come from here?"

"Havermayer showed me a picture yesterday."

I pictured Detective Francine Havermayer standing right where I was, holding up crime scene photos against a backdrop of blinking reindeer and peppermint décor. The image didn't sit right, pressing somewhere under my ribs. "What did you think?"

"It didn't come from here." Marcus didn't hesitate. "I've worked here long enough to recognize our stock."

"You're sure."

His gaze held mine, steady and certain. "Absolutely. I know what's in our kitchen. I used to be the cook, remember?"

To my surprise, relief flickered through me. I hadn't realized how tightly I'd been holding on to the possibility that something from here might tie Angus to the crime. Marcus's assurance cut that thread clean. "I needed to hear that."

"You know, that guy came in here Friday night. The dead guy."

“Really? What did he want?”

“Nothing, really. He kept to himself, ate his dinner, and left.”

“Huh. Was Angus still here at the time?”

“At first, but then he had to leave to get ready for the party.”

“I wonder if that’s how Henry knew where to find him.”

“Could be.” Marcus leaned one elbow on the countertop. “You think they’ll really be able to pin this on Angus? That guy shoos flies out the door ’cause he doesn’t want to kill them.”

“I know that, and you know that. Try convincing Havermayer, though.”

“I’ve been on her wrong side before. Not a fun place to be.”

“Yeah, I’ve been there once or twice myself.”

He glanced toward the windows, where two women at a booth were watching us and making no attempt to hide it, their coffee forgotten.

I smiled and waved at them until they turned away. “I only hope I can do it. Angus is counting on me.”

Marcus cracked a tiny grin and took my hand. “You came through for me back when my old cellmate was killed, and everyone assumed I did it. You’ll help Angus, too.”

“I appreciate that.” I squeezed his hand in return. “It helps.”

“You find out anything that makes sense, tell me. I care about Angus, too. He gave me a chance when nobody else would. I owe him a lot. And I don’t forget those kinds of things.”

“Neither do I. I’ll do my best. And you’ve earned everything you have. Don’t ever forget it.” I squeezed his hand once more before stepping back toward the door.

Outside, the cold hit me again, harsher after the diner’s warmth. Savannah perked up as I approached the car, and her tail smacked against the seat when I opened the door.

“Good news, kiddo. The knife didn’t come from the diner.”

She sneezed, spraying droplets all over the dashboard. And me.

“Exactly. That’s what *I* said.”

By the time I reached the bookstore, the parking spaces were all gone. Taken, occupied, claimed by people who’d apparently decided that coffee, books, and proximity to a murder investigation made for excellent entertainment. I had to park way down the block on Walnut Street. Savannah had some business to take care of before we went inside, though,

so it was worth the walk. The cold air had a sting to it, but it helped clear my head.

The bells over the door rang the moment we stepped inside, followed by a wave of noise. Voices layered over each other, the espresso machine hissing in its steam locomotive imitation, and Charlie's voice cut through it all, calling out drink orders with theatrical urgency.

The furor had not, in fact, died down. If anything, it'd descended into something worse than the initial hysteria. Fascination. Clusters of customers stood by the kraken guarding the Mystery section, speaking in lowered tones that were anything but low. A woman near the front register asked Lacey if we had any books about small-town murder psychology. A man near the holiday display was busy explaining stab wounds to someone whose face said they regretted making eye contact with him.

I stepped behind the pastry counter. "Tell me we're not out of peppermint syrup."

Charlie shot me a look. "We're not out of peppermint syrup. Yet."

"Great."

Lacey handed me a stack of hardcovers without preamble. "Restock romance, please. Also, if one more person asks whether Henry Smith was secretly a drifter serial killer who deserved what he got, I'm sending them to you."

"Why me?"

"Because you're not me."

"Oh. Makes sense."

Savannah flopped down beside the checkout counter, chin on paws, watching the madness with dignified interest.

I moved along the walls, sliding books into place in the cherry bookcases, offering polite smiles, and redirecting murder-tourism conversations back toward actual literature. Mostly without success.

"Yes, we do carry true crime."

"No, we don't have inside information."

"Yes, that's the new holiday release."

"No, I can't speculate about ongoing investigations."

A woman stopped me near the end of the aisle. "But you must have *some* idea what really happened. Why Angus killed that man."

"I have several. None of which I'm sharing in the Romance section."

She didn't seem satisfied.

That made two of us. By the time I circled back to the coffee bar, Charlie was juggling three latte cups and a tray of cranberry scones. “Pastries are staging a revolt. And if one more person asks whether Henry bought cookies before he died and if so, what kind—”

“He didn’t,” I said without hesitation.

“You don’t know that.”

“I know if he had, someone would’ve turned it into a headline and found a way to blame us for his death.”

Lacey snorted coffee up her nose and began coughing.

For the next hour, I poured coffee, bagged cookies, and rang up hardbacks while trying not to absorb the steady hum of morbid curiosity pressing against my skin.

When the line thinned from impossible to merely unreasonable, I slipped into the office and closed the door. The sudden quiet felt like submerging underwater.

Savannah followed, circling once before settling beside the desk with a relieved sigh.

Outside the office door, laughter rose. Bright, jarring, alive. The world continuing the way it always did.

I glanced down at my German shepherd. “We’re missing something, kiddo.”

Her tail thumped.

The knife hadn’t come from the diner. Angus was scared, but not in the way guilty people tend to be. If I was going to help him, I needed a plan.

I flipped to a clean page in my pad, then stared at the blank paper for a long moment, pen hovering. “Okay. No spiraling. Just logical steps.”

Savannah’s ears twitched as if she approved of bullet points.

In block letters, I wrote at the top of the page:

ANGUS—NIGHT OF MURDER

If I couldn’t prove who *did* kill Henry yet, I could at least try to prove who didn’t.

1. Confirm Angus’s timeline. From the moment he left the party to the moment the police showed up at his door. Every minute accounted for. Every gap explained.
2. Pin down time of death.

Ingrid would've given Havermayer a window. I didn't have access to that information, but Eric would. Or, I could ask Ingrid the way I usually did.

I tapped the pen against the pad.

3. The knife. The murder weapon. Not from the diner. So where did it come from? Someone bought it. From where? Or they already owned it. Who in town did enough cooking to need a professional-type chef's knife?

I wrote another name.

HENRY SMITH

Who benefits from his death? His wife? Kids? Enemies? His murder suggested he had at least one. And his wife was in New Hampshire, right? Or was she? I'd have to find out for sure.

Angus's anger spewed loud and visible, which made him convenient. Convenient suspects are a detective's best friend.

"If I wanted to frame someone, I'd use someone with a grudge." A slow, unsettling thought crept in. What if this wasn't about Angus at all? What if someone had been waiting for a chance to get rid of Henry and pin it on Angus?

My pen moved again.

4. Retrace Henry's final twenty-four hours. Who did he meet? Where did he go? What did he do? If Henry met someone else that night, it changes everything.

Savannah shifted, pressing her head against my leg. Solid. Present.

"I need to stop reacting and get ahead of this, little girl." I scratched between her ears.

Angus's fear replayed in my mind. Not the bluster. Not the anger. The exhaustion. The kind that comes from being dragged back into a nightmare. If he'd killed Henry because of whatever they'd been arguing about, there would've been heat behind it. A snap. Something messy and uncontrolled. But the crime scene hadn't been chaotic. One clean stab wound. Precise. Deliberate.

I drew a slow line across the page. Anger wasn't strategy. Planning was. Which meant whoever did this wanted to capitalize on Henry's proximity to Angus. A chill slipped under my sweatshirt. Angus wasn't a suspect. He was camouflage.

Savannah lifted her head, watching me.

I met her gaze. “We start with the timeline, kid. Concrete. Verifiable. Boring.”

She licked my hand, giving my plan her approval.

I’d call Eric. See if he’d share time of death with me.

Outside the office, the espresso machine continued to blow off steam the way I wished I could. *No easy relief for me.*

I tore the page from my pad and folded it in quarters. “Step one,” I told Savannah, standing. “Lock down Angus’s alibi so tight even Havermayer can’t poke holes in it.”

Savannah rose with me, stretching.

“And step two, we find out what Henry was doing in this town before someone decided he shouldn’t be here anymore.”

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CHAPTER TEN

Savannah spotted Eric before I did. Her ears shot up, entire body going rigid beside me on the sidewalk outside Ravenous Readers. She gave a low whuff, the polite version of her full-throated bark, and tugged on her leash hard enough to jolt my shoulder.

I followed her line of sight. Eric stood halfway down the sidewalk, hands planted on his hips, jacket buttoned tight, warding off the late-afternoon chill. He hunched his shoulders against the wind, and for one disorienting second he looked less like a detective and more like the man who made me coffee every morning and kissed the top of my head without thinking about it.

Beside him, Detective Havermayer stood with a face that'd been carved out of an inflexible substance. Granite, maybe. Or whatever they used to make courthouse benches. A material designed to withstand years of pressure without cracking. Unyielding and permanently skeptical.

Her posture was ramrod straight, shoulders squared, chin lifted as if she expected the world to push back and prepared herself to push harder in return. She had the type of presence that made people confess things they hadn't done just to get her out of the room.

Well. This should be fun.

Savannah dragged me the last few steps, her tail wagging in happy oblivion to the tension in favor of greeting one of her beloved humans. Probably her *favorite* human, if I were honest about it.

Eric noticed me and stilled. An almost imperceptible pause, and a switch flipped somewhere behind his eyes. Surprise flickered across his face, gone as quickly as it appeared. The professional mask slid into place. First warning sign. "Jen."

"Detectives." I nodded at Havermayer.

Savannah pressed her nose against Eric's hand, demanding attention. He obliged, absently scratching behind her ears, eyes never leaving mine. The second warning sign.

Havermayer's gaze skimmed over me the same way she'd scrutinize an item on an evidence list. Cataloged. Filed. Potentially discarded. "Out

walking the dog?”

“On our way home. And not obstructing justice. Yet.”

Her mouth flattened.

I didn’t give her time to respond. “I heard it was your decision to arrest Angus.”

Eric shifted his weight, tension threading through his shoulders. A silent plea not to do this here. “Jen—”

“You saw the knife sticking out of his gut,” Havermayer cut in. “Who else uses chef’s knives around here? He runs the only restaurant in town.”

“And that proves what? He may own the only restaurant, but he’s not the only one who cooks. People use knives at home, too, you know.”

Savannah, sensing the shrillness in my voice, leaned into my leg. Conflict made her anxious. Sometimes I wondered if she wasn’t the most emotionally intelligent creature in this town. Certainly in my part of it.

Havermayer didn’t even glance down. She continued, voice clipped. “We also have the footprints in the mud beside the body. Deep impressions. Heavy stride. Angus weighs what—two-fifty?”

“Two-thirty,” Eric muttered under his breath, pretending accuracy might somehow soften the accusation. Not helpful.

“Deep footprints,” I repeated. “In muddy ground, after a rainstorm.”

Havermayer’s eyes narrowed. “What’s your point?”

“My point is that depth in saturated soil doesn’t equal identity. It equals physics. Anyone with enough weight, or even the right boots, could leave the same impressions.”

“We cast them,” Havermayer said. “Size ten. Same as Angus.”

“And half the men in this county.”

Eric gave me a pleading look. The one that meant stop. *Please.*

I ignored it. “You’re building a case on circumstantial evidence.”

“We’re building it on motive. Angus and Henry clearly had some deep-seated animosity between them that Henry can’t talk about and Angus won’t,” Havermayer snapped.

The statement was radioactive fallout between us.

Savannah stilled.

Eric’s jaw tightened, but he didn’t contradict her. No need. We all knew the truth.

Havermayer stepped closer, into my personal space. “You think whatever it is didn’t sit and fester? You think it didn’t curdle in Angus’s gut for all

these years?”

A flash of anxiety rippled through me, but I held my ground. “But that doesn’t make him a killer.”

“It gives him a reason.”

“It gives him a history we know nothing about.”

“Which gives him motive.”

“Which gives you a suspect,” I shot back. “Not a conviction.”

Her gaze hardened. “The angle of the knife wound indicates the attacker was shorter than the victim. Angus is shorter.”

“How much shorter?”

“Three inches.”

“Three inches?” I couldn’t stop the incredulous laugh. “You’re building a murder case on three inches?”

“It’s consistent with the trajectory.”

“It’s also consistent with dozens of men. Even some women. You’re assuming Henry was standing still, upright, cooperative. What, posing for it? Taking a selfie?” My voice became strident. I toned it down a bit.

“People move when they’re being attacked. They struggle. They fall. He could’ve been bending, turning, off balance—”

“We’re not assuming anything, we’re analyzing.” Her tone dripped icicles.

“Then analyze better.” The words came out harder than I intended. Or maybe exactly as intended. “No way Angus killed that man.” The conviction in my voice startled even me.

Havermayer stepped even closer, her voice dropping into something almost threatening. “Careful, Jen. Interfering with an active investigation carries consequences.”

There it was. Not loud. Not dramatic. The polite threat. Polished, professional, unmistakable.

“I’m being careful. You should be, too.”

Eric stepped between us. Not aggressively, but enough to create space. “That’s enough.”

Havermayer held my gaze for one more beat. Then she turned away. She’d already filed me under “I” for irrelevant. Then she turned to Eric.

“We have what we need. The DA agrees.”

“Of course he does,” I barked.

She didn't look in my direction. "Stay out of it, Jen." Then she walked away.

Savannah let out a pathetic, confused whine, watching her go.

Eric exhaled slowly, tension bleeding out in a controlled release. "You couldn't help yourself, could you."

"She's wrong."

"You don't know that."

"I do."

"You don't," he said more firmly.

We stood there, tension humming under our skin. Cars rolled past. Someone laughed down the street. The bookstore door chimed behind us as someone stepped out, oblivious to the battle of wills playing out on the sidewalk.

"Come home with me," Eric said. "Let's not do this out here."

Dinner was quiet at first. Savannah lay beside the table, chin on her paws, hopeful eyes tracking every movement of Eric's fork, the way spectators followed the bright-yellow tennis ball at Roland Garros Stadium in Paris. Casper warmed my lap, his rumbling purr vibrating against my belly.

The house smelled of garlic and tomato sauce. The refrigerator hummed. The clock ticked. Domesticity pretending nothing had happened.

Eric set his fork down first. "Okay, let's talk."

I braced myself.

"You're assuming Angus didn't do it because you like him."

"That's not fair."

"Maybe, but that doesn't make it any less true. He's your friend."

"And he's not your friend?" I fired back.

"He is. But I also have a job to do."

The line he walked every day between boyfriend and detective.

"I saw the wound, Jen. The force behind it. It wasn't a random accident."

"I'm not saying it was."

"Then what are you saying?"

I pushed my plate away, appetite gone. "I'm saying the evidence isn't airtight. A chef's knife as the murder weapon? He runs a diner. Of course, he owns knives. But Marcus told me it wasn't the same as the knives they use. Told Havermayer that, too."

A flicker of unease crossed Eric's face. He knew and didn't tell me.

“And the footprints in the mud could be anybody’s. Size-ten shoes? That eliminates exactly no one. Three inches of height difference only works if they were both standing. Who knows what position Henry was in when he got stabbed.”

“It’s part of a pattern.”

“Or it’s noise you’re mistaking for a pattern.”

He reached over and took my hand. “It’s cumulative. Each piece alone might not convict. Together, they matter.” For a split second, uncertainty flickered in his eyes. Then it disappeared, buried under training, protocol, loyalty to the badge.

“Or they mislead.”

He leaned back in his chair. “You always do this.”

“Do what?”

“Assume there’s a deeper twist. That the obvious answer can’t possibly be the right one.”

“Because sometimes it isn’t. Circumstantial evidence isn’t proof.”

“This isn’t one of your books, Jen.”

The words hurt me more than he probably meant them to. In my books, I always found the truth. Real life was never so simple. “I know that.”

“Do you?” His voice softened, but not much. “Because this is real. There’s a dead man. There’s a grieving family. And a guy with motive, opportunity, and physical evidence tying him to the scene.”

“What did Ingrid say about time of death?”

He hesitated. “Between three and four Saturday morning.”

“And Angus?”

“Home alone. Says he was asleep.”

No alibi. No witness. No help.

He rubbed a hand over his pale-blond stubble. Fatigue covered his face, aging him a decade. Maybe more. “You’re so determined to prove Havermayer wrong, you’re ignoring what’s in front of you.”

“And you’re so determined to defend procedure, you’re ignoring doubt. You never even searched for anyone else.”

He went still.

“They call that tunnel vision, right?”

The silence that followed was thick enough to choke on. Heavy. Dangerous.

Savannah shifted nearer the table, thumping her tail against the chair leg.

Eric propped an elbow on either side of his plate. "What if you're wrong? What if Angus is guilty? What if all this righteous indignation helps a murderer walk?"

The questions hit hard, but didn't change my mind. "And what if *you're* wrong? What if you arrested the wrong man because it's cleaner? Because it fits? Doesn't that help a murderer walk, too?"

"That's not what we do."

"It happens, and you know it."

He stood, carrying his plate to the sink and dropping it in with more force than necessary. "You're not part of this investigation."

"I never am."

"And yet you insert yourself every time."

"Because I see things. Someone has to examine what doesn't fit. You're certainly not going to. And Angus asked for my help."

And I can't stand by when I know something is wrong.

He turned to face me. "You see patterns because you look for them."

"And you stop looking once you think you've found one."

The words hung, harsh and irreversible. For a long moment, neither of us moved.

His shoulders sagged. "I don't want you getting hurt. Havermayer's not in the mood for second-guessing, and she won't tolerate any interference. From you or anyone else. And if Angus really did this, you're putting yourself in the middle of a dangerous situation."

"I already am in the middle. Where I belong. He's my friend, and he needs my help." I carried my plate into the kitchen.

Casper jumped down off the counter, offended at the disturbance.

I set the plate in the sink with Eric's, then stepped closer and cupped Eric's face in my hands. His skin was warm. Familiar. Mine. "I'm not trying to fight you. I'm trying to keep from losing someone else. Someone I also care about."

His eyes searched mine. "It doesn't feel that way."

Savannah crawled out from under the table and pushed her head against Eric's knee, offering the unconditional loyalty neither of us humans could manage at the moment.

He scratched behind her ears. "I just need you to consider that the simplest answer might be the right one this time."

I thought of the footprints. The knife. The angle of the wound. Three inches. Maybe he was right. Maybe I was blinded by loyalty. It could be that simple. Or it could be exactly what someone wanted us to believe.

“I will,” I said, wrapping my arms around him.

Not a promise, and we both knew it.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Riddleton library staff had decided to lean all the way into the holiday season. A lot to take in on a Monday morning. Garlands looped along the tops of the tall wooden shelves, thick strands of faux pine threaded with white twinkle lights that cast a warm, almost reverent glow over the nonfiction section. The light caught on the brass placards at the end of each aisle, turning simple labels—HISTORY, BIOGRAPHY, TRUE CRIME—into something ceremonial. As if knowledge itself had been dressed up for the occasion.

Paper snowflakes hung in the front windows, each one unique in the way only handmade things could be. Some were intricate, all delicate cuts and careful symmetry. Others appeared as if they'd lost a decisive battle with safety scissors. Jagged edges, uneven arms, enthusiasm over execution. A few had glitter glued in clumps that shimmered in the light. An accidental enhancement.

A cardboard fireplace had been taped to the end of the early reader shelves. Construction-paper flames flickered in bold reds and oranges, cotton balls puffed above them in an optimistic attempt at smoke. Someone had propped a plush Santa into a child-sized armchair nearby, his stitched-on smile unwavering as he presided over a stack of picture books about kindness, sharing, and improbable holiday miracles.

A six-foot artificial tree stood near the circulation desk. Instead of ornaments, laminated book covers dangled from its branches. Brittany had punched holes through the corners of discarded dust jackets and tied them on with neat red ribbon. The lower branches were heavy with mystery titles.

I tried not to take the less-than-prominent positioning personally.

Near the entrance hall, a display table held a sign written in looping green marker: *Cozy Up with a Christmas Mystery*. My books sat side by side in the center, surrounded by several other cozy mysteries, their glossy covers reflecting the twinkle lights overhead. My name beamed up at me in cheerful font while, in reality, I was chasing the echo of a dead man through grief that didn't belong to me.

The scent of cinnamon pinecones drifted through the air, warm and sweet, fighting a losing battle against the more stubborn smells of old paper and carpet cleaner. Somewhere in the back, a heater kicked on with a low hum, pushing out air that carried enough dryness to make me aware of my own breathing.

The whole place felt safe. Insulated. An environment where problems were solved in chapters and tied up neatly before the last page. Exactly the sort of place where secrets should have no business existing.

Brittany glanced up from behind the reference desk the moment I stepped inside. Her blond hair was twisted into a messy bun, secured with a pencil that had probably been intended for actual work. A reindeer headband perched slightly off-center, glittering antlers bobbing when she moved. “Hi, Jen. You recovered from your surprise party?”

“Barely. Why did you let me drink so much?”

She arched a brow. “Let you? A herd of bulls couldn’t have stopped you.”

“Bulls or bullheaded people?”

Her laugh rang out, light and unrestrained, echoing through the mostly empty main floor. A sound that belonged here. Easy, unburdened. “So, what can I do for you this fine morning?”

I let myself take in the peaceful atmosphere until reality slid back into place. “Just thought I’d stop by to see if you found anything worthwhile on Henry Smith.”

The smile didn’t disappear so much as fold in on itself, tucked away. Her posture shifted, straightening a bit, eyes focused behind her glasses. “Ah. Unfortunately.”

All I needed to hear. I crossed the room, sneakers muffled by the carpet. “You found something useful.”

She nodded once. “I did. And you’re not going to like it.”

Nothing new. I hadn’t liked anything about this case from the moment it started. But there was an off note in her tone. Tighter than usual, which made my pulse pick up. A familiar chill settled between my shoulder blades. “I don’t think I’ve liked anything about this situation from the beginning.”

She pushed back from the desk and gestured for me to follow. I slipped through the narrow gate beside her, stepping into the small office tucked behind the main desk.

The decorations stopped at the doorway. Such a stark cutoff, it felt we'd stepped from Santa's workshop into the Temple of Doom. Outside: warmth, light, homey comfort. Inside: fluorescent overheads, a faint electrical hum, and the unvarnished reality of printed truth.

The desk was covered in documents. Printouts layered over each other, sticky tabs marking sections, Brittany's laptop open to some sort of news archive. A legal pad sat off to the side, filled with her tight, precise handwriting. No garland. No twinkle lights. Only facts, paper, and technology.

I closed the door behind me, shutting out the distant murmur of the main floor. "What did you find?"

Brittany didn't answer right away. She inhaled, as if she was organizing the information even though I knew she already had. "A drunk-driving accident that resulted in the death of one Angelica Halliburton."

The name felt weighty. I stared at the stack of papers. "Any relation to Angus?"

"His sister."

Uh-oh. A clear motive for Angus to have murdered Henry. "I never even knew he had a sister. Did you?"

"No, I had no idea. Wonder why he kept it a secret."

"Maybe it was too painful for him to talk about. What happened?"

"It seems Henry and Angelica were driving home from a night out on the town, and he lost control of the car and hit a tree. They were found the next morning by a passing motorist, who called 911."

She tucked a stray blond hair behind her ear and continued. "When the medics got there, Angelica was unconscious, barely breathing. She died on the way to the hospital."

"And Henry?"

"Conscious but confused. First responders could still smell the alcohol on him."

"How long did he spend in prison?"

"As far as I can tell, he never went to prison. Not sure why, though."

"You're kidding."

"I wish."

"So, you found nothing I can use to help clear Angus?"

She studied me over the top of her glasses. "Not yet. In fact, I seem to have made things worse." A hush hovered over us, heavy but not awkward.

Brittany rubbed her temples and leaned back in her chair. For an instant, she seemed more like a woman carrying the weight of too many stories than a librarian uncovering records.

“I hate that I’m looking into this kind of thing while organizing seating charts for my wedding,” she said with a sigh.

The shift in topic was abrupt enough to catch me off guard. “Seating charts?”

She gave me a tired half-smile. “Olinski’s mother has strong opinions about cousins.”

“Olinski’s mother has strong opinions about everything.”

Brittany huffed a muted laugh. “You joke, but if I put Aunt Marta near the bar, or Uncle John at the same table with Cousin Todd, there will be consequences.”

“I don’t doubt it. And who said I was joking? I spent way too much time with Mama Olinski in high school. She’s nothing to joke about.”

Brittany toyed with a pencil from her desk. “It just feels strange. I spent yesterday here digging up these things. Reading about the death of my friend’s sister in a senseless tragedy. And then I went home and taste-tested cake flavors.”

An unsettling dichotomy. “Which one’s winning?”

“Spice cake with cream cheese frosting.” She paused. “Olinski lobbied hard for chocolate, but claims he’s willing to ‘compromise for the sake of long-term harmony.’”

I laughed. “The man is learning. Took long enough.”

Her smile softened. Warmth glimmered in her eyes.

“Are you excited?”

“Yes.” The answer came right away. Then she exhaled. “Also terrified. Not of him. Of everything else.”

“Marriage?”

“Marriage is fine. It’s the world we live in that’s the problem.” She waved a hand over the article she’d printed out for me. “You read enough of this type of stuff, and you start to feel safety is an illusion. Like you’re just lucky until you’re not.”

I understood that more than I wanted to. I thought of Eric. The way his name on my phone always came with a flicker of anticipation and a little bit of dread. Because calls from him, during a case, didn’t come to share good news. “I get it, believe me.”

“Olinski is steady. He listens. He shows up. When I spiral, he makes tea and doesn’t try to fix me. He sits there, chin in his hand, listening to every word I say.”

“That’s not a small thing.”

“No.” Her fingers tightened around the edge of the desk. “But knowing there are men of Henry’s type out there—men who leave a trail of destruction in their wake—makes the idea of forever feel fragile.”

I considered my words. “Henry existed. That’s true. But so does Olinski. So does Angus. So does Eric.” I hesitated, then added, “The existence of monsters doesn’t cancel out the existence of good men.”

“You sound pretty sure.”

“I’m choosing to be.” Because if I let myself believe the world was only the worst of what it contained, I’d never step outside again. I’d never write another book. I’d never let the people I loved out of my sight.

Brittany’s shoulders eased. A slight relaxation, only someone who’d known her for almost thirty years would notice. “We’re keeping it small. I’ve been thinking about the botanical garden, but it might be too hot in June.”

“True. Indoors would probably be better.”

“I really wanted an outdoor wedding, though.”

“Since when?” Brittany’d been my best friend since kindergarten. We’d played pretend weddings with stuffed animals and Barbie dolls. This was the first I’d ever heard that.

“I don’t know. Now, I guess.” She folded her hands on the desk in front of her. “I only intend to get married once. I want it to be special.”

“You deserve that. You both do.”

Her eyes glistened a bit before she blinked them clear. “Thank you.”

Then she straightened into librarian mode. A well-worn cardigan slipping back over her shoulders. “All right. Enough of this mushy stuff. Too much of a detour from reality.”

“No, it wasn’t.” Because in a room filled with evidence of harm, talking about a wedding was defiant, not frivolous. Life continuing, no matter what. Choosing love anyway.

I gathered the copies she’d printed, stacking them into a neat pile. My fingers felt steadier than my thoughts. “When I give this to Havermayer,” I said, returning to the case, “it might change everything. Make things a lot worse for Angus.”

Silence filled the small office.

Outside, a child laughed near the circulation desk. A chair scraped across tile. Brittany glanced toward the door.

I stood, slipping the papers into my messenger bag. “Give me a chance to join the cake tasting,” I said as I reached for the doorknob. “I’ll weigh in on spice versus chocolate with the seriousness it deserves.”

A genuine smile broke through. “Deal. Although I know you’ll pick chocolate for sure.”

“That’s not true!”

She peered at me over the tops of her glasses again.

“Okay, fine. You’re probably right.” I took on a more serious tone.

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For everything. For always being there when I need you.”

“Be careful, Jen.”

“I will.” But as I stepped back into the glow of garland and twinkle lights, I knew that wasn’t entirely true. Because Henry Smith couldn’t only have been Angus’s past. As drunks always did, he had to have hurt other people as well. A fault line running through multiple lives.

And somewhere along that fracture was someone who’d finally decided enough was enough.

And did something about it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I pulled open one of the heavy wooden doors of the Riddleton Police Department and stepped inside, telling myself I came here as a concerned citizen. Not as a busybody who couldn't leave a mystery alone.

The lobby smelled of burned coffee and disinfectant, as usual. Fluorescent lights hummed overhead, bleaching the walls into something institutional and unforgiving. A folding table near the entrance held a stack of pamphlets on fraud prevention and a half-dead fern someone forgot about. Its leaves drooped over the rim of the pot, as if it gave up trying.

A metal bench lined one wall. A teenage boy in a hoodie sat hunched at one end while his mother whispered furiously at him. At the far desk, a duty sergeant I didn't recognize scrolled on his phone with one hand and ate a sandwich with the other, crumbs sprinkling onto a stack of paperwork he didn't seem too concerned about.

I squared my shoulders and approached. "I'm here to see Eric and Havermayer. They'll want to talk to me."

He glanced up, taking me in with an expression that, without a doubt, translated into no detective in their right mind wanted to talk to civilians who weren't suspects or witnesses. He chewed, swallowed, and wiped his fingers on a napkin. "And you are?"

"Jen Dawson."

He picked up the phone and pressed a button. "Jen Dawson's here," he said into the receiver. A pause. "Yeah. Her."

I pretended not to hear the last part.

A few minutes later, Eric appeared through the double doors leading deeper into the station. His tie was loosened, and his crisp white shirtsleeves rolled up his forearms. There were deeper lines around his mouth than usual, fatigue carving shadows beneath his eyes. He looked to be a man with too many questions and not enough answers.

"Jen." His voice carried equal parts resignation and curiosity. "Let me guess. You've discovered some information, and you just can't wait to share it with us."

"I prefer to think of it as being helpful."

“I’m sure you do.” He motioned me back.

As we weaved between desks cluttered with reports, half-empty coffee cups, and officers hunched over keyboards, I felt a prickle between my shoulder blades. Conversations didn’t stop exactly, but they paused half a beat too long as I passed. A few glances lingered, and one officer gave me the faintest shake of his head, like I represented a cautionary tale in battered Nikes.

Eric pushed open the door to the interview room, small and square, with the metal table bolted to the floor. Two metal folding chairs on one side, one on the other, and a camera in the corner, its red light steady and unblinking. The air felt thicker in here.

Havermayer sat in one of the folding chairs on the side with two, posture immaculate, spine straight as a ruler. Her dark blazer was perfectly pressed, not a wrinkle within a ten-mile radius, impatience carved into her marble expression. She didn’t smile. “Jen. This better be good. We’re a little busy today.”

My pulse ticked up, but I sat without waiting for permission. Havermayer and I had done battle in this room before, and I refused to cede ground before speaking a word.

When my bottom hit the cold metal, I said, “Henry Smith had a history of driving while intoxicated. He was a bad guy.”

A hush descended over the room. Eric leaned against the wall, arms crossed over his chest, silent, but alert.

Havermayer’s eyes narrowed. A chess player reassessing the board. “Okay. We already know that. We know about the incident with Angus’s sister, and he’s been sober ever since.”

“Okay, but it’s still worth looking into the possibility that Henry Smith might’ve done damage to another family besides the Halliburtons. What if this wasn’t his only transgression? It could just be the only time he got caught.”

“Maybe so, but that still doesn’t explain why Angus never told anyone he had a sister.”

“It’s probably too painful for him to talk about. If he tells people he had a sister, he has to tell them what happened to her.”

“Or maybe he didn’t want anyone to know, so there’d be nothing pointing to him when he took his revenge.”

“That doesn’t make much sense. An accident involving alcohol and a death would be a matter of public record and certainly made the papers. Look how easily you found out.”

Havermayer’s gaze flicked up as she weighed my words. Before she could respond, the door opened, and Zach Vick poked his head in. “You got another visitor.”

All three of us turned.

The woman who stepped inside paused long enough to take in the room, then removed her gloves one finger at a time. She was mid-forties, maybe early fifties. Striking rather than pretty. Her posture was unnaturally straight, and tension pulled her shoulders tight. Her hair was a deep iron-gray brown, cut blunt at the shoulders, smoothed into place despite what had to have been a long day of travel.

She wore black. Tailored wool coat belted at the waist. Slim trousers. Polished leather boots without a scuff on them. Nothing about her appeared accidental.

Her skin showed the pale cast of northern winters, almost translucent at her temples. Fine lines framed pale blue eyes that resembled frozen water, giving nothing away. “I’m Mary Smith,” she said, her voice low and controlled, a faint New England edge rounding the vowels. “I’m here to take my husband home.”

Eric straightened. Havermayer rose, smoothing her jacket with a subtle tug.

“Mrs. Smith,” Havermayer said. “We’ll need to speak before any arrangements can be made. We have a few questions for you, if you’re up to it.”

Mary’s chin lifted a fraction. “Someone called and told me I could claim the body.”

“You can. After we’re certain we’ve gathered all relevant information from it.”

A small flicker passed through Mary’s eyes. Not grief. Something tighter.

She wore a thin gold wedding band on her finger, worn smooth with years. No engagement ring. Her nails were neatly filed, painted a neutral shade, which had chipped at the edges. A tiny imperfection that made her seem human.

She didn’t appear to be a woman shattered by sudden loss. She seemed composed. Contained. Someone who spent years living beside a man with

problems and had learned how to pretend she didn't know. And now it was over, and she couldn't decide whether to mourn or exhale.

Havermayer gestured toward the table. "Please. Have a seat."

Mary's gaze flicked to me then. Measured, assessing. "Who are you?" No hostility in it. Just inventory.

"Jen Dawson. I was one of the people who found your husband."

Her eyes held mine a beat too long. "Alive?"

The question startled me. "No."

A faint puff of air slipped through her nose. Not grief or relief. Suspended in between.

"I'm sorry for your loss." The words tasted strange in my mouth.

"Are you?" Not accusatory. Curious.

"I didn't know him, but I'm sorry when anyone dies a violent death."

Her expression shifted again. Approval? Amusement? It was gone too quickly to name. Mary sat, awaiting the next question.

Eric cleared his throat. "Mrs. Smith, why did your husband come to Riddleton?"

"He had a job interview at the resort."

"Have you and your husband spoken since he's been here?" Havermayer asked.

"He called three days ago. Friday afternoon. After the interview."

"And?"

"And nothing," she said, a slight edge to her voice. "He told me it went well, but he wouldn't know anything until Monday. Today."

"Did you think it strange you hadn't heard from him since?"

"He was supposed to fly home Saturday morning. By the time I thought to look for him, you called to tell me about what happened."

Havermayer leaned forward. "Were you aware of any conflicts your husband had while here? Any problems with anyone?"

Mary's gaze flicked to the stack of articles on the table. "Not that he said. He didn't know anyone here."

I didn't believe her. Maybe it was instinct. Maybe the way her fingers tightened around her gloves as she spoke. No way to know for sure.

Eric exchanged a glance with Havermayer, then said, "He never mentioned Angus Halliburton to you? They grew up in the same town."

"My husband grew up with a lot of people. He never told me who they all were."

Havermayer leaned back in her seat. "It seems a bit strange to me that Henry would run into someone he knew from home out of the blue and wouldn't tell you about it."

Mary shrugged. "I don't know what to tell you, Detective. He might not've seen this man until after we spoke. I doubt the encounter alone would've justified another call. I suspect he would've mentioned it when he got home Saturday."

"One last question, Mrs. Smith. Where were you Saturday morning between three and four?"

"Home. Asleep."

"Can anyone verify that for you?"

"No. My husband was here, as you know, and my children spent the weekend with their grandmother."

"Nobody else?"

"What are you implying, Detective? I've never cheated on my husband."

Havermayer held her gaze without speaking, then nodded and said, "We're not releasing the body today. Our pathologist hasn't completed her examination."

Mary's composure cracked. Her jaw tightened, and a pulse fluttered in her temple. "For how long?"

"As long as necessary."

The air was almost palpable between them.

Mary rose. "Then I suggest you work quickly, Detective."

Steel wrapped in velvet.

"We'll work as quickly as we can, but you want us to find your husband's killer, don't you?" Havermayer said.

"I was told you already had someone in custody."

"We do, but the evidence is all circumstantial. We need to be sure we've got this right."

Mary nodded and paused at the door. "If you discover someone else did this, I would appreciate being notified before the press. I'm staying at the resort until I can take my husband home."

"Of course."

Her gaze shifted to me once more. "You found him."

"Yes." I considered telling her Angus was there, too, but decided against it. No need to draw attention to him. He'd suffered enough notoriety already.

She scrutinized my face as though searching for answers I didn't have. Then she left. The door closed with a click, and the room felt smaller.

No one spoke for several seconds.

"Well," I said, because silence and I have never been compatible in situations like this. "She's composed. I'll give her that."

"One word for it," Eric said under his breath.

Havermayer's eyes remained on the closed door. "She didn't ask how he died."

Eric frowned. "Shock presents in different ways for different people."

"Shock usually includes questions."

"Maybe Olinski told her what happened when he called."

"Could be."

I didn't say what roiled around in my head. Shock also includes cracks. Disorientation. Mary Smith had been coherent and immaculate. Dressed for tea at the palace.

Havermayer turned back to the table and tapped the stack of papers. "You're suggesting someone else Henry harmed while drunk followed him here?"

"I'm suggesting you can't assume Angus is the only person who ever wanted Henry Smith dead."

Havermayer leaned back and crossed her arms. "Why are you really here, Jen?"

"You know why." I pointed to the incriminating stack. "I needed to make sure you knew about more potential suspects."

She shook her head. "You're invested. Personally."

Angus's face flashed in my mind. The anger when he'd told me Havermayer considered him a serious suspect. "Because if Angus didn't do this, then someone else is walking around Riddleton who's capable of killing a man. And I want to know who it is before it happens again."

Eric closed the folder. "We'll follow up on this."

"We'll also be speaking with Mrs. Smith again," Havermayer added.

"Alone," Eric said.

I stood and slung my messenger bag over my shoulder. At the door, I paused. "If she didn't know about the accident, she's in for a brutal education."

"And if she did?" Havermayer asked.

"If she did, then she's been living with a monster for a long time."

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The bells over the door of Ravenous Readers jingled as I stepped inside, bringing a swirl of cold air and the faint scent of rain with me. I paused to stamp some life back into my toes on the mat before closing the door behind me.

Warm air, warm lights, and warm smells wrapped around me. Coffee and cinnamon from the pastry counter mingled with the faint papery scent of books and the pungent tang of evergreen from the garlands Lacey insisted we drape along the tops of the shelves.

On a normal day, the combination would relax me. Today, it didn't even make a dent in the slabs of granite masquerading as my shoulder muscles. The bookstore was busy, but not with the usual frenetic holiday energy. Clusters of customers stood in tight little knots between the shelves, their voices lowered to the unmistakable pitch of people discussing a topic they weren't sure they should be talking about.

Every now and then, someone glanced toward the counter, waiting for us to start handing out official murder updates along with the lattes. Which, in fact, was not part of our business model. Yet.

It seemed the word had spread faster than the flu at a kindergarten Christmas pageant. Someone tossed a handful of fake snow on us as we passed. I slipped off my coat and draped it over the hook near the office door. Savannah padded in behind me, shaking flakes from her coat with the enthusiasm of one who believed indoor snowfall was an underrated decorating choice.

After a few bits landed on the rug near the desk, she shifted to excitement over my return and demanded appropriate compensation in the form of neck scratches and belly rubs. She hated being left behind, no matter the circumstances.

When she stood to declare herself satisfied, we headed out to the sales floor. The Christmas tree Lacey talked us into putting near the Mystery section blinked holiday cheer in alternating red-and-green lights. Someone—probably Lacey—had added a new ornament shaped into a stack of books

tied with a ribbon. Festive and cozy. And, at the moment, serving as the scenic backdrop for Riddleton's unofficial Murder Discussion Club.

Behind the coffee counter, Lumberjack Charlie, wearing his red-and-black checked flannel shirt, faded jeans, and work boots, operated the espresso machine with the focused intensity of a man performing brain surgery. Steam hissed and curled upward as he tamped down coffee grounds. His plaid, fur-lined hat, complete with ear flaps, hung from a hook beneath the cash register.

He spotted me and lifted an eyebrow. "Well, well," he said as he slid a mug across the counter to a waiting customer. "Look who's back."

I rested my elbows on the glass countertop. "Please tell me you're not about to say something sarcastic."

"Wouldn't dream of it. I was only going to welcome Riddleton's newest investigative reporter into our humble midst."

"Not hardly."

"Wanna bet? You have no idea how many people have come in here today expecting a full police briefing. From you."

"That bad?"

Charlie snorted and grabbed a clean cup. "One guy asked me if the dog tracked the killers for us."

I glanced over my shoulder. Savannah, tapping into her inner Sarah Bernhardt, collapsed onto her side on the rug beside the front checkout counter and accepted belly rubs from a middle-aged woman browsing cookbooks.

Shameless hussy.

"She doesn't appear to be taking her responsibilities with the solemnity they deserve," I said.

"Very disappointing work ethic." He slid a cappuccino across to another customer and leaned a little closer to me while the man fished for his wallet.

"I tried telling them we sell books, not true-crime updates," Charlie said. "But it seems the line between 'bookstore employee' and 'unofficial town information source' is more flexible than we thought."

"That's small towns for you. If a squirrel forgets where he buried his nuts at dawn, someone will ask us about it before lunch."

The man with the cappuccino finally paid and moved aside, leaving the area clear, though I wouldn't count on it staying that way for long.

Charlie folded his arms and examined my face. "The police are still holding Angus."

"Yeah, I know."

"You okay?"

I considered giving the standard automatic answer: Fine, great, wonderful, no problems here. Instead, I sighed. "Not really."

"Didn't think so."

Another customer stepped forward to order a latte, and Charlie turned back to the espresso machine, leaving me to drift toward the front register where Lacey was ringing up a stack of Christmas mysteries for a woman in a bright-red wool coat.

"Trust me," the woman said with more cheer than the subject called for, "this author kills someone in every single book."

Lacey smiled while sliding the novels into a bag. "Sounds festive."

The woman laughed as if Lacey told the best joke she'd heard all week, paid for her books, and left.

The second the door shut behind her, Lacey slumped against the counter and rubbed her temples. "Please tell me the police caught the real killer."

"Only in their own minds."

Her shoulders sagged. "That's what I was afraid of." She leaned forward, lowering her voice. "You should've been here earlier."

"Why?"

"There was this guy. A little creepy."

"What do you mean?"

"He was big."

I raised an eyebrow. "Big how?"

"Like ..." She gestured with both hands, as if outlining a refrigerator. "Football player big. The kind of guy who fills the entire doorway when he walks in."

"Okay. What about him?"

"He asked questions about what happened in the park."

"Him and everybody else, according to Charlie."

"Uh-uh. This guy asked stuff like where they found the body. Whether the police were still searching the area. Did they have any suspects?"

My stomach tightened. "Did he say why he wanted to know?"

"No. He just seemed curious. More than the rest of the riffraff around here."

“Did you recognize him?”

“Never seen him before that I remember.”

“Do you think he might be a new local we haven’t met yet?”

She shrugged. “Could be. But if he is, he’s not someone who comes in here much.”

That alone seemed a little suspicious. In Riddleton, most people wandered through Ravenous Readers at least once in a while. Even if it was only to grab coffee or browse the magazine rack.

“What did he look like exactly?”

“Tall.” Lacey counted off on her fingers. “Broad shoulders. Thick coat.”

“What kind of coat?”

“One of those big, bulky winter ones. The kind construction workers wear. We don’t see those very often around here, unless one of them comes into town from the resort. Doesn’t get cold enough for anyone not outside all day.”

A redhead whose sweater almost matched her hair said, “I know who you’re talking about. I saw him in the park this morning over near the picnic shelters.”

My mind flicked back to the crime scene. The muddy ground. The deep impressions pressed into the earth near Henry Smith’s body. Footprints suggesting someone heavy stood there.

“What about his shoes?”

Lacey frowned, thinking.

“Boots, I think.”

“Work boots?”

“Probably.” She shrugged again. “I didn’t focus on his feet.”

Fair enough. Most people didn’t.

“Why are we discussing footwear?”

“Deep footprints in the mud at the crime scene.”

“Should I have called the police?” Lacey asked.

“No, he didn’t do anything wrong.”

“That we know of.”

The description floated around my brain. Another puzzle piece I couldn’t find a connection to. A big man. Exactly the sort of person the police would expect to leave those deep footprints. Except the prints didn’t have waffle marks the way they would if work boots had left them. “Did he say anything else?”

“Not that I heard.” Lacey tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “He pretty much listened to other people talking.”

“About the murder?”

“Yeah.”

No surprise. Half the customers in here were discussing it. “What time did he come in?”

“This afternoon? A little before you got back.”

I glanced toward the front windows. Outside, the sky had darkened into a muted winter gray, signaling evening would settle in soon. Mist drifted past the glass. The precursor to rain. “Did he buy anything?”

Lacey snorted. “Nope.”

A man who came into a bookstore asking questions about a murder probably didn’t come there for the literature. I leaned against the counter, thinking. The killer had, for all appearances, been a large, heavy man. If that were true, someone who fit the description and asked questions about the investigation might be worth paying attention to.

Or it might mean nothing at all.

Still, everyone knew how I felt about coincidences. Especially in murder investigations.

Behind me, Charlie called out, “Jen!”

I turned. “Yeah?”

“Can you help with pastries for a second? I’ve got a latte emergency.”

“On it.” I moved behind the pastry case and grabbed a pair of tongs.

The pastry case looked like a small bakery had moved into it. Lacey had insisted we double our order for the holiday shopping rush. She’d been right. As always.

As I handed a blueberry muffin to a waiting customer, I couldn’t help glancing toward the front door. Imagining a tall, heavy man filling the doorway, asking discreet questions about the murder in the park. Maybe he was curious, the same as everyone else. Or maybe he knew what’d happened out there in the mud beside Henry Smith’s body.

Savannah wandered over and leaned against my leg, peering up with the hopeful expression of a dog who believed every human interaction should involve snacks. Or at least petting. Maybe a scratch or two.

I scratched behind her ears, then went back to work. “Sorry, kid. No muffins for you today.”

Her tail wagged, ears flattened against her head.

“No cookies either.”

Across the store, two women whispered near the Mystery section, their heads bent close together. A teenage boy flipped through a comic book but kept glancing toward the coffee counter, more interested in the conversation than the pages.

The whole town buzzed. Which was both helpful and exhausting. Small towns contained incredible information networks. They also lacked volume control.

I rang up another coffee order and slid it across the counter.

“I can’t believe Angus killed that man. He’s so nice. And I love his cooking,” the woman said.

“I definitely don’t believe he killed that man.” I forced a neutral smile. “But I’m sure the police are working on it.” The answer had the advantage of being both true and vague.

“Well, I think the wife did it. It’s always the wife, right?”

I shrugged, having no real answer for her. In this case, it was possible, but other than the fact she had no alibi, no evidence led to her involvement.

A grizzled old-timer, with a gray-white beard down to his shirt collar, shared his opinion. “Well, I know for a fact that guy from the diner did exactly what they’re saying he did.”

My brows lifted. “Oh? Did you see him stab the man?”

“Nope. But I sure saw them fighting in the alley. If one of ’em had a gun, the other one woulda been dead before the party was over.”

I never saw anyone else in the alley that night. Then again, I never saw the argument, either. Perhaps Grizzly Adams over there had passed through before I made it outside.

Behind the counter, Charlie leaned closer. “You’re doing that thing again.”

“What thing?”

“Wearing the investigative face.”

“I do not have an investigative face.”

“You do. Without question.”

“What does it look like?”

“Like you’re about to reorganize the evidence board in a detective show.”

“I don’t even have an evidence board.”

“Give it time.”

He might be right. Maybe I *should* have an evidence board. Brittany would help me build one. With color-coded sticky notes. And, knowing her, suspects arranged according to the Dewey Decimal System.

Somewhere out there was the person who killed Henry Smith.

Angus could've done it, but my gut refused to believe a story so ridiculous. And now I had a new detail to ponder. A large man asking questions about the murder. Could be another curious resident or someone from the resort passing through. Or maybe he had important information to share.

Savannah nudged my hand again, hope filling her eyes.

"Still no muffins," I told her.

She sighed and flopped back onto the floor.

I envied her. Life had to be much simpler when your biggest problems were pastry denial and who's going to scratch your belly next.

Unfortunately, my life had always been way more complicated.

And I was just getting started.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I decided to decorate the house for Christmas as a peace offering to Eric. In hindsight, this sort of decision by someone like me should come with a warning label. Something along the lines of: *Caution: May result in property damage, emotional distress, and glitter in places you didn't know glitter could go.*

But to me, it seemed a reasonable idea, even though I'd never decorated any of my apartments before I moved in with Eric. Which should've been reason enough for me to scrap it. But Eric had been patient the last few days. A patience where he, without question, tried very hard not to say, *Jen, please stop involving yourself in my murder investigations.*

Which, as he well knew, was a big ask. An impossible ask.

So, while he worked on Henry's murder, I decided to do something for him. Something festive. Something that would make him walk through the door and think, *Wow, my girlfriend's a functional adult who can decorate a house.*

Yeah, right.

Savannah watched me drag the huge plastic storage bin out of the hall closet with intense interest. Her ears perked, and her tail wagged with the same enthusiasm it would if I'd announced we were going on a steak-tasting tour.

"This," I told her, tugging the lid off the bin, "is Christmas."

She sneezed straight into the box. Must've been the dust from lack of use. Or a forewarning of things to come.

The tub contained the decorations I'd purchased the year I graduated college in a burst of seasonal enthusiasm that died before I ever did anything with them. Inside, I found tangled strings of lights. A bag of ornaments. A roll of tinsel, appearing to have taken on a life of its own, and ornament hooks large enough to catch sea bass.

My artificial Christmas tree stood in the corner. The box said six feet tall and showed it to be bushy and decorated to the teeth. In reality, it resembled a skinny green umbrella with commitment issues. Still, I pulled it out and set the box aside. "Okay. How hard can this be?"

Savannah tilted her head.

Draped across the back of the couch, Casper twitched his ears with the weary expression of a kitten who'd lived through my bright ideas before. Impressive, considering he wasn't quite three months old.

I ignored both of them. Judgmental little twerps.

Before assembling the tree, though, I had to decide where to put it. I stood in the middle of the living room and turned in a slow circle. "Okay," I said out loud, because in my case, decorating also meant narrating my decision-making process like the star of *Property Brothers*. "Location is key."

Savannah wagged encouragement.

Casper yawned and dug his front claws into the top of the couch.

The obvious place seemed to be by the front window. I dragged the bottom section of the tree over there and held it upright, trying to imagine the finished product.

From outside, people walking by would see a glowing Christmas tree in the window. Classic. Very wholesome.

Then I imagined Savannah spotting a squirrel outside and launching herself into the tree. A festive torpedo.

"Maybe not." I moved to the other side of the room.

The corner near the fireplace seemed promising. I set the tree base there and stepped back. Pretty good. Cozy. Straight out of a holiday movie. Then I remembered Eric saying something about using the fireplace in winter. Which meant heat. Which meant melting plastic. Which meant explaining to Eric why the house smelled of burning Tupperware. "Okay, that's out. Where else?"

Savannah followed me across the room, acting as my furry consultant. At least she worked cheap.

Casper relocated to the coffee table and now supervised from a more central position.

"What do you think?" I asked Savannah.

She wagged.

Very helpful. I tried the corner near the bookshelf. No. Too crowded.

Then the space near the hallway. No. Too much foot traffic.

Then the area beside the couch. I held the tree base there and imagined Eric walking through the living room. He'd trip over the stand. He'd fall.

He'd break a leg. Then I'd have to explain how I incapacitated my detective boyfriend with Christmas decorations.

"Perhaps not ideal." I sighed.

Savannah sighed too, although hers sounded more dramatic.

Casper, sensing an opportunity to wreak havoc, hopped off the coffee table and inspected the tree base. He buried his head inside it.

"Please don't get stuck."

He pulled his head back out and tried to chew on one of the plastic prongs.

"No." I nudged him aside and glanced around the room again. After two more complete circles, my eyes landed on the empty space between the window and the couch.

Not right in front of the window. Not blocking the walkway. Far enough from the fireplace. Perfect. "Well, get a load of that."

Savannah wagged harder, as if she'd been the one to suggest it.

I set the tree stand down and stepped back. "Yes. This works."

Casper climbed back into the stand without delay.

"This is why we can't have nice things," I told him, sounding too much like my mother for comfort.

Once I evicted the cat from the stand, I brought over the rest of the tree, which came in three sections. The bottom part slid into the stand without too much trouble. I gave it a little twist and stepped back. It wobbled. I twisted it again. It wobbled *more*.

Savannah trotted over and sniffed it. The tree tipped sideways and bonked her on the nose. She leaped backward to escape the attacker.

"Okay, small adjustment coming right up." I wrestled the tree upright again and added the middle section. Then the top. For a brief moment, it came close to looking like a tree. A sad, skinny tree. But still a tree. Then I had a realization.

The branches.

Artificial trees didn't resemble the ones on the box by magic. I needed to pull all the branches down and spread them out one at a time. All six thousand of them.

I sighed and started fluffing. Five minutes later, I'd done maybe twelve branches and already stabbed myself twice on the wire tips. "This is why people drink eggnog," I told Savannah. "Lots and lots of eggnog."

She sat, tongue hanging out the side of her mouth.

Goofball.

Casper, meanwhile, had hopped down from the coffee table and now sat beneath the tree, staring upward with predatory fascination.

“No,” I said.

He blinked.

“I know that look.”

He kept staring.

I returned to fluffing branches, waiting for the kitten to pounce. By the time I finished, the tree turned out almost decent. Not great. But festive-adjacent. “See?” I said, giving myself an imaginary pat on the back.

Savannah barked once in approval.

Casper stood up. Then, without breaking eye contact with me, he reached out one paw and smacked a branch. The whole tree quivered.

“Don’t even think about it.”

He thought about it. Then launched himself halfway up the trunk like a furry ballistic missile.

The tree tipped.

I lunged forward.

Savannah barked.

Casper scrambled upward, clinging to branches with the determination of a mountaineer hanging off the edge of a cliff.

The tree collapsed sideways, landing on top of me. Everyone froze. Then Savannah helpfully licked my ear. “I’m fine,” I said from under six feet of plastic pine.

Casper emerged from the branches, proud of himself for taking down the usurper.

I untangled myself and hauled the tree upright again. “Okay, new rule.”

Both animals stared at me.

“No climbing the Christmas tree.”

Casper scrambled up the tree again.

I pulled him off and deposited him on the couch. “Stay.”

He stared at me as if I were speaking Cantonese.

I decided to move on before things escalated into an all-out war.

Next? Lights. The lights were tangled into a ball, the way they would be if they’d been stored by a raccoon with anger issues. I spent fifteen minutes untangling them while Savannah lay on the rug supervising. Then, I plugged them in. Nothing happened.

I frowned and unplugged them. Plugged them back in. Still nothing.

“Fantastic.” I checked the little fuse box in the plug. All good.

Then I remembered to flip the outlet switch. The lights exploded to life so suddenly Savannah jumped three feet into the air.

“Sorry, kid.” I unplugged and draped the lights around the tree, which turned out to be harder than expected because the cord kept catching on branches, and Savannah kept trying to bite the moving bulbs. “Savannah, no!”

Snap.

“Those are not chew toys.”

Snap.

In the end, I managed to get the things distributed almost equally. The front of the tree almost looked like a tasteful holiday display. The back, on the other hand, resembled a computer power station. Good enough.

“Now the ornaments.” I opened the box and dropped the first one I touched. It shattered on the floor.

Casper hissed and arched his back.

Savannah jumped backward, then cautiously leaned toward the mess for a sniff.

“Oh no, you don’t.” I scooped up the pieces before either of them could investigate. A trip to the vet would put a serious crimp in my evening plans. Not to mention my wallet.

I hung one glitter-covered glass ball. Then another.

Savannah sat beside me, tail sweeping the floor. The third ornament swung a bit. Her eyes locked on to it.

“No.”

She leaned forward.

“Savannah.”

The ornament continued to sway. Her nose twitched. Then she tapped it.

The ball swung wildly and knocked into the other two. They bounced off each other, but didn’t break.

Savannah yipped, cheering them on.

Casper returned from the couch, his pupils dilated.

Oh, this is bad.

He crouched. The ornaments swayed. One slow paw reached out.

A ball spun.

Savannah lunged.

The tree shook. I grabbed the trunk. “No! No attacking Christmas!”
Casper launched himself upward again.
Savannah barked as if a serial killer had broken in.
The lights slipped. Tinsel spilled out of the box and somehow wrapped around my foot. The tree tilted. I caught it.
Casper dangled from a branch. A fuzzy ornament.
Savannah jumped up to save him.
“Everyone, STOP!”
For some reason I’d never understand, they did. For about three seconds.
Then Savannah’s tail knocked into the ornament box and sent half of them rolling across the floor.
Casper dove after one to capture the mouse trying to get away. The ornament skittered under the couch, the white fur ball right behind it.
Savannah bolted over and shoved her nose underneath, trying to help out her little brother. The couch lifted as she wedged her whole head under.
I stared at the chaos. Ornaments everywhere. Lights uneven and dangling in places. Tinsel around my ankle.
The cat under the couch.
The dog halfway under the couch.
And the tree leaning as if it’d given up on life. “Well. This didn’t quite turn out the way I planned.”
At that moment, the front door opened. Eric stepped inside. He stopped. His gaze traveled an inch at a time around the room.
The ornaments. The tinsel. The animals under the couch.
Savannah emerged triumphant, with a glitter ball in her mouth.
Casper scrambled halfway up the tree again.
And me, standing in the middle of it all, holding a bent ornament hook.
“Hi.”
Eric’s jaw dropped.
“We’re decorating.”
Savannah wagged, shifting the delicate ball in her mouth.
Casper knocked another ornament off the tree. It shattered on the floor.
Eric turned back to me. Then he started laughing. Not polite chuckling. Full-on doubled-over laughter.
I crossed my arms. “You’re welcome.”
He wiped his eyes. “I love it.”
“You do not.”

“Oh no, I do. Promise.”

Savannah trotted over and dropped the ornament at his feet as a gift. He picked it up, added a hook, and hung it on the tree. The branch sagged under Casper’s weight. Eric lifted the cat down. “We might need a sturdier tree.”

“Or less sturdy pets.”

Savannah yipped. Casper climbed the wire-and-plastic pine again.

Eric looked at me. I looked at him. Then we both burst out laughing.

The tree leaned sideways. An ornament fell. Casper chased it.

And somehow, despite everything, the house felt a little like Christmas.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Tuesday morning began without fanfare, which seemed a small miracle after the mayhem of last night. Eric and I sat at the kitchen table with coffee and scrambled eggs while Savannah positioned herself between our chairs in a perfect spot to catch falling food. Casper took up residence on the back of Eric's chair, peering over his shoulder. A fuzzy supervisor overseeing breakfast operations.

The house still smelled of pine from the candle I'd found buried in the bottom of the decorations tote. Sunlight came through the kitchen window and caught the garland draped across the cabinets, making the little silver strands sparkle. I'd expected the decorations to be a little less enthusiastic in daylight. Instead, they added a touch of holiday cheer to the place.

I leaned back in my chair and studied the room while Eric finished his coffee. "I have to admit it looks better than I thought it would."

Eric followed my gaze around the kitchen. The lights over the sink glowed even in the daylight, and the red bows I'd attached to cabinet handles managed to seem intentional rather than desperate.

"That's because I fixed the section where the garland looked like it'd been attacked by wildlife."

"It *was* attacked by wildlife."

"True."

The dog thumped her tail against the floor in an attempt to distract us into dropping a tasty morsel.

Eric reached down and slipped her a small corner of toast.

"Hey! No table treats."

"She appreciates my generosity."

"She appreciates carbohydrates."

Savannah wagged harder, proving my point.

Eric pushed his plate back and wiped his hands on a napkin, his expression shifting into the thoughtful one he got while organizing a case in his head. "Ingrid's through with Henry Smith's autopsy. Just waiting for Havermayer's okay to release his body."

I paused halfway through my coffee. "So, Mary can take him home?"

Eric nodded. "As soon as Havermayer says so."

"What's the holdup?"

"She's not comfortable with Mary's behavior during the interview, and her not having an alibi. Something about her just isn't sitting right."

"Any indication she wasn't in New Hampshire like she says she was?"

"No, and we don't have enough to get a warrant for her financials."

I pictured Mary Smith the way I'd seen her the last time. Tired, pale, yet still proud enough to present her best. "It's a long trip back to New Hampshire."

"Makes me wonder why Henry wanted to take a job down here to begin with."

"Maybe he wanted to escape his past and start over."

"After thirty years?" Eric shrugged. "Could be, I guess."

But something about the situation continued to bother me. Henry Smith had been seeking work at the resort, located outside the town where Angus lived. And then someone murdered him. But the question circling in my mind was how much his wife knew about the situation. Did she know about the death of Angus's sister? That they'd be moving to a town where the surviving brother of her husband's victim lived?

Eric stood and carried his plate to the sink. "I'll probably be tied up most of the day. We still have a lot of work to do. Frankly, we're no closer to a solution now than we were Saturday morning. No closer to clearing Angus."

"Havermayer still thinks he did it."

"Yeah, but we still need something concrete to back it up. We sent the jacket in for testing. See if it's animal blood the way Angus claims."

"Can't the vet tell you if Angus brought in a dying dog?"

"Yes, but we still need proof that's where the blood on his jacket came from. With luck, we'll find it."

"Maybe, but will Havermayer believe it when she sees it?"

"Even my partner won't ignore absolute proof."

A thought popped into my head that hadn't occurred to me before. "Eric, how did Angus get Henry to agree to meet him in the park in the middle of the night? Have you checked his phone records to see if it's even possible? I know for a fact they didn't set up the meeting at the party because I was there."

He didn't respond, but for the first time his expression told me he might be beginning to believe in Angus's innocence. At least enough to look for exonerating evidence.

A few minutes later, he grabbed his coat and kissed me on the way out the door. "Try not to solve the case without me."

"No promises."

"I'm serious, Jen."

"I know you are."

His expression suggested he remained unconvinced, but he headed out to his department-issue Suburban, anyway.

The house fell quiet after he left. I finished the last of my coffee and began clearing the table, stacking plates and carrying them to the sink for a quick rinse. The dishwasher hummed to life a few minutes later.

When I dried my hands and stepped into the living room, I paused. The Christmas tree glowed in the corner, its lights still on from the night before. Morning sun filtered through the window and caught the ornaments, making them sparkle.

It seemed almost magazine-worthy. Which was impressive considering the decorating process included a protective dog, a climbing cat, and one memorable moment when the menagerie almost pulled the entire tree down. Again.

I smiled a little at the memory. Eric standing on the ladder. Me holding the base of the tree. Savannah circling, inspecting for defects. Casper climbing halfway up the branches, before jumping back down again.

At one point, the entire thing had tilted sideways, and Eric caught it with one arm. Still, he never complained. Even when I dragged him into things he'd rather avoid. Like bucking his partner, Havermayer, by trying to prove her favorite suspect innocent.

The thought sobered me. Because this one mattered. Not only because a man had been killed, but because Angus might go to prison for it. And Eric, despite doing everything he could within the rules to change her mind, fought an uphill battle against Havermayer's certainty. If there was another answer, I wanted to find it. I *needed* to find it.

A small pang of guilt washed through my heart. Eric had worked all day yesterday and still spent the evening helping me decorate. He'd redone the lights, climbed ladders, and rescued ornaments from under furniture without complaining once.

And now he was heading into a full day of a murder investigation. While I stood here admiring the tinsel placement.

Eric and I hadn't planned this life. When we first met, we were two people heading in completely different directions. I was an author with a case of writer's block that could span the Grand Canyon, and a habit of asking too many questions. He had a badge and a town full of people depending on him to keep things from falling apart.

Somehow, those paths had merged. And now here we were. Sharing a house, a dog, a cat, and our first Christmas in our own home. Well, rented home.

My gaze drifted back to the tree while my thoughts returned to Mary Smith. Her behavior when she discussed taking her husband home for burial. Aloof. Contained, as if she were planning a business presentation instead of a funeral. However, if Henry had enemies, Mary might know about them. Even if she didn't realize it.

I glanced toward the clock. Still early enough. I scooted up the stairs for a quick shower and real clothes. Somehow, I suspected my house sweats would never convince her to tell me anything I wanted to know. She'd laugh me all the way back to Riddleton, no wiser than I'd been to begin with. Of course, wisdom was never something attributed to me, anyway.

When I came back down, clean and somewhat awake, recalcitrant hair blow-dried into an imitation of a style, Savannah was sprawled at the foot of the stairs. Before I went anywhere, my little girl needed some exercise.

She sat up the second I reached for her leash.

"You're very predictable."

Her tail beat against the floor.

A few minutes later, we stepped outside into the crisp December air. Walnut Street resembled the cover of a holiday greeting card. The neighbors had decorated their houses with wreaths, lights, and the occasional inflatable snowman that leaned to one side in the cold.

The dog trotted ahead, nose down, investigating every inch of sidewalk, searching for vital intelligence. Which, judging by the amount of time she spent sniffing certain spots, she must've found. We headed up the street at an easy pace. Easy for her anyway. Out of shape, overweight me, not so much.

The cold air felt brisk and clean, and my breath puffed in little white clouds as we walked. As usual, my brain refused to stay focused on the

scenery. Henry Smith. Murdered in the park for no obvious reason. No clear enemies besides Angus. At least none anyone admitted to. Which meant the answer lived somewhere in his past.

Savannah paused to examine a mailbox post with intense concentration.

“Riveting,” I said.

She ignored me, then squatted.

By the time we reached Main Street and turned back, my curiosity took over. Mary Smith might not know why someone killed her husband, assuming it wasn’t her. But she might know things about him no one else did. Sometimes the smallest detail turned out to be the piece that made everything else fall into place. I just needed to uncover that detail.

The dog finished her part of the investigation and resumed walking. When we reached the house again, she trotted inside and collapsed onto the couch the way someone who’d returned from a major expedition through the Amazon might.

“You walked for twenty minutes.”

She closed her eyes.

I hung up the leash, grabbed my coat, and retrieved my keys. The Christmas tree twinkled in the corner as I headed for the door. “I’m just going to ask a few questions,” I told the empty room. Then I stepped outside, climbed into my black Jeep Wrangler, inherited from Eric, and sat with my hands resting on the steering wheel, gathering my thoughts.

After a deep breath, I turned the key in the ignition. The Jeep rumbled to life with its usual enthusiasm, which in Wrangler terms meant sounding the way a small tractor clearing its throat would. Eric, who primarily drove his department-issued Suburban, lent it to me after my old car was run off the road into a ravine, and I didn’t have the money to buy a new one. Now it was simply “my Jeep,” though he reminded me whose name was on the title from time to time. More often than not, during an argument.

I made a U-turn out of my curbside parking spot and headed down Walnut Street, passing the same houses Savannah and I had investigated ten minutes ago. Everything seemed different from behind the wheel. Less peaceful somehow. Or maybe my brain had switched from dog-walking mode to gotta-find-the-killer mode.

In normal times, the Christmas decorations made the town feel cozy. Today, they reminded me that, somewhere between those cheerful lights and inflatable snowmen, someone killed a man. Small towns were funny

that way. They could look like a holiday paradise while hiding a surprising number of secrets.

I slowed at the stop sign on the corner of Main Street and glanced toward Bob's Bakery. The windows had fogged with warmth, and inside a few customers clutched coffee cups and donuts. I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel as I turned left onto Main, the road leading out of town. Eric's words drifted back through my thoughts.

We're no closer now than we were Saturday morning.

Which meant Havermayer was still convinced Angus killed Henry.

I remained likewise convinced he had nothing to do with it. Angus had motive. No one could argue that. Henry Smith killed his sister years ago. An event that shattered the Halliburton family in ways most people couldn't imagine. But motive alone didn't make someone a murderer.

The road curved into countryside, houses thinning out until trees and farmland took their place. The resort sat several miles outside town, tucked against the shore of Lake Dester. In summer, the drive was accompanied by butterflies and songbirds high up in the pines. In the seasons when temperatures dropped, though the needles on the trees remained green, it felt isolated, barren. As if the essence of life had migrated farther south for the winter.

My tires hummed along the pavement as I followed the winding road through the trees. A pickup passed me going the other direction, the driver lifting two fingers from the steering wheel in the universal small-town wave.

I returned the gesture without thinking. A few minutes later, the trees opened up, and the resort entrance came into view. Garland wrapped the wooden sign at the driveway, and white lights twinkled along the railing of the long porch stretching across the front of the main building. The only building, really.

I turned into the long gravel drive and slowed as the sole completed structure came into full view. Several others, in various states of construction, surrounded it. I'd heard the goal was to have the whole thing up and running by next summer. From the condition of the skeletal frames I could see, I had my doubts.

The structure had wreaths hanging from almost every door and window, and someone had placed two large planters filled with pine branches and

red berries beside the front door. A couple bundled in heavy coats crossed the parking lot toward the entrance, laughing at a joke I couldn't hear.

I sat there in the road, taking it all in. A murder, a grieving widow, a suspicious past, and a resort ready to host a Christmas movie marathon. The contrast gave me a headache. I parked the Jeep and shut off the engine. Silence settled around me, broken only by the distant sound of laughter from one of the half-completed constructions. I rested my hands on the steering wheel.

"Just a few questions," I reminded myself again. I buttoned my coat, stepped out of the Wrangler, and headed toward the entrance.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The gravel crunched under my shoes as I crossed the parking lot, the sound jagged and arrhythmic in the cold morning air. It should've been enough to keep my attention anchored, but my mind had already wandered somewhere else entirely. Back to Eric. Which happened more often than I liked to admit.

Not in the obvious, romantic-comedy way. No dramatic sighs or staring dreamily into space while snow fell outside the window. Although, if I were being honest, there'd been a couple of those moments too, minus the snow. This was less obvious, yet more persistent. Thoughts slipping in when my brain slowed down enough to notice things I usually brushed past.

He'd straightened the garland over the sink this morning without making a big deal about it. He hadn't said a word. Hadn't pointed out that I'd hung it crooked in the first place. He'd just reached up while passing through the kitchen, adjusted one corner by maybe an inch, and kept walking. It hadn't mattered at all. Or how he slipped Savannah people food when he thought I wasn't paying attention. I'd been watching. I always was, even when pretending not to be.

For a man who spent his days dealing with criminals, paperwork, and the occasional town council complaint about parking enforcement, Eric had an impressive amount of patience for domestic shenanigans. Which was lucky, considering he lived with me. And my version of organized living tended to involve stacks of books, tables laden with half-finished notes, and a dog and cat who treated all surfaces as potential launching points for bedlam.

I climbed the steps and paused at the door, brushing a little gravel dust from my sleeve. The wreath hanging there was much larger up close than it'd seemed from the parking lot. Lush greenery woven thick, dotted with berries that appeared real enough to tempt a bird, and finished with a wide red ribbon tied into a bow so precise it had to be professionally done. No doubt it cost more than our weekly grocery budget. And Eric could pack away some groceries.

The corner of my mouth twitched. If he were here, he'd absolutely point that out. Not in a judgmental way—just a discreet observation, practical and

grounded. Eric had a streak of that in him, the kind that came from years of police work and growing up in a town where everyone knew exactly what everyone else earned, spent, and tried to pretend they didn't spend. Not sure how that particular trait had missed me.

Still, he'd spent half the night helping me decorate our house without a single complaint. Which alone qualified him for sainthood in my book. Convincing the Catholic Church would be a whole other story, though.

The door opened with a faint creak, and warm air rolled over me as I stepped into the lobby. Inside, Christmas had arrived in a way that came from both enthusiasm and a generous budget. Pine garlands draped along the railings in neat, symmetrical swags, threaded with tiny white lights that glowed softly rather than blinking.

A tall tree stood beside the fireplace, perfectly shaped and decorated as though a team of cheerful, detail-oriented elves had spent hours ensuring no ornament was out of place. Gold and red baubles caught the light, reflecting it in warm glimmers across the polished floor.

When I reached the front desk, a twenty-something woman in a red sweater was typing into a computer. Her nails clicked against the keyboard in a quick, efficient rhythm that stopped the moment she noticed my approach. She smiled. "Good morning. Can I help you?"

"I hope so. I'm trying to find Mary Smith."

The change in her expression was subtle but unmistakable. Names connected to murders tended to do that. Not fear, exactly. More a subtle recalibration. A reminder that something unpleasant had intruded on an otherwise pleasant environment. "Mrs. Smith is having coffee in the lounge."

"Would you mind letting her know Jen Dawson is here to see her? We met at the police station yesterday."

"Of course." She picked up the phone, her tone shifting into polite professionalism as she spoke into the receiver.

While she did, my gaze drifted toward the tall windows lining the far wall. Pale winter light spilled across the floor in long, muted rectangles, the sky outside a dull gray that hinted at more cold to come. Eric would probably not be thrilled about this little side trip. Actually, not quite true. He wouldn't like it at all.

He'd warned me more than once to stay out of the investigation. Not because he didn't trust me, but because he trusted the world even less. He'd

seen enough of it to know how quickly curiosity could turn into danger. And he knew me well enough to understand that trouble didn't always need an invitation where I was concerned.

The desk clerk hung up the phone and gestured toward a hallway. "She'll meet you in the lounge."

"Thank you." I headed that way, my rubber soles squeaking on the polished floor. As I walked, I could hear Eric's voice in my head, steady and dry.

Try not to solve the case without me.

And I could see the expression that went with it—half serious, half resigned. The expression of a man who already knew how likely it was his request would be ignored.

But Eric understood me better than anyone. He knew once a mystery lodged itself in my brain, it didn't leave until I pulled it apart piece by piece. He also knew telling me to stop investigating had about the same effect as telling Savannah not to chase squirrels. Or Casper not to climb the Christmas tree. Possible in theory. Highly improbable in practice.

I stepped into the lounge and peered through the dim light coming from the soft glow of the fireplace along one wall. Flames crackled and danced behind a black iron grate, casting warm, flickering light across the furniture.

I spotted Mary Smith in a corner booth near the fire, one arm resting along the back of the seat, a coffee cup cradled in her other hand. She appeared tired but composed, the way people sometimes did when grief had moved past the initial shock and descended into heaviness.

Her eyes found mine. "Ms. Dawson."

"Please, call me Jen."

She considered me, then gave a small nod and gestured toward the chair across from her. "Sit. Please."

I did, the cushion spongy beneath me, the heat from the fire brushing one side of my face. Neither of us spoke right away. The fire popped softly beside her, sending a small shower of sparks up the chimney. Somewhere behind the bar, a door closed with a muffled thud.

"I hope you don't mind me stopping by," I said. "I'm sorry about what happened to Henry."

She inclined her head in acknowledgment, then examined me with narrowed eyes and pursed lips. "You didn't come to offer condolences again."

Not a question. I sighed. "No."

"I didn't think so." She set the cup down with deliberate care. "You want to ask more questions about my husband."

"Yes."

The fire crackled behind us, then she leaned toward me. "The police already asked everything they could think of."

"I'm sure they did. But sometimes people remember things later."

Mary leaned back slightly, her eyes narrowing enough to signal she wasn't going to make this easy. "You're not with the police."

"No."

"Then why should I talk to you?"

I met her gaze. "Because I think the police might be wrong."

Her expression didn't change, but her attention snapped to. She glanced toward the window where the gray sky hung low over the lake. "You think someone other than the man they have in custody might've wanted Henry dead?"

"I do."

"Why?"

"I know Angus Halliburton very well. He's not capable of killing someone."

Mary considered me silently for a long moment. The firelight flickered across her face, catching in her eyes. "You're certain of that?"

"I am."

"How long have you known him?"

"Several years, and I've never seen a hint of violence in him."

"And that's enough for you to stake his innocence on?"

"I think it is."

She leaned back, contemplating. "You must trust him a great deal."

"I do." I didn't add that Eric trusted him, too. That would've complicated things. Or maybe strengthened them. Hard to say.

Mary's gaze drifted toward the fire again. When she spoke, her voice was confidential. Almost intimate. "Henry was not always an easy man to live with."

I suspected she'd just made the understatement of the year.

She shifted in her chair, her gaze fixed on the flames as though the answers might be hiding somewhere inside them.

"Henry had a temper. And he didn't handle disagreement well."

I waited. Silence had weight. Give people enough of it, and they often filled it themselves. Eric taught me that, though he'd probably deny it if I said so out loud.

Mary clasped her hands tighter, resting them on the table. "He'd had trouble when he was younger, though he refused to tell me anything about it."

"Trouble with work?" I asked.

A small, humorless smile touched her mouth. "Trouble with alcohol. That's all he'd say."

Which lined up with what I already knew, though hearing his wife didn't know about his past made it feel more substantial somehow.

"He said that was behind him," she continued. "And for the most part, I believed him."

"For the most part?"

"People generally don't change as much as they think they do." Her eyes flicked up to mine. "He didn't drink, but his addiction was always there, hovering beneath the surface. Fighting it often left him frustrated and angry. He rubbed people the wrong way."

Her gaze shifted to a spot somewhere over my shoulder. She was holding something back. "Is there something you're not telling me, Mrs. Smith? Any little thing might make a difference."

Her impeccable manicure suddenly required scrutiny. When she looked up again, her expression was one of pure misery. "I think he might've started drinking again. I never saw him do it, or smelled it on him, but he became secretive. Disappeared sometimes with no good explanation for where he'd been or what he was doing."

"Is it possible there's another explanation?"

She shook her head, a wry smile tugging at her mouth. "My uncle was an alcoholic. Almost destroyed the whole family. I know what that looks like."

"I'm so sorry. That had to be difficult."

"I wish Henry had told me what he was going through. Maybe he'd still be ..."

"I'm sure none of this is your fault." Unless she actually did kill him, of course. "Did anyone ever threaten Henry?"

She hesitated. "Not that I know of."

Not that I know of was one of those phrases that could mean almost anything. Sometimes it meant *no*. Other times, it meant *I suspect something*

but can't prove it, so I'm keeping my mouth shut.

"Did he ever mention Angus Halliburton? Or his sister Angelica?"

Mary's head lifted. "No."

The answer came too fast for someone trying to rewrite history. Which meant Henry might not've mentioned the Halliburton family or the accident at all. Which didn't surprise me. If a man spent years pretending the worst thing he ever did hadn't happened, he wasn't liable to bring it up over dinner.

"Did anything change before he came here? In the weeks leading up to the trip?"

Mary's gaze drifted back toward the fire. I thought she might deflect, but she sighed instead. "He started getting phone calls."

"What kind of calls?"

"I don't know. He'd step outside to take them. Or go to another room and close the door behind him. Lower his voice."

"And he wouldn't say who it was?"

"No." Her lips tightened. "He said it was business."

"But you didn't believe him."

She lifted her eyebrows, suggesting she might not be near as naïve as Henry'd hoped. "I believed he didn't want me to ask questions."

Sounded about right. "Did you ever hear a name or a place?"

Mary shook her head. "No."

Disappointing but not surprising. Most people who lived complicated lives didn't paste helpful labels on their problems. "Did anything change after those calls started?"

Mary thought about it. "He became distracted."

"In what way?"

"He'd check the locks more often. Look out the windows at night."

"That doesn't sound very unusual."

"It wasn't just once." Her voice lowered. "He'd check the front door. Then the back. Then the front again. Like a home invasion was imminent."

I leaned forward, fascinated.

"One night," she continued, "he checked the back door three times in the span of ten minutes. I asked him what he was doing."

"And?"

"He laughed. Said he must've forgotten if he locked it."

"But he hadn't."

“No.”

“What else?”

Mary’s fingers clasped together in her lap. “He started watching the windows.”

“In what way?”

“I’d be talking to him and realize he hadn’t heard a word I’d said. Just stared past me at the glass. Like he was expecting someone to be out there watching us.”

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t need to. That kind of fear spoke for itself. “Any idea who he might’ve been worried about?”

“I asked him once.”

“What did he say?”

Mary looked toward the window again. “He said the world was smaller than he’d expected. More crowded.”

Odd. “Any idea what he meant?”

“When I asked him, he said sometimes you can’t outrun the past as easy as you think.”

The words hung in the air between us. It didn’t sound like a man reminiscing. It sounded like a man being found who didn’t want to be.

Mary sighed again. “I assumed he meant his family. Old friends, maybe. Something along those lines.”

“But now?”

Her gaze met mine again, steady and searching. “Now I’m not so sure.” I leaned back, letting her words sink in.

Mary watched me. “You think those phone calls have something to do with what happened? With his death?”

“I think they might.”

She nodded. “So do I.”

The fire popped again behind her. Outside, the wind stirred the bare trees along the lake.

Mary’s fingers curled into fists in her lap. “There’s more.”

I waited.

“He was worried about running into someone here.”

My attention leaped back to her. “Here? Did he say who?”

“No. Only someone he’d known a long time ago might’ve moved here a while back.”

“Could that’ve been Angus Halliburton?”

“Maybe. He never gave me a name.”

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The lobby of the resort felt different the second time I walked through it. Not physically different. It was still all polished floors, stone accents, and oversized windows framing the lake. But now it seemed to be holding on to something. The way conversations lingered in the air long after people walked away from them.

Mary Smith's words still echoed in my head.

He was worried about running into someone here.

Could that someone have been Angus? Or someone else entirely? Someone whose life Henry had wrecked and who'd been waiting for a chance to even the score. Which meant guesswork wouldn't cut it. I needed facts. I needed to talk to someone who'd seen him before he ever got to the Christmas party Friday night. I needed to talk to the guy who interviewed him for the IT job.

The front desk was busy in the straightforward, efficient way resorts and first-class hotels seemed to specialize in. A couple stood off to the side, arguing over a trail map, their voices low but edged with the kind of irritation suggesting it might not be about the trail at all. A man in a golf shirt was checking out, tapping his credit card, as though trying to hurry the process along through sheer impatience.

Behind the counter, a young woman with a sleek ponytail and a name tag reading *Alyssa* was typing fast, her fingers moving with practiced speed. Not the same woman I spoke with earlier. With any luck, she'd be equally cooperative. Or at least persuadable.

I waited until the impatient man finished, then stepped to the counter.

Alyssa glanced up, her expression shifting into a warm, professional smile. "Hi there. Welcome to Kirby on the Lake. How can I help you?"

"My name is Jen Dawson, and I'm hoping you can point me in the direction of someone."

Her smile didn't falter, but her eyes narrowed a touch. "I can try."

"I'd like to speak with your hiring manager. In particular, the person who interviewed a man named Henry Smith for an IT position last Friday."

She hesitated.

I leaned in a little, lowering my voice to give her the impression I was letting her in on a secret instead of asking for a favor. "I'm not looking for a job or anything. I only want to understand why Henry would consider relocating to Riddleton. Can you help me?"

Alyssa examined me. Really examined me. Her gaze flicked over my face, my posture, my clothes, trying to place me. Trying to decide if I was harmless, persistent, or trouble. If not all three at once.

"Why don't you ask Mr. Smith himself?"

She had to be the only person in Sutton County who didn't know. "I would, but he's dead. Murdered Friday night in Riddleton Park."

A sharp intake of breath followed, her eyes widening before she could stop herself. "I ... I didn't know. Are you with the police?"

"I work closely with them," I said. Close enough to be true, flexible enough not to invite follow-up questions. "And I'm sure they'd be grateful for any assistance you can give me, as would his widow." I smiled. "Of course, I can always have one of the detectives on the case come out here if it would make you more comfortable."

I could almost see the barrage of thoughts flitting through her mind. Questions stacking on top of each other, policy bumping up against curiosity, and somewhere in the middle, the unofficial calculation about whether helping me would create a bigger problem for her than refusing. Perhaps she'd learned the hard way that sometimes saying yes was safer than saying no, even when she should.

"Let me make a call," she said at last.

"Thank you."

She turned, picked up the phone, and dialed a three-digit extension. While it rang, she kept her expression neutral, but I noticed the way she tapped her pen against the desktop. Not nervous. Thinking. Planning how to phrase my request.

"Hey, it's Alyssa at the front desk," she said when someone answered. "Do you have time to speak with Jen Dawson about an interview you did last Friday?"

A pause while she listened. Then, she pulled the phone away from her mouth, a puzzled look on her face. "Are you the mystery writer?"

My face burned. It'd been a while since anyone recognized my name. My second book had fallen far short of the success of my first. I nodded.

The mouthpiece back in place, she said into it, "Yes, that one."

I fought the urge to sigh. Being a mystery writer was sometimes useful, but more often not. Tough for people to take me seriously when I make things up for a living.

Another pause.

“Henry Smith.” She glanced at me, her smile polite but now threaded with curiosity. A minute later, she nodded. “Got it. Thanks.”

She hung up. “Mr. Adler will meet you here, but give him a few minutes. He’s in the middle of something right now.”

“Thank you.” I stepped away from the desk, moving toward one of the seating areas near the windows. From there, I had a clear view of both the front desk and the hallway leading deeper into the resort.

I sat, crossed my legs, and tried to act like someone enjoying the scenery instead of rearranging a puzzle that refused to fit together in my head. Henry Smith applied for a job in Riddleton. Or close enough to the town, it didn’t make a difference. Which meant he’d chosen this place. On purpose. Which didn’t sit right with me. I couldn’t say what bothered me about it, but something did.

The big question was why. Why would anyone who didn’t come from here move to a backwater the size of Riddleton of their own accord? A place most people did their best to escape first chance they got. There had to be a reason. I counted on Mr. Adler being able to provide it to me.

A little while later, a man stepped into the lobby from the administrative wing. He didn’t seem to be a resort guest. No vacation clothes, no camera slung around his neck, no hint he’d spent the morning admiring the view. He belonged in a meeting room with a laptop open, a schedule to keep, and little patience for interruptions.

He spotted me right away. Not difficult, considering I was the only one sitting there. He walked over with a measured, purposeful stride, adjusting his collar as he approached. Short and lean, in his early forties, he had dark hair peppered with gray at the temples. No suit jacket, but his dress shirt was crisp, sleeves rolled to the forearms, and no tie, but I’d bet money he wore one as a rule.

“Jen Dawson?”

“That’s me.” I stood and offered my hand.

He shook it, firm and efficient. No wasted motion. “Steve Adler. My wife’s a big fan. She’s going to be thrilled, and a little jealous, when I tell her I met you.” His voice was a melodic baritone.

“Tell her I said thank you. I need all the help I can get.”

“I will,” he said with a smile. “I’m told you have questions about one of our candidates.”

“Yes. Henry Smith.”

A flicker of recognition crossed his face. “Yeah, I remember him.”

His tone of voice lacked enthusiasm. Quite the opposite, in fact. Henry hadn’t only been memorable. He’d been memorable in the wrong way. Safe to assume he didn’t get the job.

“Do you have a few minutes to chat?”

He glanced toward the admin hallway, already half somewhere else. “A few, but I have a meeting soon.”

We sat, angled toward each other, a faint scent of citrus aftershave wafting into my nose. Up close, his eyes were a cool gray, steady and observant. Perfect for someone who judged people for a living. He was evaluating me now.

“I appreciate you taking the time. You know Henry was murdered Friday night?”

“I’d heard whispers to that effect.” No surprise. No curiosity. Either he’d already processed it, or he’d decided it wasn’t his problem.

“Well, I’m trying to understand why Henry wanted to come to Riddleton in the first place. It seems a bit strange to me.”

“What’s your interest in the case?”

Fair question. “The man they’ve arrested is a good friend who swears he’s innocent. I believe him, so when he asked me to help him prove it I agreed.”

A grin tugged at Adler’s mouth. “Irony, wouldn’t you say? The amateur sleuth mystery writer playing amateur sleuth?”

My smile mirrored his. “Something like that. Did Henry ever mention why he’d applied for a job so far from his home?”

Adler leaned back, cocking one elbow on the back of his chair. “It’s a standard interview question. We ask every candidate why they want to relocate.”

“And what did he say?”

He didn’t answer right away. His gaze drifted toward the front desk for a split second, then back to me. “He said he was looking for a change. Better climate, for one thing. He said New Hampshire winters could be brutal, and

he was getting too old to chop wood for the fireplace. Or something along those lines.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Weather.” Of course. The safest possible answer.

A faint smile tugged at his mouth. “You’d be surprised how often it comes up.”

“I’ve lived here all my life. I’m not surprised at all.”

That earned a more genuine smile. “He also said he wanted to work for a company with opportunities for advancement. He’d done his research. Knew our structure, where and how he might fit in.”

“So, he came prepared.”

“Very.”

I leaned forward a little. “Did you believe him?”

He paused. Not long, but enough to make me wonder. “He gave the right answers,” Adler said, hesitating.

“But?”

He exhaled, glancing down at his hands before looking back at me. “They felt rehearsed. Not unusual for the situation. People prepare for interviews. But this seemed different.”

“Different how?”

“Like he’d already decided who we wanted him to be and stepped into that version of himself. Like he was playing a part.”

“Did it bother you?”

“It made me cautious.”

“Enough not to offer him the position?”

Adler nodded. “Yes.”

“Officially, why?”

“Cultural fit would’ve been my explanation,” he said.

“And unofficially?”

He met my gaze, and for a second I thought he might shut me down. Instead, he said, “Something didn’t add up. The whole conversation felt off. He felt off.”

I let it sit for a moment. “Did he mention any connection to Riddleton? Friends, family, anything along those lines?”

“No. He didn’t reveal any extraneous information. If you ask me, I thought he was being deliberately vague.”

“Vague how?”

“He sidestepped the question, saying he was open to new opportunities. And he had no ties to where he lived now.”

I almost laughed. His wife and kids might’ve had a few things to say about that. “That’s not really an answer.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Did it strike you as odd?”

“Everything about him was a little odd.”

“Was he nervous?”

“No.”

“Overconfident?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

Adler hesitated, then said, “Controlled.”

“You thought he might be hiding something?”

Adler didn’t answer right away. When he did, his voice had a note of restraint. “More he was making sure I only saw what he wanted me to see. Most interviewees do some version of that, of course, but ...” He shrugged.

I glanced toward the windows, where intermittent sunlight broke through the clouds and spilled across the floor in warm, golden stripes. Outside, people were laughing, heading toward the lake, completely unaware of the knot tightening in my chest.

He straightened in his seat. Maybe he’d said more than he intended. “Just my take on things, you understand. In all probability, nothing to any of it.”

I didn’t believe that. And neither did he. Not even a little. I nodded anyway. “I appreciate your time.”

We stood. He smoothed his sleeves down and buttoned them at the wrists, already stepping into his next meeting in his mind. “Good luck, Ms. Dawson.”

“Thanks.” I watched him walk away, disappearing down the hallway toward the conference rooms, his posture as controlled as everything else about him. Then I exhaled and turned back toward the front desk.

Alyssa glanced up as I approached.

“Did you get what you needed?” she asked.

I thought about her question. About Henry. About rehearsed answers and careful control, and a man who’d come all this way for reasons that didn’t quite hold together. “Maybe.” But as I stepped back out into the sunlight,

one thing settled into place with uncomfortable clarity. Henry Smith hadn't come to Riddleton for the weather. He'd come for a reason only he knew. And whatever his reason, it had gotten him killed.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Christmas bells over the door at the Dandy Diner gave their half-hearted jingle as I stepped inside. Tired of announcing people who already knew they were there, I'd bet.

The diner was empty, much the way the veterinary clinic had been when the vet, Quincy Felton, was falsely accused of murder. The place smelled of grilled onions, coffee that'd been sitting a little too long, and something sweet. Cinnamon rolls, if I had to guess. Smells that enveloped you in a cozy wrap, whether you wanted them to or not.

I did want it, though. Needed it, in fact. Unfortunately.

"Jen." Marcus didn't peek up from behind the counter when he said it, but there was a smile in his voice. He was wiping down an already clean surface with a focus suggesting he'd been waiting forever for something to do with his hands.

"Marcus," I said, sliding onto a stool near the register. "If you say 'the usual,' I'm going to pretend I have a mysterious, exciting new order just to keep things interesting."

He snorted. "You? Branch out? I'll believe that when I see it."

"I like to keep people guessing."

"You ordered a bacon cheeseburger three times last week."

"That was a phase."

"A lifelong one."

I rested my elbows on the counter. "Okay, fine. But in my defense, the right bacon cheeseburger could bring about world peace."

"Good to know I've been wasting my talents here instead of negotiating global treaties."

"You'd need a bigger grill. I don't think Angus would spring for it."

Even saying Angus's name felt like I'd poked at a bruise. It sat there between us for half a second longer than it should have.

He shook his head. "You want the usual, or are you going to make me work for this?"

"Usual," I said, surrendering to the inevitable. "With a chocolate milkshake. I've earned a shake today."

“That bad of a day?”

I hesitated, which turned out to be all the answer he needed.

Marcus set the rag aside and leaned forward a bit, his expression shifting from teasing to attentive. “You look like you’ve been chasing something that doesn’t want to be caught.”

“More something that keeps changing shape the moment I think I’ve got it pinned down.”

“Sounds about right for you.”

“Is that concern I hear?”

“Don’t let it go to your head.”

I smiled, but it didn’t quite stick. A placeholder for a more convincing emotion. My mind was already circling back to the same place it’d been all morning—Henry, the resort, the tension threading through every conversation I’d had on either subject.

Marcus turned to put my order in, calling it back toward the end of the counter, though he was the only one working in the diner at the moment. Habit, I supposed. Or maybe ritual. In a place like this, routine mattered. Things happened the way they were supposed to happen, or they didn’t happen at all. Orders came in, food went out, nothing unexpected in between.

I watched him move, the familiar rhythm of it grounding in a way I hadn’t expected. It was almost comforting to watch someone who loved what they were doing, every motion efficient and practiced.

Normal. I missed normal. At least, normal for me.

“So,” he said over his shoulder, picking up a conversation we hadn’t started yet. “You didn’t come in here just for a life-changing cheeseburger.”

“I might have.”

“You didn’t.”

I sighed. “Okay, fine. I didn’t.”

He glanced back at me. “Talk.”

I picked at a spot on the counter that, without question, didn’t need picking at. “I talked to Mary Smith this morning. At the resort.”

Marcus nodded, encouraging me to continue.

“She said Henry was worried about running into someone. Here. In Riddleton.” Even now, the words didn’t sit right. Worried, as if he’d been expecting something bad to happen.

Marcus flipped the meat on the grill, the sizzle filling the space between us, and dropped my fries into the hot oil. “And you’re trying to figure out who.”

“Yeah. Problem is, it could be Angus. Or anyone from Henry’s past. This town isn’t exactly overflowing with strangers, but the resort brings in enough people that ‘anyone’ is still a pretty big list.”

“And you think it ties back to the murder somehow.”

“I don’t think it’s a coincidence.”

Marcus slid a plate onto the sideboard, then reached for a bun to lay face down on the grill. “Nothing is, as a rule.”

“I also wanted to ask you something.”

“That sounds ominous.”

“It’s not. Or at least I hope not.”

“Now I’m concerned.”

I huffed out a small laugh. “The knife.”

He set the spatula down and turned to face me. “What about it?”

“You told me before it didn’t come from here. I need to hear that again. Be sure without any questions in my mind.”

Marcus didn’t seem offended, which I appreciated more than I could say. “I’m sure. Every knife in this place is accounted for. I checked them myself after you asked the first time. Twice.”

“None missing?”

“None missing.”

I nodded, letting it sink in, though I’d already known it. Or thought I had. “And the type? You saw the photo, right?”

“Standard kitchen knife. Chef’s knife, from what Havermayer said.”

I lowered my eyebrows. “Like one you’d find here? Only not.”

He shrugged. “Here, sure, if we used that kind. But also pretty much anywhere else. It’s different from ours, though.”

“How different are we talking?”

Marcus picked up a knife from beside the grill and held it up. “Ten-inch blade, give or take. Broad, slightly curved edge. The type of knife most people have at home, even if they don’t cook much, only longer. The one included in those basic knife block sets is almost always an eight-inch.”

I stared at it, my thoughts shifting. “And the one in the photo?”

“An eight-inch knife. No question.”

“So, it’s not unique.”

“Not even a little.”

“Not high-end, not specialty—”

“Nope.”

“Just normal.”

“As normal as a knife can get.”

I leaned back, exhaling. It should’ve been helpful. It should’ve narrowed things down. Instead, it did the exact opposite. “Well, that’s incredibly unhelpful.”

Marcus smirked. “Sorry the murder weapon isn’t more distinctive for you.”

“I was hoping for something along the lines of ‘only three people in the world own that exact knife.’”

“Yeah, no. Try ‘half the population.’ Maybe more.”

I rubbed my temple. “So, it could’ve come from anyone’s kitchen.”

“Pretty much.”

“Great.” No purchase trail. No specialty shop. No obvious link. Which meant whoever did this didn’t need to plan ahead. Or had planned in a way that made the murder appear to be spontaneous.

“Hey,” he said, turning back to the grill. “At least you’re not chasing down some rare imported blade with a two-year waiting list.”

“True, but few places would sell it, making it easier to track down who bought it.”

“Maybe so.” He slid my burger onto the plate, retrieved my fries from the grease, and went to work on my milkshake.

I watched him, but my mind was elsewhere. A common kitchen knife narrowed down the suspect pool, not at all. Which meant this hadn’t required the planning I’d hoped for. No special purchase. No trail to follow.

“Jen.”

I blinked. “Sorry. Just thinking.”

“Dangerous habit.”

“So I’ve been told.”

The door jingled again behind me, and I turned, more out of habit than curiosity.

Ingrid paused inside the doorway, her gaze landing on me almost at once. “Jen,” she said, stepping inside. “I thought I saw your car out front.”

“Caught. I was hoping to sneak in unnoticed.”

“In the Dandy Diner?” Marcus called from behind the counter. “Not a chance.”

Ingrid smiled as she approached, sliding onto the next stool and giving me a side hug. “You picked the least discreet place imaginable, luv. Might as well have sent out invitations.”

“I prefer to make things easy for people.”

“Ha! I’ve never noticed that side of you myself.”

Marcus set a cup of tea in front of her without asking, and leaned forward to brush his lips over hers. “Hey, babe.”

“Hey yourself.”

I turned toward Ingrid. “I was actually hoping to talk to you.”

“About Henry.”

“How’d you guess?”

She gave me a look. “Jen, you’ve got your *investigation face* on. Bit hard to miss.”

Same thing Charlie said. Apparently, I had an investigation face. Who knew? “Right.”

At first, neither of us spoke. Then Ingrid said, “The autopsy showed death from a single stab wound. Clean. Direct.”

“Which matches what we saw.”

“Yes.”

“But?” I prompted.

Ingrid glanced down at her hands, then back up at me. “There’s more.”

“There’s always more.”

Her mouth twitched. “The angle of the wound.”

I frowned. “What about it?”

“It was upward. Not dramatically, but enough to be noticeable.”

The same thing Havermayer told me, but I wanted to hear it from the horse’s mouth rather than the other end. “Upward, meaning the person who stabbed him was lower?”

Ingrid nodded. “Shorter, most likely. Not by a mile, but enough you’d see it in the trajectory.”

I leaned back, my brain already rearranging things whether I wanted it to or not. “So, we’re talking only a little shorter? Havermayer estimated three inches.”

“Not quite that much, I’d say. Enough that it’s doubtful the attacker was the same height or taller than Henry,” she said. “The angle would’ve been

different otherwise. You'd expect a downward or level entry, not an upward one."

I stared at the counter, my reflection faint in the scratched Formica surface. Angus was shorter than Henry. By a lot. Too much to meet Ingrid's estimation? I could only hope.

Marcus set my shake in front of me, condensation dripping down the glass. He gestured toward my plate. "Eat. You seem to have forgotten how."

I picked up a fry, dunked it in my pool of ketchup, then paused, still caught in the idea Angus might actually have done this. I tried to stop that line of thinking before it could fully form, but it lingered anyway, a fraction out of reach.

Ingrid watched me carefully. "You all right, luv?"

"Maybe. Trying to translate all the information into evidence that doesn't point straight at Angus."

"Oh, come off it, now. Angus isn't the only short bloke in Riddleton."

"True, but how many short people would be capable of making those deep prints in the mud? And wear men's size-ten shoes?" The part that kept snagging. Each piece on its own? Explainable. All of them together? Not so much.

She nodded. "I don't know, but there has to be someone else. Angus didn't do this. I'd stake quite a lot on that."

"I know, but proving it is turning out to be quite a challenge. Every new piece of evidence points right back at him."

"That depends on who's holding the compass."

I took a bite of my burger, the familiar taste distracting me enough to keep my thoughts from spiraling out of control. Salt. Grease. Ketchup. Simple things. Things that made sense.

Setting the sandwich down, I swallowed. "Okay, that helps."

Ingrid tilted her head. "How?"

I met her gaze. "Because I'm not only searching for someone who had a reason. I'm searching for someone who fits the moment. Someone who could've gotten close enough and struck the way they did."

Marcus leaned against the counter, arms crossed. "And you think that narrows it down?"

I pasted on a small, humorless smile. "I think it gives me something real to work with at last. Eliminates a large swath of the population."

Even as I said it, I knew it wouldn't be enough. But it was a start.

And right now, a start was better than nothing.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

I didn't realize how tired I was until I pulled up to the curb and turned off the engine. The stillness hit first. No radio. No tires on pavement. Only the faint ticking of the cooling engine and my own thoughts—loud, insistent, and refusing to come to rest.

I kept my hands on the steering wheel longer than I needed to, staring out at the yard. The Christmas lights Eric had strung along the porch last week blinked in slow, uneven intervals, red to green to gold. Under normal circumstances, I liked that. Under normal circumstances, it felt warm. Cozy.

Tonight, it felt out of place. Henry Smith was dead, and Angus was in jail, accused of his murder. The thought landed the same way it had all afternoon. Flat, heavy, undeniable.

I pushed the door open, and the cold hit me hard enough to trigger a sharp, deep breath. Good. I needed that. Something to cut through the fog in my head.

"You've got a system," I said under my breath, heading for the house. "Stick your nose in it, follow the trail, solve the problem."

Savannah bounded toward the door the second I stepped onto the porch, her nails clicking against the floor on the other side, pretending she'd been waiting there the entire time. Of course, she might have, but for the comfy couch and the queen-size bed upstairs.

I fumbled my keys out of my pocket, the metal cold against my fingers, and barely got the lock turned before the door pulled inward under her weight.

"Hey, give me a second," I said, laughing despite myself as she forced her way into the narrow opening. The moment she had enough space, she squeezed through and launched herself at me, front paws thumping against my coat, tail wagging hard enough to throw us both off balance.

"Okay, okay." I braced myself and reached to push her back down. "I was gone for, what, a few hours? You act like I've been missing for days. Surprised you haven't put up posters yet. Oh, that's right. No thumbs."

Her whole body wiggled with excitement as she circled me once, twice, then pressed her nose insistently into my hand, seeking confirmation I was

real.

“I’m here.” I scratched behind her ears. “See? Still me.” I let myself focus on the warmth of the house spilling out through the open door, on Savannah’s solid, uncomplicated happiness, on anything that made sense.

I stepped inside and pushed the door closed behind me, shutting out the cold. The familiar smells of coffee and a pine scent from the decorations wrapped around me, and for a brief moment it felt I’d wandered into a different world. A normal one.

Savannah wasn’t done with me yet. She bumped against my legs, almost knocking me down in her enthusiasm.

“Careful. You’re going to take me out before I even get all the way inside.”

She didn’t slow down. If anything, she doubled up, alternating between poking at her leash and poking at my knee. No way she needed a business trip. Eric had installed a doggy door leading into the fenced backyard our first week here. Nope. A stroll around the neighborhood was what she had in mind.

Not such a bad idea, actually. I could use some fresh air to clear my mind. I clipped the leash on and opened the door. “Come on. Walk first. Brain later.”

Or maybe both at once, knowing me.

The neighborhood was subdued in a late-afternoon way, where everyone had retreated indoors. Lights glowed through windows. Wreaths hung on doors. Inflatable Santas leaned to one side somewhat, as if tired of standing upright for weeks on end. Normal. Peaceful.

Completely at odds with the turmoil in my head.

Savannah trotted ahead, tugging me toward some fascinating object every so often. Mailboxes, light poles, the edge of the sidewalk where a male counterpart had marked his territory in a wavy line down the curb.

I let her lead. The rhythm of walking helped. The cold air helped. It didn’t muffle my thoughts, but it did line them up into something I could work with. “Okay,” I said to myself. “Let’s go through it again.”

Savannah’s ears flicked back. She was listening. I chose to take it as encouragement.

“Henry Smith, stabbed with a standard chef’s knife from anybody’s kitchen. Which tells me nothing useful.”

Savannah pulled me toward a mailbox listing to one side as if the mail carrier had tapped it one time too many.

I followed. “Anyone could have that kind of knife. Anyone. It’s not special, not traceable, not distinctive. Which means either the killer didn’t care, or they wanted to confuse the issue as much as possible.” Maybe I was reading too much into a kitchen knife.

Savannah sniffed the base of the mailbox and worked her way up. Maybe it contained the secret to doggy longevity.

“Then there’s the footprints. Deep ones. Big. Heavy.”

Havermayer’s voice echoed in my head. Large man, significant weight, heavy stride. A male relative of one of Henry’s victims? Or Angus.

Savannah sneezed.

“Bless you.”

I shifted my grip on the leash and kept walking. “And then there’s the wound.” That part wouldn’t let go. “Ingrid said the angle suggested someone shorter. Smaller.” I shook my head. “You don’t get both if you count the deep footprints. Not cleanly. Not unless—”

I stopped mid-step. Savannah jerked my shoulder.

“Unless there were two people.” The thought had been circling all afternoon, brushing past the edges of my mind without landing. “Or, someone wants us to think there were.”

Savannah paused, looking back at me.

“Right. We’re adding it to the list.” I started walking again, slower now. “Okay. Motive.”

Where things always got messy. “Who benefits from Henry’s death?”

Savannah tugged me toward a tree, more invested in her own line of inquiry.

“Let’s start with the obvious. Angus.” My chest tightened a little. “Henry drove drunk and killed his sister ...” The anger simmering earlier flared again, harsh and uncomfortable. “That’s motive. That’s more than motive. That’s justification, depending on who you ask.”

Savannah circled twice and dropped at my feet.

I waited, staring out at the street. “But Angus says he didn’t do it.” I rubbed my thumb against the leash, thinking. “And I believe him.” Did I? Was I sure? “I want to believe him,” I corrected. “Not the same thing.”

My German shepherd glanced up at me. Apparently, I’d taken too long to make up my mind in her opinion.

“Yeah, yeah. Moving on.”

We headed back toward the sidewalk.

“Next. The unknown large man.”

The dog’s tail swished, slapping me in the knee.

“Big build. Heavy coat. Matches the footprints.” I exhaled. “Also, completely anonymous.” No name. No connection. No clear reason to exist in the story other than to fit with the evidence. “Which still makes him suspicious.”

Savannah trotted closer to my side.

“Then there are Henry’s possible other victims. People he injured in some way after drinking to excess.” I shoved my free hand into my coat pocket. “Any one of them or their male relatives could’ve decided to end it. Or any one of their friends.”

“Which means I have a list of suspects, either one person long or dozens.” Great. Very helpful. I let out a slow breath. “And then there’s Henry’s family. Mary Smith, to be exact. The wife. Always the first suspect.” I stared straight ahead, no longer seeing the houses. “She has no alibi and she knew. Or at least suspected that Henry had a past he wouldn’t tell her about.”

The thought wouldn’t leave me alone. “What does that do to you? Living with that kind of person? Knowing they’re hiding information from you, but having no clue what?”

Savannah stayed close, her steady presence comforting.

“Do you ignore it? Excuse it? Pretend it’s not real?” Or do you carry it around until it morphs into something else entirely? I shook my head. “But she was in New Hampshire when Henry died. Or so she says.”

Our house came into view, lights glowing steadily. “Who benefits?” I repeated under my breath.

Savannah emitted a small, impatient whine.

“I know, I’m getting there.” As soon as we cleared the doorway, she trotted toward the kitchen, then returned to make sure I followed.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, shrugging out of my coat. “Food. It’s always food with you.”

I hung the coat up and reached for her collar, unclipping the leash.

She sat. A miracle. Her tail thumped against the floor in a steady rhythm, eyes locked on me with intense focus.

“Wow. You’re learning patience. I’m impressed.”

She held it for exactly three seconds before popping back up and nudging my hand again.

“Yeah, that’s more like it.”

A delicate mew from behind made me pause. I turned.

Casper sat on the back of the couch, frozen in a pose for *Kitty Vogue* magazine, his green eyes fixed on me, unblinking.

“You too? Were you both waiting for me to come home?”

He blinked once, slow and deliberate.

“Right. Of course you were.”

He stretched, long and lazy, then hopped down with serene precision and made his way toward the kitchen with an important mission to carry out. In his mind, anyway.

“Reinforcements.”

Savannah gave a short bark in agreement.

I stood there, watching them. Savannah weaving back and forth between me and the kitchen, Casper moving in smooth, confident lines, knowing he owned the place.

This was ordinary. Mine. And for a few seconds, enough to push everything else back out of my mind. “All right.” I forced myself into motion. “Let’s take care of you two pitiful creatures before I dive back into it all.”

Savannah fell into step beside me at once, bumping against my leg every few steps, needing the contact. Casper weaved between my feet with expert timing, a moving obstacle I somehow managed not to trip over.

“One of these days,” I said, glancing down at him, “you’re going to succeed, and it’s not going to end well for either of us.”

He flicked his tail, unimpressed.

I reached the kitchen counter and grabbed the food scoop. The sound of kibble hitting Savannah’s bowl might as well have been a starting gun. Her entire body lit up, every ounce of focus zeroed in.

“Sit.”

She sat.

“Wait.”

She vibrated in place, muscles tight, eyes locked on the bowl to ensure it didn’t disappear when she blinked.

I set it down. “Okay.”

She dove in without hesitation.

“Every time.”

Casper, of course, had already made his way onto the counter.

“You,” I said, pointing at him, “are not starving.”

He stared at me.

“You had food this morning.”

He continued staring. I could swear his look said, “So did you.”

I sighed and reached for his dish anyway. “You’re both impossible.”

After filling his bowl, I set it on the kitchen floor. He sniffed it, then began eating with far more composure than Savannah, who inhaled hers, as if practicing for an eating contest.

Leaning back against the counter, arms crossed, I let myself just exist there. Warm. Familiar. Safe. And underneath it, the constant pull of an unresolved issue.

My gaze drifted toward the table where my pad and laptop waited. I pushed off the counter with a resigned sigh. “All right. No more putting it off.”

Savannah’s eating slowed as the food ran low, her tail still giving the occasional thump against the cabinet. Casper finished and at once began grooming, as if the world held no greater concerns.

Must be nice.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I grabbed a legal pad and sat at the table, flipping it open to a blank page. The paper stared back at me, clean, untouched, and mildly accusatory. It already knew I didn't have enough to fill it.

I sat there, pen hovering over the page, listening to the low hum of the refrigerator and the faint tick of the wall clock. The house felt too still, waiting to see what I'd do next. "Let's figure this out." The words sounded more confident out loud.

At the top, I wrote, pressing a little harder than necessary:

HENRY SMITH—MURDER

The words appeared heavy in print. Permanent. Final. A label slapped onto a man who, as far as I could tell, had lived an ordinary, sedate life. I drew a line beneath it and exhaled. *Start simple*. That's what Eric would say. Strip it down. Build it back up. Don't get lost in theories before you understand the facts. I rolled my shoulders once and started listing.

ANGUS

Motive: Sister, confrontation

Opportunity: In town at time of death, no alibi

Physical: Matches both Havermayer's and Ingrid's assertions

Behavior: Angry, denies it

I tapped the pen against the pad. On paper, Angus looked bad. Not just bad, the kind of suspect you could wrap up and hand to a jury without too much explaining.

Motive? Strong. Opportunity? Present. Forensic alignment? Close enough to be dangerous. Behavior? Defensive. Not that I blamed him.

If I didn't know him, I'd already be done. That was the problem. People didn't come in bullet points. Not real ones. Not the kind you grew up with or were lucky enough to meet later in life. Not the kind who showed up to your house with lopsided birthday cakes and terrible jokes and stayed long enough to help clean up afterward. Not the kind who stood in your kitchen and made you feel—without ever saying it out loud—things would be okay.

Angus wasn't a neat list. He was messy. Human. Loyal in a way that didn't fit with what I saw on the page. Which meant one of two things. Either I'd been wrong about him, or this glaring, yellow list was.

I pressed my lips together and drew a small line beside his name. *Too obvious?* Then, under it: *Who benefits if Angus is blamed?* Much better. Less an answer, more a direction. I shifted my grip on the pen and moved on.

UNKNOWN LARGE MAN

Motive: Unknown

Opportunity: Seen around town

Physical: Matches footprints, height differential unclear

Identity: Unknown

Behavior: Suspicious

I stared at that one longer. "Suspicious," I repeated under my breath. "That's helpful. Not." Someone big, vaguely menacing, seen often enough to exist but not enough to matter. The kind of figure people remembered because he stood out, but couldn't identify. Nope. Too convenient. Or too easy to misinterpret.

I tapped the pen again. "Seen around town," I muttered. "By who? When? Doing what?" Because *seen* didn't mean anything without context. People saw things all the time and got them wrong. Or remembered them differently later. Or filled in details their brains decided made sense, whether they did or not.

I added another line. *Witness reliability?* Then another. *Could be unrelated.* And beneath that: *Or deliberately noticeable.* That thought made me pause. If someone wanted to be remembered, they didn't need to hide. They needed to be distinct. Large. Noticeable. Memorable in a vague, unsettling way. Enough to stick, not enough to identify.

I drew a small arrow next to it. *Connection to Henry?* Because that mattered. There had to be one for this guy to be a suspect. "Or," I said to the empty room, "he's exactly what he appears to be. Which would be nice for once." The hushed space didn't argue. I moved on.

One name left, and I hesitated. She claimed to be a thousand miles away when Henry died, but nobody could verify it. She had to be considered.

MARY SMITH

Motive: Knows what he did? Tired of living with his erratic behavior?

Opportunity: Unknown/Unlikely, but no alibi.

Behavior: Controlled

Unknowns: Everything else

I leaned back against the chair, pen resting against my lip as I stared at her name. Mary didn't fit anywhere. Which might make her the most dangerous thing on the page. She wasn't loud. Not emotional. She was contained. And those people either had nothing to hide or everything.

The most obvious question of all was: *Who benefits from Henry's death?*

The question sat there, weightier than the others because it cut through everything else. Motives could lie. Witnesses could be wrong. Evidence could be misleading. But benefit? Benefit tended to be honest. It went straight to the heart of the matter.

Casper leaped onto the table with a thud.

"Of course you did. Why wouldn't you?"

He walked directly across the page without hesitation, tail held high.

"Casper."

He sat on my pad, licking his paw.

I stared at him. "You are literally sitting on a murder investigation."

He started purring.

"Fantastic. The exact level of support I need." I nudged him, trying to encourage him to get down. He flopped onto his side instead, stretching across the page to function as a furry paperweight.

Savannah barked once from the kitchen.

"Yes, I know. You're the only one taking this seriously."

Casper's tail flicked and knocked my pen out of my hand. It hit the floor with a clatter.

"I live with pandemonium." I retrieved the pen and slid the pad out from under him. Out of his reach. For now.

He protested by rolling onto his side and hooking one paw toward it.

"No. You've contributed enough."

He yawned. Unrepentant.

I turned the page. Clean space again. Fresh start. In the center, I drew a circle. Then wrote, pressing hard enough to leave an imprint on the pages beneath:

WHO BENEFITS?

Angus benefits in a way. He gets closure. Justice. A sense that the situation had finally been dealt with. But that wasn't the same as murder. Closure was what you got *after* the system worked. Except the system had already failed him.

I added: *Emotional benefit, not practical*. Then: *Would lose more than gain if caught*. Because that mattered too. Angus had a lot to lose. People who had a lot to lose didn't usually gamble it on something this messy. Unless they snapped.

I paused. "Did you snap?" The question lingered longer than I wanted.

Moving on. Next: *The family or friends of the other victims benefit. Revenge*.

The unknown man? Unclear. At least, nothing I could see. Which meant one of two things. Either he wasn't the killer, or he was the only one who actually *did* benefit, and I just didn't know how yet.

Now for Mary. My pen tapped against the paper. *Freedom*. Freedom from Henry. From his volatility. From what he'd done in the past he wouldn't tell her about. I swallowed. Maybe it had nothing to do with benefit at all. Maybe it was about ending something that should've been finished a long time ago.

Casper rolled onto his back, paws in the air, batting at a flying object only he could see. Imaginary butterflies. Or ghosts. Hard to tell with him.

"You think I'm overthinking this."

He swatted at me and missed.

"Yeah, you might be right."

I leaned forward again, scanning the page. "Knife is ordinary. Footprints might be misleading. Witnesses are vague. Motives are everywhere."

Savannah padded into the room, nails clicking softly against the floor, and rested her head on my knee.

I reached down without thinking, scratching behind her ears. "Which means the answer isn't in what fits. It's in what doesn't."

My eyes drifted back to the list. I exhaled. With enough explanation, enough assumptions, enough missing pieces filled in just right, any of them could work. Which meant none of them were solid.

Savannah's tail thumped. Casper rolled back onto his stomach and crept toward the edge of the table, peering down at the floor, hoping something fascinating had appeared.

"Don't," I warned.

He stared at me. Then knocked my pen off the edge. Again.
I pointed at him. "You're not helping."
He blinked and went back to licking his front paw.
I stood and headed for the kitchen, Savannah glued to my side. Behind me, the pad lay on the table. At the center of a new page, circled twice:

Who benefits from Henry's death?

I had the uneasy feeling the answer was already there.
I just hadn't seen it yet.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Wednesday morning, the library held an eerie quiet. Not the stiff, watchful silence of a courtroom, where every movement felt observed and recorded. Not the uneasy hush of a hospital waiting room, thick with dread and broken only by the occasional murmur or ringing phone. Something softer.

A peace that settled in layers. Pages turning. Keys tapping. The faint hum of fluorescent lights overhead. The distant creak of a chair shifting somewhere. It was the sound of people searching for answers, for distraction, for anything to fill the empty spaces in their day. Or, in my case, to fill the empty spaces in a case.

I paused inside the entrance, letting my eyes adjust as they swept across the long rows of shelves and scattered tables. The familiar scent of paper and dust wrapped around me, grounding in a way I desperately needed.

I spotted Brittany tucked into a long wooden table near the back, half-hidden behind what could only be described as a paper fortress. Stacks of books, folders, loose printouts, and legal pads surrounded her in uneven towers, like she'd carved out a research bunker and intended to defend it to the last citation.

Her laptop sat open in front of her, screen glowing, a dozen tabs crammed across the top, fighting for space. I made my way over, weaving between tables. "You weren't kidding about going all in," I said, dropping my messenger bag onto the chair beside her.

Brittany glanced up, pushing her glasses higher on her nose with one finger. A strand of hair had escaped her bun and curled along her cheek, but she didn't seem to notice. "You said archived reports. I took that personally."

A small smile tugged at my mouth as I pulled out the chair and sat. "Remind me never to give you vague instructions again."

"I won't," she said. "This is way more fun."

Up close, the scale of her work was even more impressive. Newspaper clippings—some clearly photocopied from old microfilm—were spread in careful clusters. Notes filled the margins in tight, precise handwriting.

Highlighter marks cut through columns of text in neon streaks. She'd been here a while.

"You get here at dawn?"

"Not quite, but close."

I leaned back, taking it all in. "Tell me it hasn't all been for naught."

"Oh, I've found things." A small, satisfied smile tugged at her rosebud mouth.

"Sounds promising."

"It's a mixed bag, actually," she added, tilting her head. "The big question is whether any of them matter."

"Let's find out."

She slid a copied newspaper clipping across the table toward me. The paper was slightly warped from the copier, the text a little grainy, but the headline cut through all of that, bold and immediate. Definitely above-the-fold news.

Vehicle Discovered in Halfmoon Lake

I leaned in. "What's this about?"

"You'll see. Read it."

I did. The article opened with a date in early spring, days after the last of the ice had broken apart on Halfmoon Lake. I could almost see it: gray water, drifting chunks of melting ice, the hesitant return of warmer days. Picturesque. Until the rest of the story caught up with it.

"Members of the local Polar Bear Club made a startling discovery late Saturday afternoon while swimming in Halfmoon Lake," I read aloud. "The lake, recently cleared of winter ice, had drawn several residents taking advantage of the warmer weather."

I kept reading. "According to reports, four men had ventured into the water near the northern shore when one of them noticed what appeared to be a large, dark object beneath the surface."

I glanced up, my lips twitching. "Lunatics who swim in icy water, on purpose, found something. Think it was a spaceship?"

Brittany chuckled. "Keep going."

"One of the men reportedly dove down for a closer look, initially believing the object to be debris or possibly a discarded boat. Upon resurfacing, he alerted the others that the object resembled a vehicle."

A moment easy to imagine. The murky water, the distorted shape, the slow realization as it came into focus. “They thought it was junk until they got close enough.”

“Yeah. A reasonable assumption, though.”

Moving on. “Authorities were contacted shortly thereafter. Emergency responders arrived on scene and confirmed the presence of a submerged vehicle approximately twenty feet from shore.”

Twenty feet. Close enough to the road to have been pushed off by another vehicle. “Due to water conditions and visibility, recovery efforts were delayed until the following morning. Divers later confirmed the presence of four occupants inside the vehicle.

“At the time of recovery, the identities of the individuals had not yet been determined. Officials have stated that further investigation will be required.”

Neither of us said anything. Around us, the library continued its steady rhythm. A chair scraped softly somewhere behind me. Pages turned. Someone coughed and then quickly muffled it. Life moving forward, completely unaware of the trauma sitting on the table in front of us.

I flipped the page over. “But that’s just the standard first report. What else?”

“That’s where things start to branch out.” She tapped her laptop. “Local coverage is pretty surface-level. Tragic accident, community mourning, funeral arrangements. The usual.”

“And outside coverage?”

Brittany’s smile broadened slightly. “Different story.”

She turned the laptop so I could see the screen. Another article, this one from a regional paper in a neighboring county.

Questions Arise in Fatal Crash

I leaned closer.

“This one came out about a week later,” she said. “Once the initial shock wore off, and people started wondering what really happened.”

I read. The tone was different. Less sympathetic, more probing.

“The occupants have since been identified as David Robinson, 42, and his wife, Laura Robinson, 40, both were pronounced deceased at the scene. Also recovered from the vehicle were two children, Michael Robinson, 16, and Emily Robinson, 14.”

“Two kids. Teenagers.” An image slipped into my mind—backpacks dropped by a front door, one half unzipped. A pair of shoes kicked off and left in the middle of the floor. Music playing behind a closed bedroom door. A phone buzzing with messages that would never be answered. A life in mid-motion. Gone.

Brittany nodded. “Yeah.”

“Okay, so, people suspected there was a story behind the accident.”

“More than suspected,” Brittany said. “They pushed.”

She clicked on the next tab. Another article.

Investigation Continues Into Robinson Fatalities

“This one’s where it gets interesting. State level. They don’t usually pick things up unless there’s a reason,” Brittany said. “Check out the middle section.”

I scanned the article, eyes moving quickly until I found the part she meant. “At the time of their deaths, Daniel and Laura Robinson were reportedly traveling to Concord for a scheduled meeting with the Division of Children, Youth, and Families.

“Why are you showing me this. What does something that happened months later have to do with Angelica’s death?”

“That’s the thing.” Brittany tucked a flyaway hair behind her ear. “They don’t know when the car went into the lake. What if the car in the lake was also involved in the accident that killed Angelica? What if Henry Smith killed that family, too?”

My brain rejected that supposition outright. Too much. Too convenient. Too everything. I turned the laptop toward me, my fingers brushing hers. I scanned the article, eyes catching on particular phrases.

Unidentified vehicle recovered ...

Four bodies ...

Cause of entry into the water unknown ...

Winter conditions may have obscured ...

One thing didn’t fit, though. “Wouldn’t the car have been found much sooner if the accident happened in February?”

“Not necessarily. The lake was frozen over, and it was a very cold night. One of the articles I read said that Henry Smith almost died of exposure while waiting to be found. If the car swerved onto the ice and fell through,

the lake likely would've frozen back over by the time rescuers arrived the next morning. They would've had no idea to even search for it."

The logic clicked into place with a devastating finality.

I sat down without realizing I was going to, and the chair creaked softly under my weight. "How many people knew about this?"

"Not many," Brittany said. "They didn't make the connection at the time. Different investigation. Different timeline."

"And now Henry's dead."

"Yes."

"Did they ever find a way to connect Henry directly?"

"To the accident? They tried, but couldn't make anything stick." She reached for another printout and handed it over. "Here's where it gets frustrating."

This one was later. Months after the crash. Months after the vehicle was found in the lake. I glanced at the headline and grimaced before I even started reading.

No Charges Filed in Halfmoon Lake Fatalities

"Let me guess. Insufficient evidence."

"Go on."

I scanned the article. "After a thorough review, authorities have determined there is not enough evidence to pursue criminal charges against Henry Smith in connection with the deaths of Daniel and Laura Robinson and their children, due in part to the condition of the bodies and the inability to determine precisely how long the vehicle had been submerged."

My jaw tightened. Too much water. Too much time. Too many unknowns. Enough doubt to stop a case cold. I set the paper down, my fingers lingering on the edge of it. "Just because the DA declined to prosecute doesn't mean someone didn't believe Henry was guilty of murder, or at least manslaughter, and got away with it."

She didn't answer right away. Instead, she clicked on the next open tab. "This is the last one I found."

The headline was smaller. Less dramatic.

Community Moves Forward After Tragic Loss

I frowned. "That sounds like a wrap-up piece."

"It is. But read the last paragraph."

I skimmed through until I found it. “In the months following the accident, public interest in the case has steadily declined. With no charges filed and no new evidence brought forward, the investigation has effectively concluded, determined to be a single-vehicle accident. Officials have stated there are no plans to revisit the case.”

“That had to make someone angry.”

“Yeah. Or a lot of someones.”

I leaned back in my chair, folding my arms as I stared at the spread of papers in front of us. “A family dies in a questionable crash. Potentially involving a drunk driver. Then suddenly there’s not enough evidence, no charges, and everyone moves on?”

“Not everyone.”

I stared at her.

“Someone pushed for those questions to be asked in the first place,” she said. “Those regional and state articles don’t happen unless someone keeps talking. Keeps pushing.”

“Family?” I asked.

“Maybe. Or friends. Someone close to the Robinsons.”

“And then they stopped.”

“Or got shut down,” she said, barely above a whisper.

That sat in my belly like a lead ball. I picked up the first article again and studied the names. David and Laura Robinson. They felt more real now. Not just names tied to a case, but people with a plan. A future. Around us, the library continued its steady rhythm. People searching. Learning. Digging through fragments of their own and other people’s lives.

I looked down at the articles again, at the names, the dates, the small details that had been overlooked or buried. “Let’s keep going.”

Brittany smiled, already turning back to her laptop. “Good, because I’ve got a few more leads we haven’t even touched yet.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The library had simmered down by the time the morning crowd thinned toward lunchtime. Earlier, there'd been purpose. People arriving with lists, moving with determined efficiency between shelves, gathering what they needed and settling in with a focused intent.

Now, the energy had softened. The rhythm slowed. Chairs sat empty where they hadn't before. Conversations, already hushed, faded entirely. Even the fluorescent hum seemed more noticeable as it stepped in to fill the gaps left behind. The kind of lull that let your thoughts wander too far if you weren't careful. Not sure I wanted mine doing that right now. In fact, I positively didn't.

Brittany had migrated from printed articles to a sprawling digital map on her laptop. At some point, the neat stacks of paper had become secondary. Reference material instead of the main event. Now everything lived on the screen. Catching up with the real world.

Windows layered over windows. Timelines half built. Names circled, connected by thin lines that branched and looped back on themselves. Notes floated in the margins, color-coded in a way that probably made perfect sense to her and no one else.

It didn't look like research anymore. It looked like reconstruction. Like trying to piece together something that'd never been fully assembled in the first place.

I watched her for a moment before speaking. The way she worked was almost surgical. Precise. Detached. Every movement deliberate, every click intentional. She wasn't collecting information. She was cutting through it, separating what mattered from what didn't. "Okay, we've spent all morning on the Robinsons. Let's change it up."

She didn't look up. "Henry?"

"Henry."

She leaned back, rubbing her eyes before refocusing. "I've got pieces. Not clean yet, but enough to start sketching."

"That's all we need for now."

She clicked, and the confusion on her screen reorganized into a more structured form. A timeline stretched from left to right, with dates anchoring key points and smaller notes branching off in footpaths. “Start at the crash. Or alleged crash, I should say.”

“Right. Alleged.”

“After that, Henry Smith disappears for a bit. Not completely off the grid, but low visibility. There’s a gap of a few months where he’s not in any public record.”

“Lying low?”

“Or falling apart.”

I nodded. “More likely.”

She clicked again, pulling up an official-looking document. “After the accident that killed Angus’s sister, he was in court-mandated rehab.”

I leaned in, elbows on the table. “So, there *was* something official.”

“Yeah. No direct tie to the Robinson case, though. At least not on paper.”

“They never made the connection?”

“Not as far as I can tell.”

That didn’t sit well with me. I scanned the court decree she’d pulled up. It was clinical, detached, a list of facts posing as neutral. “Alcohol dependency. Recommended inpatient treatment. Ninety-day program.”

“Standard, but he stays longer.”

“How long?”

“Ninety more days.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Voluntary extension?”

“Could be. Or he failed the first stretch, though I don’t see how that’s possible if he never left the facility.”

That gave me pause. People didn’t usually stay longer unless something inside them cracked wide enough they couldn’t pretend anymore. Or they were afraid of what might happen if they left. “Any notes?”

“Minimal. Privacy laws. But I found a discharge summary attached to the final dispensation from the court.” She clicked again.

I leaned closer and read silently this time.

Patient demonstrated consistent engagement with program requirements. Expressed remorse regarding past behavior. Acknowledged impact of substance abuse on self and others.

“Remorse is doing a lot of work in that sentence.” I exhaled slowly. “And remorse for what, exactly? Drinking and driving? Killing five people?”

Or getting caught.”

Brittany’s mouth tilted slightly. “Could be any of the above.”

“Or all of them.” I kept reading.

Recommend continued outpatient support and abstinence monitoring.

“Did he follow through?” I asked.

“Oh, he followed through.” She flipped to another section of her timeline. “After rehab, he stays local and gets a job about three months later as a construction company office clerk.”

“Who hired him?”

“Small operation. Family-owned. No big corporate background checks, probably.”

“Or someone willing to give second chances.”

“Maybe.”

I considered that. Second chances always sounded noble until you remembered what someone had done to need one. “Keep going.”

“All right.” She scrolled. “Within a year, he’s steady. Same job, consistent income. No further arrests. No incidents.”

“That’s clean. He kept out of trouble.”

“Or maybe too clean? Maybe he just never got caught again.”

“True. Or maybe killing five people scared him straight.”

Brittany nodded, as if it were only another data point.

It wasn’t. Not to me. Too much weight on that possibility. Too much implication. As if tragedy could serve as a correction rather than a consequence.

She tapped the screen. “It gets better. He gets promoted into a supervisory role three years later.”

I let out a restrained breath. “From DUI and rehab to supervisor in three years.”

“Yup.”

“Either he turned himself around, or he’s very good at looking like he did.”

Brittany tapped the screen. “There’s more.”

“Of course there is.”

“He gets married.”

“When?”

“About five years after the crash.”

“To Mary?”

“The one and only.”

I wondered how that first conversation went. When do you tell someone that part of your life? The part where you killed five people and spent six months in rehab. Over dinner? Years later? Never? “Think she knew about his past before she married him?”

Brittany shrugged. “Hard to say. It’s not exactly hidden, but it’s also not front-page news at that point.”

“And people don’t always go digging into the past.”

“No, they don’t. But they should.”

I leaned back in my chair, folding my arms. “And they have kids, right?”

“Two. One boy, one girl.”

My chest tightened in a way I didn’t expect. A man tied, however loosely, to the deaths of two teenagers got to raise two of his own. Didn’t seem fair somehow. But I was old enough to know by now, life isn’t fair. “A stable family?”

“By every measurable standard. Steady job, no legal issues, family life, community involvement. He even volunteers at his son’s Little League.”

I looked at her. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope. And he went to school at night to get his degree in Information Technology. A real redemption story. On paper, anyway.”

The kind of narrative people loved. Man hits rock bottom. Man gets help. Man rebuilds. “Except five people are still dead.”

Brittany didn’t answer. She didn’t need to.

My eyes scanned the timeline again, tracing it from left to right. “No relapses of any kind? You sure?”

“None documented. No arrests, no incidents, nothing. According to everything I can find, he’s sober. Completely.”

“That’s a helluva trajectory.”

“No kidding.”

I tapped the table, the impact stinging through my fingers. “People don’t always forgive that kind of thing.”

“No, they don’t.”

“And they don’t forget, either.” Because forgetting required closure. And closure required answers.

She closed one window and opened another. “This is where it gets interesting again.”

“You mean it hasn’t been interesting until now?”

She ignored me. “I started looking for mentions of the Robinsons after the case died down. Not official reports. Those dried up. But, other things.”

“Such as?”

“Letters to editors. Forums. Old comment sections. Community message boards.”

“The places where people say what they really think.”

“Yup.”

That made my gut flip. People were more careful when their real names were attached. Not as much when they could hide behind anonymous user names. Maybe we’d catch a break.

She turned the screen toward me. It wasn’t neat. No clean formatting, no polished headlines. Fragments of conversations frozen in time. Half-arguments that started nowhere and ended nowhere. Grief bleeding into anger, anger refining into something else. I scanned the first of a long line.

He got away with it. Everyone knows it.

Another:

Four people died, and that’s it? That’s justice?

And another:

If the system won’t do anything, someone else should.

A chill crept down my spine. “That last one. That’s not anger. It’s a call to arms.”

“A challenge.”

I kept reading. Some posts softened into grief. Others hardened into bitterness. But a few held harsher words. More dangerous. “How many of these are there?”

“More than I expected. Most are noise. People venting. Processing. But there are a handful that keep popping up.”

“Same usernames?”

“Sometimes. Sometimes not.”

“That’s not comforting.”

“Nope.”

I sat back again, settling in. “Henry rebuilds his life, step by step. Rehab, job, family, stability.” I ran a hand through my hair, leaving it sticking up in unruly tufts. “And somewhere out there, someone is still stuck on that night.”

“Never moved past it.”

“Or never *could*.” I looked back at the screen, at the scattered voices that refused to give up. “Grief doesn’t always resolve. Sometimes it curdles.”

“Into anger,” Brittany added.

“And obsession.” My gaze snagged on something. “Wait, scroll back.” She did.

“There,” I said, pointing. A username repeated across multiple posts. Different dates. Same tone.

People forget. I don’t.

Another post, months later:

Some things don’t get to be forgotten.

And then:

Justice doesn’t expire.

That wasn’t venting. It was a promise. An idea clicked into place, cold and precise. “That’s not random. That’s someone who stayed. Someone who kept watching. Waiting.”

Brittany closed the laptop halfway, momentarily lost in thought. “Could be a family member. Friend. Someone close to the Robinsons.”

“Or someone connected to the case in another way.”

“Like who?”

“I don’t know. Maybe we need to do a deeper dive into the Robinsons. I mean, why were they going to see a social worker, anyway? And bringing their children along? Were they abusive parents? Drug addicts? Maybe they were high on something and drove into the lake without help from anyone else.”

“Good questions. But don’t social workers usually make home visits when the parents are under investigation? That still wouldn’t explain why the whole Robinson family was traveling to them instead of the other way around.”

“Sounds like you still have some research to do.”

“A genius’s work is never done.”

I shot her an eye roll and headed for the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I never realized how loud an unoccupied house could be until I tried to write in one. The clock on the wall ticked like the time bomb held by Wile E. Coyote in a *Road Runner* cartoon. Somehow louder the more I tried not to hear it. The refrigerator hummed in long, uneven breaths. And somewhere in the vents, air shifted with a low, metallic rattle, coming and going often enough to keep me from ignoring it completely. Not peaceful. A collection of small, persistent noises, each one staking a claim on my attention.

I stared at the blinking cursor on my laptop. It stared back. Judgmental, as usual. “Okay.” I flexed my fingers over the keyboard. “We’re doing this.”

I typed a sentence. Deleted it. Typed another. Deleted that too. The third attempt made it to a second line before I stopped, reading it over with a growing sense of irritation. The words weren’t wrong exactly; they just weren’t right. Which, unfortunately, was worse. Wrong could be fixed. Wrong could be rewritten. Not right sat there laughing at me. Close enough to be frustrating. Far enough away to be unusable.

Leaning back in the chair, I scrubbed my hands over my face. “Come on, Jen. You’ve done harder things than this.”

The cursor blinked again. Patient. Mocking.

My gaze drifted, unbidden, to the legal pad lying beside my laptop. Not the writing notes pad. The other one. The one that’d inconveniently taken over more space in my life than I’d intended. The one with names filling the page in my own handwriting. Arrows. Circles. Notes crammed into margins. Squeezed in almost as an afterthought, even though they were the only concepts that seemed to matter to me lately.

I exhaled and reached over, pulling the pad closer despite my best intentions. “Just a quick look,” I told no one. “Then back to work.” A lie, and I knew it. My eyes moved over what I’d written, whether I wanted them to or not. The words jumbled together, rearranging themselves into a cluster of nonsense.

I gave up and shoved the pad under a pile of discarded notes. With luck, I could trap my roving thoughts inside it. “Not now,” I said under my breath. “We are not doing this right now.”

Turning back to the laptop, I forced my fingers onto the keys. I read the last paragraph I’d written yesterday. A good one. Solid. I remembered a small flicker of satisfaction when I’d finished it. The rare, fleeting moment when the words landed right where I wanted them to. Proof, theoretically, I knew how to do this.

But it felt as if it’d happened to someone else. Someone more competent. Someone who didn’t get emotionally derailed by a blinking cursor and a case refusing to stay politely in the background. I typed anyway.

Dana stepped into the room, the silence pressing in around her like

Nope. I deleted the sentence. Tried again.

The house felt wrong, like something had been taken from it

Delete.

I let out a frustrated breath. “Seriously?” My fingers hovered over the keys, useless. Every direction I tried to go in bent back to the same place. Absence. Something missing. A space that should’ve been filled but never was.

Staring at the blank space on the screen, my jaw tightened.

You’re doing it again, Jen.

Not writing. Circling. Avoiding. Because the story I was supposed to be telling suddenly felt too close to the one I shouldn’t be thinking about. I pushed the chair back a little too abruptly and stood, pacing once across the warped hardwood floor of my office before turning back again. “This is ridiculous.”

From her bed in the corner, Savannah lifted her head. She’d been sprawled across the cushion, one ear cocked as she watched me, eyes bright with curiosity. The kind suggesting she’d been awake the whole time, waiting for something interesting to happen.

“You don’t even know what ridiculous means,” I told her.

Her tail swept over the cushion. Agreement. Disagreement. Opportunistically angling for a treat. No way to know.

Casper, on the other hand, didn’t move. He was curled into a tight, judgmental loaf on the padded armchair seat in the other corner, eyes half-

closed, as if he were both asleep and keenly aware of everything happening in the room at the same time. A cat who'd seen things. Judged them. Found them lacking.

I crossed my arms. "You're no help, either."

The kitten flicked the tip of his tail.

The dog yawned dramatically and stretched, front paws extended, back arching into a perfect Downward-Facing Dog. Auditioning to be a yoga instructor for a class I would, without question, never attend. In my world, flexibility was a four-letter word.

I sighed and rubbed a hand over my face. "Must be nice. No existential crises. No unsolved mysteries. Nothing but naps, walks, and snacks."

At the word *snacks*, Savannah's head snapped up, triggered by a hidden switch. Her ears perked, and her entire posture shifted from relaxed to laser-focused in under a second.

I froze. "Not an invitation."

Her tail started wagging anyway.

"Don't you dare—"

She launched herself to her feet, nails clicking against the hardwood as she skidded, corrected, and beelined down the stairs toward the kitchen.

"Savannah!" I followed, already knowing what I'd find.

She was sitting in front of the cabinet where I kept her treats, posture alert, tail sweeping back and forth like a grandfather clock set to hopeful.

"I said snacks, not free-for-all."

She tilted her head. Looked at me. Looked at the cabinet. Looked back at me. The tail wag intensified, her bottom wriggling against the yellowed linoleum, as if trying to generate enough momentum to open the cabinet door on her own.

I pressed my lips together, fighting the urge to smile. "You are unbelievably manipulative."

She gave a delicate, encouraging yip and looked at the cabinet again.

Behind me, I heard the deliberate sound of Casper jumping down from the third step. He padded into the kitchen with an air of dignified disinterest and sat two feet away from Savannah. Waiting. Watching. Judging.

"Not you too."

The kitten blinked slowly. Which, in cat language, meant *duh*.

I sighed, defeated. "Fine. One each. That's it."

Savannah's entire body wiggled in anticipation.

I opened the cabinet, grabbed the treat bag, and, in a blur of motion, the dog lunged. Tried to snag it. “Hey! Personal space!”

I pulled it back in time, avoiding a full-scale canine heist and what would’ve been a very short-lived bag of treats and a very satisfied dog.

She whuffed, offended, as if I’d somehow wronged her and she was considering filing a formal complaint with HR.

Casper, still seated, flicked his tail and licked his paw, embarrassed on her behalf.

“I swear.” I shook a treat into my hand. “You act like you’ve never been fed in your life.”

Savannah took the biscuit with exaggerated delicacy, as if she hadn’t tried to mug me for the whole bag a minute ago.

Casper accepted his with the calm restraint of someone who knew he didn’t have to beg for anything because the system existed to serve *him*.

I put the treats away and leaned back against the counter. Savannah crunched with noisy satisfaction. Casper chewed with relaxed efficiency, and the corner of my mouth lifted despite everything. “You two have it all figured out. Simple needs. Clear priorities.”

Savannah swallowed and locked eyes with me again. Hopeful. Again.

“Oh no, absolutely not.” I shook my head, pushing away from the counter. “You know what? This isn’t working.”

Savannah perked up.

Casper’s ears twitched.

“I need a change of scenery, and you ...” I pointed at Savannah “... without a doubt, have too much energy to lie around all day watching me fail at writing.”

She barked once. Shrill. Approving.

“Don’t get too excited. It’s only a walk. Maybe we’ll go see Aunt Lacey and Uncle Charlie. What do you think about that?”

The dog exploded into motion, spinning in a tight circle before sprinting toward the front door, back to me, then to the door again. Trying to herd me in the right direction.

The cat watched her antics with open disdain.

“Sorry, buddy, you’re not coming.”

He blinked at me. Stood, stretched, and meandered toward the stairs with slow, deliberate dignity.

“Oh, so now you’re too good for us?”

He didn't look back.

I grabbed Savannah's leash from the hook by the door. The second it jingled, she lost what little composure she had left. She spun in a half-circle. Full circle. Bounce.

"Savannah."

She froze. Sat. Barely. Her body trembled with the effort of staying still.

"Good girl." I clipped the leash onto her collar and rubbed her head.

"See? You can do it when you want to."

The moment the leash clicked into place, she surged forward, almost pulling my arm out of its socket. "Hey, easy!" We stumbled out the door together, Savannah leading the charge. She had somewhere very important to be, and I was making her late.

The afternoon air hit me, cold and damp in a way that slashed straight through my jacket into my bones. The worst possible combination for comfort. Mine, anyway. Savannah tugged ahead, nose already to the ground, following an invisible but fascinating trail.

"Slow down. It's not a race."

She disagreed. We made it halfway down the block before she stopped to greet a mailbox with excessive enthusiasm.

"Not a person, goofball." I steered her away.

She pulled back and sniffed it anyway. From top to bottom, to be sure.

I shook my head, a small laugh slipping out before I could stop it.

"Unbelievable."

We continued on, her pace evening out bit by bit as the initial excitement burned off into something more manageable. The rhythm of walking helped calm my mind. The steady pull of the leash. The click of her nails against the sidewalk. The peaceful, ordinary movement forward. My racing thoughts didn't stop, but they became less insistent. More subdued.

I exhaled, watching Savannah veer toward a blinking reindeer, then correct herself when I cleared my throat. She glanced back at me, tongue lolling, pleased with herself.

We reached the corner of Main and Walnut, and Ravenous Readers sat across from us, familiar and steady, its decorated front windows sprucing up the gray light of the afternoon. I slowed, considering. Going in meant people with questions. Conversations. It meant stepping back into the thing I'd been trying so hard not to think about. But staying out here wasn't working either.

Savannah shifted her weight, glancing between me and the bookstore, waiting impatiently for a decision.

I looked at the door. Then at her. Then back again. “All right, kiddo.”

Her ears perked.

Maybe getting out of my own head and back into the world of actual people would shake something loose. Or at least give my brain something else to chew on besides ghosts and almoses and missing pieces that didn’t want to be found. “We’re going in. But you are on your best behavior. No stealing cookies, no knocking book displays over, no manipulating strangers’ emotions for treats.”

She wagged, which I chose to interpret as agreement, even though history suggested otherwise. She trotted ahead, confident. Unconcerned. Certain the universe would continue to provide everything she needed.

I followed, the noise in my head not gone, but buried under the sense that whatever we’d started pulling at this morning wouldn’t stay neatly contained on a legal pad. That it would keep unfolding whether I was ready for it or not. But maybe someone inside that bookstore had more than fragments. Maybe they had something that connected. Or something that didn’t quite fit.

I needed to shift the shape of the story enough to make the next step visible. Because right now? All I had were bits and pieces. And a growing feeling that the empty spaces between them mattered just as much as the parts I could see.

I reached for the door.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. Brittany.

Can you come back? I think I found something.

Turning Savannah around, I said, “C’mon, kid. We need to go see Aunt Brittany. She might’ve just cracked the case.”

We trotted down Main Street past the police department and the town hall to Pine. A quick left across Main and the library appeared on our right.

Brittany met us at the door and practically dragged us back to her cluttered table and shoved another printed newspaper article under my nose. “Read the part I highlighted.”

My eyes found the smeared yellow paragraph. “The Robinsons were believed to be in the final stages of an adoption process involving a preteen

boy already placed within the state system. Officials declined to provide further details, citing confidentiality protections.”

A strange, subdued tension roosted in my chest. “That’s why they were going to the social worker instead of the other way around. They were adopting.”

“Trying to,” Brittany corrected. “According to this, it wasn’t finalized yet.”

“A preteen boy.” I looked at her. “Who’d be a middle-aged man now. Anything on who he was?”

“That’s all they ever say,” she said. “No name. No age beyond that. Just ‘preteen’ and ‘in the system.’”

“They were on that road because of this meeting.”

“Appears so.”

I leaned back, thinking it through. “If the accident hadn’t happened ...” My voice trailed off.

“That kid’s life is completely different,” Brittany finished.

“Yeah.” The realization sank deeper. This wasn’t only a crash. It was a fork. A moment where one path vanished and another, unknown and unpredictable, took its place.

If Henry Smith had contributed to this car ending up in the lake, he didn’t just kill a family. He rewrote a child’s future. Silence stretched between us again, but this one felt heavier, somehow. I looked back down at the article, reading the line again.

Final stages of the adoption process.

“How close is ‘final stages’?” I asked.

“Close. Home studies done. Background checks cleared. Those meetings are usually final approvals. Only thing left is taking it to a judge.”

“Endgame.” I nodded slowly. “That’s motive. A kid in the system with a family about to adopt him. Then they die. Possibly killed by Henry Smith.”

“And that kid? We don’t know where he ends up.”

“Or who he becomes.” That was the part no one wrote articles about. I tapped the edge of the laptop. “If he was already placed somewhere in the system, he didn’t just vanish.”

“No. He stayed where he was or got reassigned. New placement. New path.”

“A different life.”

“Yeah.”

“Do we have any way of finding out who he was?”

She scrunched up her face. “That’s going to be tough. DCYF records are sealed, especially for minors. Even older cases.”

“What about indirectly? Court filings, foster placements, anything that might’ve been mentioned elsewhere?”

“I’ve been trying.” Brittany gestured to her laptop. “Nothing concrete yet. But I’m working on it.”

“And?”

“And there are a few mentions of adoption proceedings around that time, but nothing that directly names the Robinsons or ties back to the kid.”

“Still worth digging into.”

“Definitely.”

I hesitated. A thought had been sitting there, just beyond my grasp. I finally snagged it. “The boy. The one they were going to adopt.”

“What about him?”

“What if he knew? What if, at some point, he found out what happened? Who was involved? From what you showed me before, there was no shortage of speculation.”

“How would he find out?”

I gestured toward the laptop. “Articles. Posts. Speculation. People talking.”

And kids grew up. Kids asked questions. When adults didn’t give the answers they needed, they went looking for their own.

We sat silently for a long moment. The pieces hadn’t fully connected yet, but they were a lot closer than they’d been. And for the first time, I had the uneasy feeling we weren’t the first ones to put them together. “Have you told Eric or Havermayer?”

“Not yet. I wanted to talk to you first.”

I considered her face. Brittany didn’t gossip. She wasn’t dramatic. She cataloged facts and shelved them in the right place. The tightness around her eyes told me more than her words ever could. Her discovery could be a major breakthrough. Or nothing at all.

“If our theory is correct, this isn’t only Angus’s past.”

“If the two really are connected? No.” She shook her head. “It isn’t.”

The realization sprinkled over me like a cold rain. Since his death, Henry Smith had been a name tied to one family’s tragedy. Angus’s anger over his

sister's death. A singular wound that had never healed. But there might be more. Another family destroyed by his recklessness.

And now he was dead. Any one of the other victims' family and friends could've killed him. A multitude of potential suspects. Not only Angus. My mind reeled.

I sank into the chair across from Brittany's desk. "So, we're looking at what? Dozens of potential suspects?"

"Maybe, but how many of them were here in Riddleton last Friday night?"

The narrowing point. Rage alone wasn't enough. Opportunity mattered, too.

I met her eyes. "This might widen the suspect pool beyond anything the detectives have ever considered."

"Good."

That surprised me. "Good?"

"Yes." Her voice was firm now. "Because if Henry hurt that many people and nobody ever even charged him with a crime? Maybe the question isn't 'Who killed him?'"

I waited.

"Maybe it's 'Why did it take so long?'"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Not in the mood to argue with the duty sergeant over my dog, I texted Eric to meet me outside the police station. He trotted down the steps and kissed me. “Hey, babe, what’s up?”

I kept my voice steady. “Henry may have killed another family the night he killed Angus’s sister. Charges were never filed.”

Eric arched an eyebrow. “What makes you think so?”

“Because another vehicle may have been on the road. A car with four bodies in it was found in the lake near where the accident happened after the ice thawed. David and Laura Robinson and their two kids.”

“And you know this how?”

“I asked Brittany to check into Henry’s past. She found an article about the car being discovered a few months later.”

Eric’s posture shifted. Processing. “What makes you think it has anything to do with Angelica’s accident?”

“The timing. According to the stories Brittany showed me, it’s possible the family in that car disappeared around the same time as the crash.”

Eric rested his hand on my shoulder. “You’re suggesting somebody besides Angus killed Henry in retaliation?”

“I’m suggesting that if you’re building a list of people who might’ve wanted Henry dead, you need to go further than only investigating Angus.”

Eric exhaled through his nose. “Angus has motive. Opportunity.”

“There’s a good possibility Henry didn’t only hit a tree that night.” Heat crept into my voice despite my effort to stay calm. “The bodies stayed in freezing water for months. That made pinpointing the exact time of death almost impossible. They only had the family’s word for when they disappeared to go on. Not enough to file charges against Henry Smith.”

“Did the family file a missing person’s report?”

“Yes, two days later, when the Robinsons didn’t come home as scheduled.”

“I don’t know, Jen. It’s a stretch, to say the least. How would the Robinsons’ family know about Henry’s accident?”

“It was in the newspaper.” I leaned toward him. “Henry destroyed families. Angus blamed him. Don’t you think others did too?”

Eric studied me. “Could be, but Angus is the only one here. The only one who also knew Henry Smith was here.”

“That you know of.” I moved my palms to either side of the stack. “Have they discontinued airline service from New Hampshire to South Carolina? What about trains? Cars?”

An incoming text drew his attention. He glanced at the phone. “I have to go back to work. I’ll discuss it with Havermayer and see what she thinks.”

“I think we both know what she’s going to say.”

*

Savannah’s nails scuffed over the carpet as we pushed through the bookstore doorway, the sound swallowed by the familiar buzz inside. The bells chimed overhead, and the scent of paper, coffee, and something cinnamon wrapped me in a comforting hug.

This place had a way of doing that for me. Slowing things down. Softening the edges. Taking whatever sharp, jagged thing I walked in with and sanding it enough to make it manageable. Not likely this time, considering the disturbing thoughts I’d brought in with me. Would be nice if it also erased those.

Maybe we should look into that. Add it during the next remodel. Fresh paint, new shelving, emotional reset button by the door. Press once, forget all your problems. Press twice, forget why you came in.

Savannah paused inside the entrance. Not long enough to draw attention. Not enough for anyone else to notice. But I felt it through the leash. A brief hesitation, a shift in weight with her ears angled slightly forward. Then she moved on as if nothing had happened.

I filed that away as I spotted Lacey behind the counter.

She glanced up, her expression shifting into a small, surprised smile. “I wasn’t expecting to see you today. Figured you’d be out playing detective.”

“I’m multitasking.” I stepped up to the counter, sliding into the space in front of her. Savannah didn’t hesitate. Having clocked in for her shift, she circled around with practiced efficiency and made a beeline for the cash register. Specifically, the cubbyhole underneath it, where Lacey kept the good stuff.

The dog slid into position with surgical precision, sitting beside the cubby with exaggerated politeness. Her posture was perfect. Focus absolute. Eyes locked on the target. Nothing else in the world existed. If I could harness even half her level of concentration, I'd have this case wrapped up before lunch.

Lacey laughed. "Well, someone knows the routine."

"Of course she does. You've created a monster."

"A very well-behaved monster."

"Debatable."

Lacey reached into the cubby and pulled out a small treat bag. Savannah's tail started thumping before the reward even dropped into Lacey's hand. "Hey, you," Lacey said, her voice dropping into the tone people reserved for dogs and toddlers. "How's my girl today?"

Savannah accepted the treat with all the dignity of a queen accepting tribute. No snatching. No greed. As if she hadn't launched herself across the room like a guided missile thirty seconds ago. She didn't even glance at me.

"Traitor," I said.

Lacey straightened, brushing her hands together before turning her attention back to me. The warmth lingered, but something else slipped in alongside it. "You've got that look."

I recognized the shift right away and leaned an elbow on the counter. "What look?"

"The, *I've been digging and didn't appreciate what I found*, look."

"Is this a regular thing now?"

"With you? More and more every day."

"Good to know I'm predictable."

"Consistent," she corrected.

"Ah. Sounds better. Less, *headed into an inevitable downward spiral*."

She paid me no mind, as usual. "So, what is it?"

I pulled the folded copy of the article Brittany'd found from my jacket pocket, the crease worn smooth from how many times I'd opened and closed it already, and smoothed it against the counter between us. "The Robinson family found in their vehicle in Halfmoon Lake might've been involved in the same accident that killed Angus's sister."

Lacey's brows knit as she glanced down. "Okay ..."

"Four of them in the car identified. Parents. Two teenagers."

"Rough."

I tapped the bottom of the page. “There was someone else involved, not in the car with the family.”

Lacey glanced up in surprise.

“A boy. About eleven at the time. The Robinsons were in the process of adopting him when they died.”

The shifts in her expression were immediate. Sympathy first, instinctive and unfiltered. Then curiosity, more deliberate. “It’s awful. Heartbreaking, even. But how is it relevant to Henry’s murder?”

I exhaled. “Might not be. But it gives us another name to chase.” A short beat. “Or would, if we had one.”

“It does seem to be an important detail. His name.”

“Momentary inconvenience.” I tapped the paper again. Gentler this time. “The kid lost everything that night. Parents died in a car accident when he was seven. And the Robinsons die before giving him a new family. It’s a lot for anyone to carry.”

Lacey frowned, looking back down at the article. Her eyes moved over the names. “Maybe. But why wait thirty years to get his revenge?”

“Henry was never charged with the Robinsons’ deaths. Not officially. So, the kid wouldn’t have known who was responsible at that point.” I paused. “Maybe he had to grow up and start digging to figure it out.”

“Thirty years is a long time to hold on to something.”

“Or a long time to build toward it.” The words landed harder than I meant them to. Because they weren’t referring to a hypothetical situation anymore. They were about intent. Planning. The kind of patience that turned anger into something calculating.

Lacey’s gaze flicked up to mine. “Okay. But why here? Why Riddleton and not New Hampshire, where Henry lived?”

“Good question.” I glanced down at the article again. Maybe it might offer something new if I studied it long enough. “One I’m hoping answers itself once we figure out who he is.”

Savannah shifted beside me. Not toward the treats this time. Toward the front of the store. The movement was subtle, but deliberate. Her shoulder pressed into my leg as her head angled off-center, watching something not included in our conversation.

I let my hand drop to her head, fingers brushing the smooth fur between her ears.

“What do we actually know?” Lacey asked.

“Not much. After the kid’s parents died, he ended up in the foster system. The Robinsons would’ve saved him from the nightmare by adopting him.”

“Which means official records are going to be a dead end. Or gone.”

“Pretty much. Even if they still exist, he was a minor, so they’re protected.”

She leaned back, crossing her arms, thinking. “You know, you’re treating this like it lives in reports and databases.”

I tilted my head. “Doesn’t it?”

“No. People don’t live there. Not in reality.”

“Okay. What’re you getting at?”

“They live in conversations. In relationships. In the muddled, unrecorded parts.” She gestured to the paper. “You’re looking at systems. But lives happen outside of systems. Friends. Coworkers. Neighbors. People who knew them day-to-day.”

“The ones who don’t show up in clean, searchable records.”

“You got it.”

I blew out a slow, thoughtful breath. “I thought about it, but this all happened before social media exploded. No easy trail. No tagged photos or digital breadcrumbs.”

“Which only means you have to work harder, not that it’s impossible.”

Savannah’s tail thumped again, loud enough this time to draw a glance from a customer browsing near the window. Not playful. A single, measured sound.

Lacey smiled, nodding toward the paper again. “Start with the Robinsons’ world. Expand outward. Find people who knew them before the accident. Ask questions that aren’t on any form. Get a sense of who they were.”

“People who knew them off-paper.”

“Yes.”

“One of them might know who the little boy was.”

“That’s the objective.”

The idea settled into place. Not clean. Not easy. But solid. It could work.

“You’re talking about ghosts again, aren’t you?”

I turned.

Cowboy Charlie, decked out in jeans, long-sleeve plaid shirt, gun belt complete with an empty holster, leather chaps, cowboy boots, and his iconic

white ten-gallon hat, leaned against the display of booklights and reading glasses beside the register. His arms were crossed, expression somewhere between amused and invested. He'd been there long enough I had no idea when he'd come over.

"Eavesdropping is rude, you know," I said without much heat behind it. We didn't really do secrets here.

"Walking into the middle of a discussion about a mysterious missing boy tends to do that," he said.

His gaze dropped to Savannah. "Hey, pardner."

Savannah lifted her head, gave him a brief glance, then turned toward the front windows. Her body had gone still. Not tense. Not yet. But alert.

Strange. I followed her gaze, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. "Don't take it personally," I said to Charlie. "You rank below Lacey, that's all. In fact, we all do."

"I assumed as much." Charlie stepped closer, attention shifting to the copy on the counter. His expression focused as he scanned it. "What've we got?"

"A dead family with another kid who wasn't in the car."

Charlie's brow furrowed. "The eleven-year-old?"

"The very one," I said.

"And no one knows who he is?"

"No one who'll tell us. Anyone who *does* know is bound by confidentiality restraints." The part that bothered me most. Not just missing, anonymous.

Charlie let out a slow breath. "Not great."

"Nope. Think you can work your magic?"

He didn't answer right away. He'd already started working through it in his head. "I can help. I've got a few backchannels I can tap into."

"Backchannels?"

"Nothing illegal," he said, holding up a hand. "Less than official."

The gray area. The space between what you *could* do and what you *should* do. I hesitated, though I knew Charlie was a white-hat hacker, one of the good guys, and he'd helped me find crucial information many times before. He wouldn't cross any lines.

Savannah shifted again, pressing more of her weight against my leg this time. She could feel the moment changing.

"What would you need?"

“Everything you got,” Charlie said. “Timeline. Location. Estimated age. Anything narrowing the field.”

“I can get it to you. I’ll bring everything Brittany’s found so far.”

“Good. I’ll get started as soon as I have it.”

Lacey glanced at us both. “And in the meantime, we work the human angle.”

“Friends, neighbors, coworkers,” I said.

“Right.”

We had two paths laid out. One official-adjacent, which Charlie would explore. One entirely human, left for Lacey and me. “Someone knows who he is.”

Lacey reached out and rested a hand on my shoulder. “They do.”

“And we’re going to find them,” Charlie added. “For Angus’s sake, if nothing else.”

Savannah nudged my hand, more insistent now. Definitely about the treats this time.

“Yeah,” I said, scratching behind her ear. “I know. I just wish I knew what was bugging you today. It started when we walked in the door.”

But my gaze had drifted past the counter toward the front windows. At first, it was nothing. A reflection. Movement. The usual layering of inside and outside. Then another flicker. A shape passing too quickly to catch. A shift in the reflection that didn’t match anything inside the store. Gone before I could lock on to it. I straightened.

“Everything okay?” Lacey asked.

“Yeah.” I kept looking. The sidewalk outside was empty. A car rolled past, slow and ordinary. A couple crossed at the corner. Someone paused to check their phone. Nothing out of place that I could see.

Still ... Savannah’s posture had changed. So subtle most people wouldn’t notice it. But I did. Her body had gone rigid, her attention angled—not toward the treats, not toward Lacey—Toward the door. Watching. Waiting.

Something tightened deep in my belly. “Savannah.”

Her ears flicked, but she didn’t look at me.

Charlie noticed it too. “What is it?”

“Probably nothing.” But it didn’t feel like nothing. It felt like the disturbing edge I’d walked in with had followed me inside after all. Like whatever I’d been digging into had begun to dig back. And my dog felt it too.

I forced myself to look away from the door, to break the moment before it wormed its way too far into my head. I folded the article and handed it to Charlie. “Let’s go find a name.”

But as I said it, I couldn’t shake the feeling that somewhere out there someone already knew ours.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The house had a way of holding on to silence. Not the good kind that relaxed in and made everything feel calm, but the other kind. The kind that pressed in from the edges and made every small sound feel too loud and every thought echo as if someone had whispered in my ear.

I stood in the middle of the kitchen with a dish towel slung over my shoulder, staring at a mug I didn't remember setting down. Coffee. Half full. Cold.

At my feet, Savannah let out a subtle whine, her tail thumping against the cabinet as if to remind me I'd been standing in one place too long.

"I know," I told her. "I'm thinking too hard again."

Her ears flicked, unimpressed.

I frowned at the mug, trying to retrace my steps. I'd made it what? Twenty minutes ago? An hour? Time had gone slippery, stretching and folding in ways I couldn't make sense of.

Get it together, Jen.

No help. I picked up the mug, took a sip, and grimaced. Bitter and lukewarm. I dumped it in the sink, the splash too loud in the quiet room. Savannah's head lifted at the noise, alert for half a second before she relaxed again.

"Sorry, kid." I turned on the faucet and rinsed the mug out longer than necessary, watching the brown water spiral down the drain, wishing it could take my thoughts along for the ride. *No such luck.*

A sudden blur of white shot across the counter.

"Casper—hey!"

The snow-white kitten skidded to a stop near the edge of the sink, batting at a stray droplet of water. His tail flicked, eyes wide, completely absorbed.

Savannah lifted her head again, watching him with the resigned fortitude of a dog who'd already accepted this was her life now.

I dried the mug and set it in the cabinet above the coffeemaker, then nudged it an inch to the left so it lined up with the others. Which didn't feel right either. I shifted it back.

My hands stilled. This wasn't about the mug. I couldn't care less if they lined up or not. Definitely Eric's thing, not mine. I exhaled and stepped away from the counter, wiping my palms against my jeans. The kitchen was already spotless. I'd wiped the counters twice, reorganized the spice rack, and rearranged a drawer that hadn't needed it.

When did I become Little Jenny Homemaker?

Casper darted past me again, chasing something invisible to the rest of us, his paws sliding on the cracked linoleum. Savannah tracked him with her eyes but didn't move, her tail swishing across the floor.

"Don't encourage him," I told her.

She peered up at me, her chin resting on her paws.

I turned back to the stove and thought about what to make for dinner before Eric came home. He'd be way too tired to cook, and it wouldn't be fair of me to ask him to. Of course, it wouldn't be fair to ask him to eat whatever I'd cooked, either. Especially after last time when my pan had exploded and left pork chops on the ceiling.

The evening called for something simple. Easy. No disasters allowed.

I pulled a bowl from the cabinet and set it on the counter. Eggs. Something safe. Eggs didn't require brainpower. Eggs didn't spiral into something complicated that would make a mess Eric would have to help me clean up.

Casper picked that exact moment to climb onto the counter again.

"Uh-uh—"

Didn't work. He skidded on the smooth surface, caught himself, and immediately zeroed in on the whisk as if it were a personal challenge.

"Casper."

He batted at it.

"Casper!"

He batted harder.

I sighed, scooped him up with one hand, and tucked him against my side. He squirmed, indignant. "You are not helping," I told him.

He blinked up at me, wide-eyed and innocent in a way that would've been convincing if I hadn't watched him try to attack kitchen utensils less than a minute ago. *Friendly ghost, my foot.*

"Floor. Where cats belong." I set him down. He paused for exactly one second and sprinted across the kitchen, claws scrabbling against the linoleum. A wind-up toy gone rogue.

Savannah watched him go and looked back at me with a *your problem, not mine* expression on her face.

“Support would be nice,” I said. “Don’t forget, the cat was *your* idea in the first place.” My German shepherd had found teeny-tiny Casper outside Ravenous Readers during our Halloween party a few weeks ago.

She yawned.

I cracked the eggs into the bowl, the pointed tap against the rim encouraging me. One, two, three, four. No overthinking. Just motion. For a few seconds, it worked. Until my brain slipped right back to where it wanted to go, still ten steps ahead of my hands and distracted by all Brittany and I had learned this morning.

I whisked the eggs harder than necessary, determined to bring my mind back to the present. If there was a way to screw up scrambled eggs, I’d find it. The least I could do was fix an edible dinner for Eric.

Forcing myself to slow down, I focused on what was right in front of me. The pale yellow of the eggs. The steady circular motion. The sound of the whisk against the bowl. Mindful. In the moment.

I set the bowl aside and grabbed mushrooms, a handful of spinach I needed to use before it died of natural causes, and a block of cheese from the fridge. Nothing fancy. Enough to make a meal. Knife. Chop. Slide. Repeat.

Casper reappeared, skidding to a stop right at my feet before launching himself at the cabinet under the sink. Maybe it harbored a fugitive he had to bring to justice. No telling.

“Okay, what are you even doing now?” I asked him.

He chirped at me and took off. Somebody got into the catnip again. Which was a neat trick since we didn’t have any.

Savannah didn’t bother to lift her head this time.

I shook mine, a chuckle slipping out before I could stop it. The dog’s tail thumped. I slid the mushrooms into the pan, listening to the sizzle as they hit the heat. It was better than the interminable silence. Easier to sit with. Easier to stay focused.

The spinach followed, wilting almost at once. I stirred, watching it all come together without having to think too hard about it. This I could do. This didn’t require answers to a myriad of questions.

Savannah shifted closer, her side brushing my ankle. Solid. Present. I sighed and let my shoulders drop a fraction, reaching down to rest my hand

on her head. The tension didn't disappear, but it eased enough to breathe.

After I poured the eggs into the pan, the hiss of cold hitting hot butter filled the space. I added the cheese and stirred slowly this time, deliberate, keeping my attention locked on the movement. Curds forming. Edges setting. Nothing too complicated.

I reached for the bread and dropped a couple slices into the toaster. The click felt louder than it should have, but not too much. Better than the quiet. Better than the echo in my head. I kept stirring, letting the eggs cook enough without overdoing it. Simple. Easy. Hopefully edible.

My ultimate goal was no spiraling. No forcing connections. No grabbing threads not ready to be pulled. Just dinner. Just this moment. The toaster popped, making me jump. I lifted the bread out, spreading butter over it while it melted into the surface. Automatic. Familiar.

I plated everything and set it in the oven for when Eric got home. Not fancy. Not impressive. But warm and ready to eat. The best I could do, for now.

In the living room, Casper leaped onto the arm of the couch, misjudged the distance, and scrambled for purchase. Savannah stood at once, crossing the room in two strides, her nose nudging only enough to steady her baby before he tumbled.

I snorted a laugh. "Okay, that was actually impressive."

Casper puffed up as if he'd meant to do that, then hopped down and trotted off, pretending nothing had happened.

Savannah returned to her spot, satisfied.

I shook my head and grabbed the remote, flipping on the TV more for noise than anything else. I cycled through channels without really seeing them. News. Commercials. A sitcom with a laugh track grating against my nerves. I muted it.

The flickering images filled the room without sound, somehow making the silence worse. I tossed the remote aside and stood again, restless energy crawling under my skin. Savannah shadowed me as I moved to the bookshelf, grabbed the first book I saw, and put it back.

"You don't have to supervise everything," I told her. Although at this point, I might need some supervision. Anything to keep my mind off the mysterious eleven-year-old and the dead man in the park.

The pieces were there. I could feel it. But they weren't lining up, and uncertainty itched at the back of my brain. I moved to the window and

nudged the curtain aside. Early evening light stretched across the yard, long shadows creeping over the grass. Everything out there seemed normal. Inside my head? Not even close.

I let the curtain fall and pushed away. Standing still wasn't helping, so I moved. Took a lap around the house, and ended up back at the window again.

"Jen?" Eric's voice carried through the house, heavy with fatigue.

"In here," I called.

Savannah was already halfway to the door. Eric laughed as she leaped her greeting. "Hey, girl. Yeah, I missed you too." His footsteps were heavier as he approached, Savannah glued to his side. Casper followed at a distance, cautious but curious.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey."

He dropped his keys on the table and leaned against it, closing his eyes. Savannah pressed into him, as if she knew he needed something to prop him up. "Something smells good."

"I cooked dinner. It's staying warm in the oven."

He struggled to maintain a neutral expression on his face, but couldn't quite hide the automatic cringe.

I let it slide. "Rough day?"

"You could say that."

"No breakthroughs, I take it?"

He shook his head. "We're chasing our tails. Every lead falls apart."

"What about Henry?"

His eyes opened. "What about him?"

"The car in the lake. Any connection?"

"Nothing we can prove."

"But you've checked."

"Of course we've checked. We got everything New Hampshire had on the case." He paced a few steps, Savannah tracking him. "There's overlap, but it's all circumstantial. Nothing to connect him to the accident."

"Too bad. It would've helped if you did."

He stopped. "What does *that* mean?"

"It means Brittany and I found something."

"What kind of something?"

“A possibility,” I said. “The Robinsons were in the car because they had a meeting in Concord to finalize their adoption of an eleven-year-old boy.”

“Okay?”

“The kid didn’t get his new family because of the accident.”

“And you think he might be connected to Henry’s death somehow?”

“I think it’s possible.”

“But it’s not enough,” Eric said.

“I know, but it’s something to look into. A potential suspect besides Angus.” My phone buzzed on the counter.

Charlie.

I grabbed it. “Hey.”

“I’ve got a name.”

“Yeah?”

“Bobby Richardson.”

I glanced at Eric. He’d moved closer, listening. “Say it again,” I said, putting the cell phone on speaker.

“Bobby Richardson,” Charlie repeated. “Foster kid. Aged out at eighteen. After that, spotty. Then at twenty-one, he disappears.”

“No records? No social media?”

“Nothing.”

Eric leaned toward the phone. “Did you check death records?”

“I did. Nothing in New Hampshire. Of course, we don’t know he stayed there, but I found no records of him moving somewhere else, either. No way to know where he ended up.”

“Could he have changed his name?”

“Maybe. But I’d have to know which court he petitioned. Which means I have to know what state he was living in at the time. Which means a lot more digging.”

“Keep at it, Charlie. And thanks.”

“You got it, Boss.”

I tapped the button to end the call.

Eric crossed his arms. “It’s more than we had.”

“Yeah.”

“But still not enough.”

“Not yet. Charlie is nothing if not tenacious. He’s never let me down before. I doubt he will now.”

“I’ll bring it in to work tomorrow. See if we have any luck.”

“Thank you.” I met his gaze as an idea flashed through my brain. “Hey, you think maybe Mary Smith had a partner who followed Henry here to Riddleton to kill him? She’d be safely tucked away in New Hampshire, free of suspicion, and we wouldn’t have any idea who the other person is.”

He twisted his lips. “Hmmm. It’s possible, I guess. You thinking about a hired killer?”

“Maybe. Or maybe someone else who had a reason to want him gone. Like Bobby Richardson. I suspect she wouldn’t even have had to pay him.”

“Interesting idea.”

“Worth looking into, anyway.”

He nodded and glanced toward the stove. “You might want to save dinner.”

“Crap!” I grabbed the plate from the oven and dropped it on the counter, singeing the tips of my fingers. I stuck them in my mouth while Eric ran cold water in the sink.

“Here, let me see.” He gently pulled my hand toward the water. “Seems we’ve done this a few times before,” he said with a grin.

I stuck my tongue out at him.

Another day in the life of the culinarily challenged.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The bells over the bookstore door gave their usual pathetic jingle Thursday morning as I shifted a stack of new arrivals onto the front display table. Outside, the late-morning light stretched thin across the sidewalk, hinting at winter without quite committing to it.

From the back corner of the Ravenous Kids' section, Lacey's voice carried, gentle and animated in that special way she had with kids. "... and the bear said, 'That's not my hat!'"

A chorus of tiny giggles followed, along with the rustle of picture book pages being turned by impatient little hands.

Story Time.

I smiled to myself, enjoying one of those rare lulls during the "season to be jolly." Parents clustered at tables near the children's section, scrolling on their phones and sipping coffee from the urn on the coffee bar.

Behind the pastry case, Charlie tapped steadily on his laptop.

"Nerd Charlie," I said, glancing over my shoulder, "if you tap any harder, you're going to wear a hole through the keyboard."

He didn't look up. "Mechanical keys. Rated for eighty million strokes."

"Which doesn't make it less annoying."

"It does, actually."

I leaned against the glass case as I took him in. He'd committed to the look today. Long-sleeve white button-down shirt, cuffs buttoned at the wrists. Khaki pants pressed to a knife's edge. A red-and-green argyle sweater vest and shiny brown penny loafers with brand-new pennies. His heavy black eyeglass frames with no lenses sat on his nose, and there was, of course, the pencil tucked behind his right ear as he might need to solve a complex equation at any moment.

"You look like a substitute teacher who takes his job too seriously," I said.

"I prefer 'academic adjacent.'"

"You don't work in academia. Or even preschool."

"I embody the spirit of it."

I laughed. "Uh-uh. Not a real thing."

“It is if you’re dedicated.”

Before I could respond, my phone buzzed against the counter. A text from Eric. I picked it up, my thumb already unlocking the screen. **Can you sneak away for a coffee break?**

I glanced toward the back, where Lacey was now doing voices for at least three different animal characters. She had the situation completely under control. As always.

I leaned toward Charlie. He didn’t look up when he said, “If you’re about to ask whether I can handle the store for a few minutes until Lacey’s done, the answer is yes.”

“What makes you think that’s what I was going to say?”

“I inferred.”

“Dangerous habit, but congrats on using the word correctly.”

“I’m quite efficient, in case you haven’t noticed.”

I smiled and responded to Eric. **Yeah. Give me five?**

The answer came right away. **Perfect. I’ll meet you at the diner.**

I slipped the phone into my pocket and crossed my arms, watching Charlie for a moment before speaking. “How’s it coming? Any luck finding grown-up Bobby?”

His fingers paused mid-keystroke, and he looked at me over the top of those fake glasses. “I’m working on it. We’ve already established he pretty much disappears from standard systems at age twenty-one. No tax filings, no employment records, no credit activity. It’s not just absence, it’s intentional absence.”

“Sounds like he chose to disappear and doesn’t want to be found.”

He reached up, plucked the pencil from behind his ear, and tapped it lightly against the counter. “If Bobby Richardson didn’t die, then he changed identities, went completely off-grid in some canyon in Utah, or he’s operating in spaces that don’t require traditional identification.”

“Such as?”

“Cash economies. Informal labor paying under the table. Or digital environments that don’t exactly cooperate with legal oversight.”

“You mean the dark web.”

“I mean less indexed portions of the internet.”

I folded my arms tighter. “Charlie.”

He sighed. “Yes. The dark web.”

“Can you find him?”

“I can try, but no guarantees. To be honest, I’m leaning toward he got himself a new name somewhere other than New Hampshire.”

“Which leaves too many possibilities. He could be anywhere.” I narrowed my eyes, thinking. “He could even be here.”

He studied me, something under his usual dry tone. “An interesting idea.”

“Yeah, but how do we find him?”

From the back, Lacey’s voice rose again, bright and warm. “And what do we say when someone shares their toys?”

“THAAAANK YOU!” the kids shouted.

I swallowed. “We need to get a handle on this guy. My gut tells me it’s important.”

Charlie nodded. “Okay, I’ll keep digging.”

“Carefully.”

“I’m always careful.”

“Not true.”

“It’s aspirational.”

I let out a breath that’d been sitting in my lungs too long. “Thank you.”

He gave a small shrug. No big deal. His fingers were already moving again, faster now, more focused.

I grabbed my jacket from the hook by the office, pausing long enough to peek into the children’s section. I waved to Lacey sitting on her throne, book open wide, surrounded by a semi-circle of toddlers who appeared completely enthralled.

She glanced up long enough to catch my eye. “Running out?”

“Coffee with Eric.”

She smiled. “Go. We’re good here.”

I hesitated a second and nodded. “Yell if the place catches fire.”

“I will, but not for you. You’re not what I’d call crisis material.”

“Not fair. I’m involved in all kinds of crises.”

She laughed and waved me off.

I slipped out the front door, the bells jangling behind me.

The smell of coffee, bacon, and something fried assaulted me the second I stepped inside the diner. It was busier than it’d been lately, but nothing hectic, only the steady hum of conversation and clinking silverware. Eric

was already in our booth in the corner near the stockroom, a mug of coffee in front of him, his phone face down on the table.

He looked up when I approached, and the tension in his shoulders eased. “Hey.”

“Hey.” I slid into the orange vinyl seat across from him, shrugging off my coat.

“Thanks for coming so early. I didn’t know if I’d be able to get away later, and I wanted to see you.”

“Sweet, but I suspect you have an ulterior motive.”

“Maybe I do. It’s been a day already, and it isn’t even noon yet.”

I raised an eyebrow. “That bad?”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “I needed a break.”

A server I’d never seen before appeared almost at once, topping off his coffee before turning to me. “What can I get you, hon?”

“Coffee, please.”

“You got it.” She moved off.

I leaned forward a bit. “Havermayer giving you a hard time?”

Eric’s expression tightened enough to confirm it. “Yeah.”

“What now?”

He picked up his mug, then set it back down without drinking. “She’s convinced we’re done.”

“With the investigation?”

“With everything,” he said. “In her mind, we’ve got our suspect, we’ve got the narrative, we need to close it out and move on.”

“What did Angus’s phone records show?”

“No contact between him and Henry.”

I opened my mouth to respond, and Eric held up his hand to stop me. “You weren’t there for their whole conversation. Havermayer thinks they could’ve set up the meet before you came outside. Before or during the argument you only saw the tail end of.”

My stomach sank. “She really thinks Angus did it? There’s no possibility in her mind it might be someone else who killed Henry Smith?”

“She’s satisfied,” he said. “And once she’s satisfied, you know it’s hard to budge her.”

“That’s putting it mildly.”

The waitress returned with my coffee, and I added cream and sugar, then wrapped my hands around the mug, letting the heat seep into my fingers.

“So, what are you going to do?”

“Try to make the case Bobby Richardson might matter,” Eric said. “That he might not be just some unrelated ghost in the system.”

“Think there’s a chance?”

“I’m probably not going to win.”

I leaned back, studying him. “*You* believe it, though, right?”

He didn’t hesitate. “Yeah. He might be our guy. We can’t find anyone else besides Angus. It’s worth a look, at least.”

“Why do you believe me?”

Eric exhaled. “Because people don’t disappear unless they have a reason. And maybe the reason matters. Or maybe he wanted a fresh start after years in foster care. But we won’t know which one it is until we find him.”

I nodded, my grip tightening on the mug. “That’s what I think too.”

He met my eyes. “You’re still digging?”

“Charlie’s working on it. He’s trying to track down Bobby after twenty-one, when he drops out of sight.”

Eric’s brows lifted. “Is he getting anywhere?”

“Too soon to tell. But if there’s anything to find ...”

“He’ll find it.”

“He always comes through. Sooner or later.”

A beat of peace settled over the table, and Eric sighed, leaning back in his seat. “I hate this part.”

“What part?”

“The part where you know something’s off, but you can’t prove it yet. Where you’re stuck trying to convince someone who doesn’t want to be convinced you’re right, but have no evidence to back it up.”

I tilted my head. “Sounds familiar.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. The same as every case I’ve ended up in the middle of.”

He considered me and shook his head. “Talking about it isn’t getting us anywhere. We’ll have to wait and see how it plays out.”

“Fine. What do you want to talk about?”

Eric leaned forward, a hint of a smile crossing his face. “Christmas.”

I stared at him. “Christmas. Again?”

“Yes.”

“With everything that’s going on?”

“Yup.”

I took a slow sip of coffee, buying myself some time. “Okay. What about it?”

He hesitated. “My mom called.”

“How’s she doing?”

“She wants to know what our plans are.”

I snorted. “Translation: she wants to know why we haven’t committed to spending the entire day at her house.”

“Something like that.”

I set my mug down. “Eric ...”

“I know, I know. I’m not trying to bulldoze you into anything.”

“Good, because my mom is probably wondering the same thing as yours.”

“We should figure out what we’re going to do.”

I leaned back, crossing my arms as I thought about it. “I don’t want a marathon day. To spend twelve hours bouncing between houses, trying to keep everyone happy.”

“Agreed.”

“I don’t want to feel we’re on a schedule.”

“Also agreed.”

“And I definitely don’t want to open presents at three different places at three different times. Not to mention three different dinners.”

Eric nodded. “Pure chaos.”

“It’s exhausting.”

“Yeah.”

I looked at him. “What about you?”

“I want a holiday that feels like ours. Not obligations.”

“Okay, that I can work with.”

We sat for a second, both thinking. Then I said, “What if we split it?”

“How?”

“Christmas Eve at home. Small. Just us. Maybe a few people, if we want, but low-key. Friends hanging out.”

Eric’s expression shifted, interest sparking. “And Christmas Day?”

“We take it slow. Morning at home. Coffee, breakfast, presents—just us.”

He nodded. “And then?”

“Then we can do family. But on our terms. A few hours, not the whole day.”

Eric leaned back, considering it. "That might actually work."
"It gives everyone something, but we don't lose ourselves in it."
He smiled. "I love it."
"Yeah? You're not just saying that?"
"Yeah. Now we have to break it to our families."
Oh, brother.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Halfway back to the bookstore, I decided instead to take another look at the place where we'd found Henry Smith's body. The decision came without ceremony. No dramatic pause, no lightning-bolt realizations. Something had been niggling at the back of my mind, but I couldn't quite figure out what the issue was. Something I'd noticed last Saturday that didn't register at the time, but refused to let go.

Slowing as I approached the police station, my Nikes scuffed against the pavement, then stopped altogether. The building loomed to my left, familiar and solid, its brick exterior exuding authority without needing to announce itself. I considered going inside. Asking questions. Looking at reports. But whatever bothered me wouldn't be in there.

I turned on my heel and headed back down Main, past the diner I'd just left, toward Park Street, shivering a little in my jacket. The afternoon had eased into that muted gray that came with winter, the sun diffused behind a thick layer of cloud that never quite decided whether it wanted to rain. Cold enough to bite. Not cold enough to commit.

When I reached my old apartment building, where I'd lived before moving in with Eric on Walnut Street, I slowed without meaning to. The place hadn't changed. Same faded brick. Same narrow walkway leading up to the steps. For a minute, it felt like I could fall back into that version of my life without resistance. As if nothing had moved forward. But deep down, I knew better. Going back would mean giving up the life I have now. Not an option.

I stopped at the old oak tree Savannah had taken on as her personal responsibility. Watering it every day had become a ritual for her. One I hadn't encouraged, but hadn't stopped either. It looked fine. No obvious signs of distress on the tree. No brittle leaves clinging where they shouldn't be. No strange discoloration creeping up the trunk. Just bark. Rough and ridged and steady under my fingertips when I reached out to brush them across it. Thriving, at least on the surface.

I crouched, my knees protesting a bit as cold air seeped through denim, and examined the base. The soil was dark, slightly compacted, but not

waterlogged. No rot. No fungal growth. No spongy spots that gave under pressure. My dog's territoriality turned out harmless in the end. I straightened and exhaled, the faint puff of my breath dissipating in the cold air.

Tucking my hands deeper into my jacket pockets, I walked down Park Street, my sneakers slapping a steady rhythm against the sidewalk. The A-frame houses started about halfway down the block, their steep roofs catching the pale winter light. In summer, they looked almost identical, cookies from the same cutter, but now each one displayed a unique personality.

The folks in the first house had gone all out. White string lights traced the sharp angles of the roof with almost obsessive precision, each line straight, each corner crisp. Two oversized wreaths hung in the front windows, identical in size and shape, each tied with a deep red ribbon that fluttered gently in the breeze. Below them, a row of glowing reindeer stood frozen mid-step, their wire frames wrapped tight with tiny bulbs flickering in a pattern designed to create the illusion of movement.

The next house abandoned any semblance of precision. Multicolored lights zigzagged across the front, some drooping lower than others. Thrown up in a hurry. A plastic Santa leaned precariously near the brick steps, his cheerful wave frozen mid-motion. Someone had wrapped tinsel around his arm, but it'd slipped halfway down, catching and twisting in the wind. Messy, but real.

As I passed, movement flickered behind the front window. A shadow crossed in front of a lit Christmas tree, and I could almost hear the laughter, the overlapping voices, the clink of dishes. The low hum of people existing together in a way that had nothing to do with murder scenes or evidence patterns.

I kept walking. A few houses down, one of the smaller A-frames stood muter than the rest. No lawn decorations, no blinking lights. Only a single strand of warm white bulbs outlined the doorway, and a simple evergreen wreath hung dead center. Even the walkway leading up to the house was clean, swept free of stray pine needles.

The street dipped some as it approached Riddleton Park, and the air seemed to cool with it. The trees ahead were bare, their branches thin and skeletal against the overcast sky, decorated with red and gold ornaments that swayed gently in the breeze.

A group of pre-teens tore past me on the sidewalk, their laughter slicing clean through the tranquility. One of them almost clipped my shoulder, then twisted back mid-stride. "Sorry!"

"You're good."

They didn't break pace. Didn't look back. Just kept running, energy spilling out of them in a way only kids on winter break could manage.

The last house before the park belonged to Detective Havermayer. No decorations. Not even an attempt. Not that I'd expected any. She'd been much too busy jumping to conclusions about Angus to join in the seasonal festivities. Although I suspected she wouldn't have bothered anyway. Not her style.

Still, the absence stood out. No lights. No wreath. Not even a string of garland out of obligation. The front yard was bare, the grass yellowed by winter. The walkway had been cleared just enough to prevent a lawsuit. I didn't linger.

The parking lot had a few vehicles scattered about. Not too many, but the place seemed busy enough. A lot of folks took vacation this time of year. Easier to keep track of their children and still get all their shopping done.

The wrought-iron arch at the park entrance came into view, wrapped in strands of lights that blinked in the fading afternoon. Beyond it, the grounds stretched out in familiar lines. Paths cut through open space, picnic shelters scattered at measured intervals, the pine trees silent sentinels observing it all.

The park had been dressed for the season, the same as every year. Trees wrapped in lights dangled oversize ornaments swaying in the light breeze, and eight plastic reindeer towed Santa in his present-laden sleigh. A thin veneer of holiday spirit covering something that hadn't changed underneath. Less than a week ago, Henry Smith had died here.

I stepped through the arch and headed toward the picnic shelters, my pace slowing as I approached the spot where we found the body. The ground told a different story now. Fresh footprints layered over older ones, some crisp and defined, others softened by time and weather. A chaotic overlay of movement that blurred the original pattern, but a few of the deeper impressions remained.

Moving closer, I crouched, ignoring the cold as it immediately pressed through my jeans, and focused on one print, trying to figure out what bugged me so much about it. I tilted my head, shifting my perspective,

trying to see it the way I had on Saturday. Before the crowd. Before the contamination. Before everything got muddled. The answer was there. I could feel it dancing just out of reach.

I shifted, bringing my face closer to the ground. The smell of damp earth filled my nose as I traced the outline with my eyes and moved to the next print. And the next.

Then it clicked. The toe section of the prints was shallower than the heel. I traced the pattern forward with my eyes. It was harder now, the newer prints cutting across some of the impressions at odd angles, but the rhythm remained. Step. Step. Step. Each one pressing down harder at the back, fading at the front. Like the guy hadn't pushed off the toe with each step. How did someone walk without pushing off?

Standing, I rested my foot beside one of the prints, careful not to disturb it any more than it already had been, and mimicked the angle, the spacing, the orientation. Then I took a step, heel to toe. My weight rolled forward, automatically. No conscious thought involved. My toe dug in, pressing deeper into the moist soil as I pushed off into the next step.

I stopped. Reset. Tried again. This time, I forced it. Pressed into my heel. Kept my toe light. Refused the natural roll of motion my body wanted. It lasted one step. Maybe two. By the third, my balance faltered. My body compensated again, my other foot shifting wider, center of gravity adjusting to keep me upright.

One more try, slower this time. Deliberate. Heel heavy, toe light, no push. It felt like I was walking on the edge of falling backward. My calves tightened. My core engaged instinctively, trying to correct the imbalance. My body *refused* to accept it as normal movement.

I stopped again, a flicker of unease sliding through me. Okay. Maybe he had some kind of injury. I shifted my weight unevenly, simulating a limp. No, that changed the stride length. The spacing. Introduced drag marks that didn't show up in the original prints.

Maybe carrying a heavy burden, like a body. I leaned back slightly, imagining weight pulling me off-center. Still wrong. The pressure distribution changed, but not the right way. Not clean and inconsistent with what I saw.

Okay. I turned and walked backward along the path of my own prints. Heel-first contact, toe light. It worked for one step. Then the pattern broke

again. The spacing changed. The alignment shifted. The prints in front of me didn't match what I'd created.

I stopped. He wasn't injured or burdened. What did that leave?

Shifting my focus, I turned to the stationary print. The one beside the body. The toe was shallower on that one, too. I leaned closer, studying it more carefully. The edges were a bit more defined, less disturbed than the others. Whoever had stood there hadn't moved much. No pivot marks, no shifting. Planted. But even planted, the weight distribution would be off. No matter what, it didn't work. Why would someone stand in such an uncomfortable position?

I glanced up as a golden retriever bounded past, its leash slack, the owner jogging to keep up. The dog veered alarmingly close to the prints I was examining, giant paws thudding into the dirt.

"Sorry!" the tall, thin man on the other end of the leash called.

"No problem," I said, even as I watched one of the clearer impressions blur under the impact. Not ideal, but not fatal. The police had already photographed and taken molds of them. I could always get Eric to show them to me.

I stood, brushing dirt from my hands, and adopted the stance myself. Forcing my weight into my heel while keeping my toe light. Immediately, my ankle tightened. My knee adjusted. My other foot moved slightly to compensate, widening my base. Tiny, automatic corrections.

I tried to hold still. To freeze the position. My muscles protested. Micro-adjustments slipped in anyway, impossible to suppress completely. Balance demanded it. I looked back down at the print. No corrections. No adjustments. *How?*

A child's voice rang out behind me, calling for someone to look at a pinecone they'd found. Laughter followed. The normalcy of it felt almost surreal, given the unease haunting me.

I let my gaze sweep the area again. Families. Dogs. Kids weaving between trees. Decorations swaying gently in the wind. Everything exactly as it should be. Except for a story written into the ground none of them could see.

I pressed my lips together, the disquiet settling deeper. This wasn't about how someone walked. It was about how normal people didn't. Couldn't.

A moment passed as I let the pattern take root in my mind, committing it to memory the same way I did anything that mattered. I exhaled and

straightened, brushing the last of the dirt from my palms.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I hesitated for a fraction of a second before unlocking it. My thumb hovered over Eric's photo. He'd want to know. He needed to know. His name lit up under my thumb as I hit call and lifted the cell to my ear. My gaze drifted back to the prints, ensuring I wouldn't lose them by looking away too long.

The line rang. Once. Twice. Three times. I started pacing along the edge of the shelter, my steps slow, controlled, my attention split between the call and the ground.

On the fourth ring, he picked up. "Hey," he said, his voice a little distracted. Papers shuffled in the background. "Everything okay?"

"Depends," I said, turning so I could keep the print pattern in my peripheral vision. "How attached are you to your current working theory?"

A brief pause. "I don't know. How about you tell me what you've got, and then I'll decide."

"The footprints. The ones near Henry's body?"

Another pause. Shorter. "What about them?"

"They're wrong."

Stillness broken by a deep breath. "Define wrong."

I crouched again, even though I didn't need to. It helped me think. "Heel heavy. Toe light. Not one or two. Every step. It's a consistent pattern."

"Could just be gait. People walk in different ways." Solid, but his conviction was fading.

"Not this way. I tried it."

"What happened?"

"I could force it for a step or two, but it throws off your balance. Your body compensates right away, and you can't sustain it."

"And the prints?"

"No compensation. No correction marks. No shift in balance."

"You're sure?"

"Yes." I straightened, shifting my weight without thinking in a normal heel-to-toe motion to feel the difference again.

A longer silence. I could hear the change in his breathing. The way his focus had narrowed. "And the stationary one by the body?"

"The stationary one has the same distribution."

"Meaning?"

I turned little by little, scanning the area again. “Meaning even when they were standing still, they didn’t brace forward. No weight transfer. No adjustment.”

“You think they were what? Leaning back?”

“Maybe. But even then, you’d adjust. You’d have to. I’m not really sure what it means, but it has to mean something.”

The line went quiet. I could almost hear him thinking. “Stay right there.”

“I wasn’t planning on going anywhere.”

“I’m on my way. Fifteen minutes.”

“I’ll be here.” I ended the call before he could add anything else and slipped my phone back into my pocket. Standing there, I let the sounds of the park relax around me again. A dog barking in the distance. Someone calling a name. The faint creak of a nearby ornament hook swaying in the wind.

Normal.

I looked back down at the prints. My body shifted automatically, weight rolling from heel to toe as I adjusted my stance without thinking. Effortless. Natural. Human.

The ground told a different story. One my body didn’t understand. One that didn’t make sense. My body knew how to walk, and it wasn’t like this. I stared at the shallow toe impressions, the deep-set heels, the impossible stillness of the stationary print. A calm certainty ballooned in my chest, heavy and unshakable.

Not normal.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I walked in the house and dropped my keys into the ceramic dish by the door—a Christmas gift I’d bought myself last year, painted with lopsided snowflakes and what was supposed to be a dog but ended up looking more like a melted reindeer—and shrugged out of my jacket. It carried the faint scent of cold air and diner grease, a combination I’d begun to associate with this case. With Henry. With the footprints and everything that followed.

“Hey, kid, where are you?” I called, already hearing the rhythmic thump of a tail against the wall.

Savannah rounded the corner from the living room, ears up, eyes bright, her entire body language shifting the second she saw me. No hesitation. No restraint. She didn’t bark, but came straight at me, bouncing on all fours. A jack-in-the-box wound too tight.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m back.” I waited for a lull to scratch behind her ears. “You’d think I’d been gone for a week.”

Her tail wagged harder, her entire back half wriggling along. From somewhere lower—and much more frenzied—came a scrambling sound, followed by a tiny, white blur shooting across the hardwood floor.

“Casper, take it easy ...”

Not a chance. The kitten launched himself straight into Savannah’s rib cage, ricocheted off, and skidded across the floor on his backbone. His hind legs kicked furiously, claws scrabbling for nonexistent traction, tail puffed to twice its normal size.

I burst out laughing before I could stop myself, while the dog wagged along.

Casper recovered his composure with a level of dramatic flair only a kitten could manage, flipped upright, spotted my shoelace, and declared war.

“Absolutely not.” I toed off my sneakers before he cemented his grip. “You’re going to be the death of me.” I bent and scooped him up. He latched on to my sleeve with all four paws and began bunny-kicking.

“Great. Perfect. This is exactly the energy I needed.”

Savannah huffed and turned toward the kitchen.

“Coffee. Yes. Good call.” Of course, she couldn’t care less about French roast. She was after the treat bag.

I set Casper on the counter—an act I knew was a mistake before my hands even left him—and loaded the coffeemaker. Filter, scoop, water. Muscle memory.

The kitten began investigating everything within reach, including the edge of the sink, my mug, and the concept of falling. He reached out a paw.

“Don’t you—”

A spoon clattered to the floor.

“—do that.”

Savannah settled by the cabinet where the treats lived, her gaze flicking between me and the kitten with mild concern but zero intention of intervening.

“Some backup would be nice,” I told her.

She poked the cabinet door with her nose and looked back at me.

“Right. You’re off duty.”

The coffeemaker gurgled, and I leaned back against the counter, arms folding as my thoughts circled back to where they’d been all afternoon. A missing kid, a dead man, and footprints that didn’t make any sense.

I reached into the cabinet, pulled out a chew stick, and handed it to Savannah. She accepted it with solemn appreciation and immediately settled in to work. A cat treat bought me about thirty seconds of peace on the other front. Maybe forty.

The coffeemaker hissed its last breath, so I filled my cup and added enough cream and sugar to make it something resembling palatable. We migrated to the living room like a mismatched flock of geese in September.

Savannah claimed her spot on the couch, chew stick angled out the side of her mouth, a cigar waiting for someone with a handy Zippo. Casper bounded after me, got distracted halfway across the room, and launched himself at the fringe of the throw blanket.

I paced the room, sipping coffee. Turned. Paced again, trying to imagine what might’ve happened to Bobby Richardson. The choices were slim. He could’ve died, and we hadn’t found a record of it yet, which seemed improbable given Charlie’s skill at manipulating the internet.

Or he moved to some isolated location where the computer was still something found in science fiction novels. No records. No digital footprint. Which, while possible, wouldn’t be easy.

The only other option I could think of was he'd changed his name. I stopped pacing. That seemed the most reasonable solution. Quick and easy. All he'd need was a judge with a rubber stamp. The main problem we had now? Which of the fifty United States did that judge preside in? If Charlie had found any answers, he'd have called me.

I dragged a hand through my hair, trying to stimulate some brain function. Bobby had bounced around in foster care. Multiple placements. A family wanted to adopt him. They chose him. He chose them. Which should've been the good part. The stable part. Except they end up at the bottom of a lake trapped in their vehicle. The adoption falls apart. Not because of him. Not because of anything he did.

The living room faded out around the edges as I stared at nothing. That kind of thing wouldn't just bounce off a kid. Being chosen and then unchosen through no fault of his own? It would rewire something in his psyche.

I started pacing again, slower now. After that, he'd be older. Harder to place. Less likely to get adopted again. Kids in those positions don't sit around and wait. They adapt. They learn to survive. Learn not to count on anyone. And sometimes they learned how to disappear.

I needed more. I scratched Savannah behind the ears, and she leaned into it briefly before returning to her chew. I needed to know what kind of man Bobby Richardson grew up to be. Because that was the missing piece. Not the child. The adult.

After typing "New Hampshire Department for Children, Youth, and Families" into my phone's search bar, I stared at the number on my screen for a long moment before dialing.

Casper took this as his cue to sprint across the couch, ricochet off the armrest, and disappear down the hallway as if he'd been summoned to a patient's room STAT.

Savannah lifted her head from the couch, watching me to see if I'd do something about the furry lunatic she'd once thought was so lovable.

I didn't. The line rang twice. Three times. "DCYF, this is Melissa Grant." Her voice was calm. Professional. Carrying the faint edge of someone who'd spent the better part of her life managing other people's crises.

"Hi, Ms. Grant. My name is Jen Dawson, and I'm calling about a former case. Bobby Richardson. He would've been in your system around thirty

years ago or so.”

She paused. “I’m sorry. His file is quite old and may not be digitized. May I ask why you’re inquiring?”

I paced a few steps into the living room, keeping my voice even. “I’m working on something that may involve him, and hoping to speak with his original caseworker, if they’re still available.”

“Are you with law enforcement?”

“No, but I work closely with the Riddleton, South Carolina, police department.” I crossed my fingers. “I’m assisting one of their detectives.”

Another pause. Longer this time. “I’m fairly certain his original caseworker is gone by now. Retired. I’m one of the senior people here. However ...” Papers rustled in the background. “I was a secondary caseworker on several cases back when I was training. The name Richardson does sound familiar.”

I stopped moving. “Take your time.”

A long, slow breath. “I’m trying to place him,” she murmured. More papers shifted on her end, though I doubted she was actually looking at anything related to my question. “Bobby. Yes, I do remember him. Such a sad case.”

My chest tightened as my breath caught. “What do you remember?”

“He was a sweet kid. Affable. Easy to talk to. One of those kids who, you know, tries to make things easier for everyone else in the room.”

“It’s a shame he ended up in foster care.”

“Yes. His parents’ deaths were a tragedy. But he came through it surprisingly well. He didn’t cause any problems for his foster parents or us. Not at first.”

“What changed?” I asked, though the failed adoption almost had to be the answer.

A moment’s hesitation. “We had an adoption in the works. A prospective family, a strong match. Stable. They were excited about him. And he was excited about them.”

I turned toward the window, without focusing on anything outside. “What happened?”

“There was an accident.” The word landed flat. “Their car swerved off the road into a lake, and the whole family died.”

I closed my eyes, still moved by the story, no matter how many times I’d heard it. “And Bobby?”

“He wasn’t with them in the car at the time.”

I started pacing. “What happened to him after that?”

Another deep breath on the other end of the line. “He stayed in the system. And he changed. A lot more than we expected.”

The way she said it made my stomach flip. “How?”

“At first, we attributed it to grief, which was certainly part of it. But it became more.”

I leaned against a wall, focusing on every word.

“He became volatile,” she continued. “Easily frustrated. Quick to escalate.”

“That’s not unexpected, I would think. Given the circumstances, it almost seems understandable to me.”

“It can be. Trauma responses vary, but most children respond to intervention. Therapy. Stability.”

“And he didn’t.”

“No. Bobby refused to go. When we made him see the counselor, he refused to cooperate. Sat silently until the session ended. The more we tried to encourage him, the more incidents there were.”

I pushed off the wall and started pacing again. “What kind of incidents?”

“Defiance. Arguments. Confrontations with staff and other children. He didn’t lash out randomly, though. It appeared targeted.”

“Targeted how?”

“He reacted to perceived control. Authority. Structure. Any attempt to impose direction.”

“He pushed back.”

“Constantly. Enough that it became difficult to maintain stability for him. He bounced from home to home.”

“For how long?”

“A few more years. Until he aged out.”

“And after that?”

This time, the dead air stretched long enough that I pulled the phone away to check the connection. “Hello?”

“I’m here,” she said.

“What happened to him after he aged out?”

“I don’t know.”

“No follow-up? No records?”

“Not that I’m aware of. Once they turn eighteen, contact becomes voluntary. He never reached out to any of us. We never heard from him again.”

I started pacing again, faster now. “Do you remember anything else? Habits, skills, relationships? Anything that stood out?”

“The thing I remember most is he was smart. Observant. He paid attention to people. To systems. Patterns. Processes. To how things worked.”

“Ms. Grant,” I said, more careful now, “in your experience, if someone as intelligent as Bobby were to, hypothetically, leave no trace of his activities after age twenty-one, what would that suggest to you?”

A long pause. When she spoke again, her voice was restrained. More cautious. “I can only speculate, but if I had to guess, I’d say it was no accident. That he didn’t want to be found.”

My grip tightened on the phone. “You think he chose to disappear?”

“I think disappearing altogether takes planning. And intention.”

“And in Bobby’s case?”

Another small breath. “Bobby was capable of both.”

“Thank you,” I said. “You’ve been very helpful.”

“You’re welcome. I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

The line clicked dead, and I lowered the phone. He was a stable kid whose entire personality changed after the failed adoption. My pulse ticked up. “Then a few years later ...” I looked at Savannah “... he was gone.”

Savannah didn’t move, but her eyes stayed on me.

“But none of that makes him a killer.”

Her tail thumped against the back of the couch.

The trauma explained his behavior. It explained his anger. It also explained why he might’ve wanted a clean slate. But none of it proved he had anything to do with Henry Smith’s murder. Not even a little bit.

Savannah’s tail waved again, and Casper pounced on it. The dog lifted it with the kitten hanging on. He slid off, hit the floor with a thud, and stared at her as if she’d betrayed his trust.

I bent, scooped him up, and brushed a hand down his back as he settled against my chest. “I’m not doing this,” I said into the kitten’s fur. “I’m not turning a kid with a rough past into the villain because it fits.”

But, if not him, who?

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Dinner ended the way most of our dinners have lately—half conversation, half distraction. Eric spent the meal telling me about a case he'd worked years ago, something about a break-in that hadn't been about theft at all. The guy had left valuables untouched—jewelry, cash, electronics—only moved things around. Opened drawers. Rearranged objects. Sat, apparently, in the homeowner's chair long enough to leave an impression in the cushion.

"Turned out," Eric said, scraping the last bite of chicken off his plate, "he wanted to prove he could get in. That he could be there without anyone knowing."

"That's unsettling."

"Yeah. Judge didn't find it even close to as interesting as the guy did."

I nodded as if following along, but my attention kept slipping. My thoughts snagged on loose threads that refused to tie up, no matter how many times I rearranged them in my head.

Savannah sat beside my chair through the entire meal, her chin resting on my knee, eyes following every movement of my fork, while calculating the exact angle required for a successful interception.

Casper, on the other hand, treated dinner like a full-contact sport. He skidded across the floor after a crumpled napkin, launched himself halfway up the back of Eric's chair, missed, tried again, and then disappeared under the table to ambush an enemy invisible to all but him.

Normal. Loud. Tumultuous. It should have felt comforting. Instead, the tightness in my chest hadn't let up all evening.

"Walk?" Eric asked as he cleared his plate, glancing toward Savannah, who immediately perked up at the word. Her ears snapped forward. Bushy tail thumping, then she stood, already vibrating with anticipation.

"Yeah, I could use the air," I said, pushing back my chair. That part, at least, was true.

The evening had cooled into a serene winter chill, the air damp enough to penetrate through my jacket into my bones. The sky appeared a deep,

velvety blue, the first stars pushing through, faint against the gathering dark. Porch lights blinked on one by one up and down the street, diffuse halos of yellow cutting into the gathering shadows. Christmas lights glowed in reds and greens, reflected in the windows of parked cars.

Savannah walked between us at first, her leash loose, stride relaxed. She sniffed her usual spots—the base of the mailbox two houses down, the edge of Mrs. Calder’s flower bed, the crooked wooden fence where she always lingered longer than necessary.

I tried to match her calm, but couldn’t quite manage it. Every day that passed without Henry Smith’s real killer being found brought Angus a day closer to being tried for the crime. One step closer to an event that couldn’t be undone.

“You’ve been quiet,” Eric said after a few minutes.

“I’m thinking.”

“About?”

“Everything.”

“That narrows it down.”

A breath left me that almost passed for a laugh. “Bobby Richardson, mostly. And Henry Smith. It’s like I keep getting pieces, but they don’t belong to the same puzzle.”

“Or they do, and you don’t have the picture yet.”

“That’s the problem. I don’t even know what I’m supposed to be looking at.”

Savannah slowed, nose dipping to the ground. Then she stopped. Not unusual, she did it all the time, but something about the way she froze made my attention snap to her.

Her body went rigid. No other dogs around, so not tense or on guard. Not curious, either. Alert. Her ears angled forward, but her head didn’t lower to sniff. Her eyes were fixed. Not on the ground. Not on anything I could see.

“You see that?” I nudged Eric in the ribs with my elbow.

He followed her line of sight, squinting. “No.”

Savannah made a low, almost inaudible sound in her throat. Not a growl, but close enough to make my skin prickle. Too close.

A flicker of unease slid through me. We started walking again, but Savannah didn’t return to her usual rhythm. She stayed tight to my side now, her leash still loose but her attention scanning. Left, right, forward. Watching. Listening.

And that's when I noticed it. A sound. Out of sync with our footsteps. I slowed, listening. A faint scuff behind me. I glanced over my shoulder. Nothing. Only the calm stretch of sidewalk behind us, lined with parked cars and yards lit by Christmas decorations. "You hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"Footsteps."

Eric paused, listening. The neighborhood held its breath. No cars passing, no voices from nearby houses. Nothing more than the rustle of leaves in a light breeze. "I don't hear anything."

I nodded, but the heaviness in my gut remained. We kept walking. A few steps later, I heard it again. I turned my head, catching the edge of a flash in my peripheral vision. A shape. Gone the second I tried to focus on it. Probably nothing, I tried to convince myself. "You're spooking yourself."

"What'd you say?" Eric asked.

"Nothing."

But Savannah's behavior said otherwise. If anything, she grew more focused. Her head lifted slightly, nose working the air instead of the ground. Tracking.

"Okay," Eric said. "Something's got her attention."

"Yeah, I noticed."

We reached the next stretch of streetlights, spaced evenly along the sidewalk. We stepped into the next pool of light, the streetlamp above us buzzing, its glow cutting a clean circle into the dark. Beyond it, shadows pooled thick between houses.

Savannah stopped again, her body angled back toward where we'd come from. A low sound rumbled in her chest. A growl this time, without question.

"Hey," Eric said, placing a calming hand near her collar. "Easy, girl."

She didn't relax. Didn't turn his way. Kept staring.

And suddenly, I became aware of how muted the neighborhood had become.

"Okay," Eric said, his voice shifting. More alert. "Jen."

"What?"

"Go stand under that streetlight."

"Why?"

"So I can see you're safe."

"Huh?"

“Just do it.” No argument in his tone. His eyes locked on to mine. “I’m going to take her and have a look around. Stay where it’s lit.”

“I can come with you—”

“No.” The word wasn’t loud, but it didn’t leave room for discussion.

The degree of tension in his expression made me stop pushing.

He was already in motion, adjusting his grip on Savannah’s leash as he stepped away from me, angling off the sidewalk toward the darker stretch between houses. Savannah went without a fight this time. Her posture shifted from wary to purposeful, nose forward, body low but moving. Stalking.

I stepped into the center of the streetlight’s glow, folding my arms across my chest. *Fine*. I’d stay put. Eric and Savannah disappeared into shadow. I shifted my weight, trying to ignore the way my senses felt honed to a razor’s edge.

The houses across the street were tranquil, windows lit but curtains drawn. Cars lined the street, surfaces reflecting the reds, whites, and greens of a Walnut Street Christmas. Completely at odds with the tension coiled in my body.

Nothing moved. Eric and Savannah must’ve been between two streetlights because I couldn’t see them either. I turned to face the undecorated house I stood in front of, my heart giving a small, unwelcome kick. It was dark, the narrow strip between it and the neighboring yard swallowed in shadow.

A tiny flicker hit the corner of my eye. I stared in that direction. Waited. Nothing.

You’re imagining things, Jen.

I let out a breath, forcing my shoulders to relax. Then, a faint scrape. Plastic against concrete. My eyes snapped back to the alley. Something, or someone, was in there. “Eric?”

No response. Of course not. He’d gone in the other direction. My pulse picked up. I hesitated. *Stay under the light*. That’s what he’d said. Stay put.

Another scrape behind me. A person? Watching me? The thought slid in fast and cold. I glanced toward the darkness where Eric and the dog went. Still nothing.

He’d be annoyed if I moved. More than annoyed. But standing there, doing nothing, felt worse. I took a step toward the edge of the light. Stopped. Took another. “Hello?” I called, my voice steadier than I felt.

No answer. Only that faint rustling sound again.

I moved closer to the house, the light fading behind me as the shadows thickened. Sweat trickled down my spine despite the chill. Each step felt louder now, my shoes crunching in the dry winter grass, my heartbeat thudding in my ears.

A plastic trash can came into view, resting against the brick veneer. Was someone hiding behind it? Or deeper in the shadows? I couldn't hear my own thoughts over my pounding pulse. I exhaled to ease the tension spiraling tighter through my chest.

I took one more step. The lid jerked upward. I flinched, ready to run.

A striped, masked face popped into view.

A raccoon.

My breath released in a rush. "You gotta be kidding me."

It froze, staring at me with bright, reflective eyes, one paw hooked over the edge of the can. We held eye contact for a long, ridiculous second. Then it hissed.

I jumped back, a startled laugh bursting out of me before I could stop it. "Seriously?" I pressed a hand to my chest, as if it could do anything to slow my racing heart. "You're what's been stalking me?"

The raccoon blinked, unimpressed, then went right back to digging through the trash as if I didn't exist.

I let out another breath, tension draining from my shoulders. Of course it would be a raccoon. Not a shadowy figure. Not someone watching. A determined little trash bandit with terrible timing.

"Jen." Eric's voice cut in from behind me.

I turned.

He was striding back, Savannah at his side, her posture still alert but less rigid than before. His gaze swept the yard, the shadows, the trash can. Quickly assessing. "What are you doing back here?"

I winced. "Investigating."

"I told you to stay under the light."

"I know, but—" I gestured. "I thought someone was there."

Eric followed my movement toward the raccoon, now upside down in the trash can, tail sticking out at an angle. He stared at it. Then at me. "So, you immediately did the opposite of what I told you to do?"

I shrugged. He was right, of course. I never should've left the safety of the light. "In my defense, the situation seemed quite suspicious."

He exhaled, an expression between relief and exasperation crossing his face. "A raccoon. For real?"

"Uh-huh."

Savannah gave a soft chuff, ears still forward but no longer tense. She glanced at the trash can, then back toward the street, already dismissing the raccoon as irrelevant. Not a threat.

Eric noticed it too. His hand rested on her neck, but his eyes lifted, scanning past me, past the house, toward the darker stretch of road behind us. "You okay?" He stepped closer.

"Yeah. Jumpy, I guess."

He studied me, then nodded. "Come on. Let's head back."

We turned together, falling into step as we moved away from the house back toward our own. Savannah settled into a more familiar rhythm now, though she still checked behind us once or twice before allowing herself to relax.

I glanced back once. The raccoon was still there, rustling in the trash with joy, unconcerned. I shook my head. "Of all the things ..."

"Hey, better a raccoon than a guy with a gun, right?"

"Yeah." Better. Definitely better. But as we walked, I couldn't quite shake the feeling not everything I'd noticed had been imaginary. Especially the way Savannah reacted *before* we ever got near the house with the raccoon.

I glanced behind us again. The street remained empty. Still. Too quiet.

Savannah stopped. Her head turned back toward the darkness, and a low sound rumbled in her chest. Then she kept walking as if nothing had happened.

I looked back one more time.

Just in case.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The first cheerful notes of “It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas” sliced straight through whatever thin layer of sleep I’d managed to hold on to. My hand shot out from under the blankets, fumbling across the nightstand until I found my alarm clock. Missed, knocked it half off the edge, caught it, fumbled again, and finally managed to muzzle the noise mid-lyric.

I lay there, eyes still closed, breathing slow, pretending I hadn’t been violently introduced to consciousness by a man who sounded way too delighted about wreaths and snow. And I couldn’t care less what the five and ten looks like at seven on a Friday morning. And what’s a five and ten, anyway?

The room became quiet again. Too quiet. The first thing that felt off. I opened my eyes. The beginnings of gray winter light filtered in through the curtains, muted and thin, which didn’t so much illuminate as suggest the day might exist sooner or later. No urgency. No commitment. I voted for later.

I shifted under the covers, expecting the usual ripple of movement beside me. Nothing. No sleepy groan. No arm tightening around my waist, so I wouldn’t move. No warm, solid presence taking up more than his fair share of the bed like he paid extra rent for it.

I rolled onto my back and turned my head. Empty. The other side of the bed cold, sheets smoothed out enough to tell me Eric’d been gone for a while. Not a quick trip downstairs. Not a bathroom break. Gone gone.

“Huh.” I pushed myself onto my elbows and glanced toward the foot of the bed. Also empty. No dog curled into a stubborn, unmoving barricade. No cat stretched out across my face. Wow. Abandoned by all species. A new low, even for me. I dropped back against the pillow for another second, staring at the ceiling. The song replayed in my head, bright and smug.

“It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas.”

“It’s beginning to sound like a lawsuit,” I mumbled. “Who plays that for someone to wake up to?” Time to start using my phone alarm the way normal people did these days. Then I wouldn’t be at the mercy of the

sadistic morning shock jocks. Of course, I'd never once claimed to be normal. My mother taught me that good girls always tell the truth.

With a sigh, I pushed the blankets back and swung my legs over the side of the bed. The floor felt cold enough to turn my feet into blocks of ice. I stood there, swaying, letting my body catch up with the concept of being upright. Then I grabbed the nearest hoodie off the chair—Eric's, judging by the size—and pulled it on over my sleep T-shirt.

It smelled like him. Laundry detergent with his own masculine scent underneath. That helped a little. Not much, but a little. I shuffled into the hallway, the house still quiet around me, and made my way to the bathroom.

I flicked on the light and squinted against the brightness as it flooded the small space. Somebody needed to teach that bulb some manners. The mirror didn't care. It never did. I leaned forward, bracing my hands on the edge of the sink, and scrutinized myself. My hair was doing acrobatics that could only be described as the result of a finger stuck in a power outlet. Black waves went in at least six different directions, none of them compatible with gravity or reason. One section stuck straight out to the side, making a break for it.

My eyes were worse. Blue, technically, but right now, rimmed in red, the whites veined and irritated, as if I'd spent the night fighting a sandstorm, and the sand won. Sleep lines creased one side of my face, making it look like I'd used a waffle iron for a pillow.

Tilting my head helped me examine the damage. "You could be the star of a horror movie," I said to my reflection. "No makeup required. Just walk into a room and watch the people run away screaming." The mirror version of me didn't disagree. "Method acting. Quite committed to the role." Still horrifying.

I straightened, reached for my toothbrush, and got to work on the bare minimum required to make myself resemble a functioning human being. Toothpaste. Water. Brush. Spit. Rinse. Cold water on my face, which helped a little. Not enough to fix anything, but enough to make me feel I'd made an effort.

Dragging my hand through my hair, I made a vain attempt to tame it. It fought back. *Forget it.* As good as it would get before caffeine. "Fine. Be feral. See if I care."

I flicked off the light and headed downstairs. The smell hit me halfway down. Bacon. Real, honest-to-goodness bacon. The kind that sizzled and filled the air with an unmistakable, salty richness that made your mouth wake up before the rest of you had a chance to object.

By the time I reached the bottom, I could hear the rest of it. The soft scrape of a spatula against a pan. The faint hiss of eggs cooking. The clink of dishes.

The kitchen lights were on, warm and bright, a sharp contrast to the muted gray of the rest of the house. Eric stood at the stove, back to me, focused in the way he got when he was performing a simple but important, to him, task. Sleeves pushed up, shoulders relaxed, moving with an easy efficiency that made it seem effortless. From my past experiences in the kitchen, I knew better.

I stood there and watched him. A small, quiet moment that loosened something in me I hadn't realized had grown tight. I crossed the room and slid my arms around his waist, pressing my cheek against his back. "Please tell me that's for me," I said, my voice still morning rough.

He glanced over his shoulder, a quick smile breaking across his face. "Morning. And yes. Assuming you don't plan on staging a dramatic protest against breakfast."

"Depends. What are my options?"

"Bacon, eggs, toast. The usual. Coffee's already on."

I followed his nod toward the coffeemaker. A full pot with steam curling up in lazy spirals made me a little emotional. "You can stay. I've decided."

"Good to know I passed the test. I was worried there for a bit."

"You should be. Standards are high around here."

I moved past him to grab my mug, pouring myself a generous amount of coffee before adding enough cream and sugar to take the edge off. First sip. Better. Not perfect, but closer to human. I leaned back against the counter, cradling the mug in both hands. "You were gone when I woke up."

"Yeah. Been up for a while. Couldn't sleep."

"No kidding. The bed was cold. Even the animals abandoned me."

"That's because they're smarter than you. They followed the food."

I glanced around. Right on cue, I found Savannah sprawled near the far wall, eyes half-open but tracking every movement Eric made. Casper sat on a chair, tail wrapped around his paws, watching with quiet intensity, supervising the entire operation.

“Traitors.”

“Opportunists.”

“Same thing in my book.”

He plated the eggs and bacon, then popped the toast, slathered on butter, and added it to the rest. A quick, practiced motion, and breakfast was ready. “Sit,” he said, nodding toward the table.

No argument from me. We settled across from each other, the plates between us, the quiet of the morning wrapping around us. I picked up a piece of bacon and took a bite. Perfect. “Okay. I forgive you for everything.”

“Everything?”

“Everything you’ve ever done wrong. This resets the slate.”

“I should cook more often.”

“Absolutely.”

For a minute or two, we ate in relative silence. Not uncomfortable. An easy quiet that didn’t demand anything. Eventually, reality worked its way back in. It always did.

“So,” I said, setting my fork down. “Where are we with Henry Smith?”

“Same as before.” Eric leaned back, wiping his hands on a napkin before folding it and setting it aside. “Except Angus got out.”

“What?”

“Bail. Posted the other day.”

“You’re kidding. That’s great. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Slipped my mind, sorry. Besides, we’ve been a little busy, don’t you think?”

I stared at him, processing, then forced myself to admit he had a point. “Who put up the money?”

“He did. A bit of a surprise, to be honest. It’s not a small amount, either.”

“I’ll bet. I didn’t know he had that kind of money. Guess the diner’s more profitable than I realized.” I leaned back in my chair, crossing my arms. “Do we know where he is?”

“Home, I assume. He’s supposed to stay within county limits, check in regularly. Standard conditions. You know the drill.”

I did. From personal experience. The memory of my brief wrongful incarceration flickered. Cold benches, stale air, the slow grind of hands on the clock that never appeared to move. I pushed it aside before it could

settle and tapped my fingers against the table. "So, nothing new in the investigation?"

"Nothing solid. Havermayer's still convinced she's right about Angus."

What a surprise.

I reached for my coffee again, taking another sip. "What about other suspects? The family that died in the lake I told you about? And the kid who didn't get adopted because of the accident?"

"Yes, but finding a connection to Henry is almost impossible at this point. The cops in New Hampshire couldn't even do it back when it happened."

I nodded, trying to keep my frustration from showing on my face. It wasn't his fault. I'd been asking him to prove something that might not be possible to prove. "And Angus? What does that mean for him? I know as well as I know my own name, he didn't do this."

Eric hesitated. "Same place, unfortunately. Unless we catch a break, and soon, he'll be going to trial."

I let out a short, humorless laugh. "Fantastic."

He watched me. "You okay?"

"Ask me after my second cup of coffee. And maybe after we figure out who Bobby Richardson is now and where he went."

Eric's expression shifted into a frown. "We have to prove Henry was involved with it before Havermayer will let me touch it. She's the lead detective. The decision is hers to make."

An uneasy feeling settled in my stomach. "Can't you go over her head? Go straight to Olinski and tell him what we've found?"

"Yeah, if I want to spend the rest of my career on the outside looking in. She'll never trust me again."

I gazed down at my plate, appetite fading. "Looks like Christmas came early."

Eric raised an eyebrow.

I gestured toward the window, toward the gray morning, toward everything. "Because nothing says holiday spirit like the prospect of a man going to prison for the rest of his life for a crime he didn't commit."

"Yeah. Real festive."

I pushed the last bite of eggs around my plate, then set my fork down. "Next steps? If any?"

“You keep digging. My hands are tied. As far as Havermayer’s concerned, the case is solved. But yours aren’t. Just don’t break any laws while you’re at it.”

A slow grin tugged at my mouth. “Are you giving me permission to interfere in your investigation?”

“I guess I am. I don’t see what other choice we have.” He reached across the table and took my hand, his grip warm and steady. “Promise me you’ll be careful. Don’t take any stupid chances.”

“I’ll be fine. I’ve got you for backup.”

“Always.” He wiped his mouth with his napkin. “We did get one piece of good news yesterday, though. The test results for the blood on Angus’s jacket came back. It’s canine, just like he said it was.”

“I never doubted it.” I stood, grabbing my mug and draining the last of the coffee before setting it in the sink. “Okay, I’d better get started. We don’t have much time.”

Savannah lifted her head, hopeful.

“No, ma’am. You already picked your side this morning.”

Her tail thumped anyway.

Casper blinked slowly, unconcerned.

I glanced back at Eric. “First stop, Angus.”

Eric nodded. “Call me if anything feels off.”

“Everything feels off,” I said. “The whole situation is surreal.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do.”

The house felt warmer now, the heat kicking in, the faint hum of it filling the background. Outside, the day had arrived, pale, cold, and quiet. The kind of winter morning that appeared harmless until you stepped into it. Inside, the plates sat empty in the sink, coffee cooling, the normalcy of breakfast already fading under, the weight of the case hanging over me like an anvil cloud in July.

Christmas music might have started the morning. But as I grabbed my coat and headed out, keys in hand, one thought cut clean through the rest. This wasn’t a day for cheerful songs. This was a day for the “Eye of the Tiger.”

And I stood ready for the fight.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The closer I got to Oak Street, the quieter everything felt. Not the soft hush of falling snow or the calm of a town settling in for the night. Something pulled too tight that might snap if you breathed on it wrong. I suspected the problem was mine more than the town's.

Riddleton didn't change overnight. It didn't turn eerie all of a sudden because my brain decided to latch on to worst-case scenarios. The streets were still lined with the same modest houses, the same carefully swept sidewalks, the same mailboxes decorated with bows that had seen better Decembers.

But I'd gone through a swing of some sort. And now everything felt off. Riddleton Park sat across the street from Angus's place, its wide stretch of winter-yellow grass dusted with patchy snow that'd fallen overnight. Just enough to make everything look colder without bothering to be pretty about it.

Someone had added more decorations since I'd last been here. The walking path was now lined with glowing plastic candy canes. Charming in a cheerful, small-town way. A set of reindeer made from white wire and lights stood near the side entrance, frozen mid-leap. Guess they'd been caught trying to escape. And nearby, the nativity scene had been cleared of snow, ensuring the paint still showed. Mary's robe appeared newer than the rest. Retouched, maybe.

But being there now, contemplating Angus's house across from all that careful cheer, felt wrong. Tinsel hanging over a crime scene. I slowed and made a U-turn to park in front, facing back toward town. Habit, mostly. Easier if I needed to make a quick getaway. The engine ticked as it cooled, the Wrangler's cabin still filled with warmth I hesitated to leave behind. But duty called, so I grabbed my keys and stepped out into the cold.

Angus lived in a small, single-story home with faded gray siding and a front porch that'd lived through too many decades. The paint on the railing had chipped in long, thin strips, exposing the wood underneath, and the steps creaked when no one was on them. I'd been here before, but it felt different now. Everything did.

The decorations were up. The first thing I noticed. A string of multicolored lights lined the edge of the roof, the bulbs dull in the morning light. The extension cord ran down the side of the house, taped in place, suggesting patience ran out halfway through the job.

An inflated Santa balanced near the steps, one arm raised in a perpetual wave. His face was forever cheerful, though the paint had chipped in places, leaving small patches of white dotting the red. Measles in the “Twilight Zone.” A real pine wreath adorned the front door, and from a few feet away I could see it had begun to dry out. The needles curled inward, brittle at the edges, a few already fallen and scattered across the porch. It hadn’t been touched in days. Maybe longer.

I stepped onto the porch, my rubber soles smacking against the worn boards, my gaze moving over everything. A small wooden bench sat off to the side, one of the slats cracked and bowed in the middle. A pair of boots sat near the door, toes pointed outward, kicked off in a hurry, never to be picked up again.

Swallowing hard, my gaze drifted back to the wreath. Angus put this up. Probably not long before everything happened. Before his world tilted sideways. Before Christmas, the whole bright, relentless season turned into a nightmare.

I tried to picture him standing here, maybe wrestling with the string of lights, muttering under his breath when one section refused to turn on. Giving it that little shake people always do, like intimidation was the solution to faulty wiring.

Maybe he’d stepped back onto the sidewalk the way everyone else in town did, hands on his hips, judging his own work with a critical eye. Smiling. Maybe he’d even been proud of it.

The thought sat heavy in my chest. Because now? Now every light, every decoration, every cheerful little detail was a reminder. Not of joy. Not of celebration. Of what he might lose. Of what had already started slipping through his fingers.

I knocked on the door. The sound echoed inside, and I waited, listening, my breath fogging in the cold, humid air. Nothing. I knocked again, a little louder this time.

“Angus?” I pitched my voice to carry without turning it into a shout. Still nothing. I stepped back, glancing at the windows. The curtains in the front room were drawn, heavy enough to block most of the light. No movement

behind them. No shift in shadow. No flicker suggesting someone was inside, but ignoring me.

A knot tightened in my belly. He should be here. Or at least I thought he should be. After everything, after being released, where else would he go?

I tried the doorknob, expecting it to be locked, though many people in town never bothered. Riddleton's crime rate sat comfortably near nonexistent. People left doors unlocked, cars running, wallets on counters. Trust was the default setting here.

The knob turned under my hand. I hesitated. Technically, I probably shouldn't walk into someone's house without permission. Even if that someone had been at the center of everything lately. Even if I was worried. Even if every instinct in my body told me something wasn't right.

I pushed the door open anyway. "Angus?" I called again, stepping inside. The air hit me first. The house smelled of dust, or maybe the stale scent of a place that hadn't been lived in for a few days. The living room was lit only by the weak daylight filtering through the curtains.

A small artificial tree stood in the corner, decorated with mismatched ornaments. Some handmade with popsicle sticks and glitter. The kind children struggle for hours to create, and adults keep them forever, because throwing them away feels criminal. Others were store-bought, shiny, and uniform. Much less personal.

The lights on the tree were off. A strand had slipped halfway down, pooling near the base. No presents underneath. Only the tree skirt, a little crooked, one edge folded over itself.

I moved farther in, my footsteps quiet on the worn carpet. The place wasn't messy, but it wore an unsettled look, as if Angus had been interrupted in the middle of normal life and hadn't quite found his way back to it yet. Which, of course, he had.

A mug sat on the coffee table, a ring of who-knows-what dried on the bottom. Coffee, probably. Or tea long since undrinkable. A folded blanket lay draped over the arm of the couch, one corner trailing on the floor.

"Angus?" I tried again. The word disappeared into the heavy quietude of the house.

I checked the kitchen next. Empty. A few dishes in the sink, a dish towel draped over the oven handle. The fridge hummed when I opened it, the light flicking on without hesitation. There was food inside. Diner leftovers in Styrofoam containers. A carton of milk, three days expired. Eggs. Nothing

alarming. But nothing that appeared to have been touched recently, either. I closed it.

Moving down the short hallway, I glanced into each room, starting with the bedroom—bed unmade, sheets twisted, a pillow on the floor. Clothes piled on a chair. Bathroom—clean enough, but impersonal. No damp towel. No sign of recent use. The whole place felt frozen. Someone hit the pause button on the remote and walked away.

I stood in the hallway, listening. Nothing. No creak of floorboards. No running water. No subtle sounds that might mean someone was around but just not answering. Angus wasn't here.

Maybe he'd gone out, needing air, or space, or anything that didn't remind him of his uncertain future. Being here, surrounded by normality in the face of impending disaster, could've been too much for him. I couldn't blame him for that.

Still, I wasn't ready to leave yet. I stepped back outside, pulling the door shut behind me, and circled around the side of the house. My sneakers crunched over a narrow strip of frozen grass, the sound grating against my eardrums.

Angus had enclosed the backyard with a simple wooden fence, the gate hanging a little crooked on its hinges. I pushed it open and stepped inside. The small yard had a few patches of snow clinging to the shaded corners, and the rest was a mix of dead grass and frozen dirt.

A metal folding chair sat near the back door, a thin layer of frost coating the seat. I spotted a set of footprints crossing part of the yard. Old ones, edges softened, somewhat filled in by wind and a dusting of snow. I followed them anyway, my eyes scanning the space. "Angus?" I called again, louder this time.

The only response came in the form of the distant sound of a car passing on a nearby street. I checked behind the small, locked shed in the corner, then along the fence line. An effort to be thorough that didn't take long. Not much space to cover. He wasn't here, either.

I stood in the middle of the yard, my breath coming out in small clouds, and turned in a full circle. No sign of him anywhere. A flicker of unease settled deeper in my chest. Where would he go? The park, maybe. The diner. Somewhere familiar. Somewhere that didn't remind him so much of his current predicament.

I glanced back at the house, at the sagging line of Christmas lights along the roof. Yeah, I wouldn't stay here, either. He had to be at the diner. That made the most sense. Routine. Familiarity. Coffee and noise and people who didn't ask too many questions unless you asked some first.

Decision made, I headed back out to the street and into the blessed warmth of my Jeep. I fired it up and cranked the heat as high as it would go, warming my stiffened fingers in front of the vents until the sting subsided. Whoever invented winter should be shot at sunrise.

The trip to the diner felt longer than usual, though it stood a mere few blocks away. My mind kept circling back to the same thing. Two days. He'd been out of jail for two days, and no one had seen him. That wasn't only unusual, it was wrong.

I parked on the Pine Street side and braced myself before stepping back into the cold. I had to maneuver around a few demonstrators, none of whom I recognized, carrying signs calling for a boycott of the diner and chanting "No Killers Here."

The Christmas bells above the door tinkled as I stepped inside, and a wave of warmth hit me, along with the familiar smells of coffee, frying oil, and something sweet.

Ingrid was perched on one of the stools with a mug of tea cupped between her hands. She appeared cozy in a soft sweater, her short, loose curls framing her face. I squeezed her shoulder as I passed on my way to talk to Marcus, working near the grill.

His expression shifted into mild surprise when he saw me. "Jen. Hey. Didn't expect to see you out today."

"Yeah, well, it's either this or sit at home and overthink everything, so ..."

He chuckled. "Makes sense."

"Looks like you've got some excitement outside."

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Crackpots. And I don't even know who any of them are."

"Where are they from?"

"Dunno," he said with a shrug. "I haven't gone out there to ask them."

"Weird." I leaned against the counter and lowered my voice. "Have you seen Angus?"

"No, I haven't made it over there yet. Sutton's a bit far for a quick run during the afternoon lull."

“Guess you haven’t heard. He’s out on bail. Been out since Wednesday.”

“Really?” His brows pulled together. “I wonder why he hasn’t stopped in to check on the restaurant. Make sure I hadn’t blown it up while he was gone.”

“No idea, but it’s strange. I checked out his place a little while ago. He’s not there, either. Hasn’t been there as far as I can tell.”

Marcus’s frown deepened. “Huh.”

“And his door was unlocked, which I found strange,” I added. “It means the cops didn’t bother to lock up when they finished searching.”

He leaned back, crossing his arms. “I can’t believe Angus didn’t tell me he’d been released.”

“Yeah, me neither.”

Ingrid carried her tea down to our end and slid onto a stool.

“Hey,” I said, forcing a small smile.

“Hullo. It appears you’ve been out in the cold far too long. Your face is all red.”

“Accurate,” I admitted, sliding onto the stool next to her.

Marcus set a fresh cup of coffee in front of me. I gave him a grateful glance and added cream and sugar, my hands moving on autopilot.

Ingrid tilted her head. “Everything all right?”

“Not really. Angus has been out on bail for two days and, unless someone’s heard otherwise, nobody’s seen him since. And he didn’t tell anyone he even had a hearing.”

She winced. “Ah. That is rather strange. Quite out of character, I’d say.”

“And I have no idea where else to search for him.”

“Don’t worry. I’m sure he’ll turn up.” She hummed under her breath, thoughtful, then, after a brief pause, Ingrid seemed to make a conscious decision to steer things somewhere lighter. “So,” she said, taking a sip of her tea. “What did you get Eric for Christmas?”

I blinked. My brain, which had been occupied with Angus, missing children, and a dead man, hit a very solid, very unexpected wall. “What?”

Ingrid smiled, amused at my discomfort. “Eric. Your boyfriend. Christmas gift?”

“I—” I stopped. Because the horrifying truth was I hadn’t thought about it. Not once. Not even a little. “Oh, no.” I stared down at my coffee, hoping it had Eric’s list for Santa hidden in the steam.

Ingrid’s grin widened. “Oh, no?”

“I haven’t gotten him anything.”

Marcus snorted.

I shot him a scowl. “Don’t you dare say a word.”

“Hey, I’m not judging,” he said, holding up his hands in surrender. “Just enjoying the moment.”

“This is bad. This is really bad.”

Ingrid leaned her elbow on the counter, settling in as if my predicament had become her new favorite form of entertainment. “All right. Relax. We can sort this.”

“Can we?”

“Yes. We absolutely can. We just need to figure what kind of gift he’d like.”

I rubbed my forehead. “Right. Good.”

Marcus chimed in, “What’s he into?”

“Work.”

They both stared at me.

“Okay,” I amended. “He’s into other things. Probably.”

Ingrid laughed. “Well, that’s a promising beginning.”

I sighed. “No, I’m serious. He’s been so busy these days. Everything revolves around cases and paperwork and—” I gestured vaguely. “All that stuff.”

“Then perhaps a gift that helps him switch off,” Ingrid suggested.

“Such as?”

She considered. “Does he have any hobbies?”

I hesitated. “He used to fish sometimes.”

Marcus perked up. “There you go.”

“In December?”

“People fish in winter.”

“In freezing water?”

“Dedicated people do.”

I grimaced. “I don’t think hypothermia is the gift I’m going for.”

Marcus grinned. “Well, summer will be coming back eventually, you know.”

Ingrid laughed into her tea. “Right, perhaps not fishing, then. What about something a bit more personal?”

“Personal as in what?”

“Something meaningful. Something that shows you actually know him.” She gave me a pointed look over the rim of her cup.

I stared at her. “You’re overestimating me.”

“You’ve been dating him for ages, and you’re living with him, now,” she pointed out.

“Yes, and somehow I still didn’t think about getting him a Christmas present.”

“Minor detail,” Marcus said.

“Not minor,” I shot back. “Very major. Major on a huge scale. In theory, relationship-ending, major.”

Ingrid waved a hand. “It’s not relationship-ending.”

“You don’t know that. What if he got me an amazing present, and I show up with what? A last-minute gas station gift card? A stale bag of chips to go with it?”

Marcus grinned again. “Hey, us growing boys always appreciate snacks.”

I groaned. “I’m doomed.”

Ingrid leaned closer, lowering her voice conspiratorially. “All right, what about going sentimental? A photograph, perhaps? Tied to a memory you share? A good memory.”

That actually wasn’t a terrible idea. “We do have that one picture from the fall festival last year. The one with his mouth stuffed with pie, where he looks like he’s about to lose a contest.”

Marcus laughed. “Now that I’d pay to see.”

“He was very serious about that pie.”

“Of course,” Ingrid said. “Men and food. Quite predictable.”

I smiled. “So, something he can relate to. A framed photo, maybe.”

“There you go,” Ingrid said, pleased. “Thoughtful, personal, and not too complicated. Brilliant!”

“And I can get it done in time.” I took a sip of my coffee, feeling a small amount of relief creep in. “Okay. This is manageable.”

“See?” Ingrid said. “Crisis averted.”

“Gift crisis,” Marcus added. “The other one’s still out there.”

Right. Angus. The unease slipped back in, quiet but persistent. I set my cup down, my fingers curling around the warmth.

“Yeah,” I said. “Still working on that.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The tinkling bells followed me out onto Pine Street, lingering a beat too long in my ears. An echo of a sound I couldn't quite place. Cold air met me head on, stinging my cheeks. The Christmas lights strung along the diner's roof blinked and shimmered, reflecting off the thin sheen of ice along the curb. The whole street had a quiet stillness to it. Everyone hunkering down, waiting for the chill to pass.

I shoved my hands into my jacket pockets and started toward where I'd parked my Wrangler, Eric's gift dominating my thoughts. Now that I was alone outside, it took over completely. Not a casual idea anymore. A problem. A puzzle. One that felt more complicated the longer I considered it.

What do you get a man like Eric?

I frowned, watching my breath puff out in front of me as I walked. It drifted upward and disappeared, like the answer I kept almost grasping and then losing. The photo idea seemed nice, but I couldn't think of a single one Eric would be that sentimental about. Not even the pie pic resonated with him the way it had me. So, what did that leave me?

He wasn't flashy. Didn't want anything expensive. Wasn't really the type to care about gifts at all, which somehow made it worse. People who wanted things were easy. You listened, picked an item you could afford off the list, wrapped it up, and you were done. Eric never gave me a list in any form. Ever.

He gave me a shrug. A half-smile. A "you don't have to get me anything. Just having you is present enough."

Sweet. Also, the worst possible answer.

I turned the corner onto Pine. A car rolled past, tires crunching over the salted road, and I squeezed my chin down into my collar, playing turtle, wishing I had a scarf. Not true. I owned a scarf, just never remembered to wear it when I needed it.

Maybe something he needed? Not helpful. Eric didn't *need* anything either. Or if he did, he wasn't the kind of man who'd talk about it. He fixed

things himself. Took care of his own problems. The kind of guy who noticed what *I* needed before I even realized it.

Which left me standing out here in the cold, trying to find a gift that wouldn't feel small. Insignificant. I reached my Jeep and stopped beside the driver's door, staring at it as if it might have the solution etched somewhere on the glass.

"Okay," I muttered under my breath. "Think, Jen." Something practical? No. Too impersonal. Sentimental? Dangerous territory. Handmade? I laughed out loud at that one. Definitely not my skill set.

I pulled my keys from my jacket pocket, the metal biting cold against my fingers, and slid the right one into the door lock. The motion was automatic, muscle memory taking over while my brain stayed somewhere else entirely.

What about—

Something shifted behind me. Not a sound exactly. A presence. My thoughts stuttered. I started to turn. A hand clamped over my mouth. The world snapped into sharp, violent focus.

My breath caught, a muffled sound swallowed against an icy palm that smelled of leather. My keys slipped from my grip, hitting the pavement with a dull, distant clatter.

Before I could react, an arm hooked tight around my torso and yanked me backward. Hard. My shoulder slammed into something. Car door? I couldn't tell. My balance vanished. My feet scrambled for traction, but the ground was slick, unforgiving.

"Mmm—!" The sound came out strangled, useless. Panic hit fast and hot, adrenaline flooding my system. Move. *Move now!*

I tried to twist, to plant my feet, but the slippery ground worked against me, and whoever had me was strong. Strong enough, my weight had no effect. My heels skidded uselessly over pavement as he dragged me sideways, off the street, into the alley behind the diner.

No. No, no—

My face hit brick. The impact knocked the air out of me in a forceful burst. The hand over my mouth tightened, sealing off any real scream.

C'mon, Jen. Move.

I drove my elbow backward, aiming for ribs. Good contact, except my arm bounced off as if I'd hit a wall. A grunt—more irritation than pain—and the grip shifted, tightening, adjusting. Not weakening.

Too big. My first clear thought. Not tall, wide. Thick. I tried to grab hold of him. An arm, a sleeve, anything. But my fingers slid over heavy fabric. Beneath it, I didn't find firm muscle the way I expected. It was layered. Dense.

My hands sank. No leverage. Nothing to work with. I jerked my head, trying to bite, but I couldn't get through the leather glove. The grip clamped tighter, forcing my jaw shut.

My heart hammered so hard I thought it might crack my ribs from the inside. I stomped backward, aiming for a foot. Connected hard enough, felt a give beneath my heel. A hiss of breath. A shift. But still no release.

Then he moved. Fast.

The hand left my mouth long enough for me to suck in a breath. Then he shoved my face forward again, cheek grinding against the brick as he pinned me there. Pain flared along my skin, powerful and immediate. "Don't—" I tried, but the rest of the words vanished as his body pressed into mine, trapping me against the wall, forcing the air out of my lungs.

The size of him overwhelmed me. Not strength, mass. Solid, unyielding. I sucked in a breath, tried to shove back, create space.

Something hard pressed into the middle of my back. Square. Cold realization sliced through the panic. Weapon? My pulse spiked even higher. Pounding in my ears. "Listen," I said, my voice shaking. "You don't—"

A breath brushed my ear. Close. Too close. Carrying a faint citrus scent. I stilled.

And then a voice. Low. Roughened. Controlled. "Forget about Henry Smith."

The words were quiet. Chosen by design.

My brain scrambled to process them even as fear clawed its way up my throat. Before I could respond, before I could even fully comprehend what he meant, the pressure vanished.

The weight behind me pulled away so fast it left me off balance. My hands hit the wall to keep myself upright, palms scraping over rough brick.

Footsteps pounded the pavement behind me. I turned. "Hey!" The word came out hoarse, useless. My vision took a second too long to adjust as I spun. The man was already halfway down the alley, moving fast. Big. Broad-shouldered. The kind of presence you noticed even in a crowd. "Stop!" I tried again, pushing off the wall, taking a step after him.

My legs didn't cooperate. Adrenaline made everything shaky, unsteady. The ground tilted. Made me hesitate.

The man reached the end of the alley, turned sharply, and disappeared.

I stood there, chest heaving, the sound of my own breathing too loud in the sudden hush.

"Are you all right?" The voice came from the street behind me.

I turned toward it. A man stood at the mouth of the alley, bundled in a heavy coat, scarf wrapped around his lower face, a grocery bag dangling from one hand he appeared to have forgotten was there.

"You okay?" he asked, stepping closer, his gaze flicking past me toward where the man had vanished.

"I ... " My voice caught. I cleared my throat, forcing the words out.

"Yeah. I think so."

Not a lie, but not quite the truth either.

He frowned. "I saw someone running away." His eyes narrowed, replaying it. "Big guy. Kind of awkward."

My stomach twisted. "Did you see his face?"

"No, he never turned around. But ..." He hesitated, unsure if he should say it.

"But what?"

He shifted his bag from one hand to the other, glancing back down the street before returning his attention to me. "My impression was Angus. From the diner." He paused. "Hard to miss his kind of build."

Angus. The name hit like a second blow. I stared at him. "You're sure?"

He shook his head immediately. "Didn't say that. Just the same size. Same way of moving." A small shrug, uneasy. "I could be wrong."

Could be? No, *had* to be. But the image locked into place anyway. Big. Broad. Impossible to get a grip on. My hands curled at my sides, phantom sensation lingering where I'd tried, and failed, to fight back.

"Do you need me to call someone?" he asked. "Police? Ambulance?"

Eric. The thought came instantly, but no. Not yet. "I'm okay," I said with more conviction this time. "Shaken up a bit, but I'll survive."

He studied me for another second, doubt stamped on his face, then nodded. "All right. If you're sure. But you should get inside. It's not safe hanging around out here."

Not safe. A short, humorless laugh slipped out of me. "Yeah, I kinda got that impression."

That earned the faintest hint of a smile from him, though it didn't quite reach his eyes. "You sure you're good?" he asked one more time.

"I will be."

He nodded again, then turned, heading back down Pine Street, glancing over his shoulder once before disappearing from view.

I waited until he was gone before I moved. My legs still felt unsteady, but they held as I stepped out of the alley and back onto the sidewalk. A movement in my peripheral vision made my pulse jump. Everything felt different now. Every shadow stretched longer. Every sound more distinct, laced with danger.

I forced myself to breathe. In. Out. In. Out.

You're fine.

You're fine.

I walked back to my Wrangler, more aware now of every step, every sound. The quiet didn't comfort me anymore. It pressed in, heavy and watchful. I found the keys on the ground beside the car and stared at them for a second, then at the door.

One minute, I'd been thinking about Christmas presents, and the next—

Picking them up, I slid the key into the lock, my hand steadier. The mechanism thunked, and I yanked the door open, climbed in, and slammed it shut behind me, immediately hitting the lock again. The sound was loud in the enclosed space.

I sat there, hands gripping the steering wheel, breath coming a little too fast.

Forget about Henry Smith.

The words replayed in my head, quieter now but no less disturbing. My gaze drifted to the windshield, but I didn't see the street in front of me anymore. I saw the past few days. The questions I'd asked. The places I'd gone. The people I'd pushed. A chill slid through me that had nothing to do with the cold outside.

My fingers tightened on the wheel. Angus. Maybe. But why would Angus want me to stop investigating a situation he'd asked me to look into in the first place? It made no sense. Unless the circumstances had changed. Maybe a past event he didn't want to come to light, he didn't think would be a factor when he'd first asked for my help.

Or maybe someone wanted me to *think* it was Angus who attacked me.

“Forget about Henry Smith?” I let out a slow breath, watching it fog the glass before fading. “Yeah, that’s not happening.”

Because if someone thought dragging me into an alley was enough to scare me into dropping it, they didn’t know me very well. I started the engine, the familiar rumble steadying the last of the adrenaline buzzing through my system.

Eric’s gift drifted back into my thoughts, distant now, almost laughably trivial compared to everything else. But it lingered anyway, a quiet thread weaving through the confusion. A present. Meaningful. Important to him.

My grip on the wheel eased a bit. I’d figure that out. But first, I’d figure out who thought they could corner me in an alley and walk away like it meant nothing.

And what they were so afraid I might find.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Cold air clung to my coat as I stepped inside Ravenous Readers, the warmth of the shop rising up to meet me. I stood there longer than necessary, letting the door swing shut behind me, scanning the room out of fear now instead of appreciation. No one lurking. No one watching. Still, my shoulders didn't quite relax.

"Jen?"

Lacey's voice cut through the quiet hum of the store. I turned to find her behind the counter, her brows already knitting together as she took in my bruised face. Charlie was perched on a stool behind the pastry case, working on his laptop. He followed her gaze, and whatever he saw made him straighten.

"Well," Charlie said, closing his computer. "You seem to have had a worse morning than usual, and that's saying something."

I tried for a smile, but it didn't land. I shrugged out of my jacket. "Yeah. That's one way to put it."

Lacey didn't wait for more. She rounded the register counter, closing the distance between us in quick steps. "What happened?"

The concern in her voice cracked something open in my chest. I hadn't realized how tightly I'd been holding everything in until that moment. "I got attacked. A few minutes ago, when I left the diner."

A curtain of silence dropped over the room.

Charlie's mouth fell open. "I'm sorry, you what?"

Lacey's hand came up, hovering near my arm, wanting to check for injuries but not sure where to start. "Jen, are you okay? Did you go to the hospital? Who did it?"

"I'm all right. Bruised. Sore. A little banged up, but nothing broken."

"Sit," Lacey said, already guiding me toward the couch by the window as if I didn't have a say in the matter. "Now."

I didn't argue, my stiffening body more than willing to comply.

Charlie dragged over a chair, spinning it around so he could sit backward, arms folded across the backrest as he leaned toward me. Lacey

disappeared to the coffee bar and came back with a mug of steaming liquid, pressing it into my hands. "Start talking."

So, I did. I told them about leaving the diner. About the cold, the quiet, the way my mind had been on Eric, on Christmas, on everything except what I should've been paying attention to.

Charlie winced. "You shouldn't have to worry about getting attacked in Riddleton. It wasn't your fault."

"Thanks, but not helpful."

"Continuing," he said, holding up a hand.

I went on. Reaching my Wrangler. The moment my key slid into the lock. The sudden presence behind me.

Lacey's fingers curled into fists.

"He grabbed me from behind. Fast. Strong. I didn't even get a chance to turn all the way around before he had me."

"Did you see him?" Charlie asked.

I shook my head. "Not really. He kept me turned away most of the time. Then he dragged me into the alley behind the diner and pinned me against the wall. But I fought. I tried to get loose."

"And?" Lacey pressed.

"And he was big." I frowned, trying to pull the memory into clearer focus. "Thick. I couldn't get a grip on him. Every time I tried to twist or hook an arm, there was too much bulk."

Charlie tilted his head. "Big man or layers?"

"Yeah." The word came out slow as it clicked into place in my head.

"That's exactly how it felt. Like he had on multiple layers."

Lacey's expression focused. "That's intentional."

"At the time, I thought I was losing leverage. But now, it felt wrong. Too bulky. Too deliberate."

Lacey's gaze bore into mine. "Padding."

"That's what I'm thinking," I said. "Not only on his torso. Everywhere. He'd built himself up under his clothes."

Charlie sat back, processing. "So not just bulky. Engineered bulky."

"Yeah. He wanted to feel and look bigger than he actually is."

"Harder to identify," Lacey added.

Charlie nodded. "Okay. Go on."

I took a breath, then added, "There's more."

They both leaned in.

“I got one good shot in with my foot. Brought my heel straight down on his toes as hard as I could.”

“That’ll do it,” Charlie said.

“It should have.”

Lacey’s eyes narrowed. “But it didn’t?”

I shook my head. “His foot collapsed under my heel. There was give where there should’ve been toes. Not the solid resistance I expected.”

Charlie frowned. “Sneakers?”

“Maybe. But he didn’t react. No abrupt intake of breath, no shift in balance, nothing that said I’d hurt him. Or even touched him, for that matter. Almost like his shoes were too big for his feet.” Could that explain the light-toed footprints near Henry’s body?

“Huh.”

A thought flickered, uneasy and insistent. “What if he bulked up to fool any witnesses into thinking he was someone else?”

They both went still.

“Say that again,” Charlie said.

I shifted in my seat, the idea taking shape as I spoke it aloud. “What if the bulk wasn’t for protection? What if it was to change his silhouette?”

Lacey’s eyes widened. “You think he wanted to mimic someone else?”

“I think it’s possible.”

“Yeah, but why?” Charlie asked.

“What if he wanted to appear to be Angus?” I said. “Or close enough to make people think he *was* Angus?”

Charlie dragged a hand down his face. “That’s actually not crazy.”

Lacey nodded. “Especially if he knew someone might catch a glimpse.”

“It gives him cover. Someone sees him, reports it, and all of a sudden the suspicion lands on Angus again.”

“Damn,” Charlie muttered. “That’s cold.”

“It’s smart,” Lacey corrected. “Especially since Angus is out on bail.”

I swallowed hard, the implications settling heavy in my gut.

“Did he say anything?” Lacey asked.

I hesitated. “He leaned in close at one point. Right near my ear. Told me to forget about Henry Smith. My head was ringing, but I remember his voice. A low baritone. Controlled. Almost a whisper, but not quite.”

“Anything else?” Charlie pressed.

“I smelled citrus.”

Lacey's brows shot up. "Citrus?"

"Yeah. It hit me when he leaned in. Completely out of place. Not sweat, not alcohol, not anything you'd expect in that kind of situation. Just citrus."

Charlie leaned back, thinking. "That's oddly specific."

"That's what *I* thought. At the time, it didn't matter. All I cared about was getting away. But it stuck with me."

Lacey crossed her arms. "What happened next?"

"He let me go and ran down the alley to Oak, then disappeared around the corner."

"You didn't see his face at all?" Charlie asked.

"No. But a man came by as the guy ran away."

"He identified him?" Lacey said.

I shrugged. "Sort of. He said, to him, the guy looked like Angus."

"And he was sure?" Charlie asked.

"No. He said that was his impression. His first thought. But if someone went out of their way to build themselves up to mimic Angus's size ..."

Charlie let out a slow breath. "That's a whole different level of planning."

"I think this *was* planned. Every part of it. To pin Henry's murder on Angus."

Stillness settled as the three of us turned that over.

I stared down into my mug, watching the steam curl upward.

"Citrus," Lacey said. "That's not common around here. Not for men, anyway."

Charlie shrugged. "Depends. Some guys go for that clean, high-end vibe."

"Not around here," Lacey repeated. "Most men stick to woodsy or musk. A heavier scent. More manly."

"She's right." And then something tickled my brain. Small at first. A flicker. A thread catching. Citrus. Familiar. I went still.

Charlie noticed. "What?"

I didn't answer right away. My brain was already calculating. Pulling up faces, places, conversations.

Lacey rested a hand on my knee. "Jen, what is it?"

"I've smelled it before. That exact scent."

"Okay," Charlie said. "That's good. That's very good. Where?"

I closed my eyes, letting the memory settle. Not the diner. Not here. Not ...

The resort. My eyes snapped open. "I smelled it somewhere at the resort."

Lacey's posture changed. "You're sure?"

The room went quiet again. But this time it wasn't about the attack. It was about what came before.

Lacey considered me for a long moment. "What're you going to do?"

I didn't hesitate. "I'm going to the resort to figure out where I smelled that scent before."

"Are you sure that's wise?" Charlie asked. "Whoever wore that scent attacked you."

I shrugged. "I'm not going to confront anyone. I'll tell Eric who it is and let him take care of it. Besides, I think I'll have another chat with Mary Smith while I'm out there. She might've remembered something useful."

Lacey hesitated, then asked, "Does Eric know about your attack?"

I looked away, focusing on the faint swirl of coffee in my mug. "No."

Charlie grimaced. "No, as in not yet, or no as in you're not telling him?"

I didn't answer right away.

Lacey's voice softened. "Jen ..."

"I'm not telling him."

It got quiet again, but this time it was different. More complicated.

Charlie sat up straighter. "Okay, I'm going to need you to walk me through that decision. Make it make sense."

I exhaled. "If I tell Eric, he's going to shut this down."

"He's going to try to protect you," Lacey said.

"He's going to sideline me. Tell me to stay home, keep out of the investigation."

"And you don't think that's reasonable?" Charlie asked.

"No. Because I'm already in it. He told me his hands were tied. There was nothing he could do to help Angus." I sat down again. "I'm not stepping back now. Not when the story is getting clearer."

"Clearer?" Charlie echoed. "You were just attacked."

"Which means I'm close."

Lacey shook her head. "Or it means you're in danger."

"Both can be true," I said with a wry smile.

She considered me, lips pursed. "This isn't only about the case."

I hesitated. Because she wasn't wrong. "If I tell him, he'll look at me in a different way."

Charlie frowned. "A different way how?"

"Like I'm fragile. Like I need to be handled instead of trusted."

Lacey's expression softened. "Jen ..."

"He won't mean to. But he will. He always does when I get into the kind of trouble I might be walking into. And then every decision I make, every place I go, it'll be a discussion. Or a fight. I don't want that."

Charlie rubbed the back of his neck. "That tends to happen to relationships when one person gets into as much trouble as you seem to."

I shot him a side-eye.

Lacey sat beside me. "You're trying to hold on to control."

"I *am* holding on to control."

"At what cost?"

I didn't answer that because I didn't have a good one.

After a moment, Charlie spoke again, more measured this time. "So, what's the plan? You don't tell him ever?"

"I'll tell him when I have solid information. When I can walk in and say, 'Here's what happened, and here's who did it.' Not, 'I got grabbed in an alley by someone I couldn't identify but might've been Angus.'"

Charlie exhaled. "You realize that's not how this works as a rule."

"I know, but it's how it's going to work this time."

Charlie pointed at me. "Okay, but if this escalates again, if anything else happens, you tell him. Immediately."

I hesitated.

"Jen."

"Okay. If it escalates, I tell him."

"Good," he said. "Because I'd rather deal with an overprotective Eric than help him plan your funeral."

"Wow, that's comforting."

"Just being honest."

I grabbed my jacket, easing it over stiff shoulders.

Lacey stood too. "Call us when you get there."

"I will."

"And when you leave."

"Yes, Mother." I turned to Charlie. "And in the meantime, see if you can find a connection between Bobby Richardson and someone at the resort."

“Will do.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The road to the resort wound through a stretch of dense woodland that always felt a little too quiet for comfort. Even in daylight, it carried an eerie, suspended stillness. My Wrangler rumbled beneath me, tires crunching over the narrow strip of asphalt as pale morning light filtered through the canopy above. It broke into long, shifting shadows slithering across the road, reminiscent of a snake dashing back to its burrow.

Tall pines pressed in on either side, their branches knitting together overhead in places, turning the sky into thin slivers of gray-blue. The deeper I drove, the darker it felt. Not in a horror-movie way exactly, more closed in. Contained. As if there were fewer ways out than ways in. The air seemed colder here. Even with the windows up, I could almost smell the damp earth, the pine sap, the faint decay of leaves that had been settling into the ground for years.

Visibility was limited. Curves came up fast, one after another, each bend hiding whatever came next. A deer. A fallen branch. Or worse.

My hands gripped the steering wheel as I rounded another turn, my eyes scanning automatically. Road, trees, ditch line, back to road. Habit. Awareness. The kind hardwired into me these days whether I wanted it or not. My grip on the wheel tightened as I rounded another turn, the trees closing in tighter before opening enough to let a wash of light spill across the hood.

But my mind refused to stay in one lane. The resort. Henry Smith. Eric. Back to the resort. Then Eric again. As if my brain had decided to juggle knives for fun.

Then, because my brain had impeccable timing, Eric took over my thoughts the way he always did. Christmas. I groaned and tipped my head back against the seat for half a second before refocusing on the road.

Of all the times for this. I might be about to confront a murderer, and my psyche wanted to workshop gift ideas? What should I get a man who has everything he wants or needs? The question circled, persistent and unhelpful.

Eric wasn't hard to shop for in the obvious sense. He liked practical things, well-made things, things with purpose. Which also made it harder. Anything generic would feel wrong. Selfish, as if I hadn't been paying attention.

He'd notice. He always noticed. A memory surfaced without my thinking about it. Him tightening a loose screw on my kitchen cabinet without saying a word. Fixing it as if it mattered, even though I could do it myself, no problem, and my apartment complex had a maintenance crew if I couldn't.

My grip on the steering wheel softened. Something meaningful, then. Something that said *I see you*. Great. No pressure there. I exhaled and shook my head.

Focus, Jen.

Somebody at the resort might be a murderer. Which probably deserved top billing on my priorities list. Angus needed me. Now more than ever. The thought steadied me more than anything else had in days.

Kirby on the Lake rose out of the landscape in a way designed to scream money while pretending it didn't. The main building sat finished and polished, all clean lines and warm tones, while off to the side, construction crews moved in synchrony. Painting, hauling, the sharp staccato of nail guns cutting through the air. Two worlds overlapping. One for show. One still being created.

I pulled into the parking lot and cut the engine, letting the silence settle around me. Fortifying myself before going inside to annoy a potentially dangerous man.

Good plan, Jen.

The breeze coming off the lake bit my cheeks when I stepped out, crossed the lot, and headed toward the entrance. The lobby hadn't changed since the last time I'd been here, which seemed like a year or more, though it'd only been a few days. High ceilings with exposed wooden beams, soft lighting placed with care, polished stone floors that reflected enough to remind guests how clean everything was.

A massive arrangement of poinsettias dominated the center table, all structured elegance and bright color, buried under a huge dollop of Christmas. Behind the front desk stood a man who carried himself as someone who'd been hired to prevent problems. Tall, mid-thirties, dark hair combed with precision, jawline sharp and defined. His name tag read *Evan*,

and his expression already hovered somewhere between polite and disapproving.

“Good afternoon,” he said, voice smooth and practiced. “How may I assist you?”

Translation: Please don't make my job harder.

“Afternoon,” I said, offering a quick smile. No trace of citrus on Evan. One down. “Would you mind calling Mary Smith’s room and telling her Jen Dawson is here to see her?”

“Actually, Mrs. Smith is in the lounge at the moment.” He pointed across the lobby.

“I know where it is, thank you.”

“My pleasure. Enjoy your visit.”

Doubtful, but stranger things have happened.

I found Mary Smith in the same seat, at the same table beside the fireplace. Only this time, her coffee cup had been replaced by a lowball glass containing an amber liquid served neat, and her rumpled clothing and cosmetics-free face appeared anything but controlled and contained. Grief had finally struck home.

“Mind if I join you?” I asked, gesturing toward the empty seat opposite her.

“Help yourself,” she replied in a flat voice followed by a large swallow from her glass.

I pulled out the chair and sat. “Thank you.”

“Would you like a drink? I think there’s a waiter around here somewhere.”

“I’m fine, thanks. I won’t take up much of your time.”

“How’s the investigation going? Still think your guy’s innocent?”

“I do. Which is why I’m here.”

She lifted her drink, then set it back down again. “What can I do for you? Pretty sure I answered all your questions last time.”

“You were very helpful. I was wondering if you’d remembered anything else since we spoke. Anything else unusual about Henry’s behavior or something he might’ve said.”

Silence while she sipped, then she shook her head. “No, nothing I can think of.”

A man dressed in black pants, a white shirt, and black vest approached our table. “Can I get you ladies anything?”

“Nothing for me, thanks,” I replied, detecting no hint of citrus from him, either.

Mary lifted her empty tumbler. “I’ll have another one of these.”

“Scotch?”

“Black Label. Neat.”

“Yes, ma’am. Johnnie Walker Black coming right up.” He retrieved her empty tumbler and strode to the bar.

“So, where were we?” she asked, hands restless with nothing to distract them. “Oh, yes. Questions. Questions and more questions. My husband, the father of my children, is dead, and all anybody cares about is asking questions.”

For the first time, I wondered just how many of those drinks she’d had. And, right on cue, our server appeared with her refill. I waited for him to leave, then said, “I really only have one more question for you, Mrs. Smith. Can you tell me why your husband wanted to apply for a job so far from home?”

She studied me over the top of her glass. “Henry didn’t apply for this job. He was recruited by Steve Adler. Completely out of the blue.”

Funny how Adler hadn’t mentioned that when I asked him about Henry relocating here. Guess I’d have to talk to him again before I went back to Riddleton. “Any idea why?”

“Why Henry was recruited? None at all. I thought it a little strange, but Henry was so happy, I didn’t want to bring him down, so I didn’t push it. He’d been so miserable lately. Figured we had plenty of time to talk about it if he got the job.”

My stomach soured, sending bile up my esophagus. People always thought they had more time. “Did he tell you what about the offer made him so happy?”

“What didn’t? The pay, the benefits, opportunities for advancement were way above average. It seemed like the perfect job. Too good to be true, in my opinion, but Henry wouldn’t hear any of it.”

We sat in silence for a few minutes while I struggled to find another question to ask. At this point, I believed Mary Smith had told me all she knew about the prelude to her husband’s death. I stood. “Is there anything I can do for you, Mrs. Smith? Anything you need?”

“I need that detective to let me take my husband home. My children need closure, and if I’m honest so do I.”

“I’ll see what I can do. Thank you for your time.”

She lifted her glass in a toast and drank deeply.

I headed for the front desk. Evan was still the man in charge.

He looked up as I approached. “Did you have a good visit?”

“I did, thanks. Now I need one more favor, if you don’t mind. Can you please call Mr. Adler and tell him Jen Dawson would like to speak with him?”

He hesitated.

I could almost see the internal checklist running behind his eyes. Protocol, professionalism, risk versus reward.

“Please. I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important.”

Another beat. Then a quick, short nod. “I’ll contact his office.”

“Thank you.”

He picked up the phone, dialing with efficient precision, his voice dropping low as he spoke into the receiver. I couldn’t hear the words, but I watched his posture. The slight straightening, the respectful tone. Definitely talking to someone important. The call stretched into a full minute. Then he nodded again. “Yes, sir. I understand.”

He hung up and turned back to me. “Mr. Adler will see you.”

My tension eased a notch. “Great. Thank you.” I glanced at his name tag again. “Evan.”

“He’s in the administrative wing. You’ll take the hallway to your left, follow it past the spa entrance, and continue until you reach a set of double doors. His office is the third on the right.”

“Got it.”

“And, ma’am ...” He paused.

“Jen,” I said again.

His lips pressed into an almost smile. “Yes. Mr. Adler asked for you to come alone.”

I glanced around the empty lobby. “Wasn’t planning to bring a crowd.”

That earned me the faintest lift of an eyebrow.

I turned and headed down the hallway. The resort changed personality as I moved deeper inside, the public warmth fading into something quieter, more functional. The hallways narrowed, the décor simplified. Staff members passed by on occasion, each one focused, purposeful. The behind-the-scenes version of luxury, functioning the same way as the gears and springs of a clock.

The double doors appeared, as Evan had described. I pushed through them and found myself in a quieter corridor, the air cooler, the lighting brighter. Third door on the right. I stopped in front of it, hand hovering for a millisecond before I knocked.

“Come in.”

I opened the solid door. Steve Adler’s office was what I should’ve expected, and somehow still surprising. Large, but not ostentatious. Floor-to-ceiling windows lined one wall, offering a sweeping view of the lake beyond, golden light spilling across the water. The desk was dark wood, sleek and uncluttered, with a single desktop computer monitor, a leather notebook, and a pen placed with almost obsessive precision.

Behind him, a bookshelf held a mix of business texts, hospitality guides, and a few decorative statues chosen with care. Nothing personal, nothing messy. Everything curated. Intentional. And Steve himself fit right into the décor he’d created.

He stood as I entered, composed, dressed in a tailored charcoal suit belonging in a boardroom more than a lakeside resort. “Jen, good to see you again.” He gestured toward one of the leather wingback chairs in front of the desk. “Please, have a seat.”

I stepped inside, closing the door behind me, and eased into the seat. “Thanks for seeing me on short notice.”

“Evan mentioned you wanted to talk to me?”

“Yes. About Henry Smith.”

He sat back down, folding his hands neatly in front of him. “I thought we pretty well covered the topic last time you came out here. I’m not sure what else I can add.”

“I only have a couple more questions. It won’t take but a minute.”

“What do you want to know?”

I appreciated his directness and hoped he’d appreciate mine. “Why him?”

A trace of interest crossed his face. “Why Henry?”

“Yes. Out of everyone you could’ve brought in, why Henry Smith?”

Steve leaned back in his chair, fingers steeped in front of him as he studied me. “Henry had a particular skill set.”

“Which was?”

“He understood systems,” Steve said. “Not in a surface-level way. He could see how everything connected. Where the weak points were and how

to move through them without setting anything off-kilter. He was the type to anticipate problems before they happened and fix the ones he couldn't anticipate before anyone noticed."

"He worked for a construction company."

"He didn't come up through traditional IT channels, but sometimes that's an advantage. He wasn't boxed in by standard protocols. He approached things in a different way than most IT specialists. And I hoped his differences would make him very effective."

"So, you recruited him personally?"

"Yes."

"How'd you find him?"

"A recommendation," he said smoothly. "From a mutual acquaintance."

"Name?"

The corners of his lips twitched. "I don't believe that's relevant."

"Everything's relevant in a murder investigation."

"And you're not in law enforcement. You're a writer." His gaze held mine. "Henry would've been an asset. That's what matters."

"And now he's dead."

The words hung between us. Adler didn't flinch. "Yes."

"What happened to him, Steve?"

Before he could answer, my phone vibrated. The sound was a buzz saw cutting through the thick air in the room. I froze, then forced a casual smile.

"Sorry. I should—"

He waved a hand. "Go ahead."

I pulled my phone out, glancing at the screen.

Charlie.

I answered, keeping my tone light. "Hey, Charlie."

"Jen, listen carefully," he said, voice low and urgent. "Bobby Richardson? The name we've been chasing?"

My pulse jumped. "Yeah?"

"It's him. Steve Adler is Bobby Richardson."

Everything inside me went very, very still. I glanced up.

Steve Adler watched me with a thoughtful expression on his face.

"I'm chatting with Steve Adler up here at the resort. Can it wait until I get back?"

There was a beat of silence on the other end. "Then you need to—"

I cut in quickly, injecting enough annoyance to make it believable with a fair share of luck. "Okay, I'll take care of it when I get back to the store. Shouldn't be more than an hour or so." I shrugged one shoulder at Steve and rolled my eyes. "Good enough?"

Another pause. "Okay," Charlie said slowly. "Be careful."

"Got it. See you soon." I hung up, holding the phone in my lap with what I hoped appeared to be mild irritation. "Sorry about the interruption."

Steve hadn't moved. "Problem at the bookstore?"

"They can't function without me, it seems."

Silence stretched. The air shifted. Subtle, but unmistakable. The room temperature seemed to drop a few degrees. Steve leaned forward, resting his forearms on the desk. "Jen," he said, voice softer now. "What exactly is it you think you're doing here?"

My grip tightened on my cell, palms slick with sweat. "Getting answers."

"And have you?"

"Not yet."

His lips curved, but there was no warmth in it. "I think you have."

My pulse thudded in my ears.

"I think you've stumbled into a situation you don't fully understand."

"Then help me understand it." For a moment, I thought he might.

Then his gaze flicked to my lap.

"I'll take that phone now."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

The hallway gave the impression of growing longer the farther we went. Not physically longer, obviously, but stretched in the warped, elastic way space does when nerves light up and instincts scream. Every step took too long to land. Too long to recover from.

Steve walked a few feet behind me, keys jangling from his hand enough to remind me they were there. That *he* had them, and they meant bad news for me without a doubt.

Soft, golden lighting spilled from evenly spaced sconces along the walls, illuminating a wide carpeted path in warm, neutral tones. Everything about the place designed to soothe. To relax your guard. Framed landscape prints of the lake hung at regular intervals. Mist over water, early morning light, quiet docks disappearing into infinity. Each one chosen to reinforce the calm, retreat-like atmosphere.

Every door we passed was uniform but inviting. Polished wood. Clean brass handles with keycard entry. Numbers screwed in neatly, catching the light. Small touches—like a narrow console table with a vase of dried wildflowers, the faint scent of pine drifting through the air—gave the place a lived-in warmth. Natural rather than staged. But it *was* staged. It had to be.

It should've been comforting. My pulse sped up with each step anyway. I forced myself to breathe in a regular rhythm, matching his pace, willing my shoulders to stay loose so as not to let him see the fear sliding down my spine. "Where are we going?" I asked, my voice too loud in the quiet, verging on the brink of panic.

He didn't stop. "Somewhere safe."

Safe. For me or him?

My fingers curled at my sides. I glanced back. His expression hadn't changed. Calm. Focused. Dealing with me, another task on his daily checklist. "Steve, what're you doing? You'll only make things worse for yourself."

He hesitated, a flicker of annoyance crossing his face, then lifted the keys as if they explained everything. "Almost there."

Not an answer. But pushing harder right now felt dangerous. Stepping too close to the edge of a canyon I couldn't see the bottom of yet. So, I let it go. For now.

He stepped ahead of me, closing the last stretch of hallway to a door at the very end. And everything in me tightened. Unlike the other doors, this one didn't have a number. It did have something else, though.

A deadbolt.

Not the standard little latch you flip from inside a hotel room. This was heavy-duty. Industrial. A Schlage lock meant to keep people out. Or, in this case, in. It sat above the handle, solid and deliberate, the dull metal catching the soft light.

My stomach dropped. I stopped a few feet back. "Why does this door lock from the outside? Isn't that a fire hazard?"

Steve's hand stilled on the keys.

For a second, I thought he might ignore me.

Then he let out a soft breath. Almost a laugh, but without humor. "Growing up, I didn't always get to choose who I shared space with." His voice was different now. Not angry. Flat. As if all the emotion had been squashed out of it by an industrial press. "I was in foster care for a long time. Different houses. Different people." A beat. "Some better than others. I learned pretty quick the value of keeping people out of my room."

My eyes flicked back to the deadbolt.

"Especially at night." He took a deep breath, eyes clouded in memory. "I didn't have a choice then, but I do now."

A chill ran through me, and I almost felt sorry for him. Almost. Then, the reality of the situation I found myself in sprang back into place like the trap it was. "And this is your version of control? This is what you do with your newfound freedom?"

He considered me for a beat, a calculation behind his eyes. Then he smiled. "Something like that."

Before I could respond, he turned, slid the key into the lock, and twisted. The deadbolt clicked open with a heavy, foreboding sound. He opened the door and stepped aside, gesturing me in. "After you."

My every instinct screamed not to move. Not to go inside. Not to make this easy for him. But the hallway behind me wasn't safety, either. Only a different kind of trap. And there was nowhere to run, so I stepped inside.

The room appeared larger than I expected, and somehow worse for it. Not a typical guest room either. It felt lived in. A wooden dresser stood to the left, its surface cluttered with random objects. A half-empty glass, a couple of paperback books, a small flashlight. And the curtains were drawn tight over the window, but a thin line of light leaked through the edges, enough to outline the room in a muted gray.

The air smelled stale. Closed in. A queen-sized bed sat against the far wall, rumpled sheets tangled as if someone had been tossing and turning for hours. And on the bed I found Angus. He lay flat on his back, staring up at the ceiling, counting the cracks in the plaster. His hands rested on his stomach, fingers twitching, lost somewhere deep in thought.

He didn't react when we walked in. Didn't sit up. Didn't turn his head.

"Angus," Steve said. "I brought you some company."

Angus turned his head, his gaze landing on Steve first, then sliding past him to me. Relief tinged with fear broke across his face. "Jen ..." His voice came out rough. Dry, as if he hadn't used it in a while

"Figured you two would have a lot to talk about," Steve replied. "Catch up on everything you've missed since you went on vacation."

My heart hammered as I stepped farther into the room, my focus on Angus. He looked tired. Worn down in a way that made my heart break. His hair was messier than usual, exposing more of his bald spot, his jaw shadowed with stubble, and he carried a tension I'd never seen in him before. "How long have you been here?"

Angus pushed himself up onto his elbows, glancing at Steve for a split second before answering. "Since court."

My stomach sank. His bail hearing was two days ago. Two days alone in this room with *him* coming and going. Time felt slippery all of a sudden. I turned to Steve. "You helped him get out of jail?"

"I did. Visited him in jail. Talked to a few people. Helped him with bail money when he didn't have enough."

Angus let out a short, humorless laugh. "Yeah. Real generous."

Steve's smile didn't falter. "And then I picked him up—"

"And brought him here to rot," Angus finished.

Silence stretched for a beat. I swallowed back a lump in my throat. "Why didn't you take him home? Why bring him here?"

Steve tilted his head, brows lowered as if the answer should've been obvious. "Because this is safer."

That word again. “For who?” I snapped.

He didn’t answer. Instead, he stepped back toward the door. “Get comfortable. You’ll both be here a while.”

My gut clenched. “Steve—”

The door shut, and the deadbolt slid into place with a solid, final thunk. And in an instant, he was gone. Neither of us spoke. I stood there, staring at the door as if I could somehow will it open again.

Then Angus exhaled. “Yeah, that’s about how it went for me, too.”

I turned back to him, my mind snapping into gear. “He’s been keeping you locked in here this whole time?”

“Yeah.”

“Why aren’t you ...” I gestured vaguely around the room, frustration bleeding through. “Breaking something? Climbing out the window?”

“I tried.” He eased his legs over the side of the bed and sat up, rubbing a hand over his face. “First thing I did was check the window. Doesn’t open more than a couple inches. Some kind of stopper. I even tried forcing it. No luck.”

“Did you try to break it?”

He gave a short laugh. “Safety glass. Wouldn’t even crack.”

I moved to the window, tugging at the frame. He wasn’t kidding. It barely budged. “Okay,” I said, forcing myself to think. “Door?”

“Solid wood. Deadbolt. Hinges are on this side, but no way to get ’em out without tools. And we don’t happen to have any at the moment.”

I pressed my palm against the door anyway, as if feeling it might offer a revelation. Nothing but unyielding wood. “Bathroom?”

Angus nodded toward a door in the corner.

I crossed the room and pushed it open. Small and basic. Sink, toilet, shower. No window. No vents big enough to crawl through. I stepped back out, my thoughts spinning faster. Not panic. Not yet. Problem-solving. “Okay, we need to think this through. There must be a way out of here.”

Angus watched me, his gaze steadier now. “I’ve been trying for two days. Maybe a second brain’ll help.”

It might if it weren’t mine. “What are we missing?” My gaze swept the room again. Not as a victim. As someone looking for weaknesses. This wasn’t a holding room. It was his living space.

I checked the phone on the nightstand. The cord had disappeared. I moved to the dresser, examining the items. Flipped through the books with

dog-eared pages, cracked spines. One was a crime novel recently on the bestseller list, and the other older, classic literature I'd never heard of. A notebook sat half-hidden beneath them, its cover scuffed.

Flipping it open, I found blank pages at first glance, but then noticed faint impressions. Something had been written and torn out. I ran my fingers over it, trying to catch any indentation. Nothing useful. Especially without a pencil to shade over the words. The drink beside it smelled of alcohol. I glanced at Angus. Coping mechanism? Or just passing time.

I moved to the closet next. Inside hung a few jackets and three black suits. A pair of boots—size nine—sat beneath them, alongside a duffel bag. I crouched, unzipping it. Empty. No help, unless I planned to smother him with it.

I stood, frustration building. “The problem is he’s confident.”

Angus snorted. “Yeah. That’s one word for it.”

“He thinks this setup is enough to keep us out of the way. We’re contained for the duration as far as he’s concerned.”

“Aren’t we?”

“Not necessarily. Overconfidence makes people sloppy.”

He considered me. “I’ll go along with that. So, what are we missing?”

I leaned against the dresser, forcing my mind to slow down.

Think, Jen.

“Food?” I asked suddenly.

Angus pointed toward a small tray on the floor beside the bed. “Brings it a couple times a day. Water too.”

“How does he do it? Unlocks the door and walks in?”

“Pretty much.”

I straightened. “And you haven’t tried rushing him?”

Angus hesitated. “For what? I’m no fighter, and he knows it. And he’s careful.”

“What do you mean?”

“He doesn’t come in all the way. Keeps his distance. Sets the tray down, watching me the whole time. The door stays open behind him.”

So, he wasn’t stupid. Still ... “What about the timing? Does he come on a predictable schedule?”

“Roughly. Sometime in the morning, then again late afternoon.”

A small crack. I nodded, pieces starting to fall into place. “What if we don’t go at him head on?”

Angus raised an eyebrow. "I'm listening."

I gestured between us. "He's used to only one person. One set of movements, one set of reactions."

"And now there are two."

My brain clicked. "Which means two trays instead of one. Twice the opportunity to get to him." I pushed off the dresser, energy building now. "We use it. Confuse the situation. Split his attention."

Angus leaned forward. "Go on."

"When he opens the door, one of us draws him in. Talking, arguing, pretending to approach him. Whatever it takes."

"And the other?"

"Stays out of sight."

His eyes flicked around the room. "Not a lot of hiding spots, except the bathroom, of course."

"The bathroom'll do." I glanced at the door, then back at him. "But actually, behind the open door might be better."

Understanding flickered across his face. "He opens it inward ..."

"Which means there's a blind spot," I finished.

He nodded slowly.

"He only needs to hesitate for a second. And we have the element of surprise."

"And that's all we'd get, most likely." Angus considered it, his jaw tightening. "Still risky. And what if he doesn't bring food this time?"

"It's a chance we'll have to take. What choice is there? Besides, he'll have to bring food eventually. Starvation would take weeks."

"Then what would he do with us? Hauling two dead bodies through a busy resort wouldn't be high on his list of solutions." He smiled. "Yeah, it might work."

A small, fragile thread of hope sparked in my chest. Not much. But enough. I looked around the room once more, this time not as a trap, but as a puzzle.

Steve thought he had control. Thought he'd accounted for everything. But he hadn't counted on this. On us working together.

Which would be his biggest mistake.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

The waiting was the worst part. It always was. The stretch of time before the action, when everything felt suspended and too distinct all at once. Every sound louder and passing second longer.

I couldn't sit, but tried for Angus's sake. I lowered myself into the chair near the desk, hands folded as if capable of calm, as if I wasn't vibrating out of my own skin. The cushion dipped beneath me, too soft, too yielding, and within seconds I sprang back to my feet again.

Pacing. Three steps to the door. Turn. Four steps to the window. Turn. Repeat.

"Jen," Angus said from where he sat on the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees, watching me. "You're going to wear a groove in the carpet."

I looked down at the flattened track beneath my feet. "I already have."

The room smelled stale. Closed space. No escape. It made my lungs feel tight.

"He's going to notice," Angus added.

"I want him to notice." I stopped pacing long enough to look at him. "I want him off balance. Distracted."

"What about the element of surprise? You're not exactly being subtle right now."

"I'm not trying to be subtle." My voice came out harsher than I intended. I dragged a hand through my hair, forcing myself to stop moving. "I'm trying not to explode before he even gets here."

Angus leaned back, studying me, his expression steady. Grounding, if I let it be. "Then talk to me."

I let out a slow breath. "About what?"

Voices drifted somewhere down the hall, a distant door closed, and behind the walls, a mechanical humming. Everything seemed too near and too far away at the same time.

"Tell me about the accident," I said finally. The words felt more oppressive out loud than they had in my head.

Angus didn't answer right away. His shoulders stiffened, and his gaze drifted past me, searching for somewhere else to be. Anywhere but here.

I waited, making another pass along my path.

“You already know about the accident,” he said after a moment, his voice rougher than before.

“I know the version reported in the papers. Not yours.”

He stared down at his hands, turning them the way he would if seeing them for the first time. “You remember I moved here from New Hampshire after my wife died, right?”

“Yes.”

“We lived in a small town. Nothing place. Everyone knew everyone. You couldn’t sneeze without someone, somewhere, saying ‘Gesundheit.’”

“Sounds a lot like Riddleton.”

Angus nodded. “Henry went to high school with my sister. They dated for a while, then she broke it off.”

“Sounds benign enough. Why did you argue about her at the Christmas party?”

“The reason Angelica broke up with him was he had a drinking problem. He scared her a few times while driving drunk. And he always refused to give up the car keys. Thought he was invincible. He swerved around a bend one time too many, and she’d had enough.”

I waited for him to get to the part relevant to the argument, hands clasped on the table. Listening, the way Eric told me to what seemed like a lifetime ago.

Finally, he took a deep breath and said, “He swore he’d stopped drinking. Begged Angelica for another chance. She believed him.”

He stood and moved toward the window. Not much to see. Only a dull stretch of parking lot and the dark edge of the tree line. But he stared out, hoping it might offer him something solid to hold on to.

His hand came up, fingers bracing against the glass. “They were driving back late from a date. It was a dark night. No moon, lots of cloud cover. That stretch of road runs right along the lake.” He swallowed. “Henry Smith was drunk. Really drunk. Blood alcohol still over the limit when someone spotted them the next morning and called 911.”

He pushed off the window and started pacing. Tight, restless strides, mirroring my movements from earlier. The energy in the room had shifted into him.

“He missed a curve. Swerved off the road into a tree.” His gaze flicked to the floor, seeing the scene in his mind as it happened, even though he

hadn't been there. "Angelica died on the way to the hospital. If first responders had gotten to her sooner ..."

A bowling ball settled in my gut. "She might have lived?"

"Maybe, though there's no way to know for sure. She was badly hurt and might've died, anyway. But we'll never know because Henry Smith was too scared to call for help. Decided to wait until his blood alcohol level came down. By then it was too late."

"And the other car? The one they found in the lake."

"Months later," he replied, the words tight. "Search teams missed it because of the ice covering the water."

"A whole family lost."

"And no proof Smith was involved."

My pulse kicked up. "And tonight?"

Angus exhaled, bracing himself for impact all over again. "Tonight, we stop letting Adler hide behind his new identity. We push him. See what breaks."

"You're expecting a confession?"

"I'm going to say whatever I have to in order to get one." His mouth tightened. "His kind, when you corner them, they show you who they really are."

"And if he doesn't?"

"I'll crack him like a rotten walnut."

I persisted, concerned about Angus's mental state. "And if he doesn't crack?"

He didn't answer.

I stepped closer, lowering my voice. "When he comes in, you keep him talking. Bring up the crash and how it affected him. Make it personal. Don't let him leave the room."

"And you?"

"I'll be behind the door, waiting for my chance."

Angus frowned. "This could go sideways fast."

"It already has." I held his gaze. "We're just catching up." For a second, I thought he might argue more.

But then he nodded, slow and reluctant. "All right. But if this goes wrong—"

"It will, without a doubt. The question is what we do when it does."

A knock echoed somewhere down the hall. Not our door. Not yet, but soon.

Then a rattle sounded in the hall outside our room. My pulse spiked. “This is it.”

Angus straightened on the bed.

I didn’t give myself time to think. If I did, I might hesitate. And hesitation wasn’t an option we could afford. I moved fast, slipping into the bathroom. Flushed the toilet. The sudden rush of water filled the small space, loud and unmistakable.

I turned on the faucet next, letting it run full force. More noise equals more cover.

“You can do this,” I whispered to myself. *Liar*. But I didn’t need to believe it. I only needed to pretend I did.

Cracking the door open, I slipped out quietly and eased it back into place. The running water masked everything.

I moved beside the hinge side of the hall door and flattened myself against the wall so when Henry opened fully, it would block me from his view. Positioning meant the difference between potential success and abject failure. My heart hammered so loudly I was sure it would give me away.

Seconds crawled by. Then a key in the lock.

Every muscle in my body went rigid.

A heavy thunk as the deadbolt slid back.

The door opened.

I squeezed into the hinges, blinding myself to Steve’s actions.

“Where’s Jen?” Steve asked.

“In the bathroom,” Angus replied, the way we’d planned.

A hesitation, then Steve chuckled. “Figures. Isn’t that where women are always hiding when you need them?”

“I’ve been thinking,” Angus continued, calm but firm, ignoring Steve’s misogynistic remark. “About the accident.”

“What accident?” Steve asked, but the way he said it didn’t ring true. Too quick. Too defensive.

“The one that killed Angelica, my sister,” Angus said. “And probably the Robinson family, too.”

Another pause. “What about it? I had nothing to do with any of that. I wasn’t even there.”

I could feel the tension building without being able to see it for myself.

“No, but it affected you.”

“That’s ridiculous. How?”

“You know how.” Angus didn’t back off. “You murdered Henry Smith because of what happened that night.”

“I don’t know what you’re getting at.”

“I think you do.”

Footsteps. Closer to Angus.

“You’re butting into a situation you don’t understand,” Steve warned.

“Then help me understand,” Angus shot back. “Because from where I’m sitting, it looks like you murdered the man who killed the family who was going to adopt you. And tried to pin it on me.”

A sharp breath.

Got him.

“You’re reaching,” Steve said, but the tension in his voice gave him away.

“Am I? Because it’s the only thing that makes sense. Angelica dies. The Robinsons die, and poof, your entire future disappears.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Then explain it to me.”

“I don’t owe you any explanations.”

“No, but you owe Henry one.”

The room went still. Then Steve lost his composure. “You think I didn’t try to move on with my life?” he burst out, the words ripping free before he could stop them. “You think I shouldn’t have gone after him for what he did? He destroyed my chance for a future.”

Steve sucked in a breath, realizing what he’d said, too late to take it back. The crack had widened. Almost enough for him to fall in. “You don’t know anything,” Steve said, but the control in his voice was slipping now, fraying at the edges.

“Then tell me. Tell me what you did.”

“I found him. I tracked him down after they let him walk like it was nothing. Like he didn’t wipe out an entire family and your sister in one night.”

My heart slammed harder against my ribs.

“You lured him down here and murdered him,” Angus said with no emotion.

I heard the shift. Footsteps moving, faster now, heavier. Closing the distance.

“You need to drop this.”

Angus chuckled. “Or what?”

A thud. A chair scraping. Close together now. Too close.

Steve had moved all the way into the room.

Exactly where I needed him.

Now. I sprang into action. The door swung as I lunged forward, all momentum and adrenaline. My arms locked around Steve from behind, clamping across his shoulders and chest.

No time for him to react. Not at first. Then: “What the—” He jerked violently, trying to shake me off.

I held on, every muscle screaming. “Angus, go!” I shouted.

“Jen—”

“Go!”

Angus pushed past us, jerking open the door.

Steve twisted. His elbow slammed into my side.

Pain exploded through my ribs, forcing the air from my lungs.

I didn’t let go. Couldn’t.

His hand shot back, tangling in my hair, yanking hard.

Stars exploded behind my eyes. I gasped. My grip slipped.

He spun, breaking free, shoving me backward.

I staggered, catching myself before I hit the floor.

“Crazy—” he started, but I didn’t let him finish.

The half-full glass still sat on the desk. I grabbed it.

Alcohol sloshed over the rim as I hurled the contents straight at his face.

Liquid splashed across his eyes, soaking into them. He recoiled, swearing, hands flying up. “What the hell—”

He stumbled back, blinking.

An opportunity.

I didn’t hesitate.

I grabbed the desk chair and swung. The impact cracked across his back, jolting my arms.

He cried out, sinking to one knee.

I dropped the chair, breath coming in ragged bursts.

Move. Move now.

I bolted past him. Past the threshold. Into the hallway.

I ran. Footsteps pounded behind me.
No. In front of me. I skidded and slammed straight into Eric.
He caught my shoulders, steadying me. “Jen—what—”
“Move!” I gasped, panic surging. “He’s behind me.”
Eric pivoted instantly, pushing me down the hall with one hand while drawing his weapon with the other.
He barked at me. “Run! Get to the lobby.”
I ran.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

The first thing I noticed was the quiet in the house. Not the uneasy second shadow following me around the last couple of weeks. The soft, settled peace coming when a home is full of warmth and expectation instead of dread. It sat in the corners of the living room, curled beneath the glow of the Christmas lights strung around the windows, and lingered in the kitchen, where Eric had a rich, savory offering simmering on the stove.

For once, my thoughts didn't race ahead of me.

For once, I let myself stand there and breathe it in.

Savannah ruined the moment by skidding across the hardwood floor and almost taking out my knees.

"Hey, whoa!" I caught myself by the top of the couch as the German shepherd barreled past, nails clicking, a blur of tan and black and irrepressible energy.

From somewhere behind me came the soft, indignant *mrrp* of Casper, followed by the delicate patter of kitten paws.

"Don't even think about it," I warned, in time to see Savannah pivot.

She lunged toward the fluffy white cat, who puffed up to twice his size and bounced sideways, reminding me of a startled marshmallow.

"Savannah!" Eric called from the stove without turning around. "Leave your brother alone."

Brother was generous. Casper no doubt didn't agree with the label.

Savannah halted mid-pounce, glanced back at Eric, then sat, hard, as if she'd just remembered gravity existed. Her tail thumped against the floor.

Casper, emboldened by her sudden obedience, trotted past her with his tail held high, knowing in his kitty mind he'd orchestrated the whole thing.

"You're both disasters," I told them, laughing.

Savannah grinned, tongue hanging out the side of her mouth.

Eric turned, wooden spoon in hand, brow a little damp from the heat of the stove. "They've been this way all afternoon," he said. "If Savannah doesn't calm down, I'm putting them both upstairs."

Savannah's ears twitched.

Casper blinked slowly.

Neither of them looked a bit worried.

“They’ll behave,” I said, though I had absolutely no basis for the claim.

Eric gave me a look, telling me he knew how unreliable my prediction was. Still, he smiled, and something in my chest loosened. “You okay?”

“I am, yeah.” I slid my arms around him and kissed the back of his neck.

He studied me for a second longer, then returned his attention to the stove. “Good. Because we’ve got people coming in—” he glanced at the clock “—ten minutes, and I need you to tell me if the table looks like Christmas or a craft store blew up.”

I pushed off the counter, moved into the dining room, and stopped. “Oh.” The best I could manage.

Eric leaned to peek around the doorway. “That bad?”

“No.” I shook my head. “That ... wow.”

The table resembled a magazine spread, but warmer. Less staged, more us. A deep green runner stretched down the center, edged with pine garland dotted with small white lights. Real pine I could smell from where I stood. Tucked between the branches were small clusters of cranberries, adding little bursts of red.

The white dishes rimmed in gold Eric’s mother had given us for a housewarming present were each topped with a folded napkin tied with twine and a tiny sprig of rosemary. The silverware gleamed, and the glasses reflected the light from candles spaced evenly along the runner’s center. “It looks like Christmas. It smells like Christmas.”

Eric’s voice came from behind me, quieter now. “Good. That was the goal.”

I turned, leaning back against the table, taking him in—the rolled sleeves, the loosened collar, the way he looked both frazzled and completely in his element at the same time.

“What are you making?”

He perked up as if I’d flipped a switch. “Okay,” he said, pointing the spoon at me. “We’ve got a rosemary garlic roasted chicken. Whole bird, nice and crispy skin. I did a red wine reduction for it, a little drizzle, nothing heavy.”

“Of course you did,” I said with a smile. By the same token, if I’d been responsible for dinner, there’d be pizza boxes everywhere.

He ignored me. “Then there’s creamy mashed potatoes with actual butter, not the fake stuff you pretend is fine, and roasted Brussels sprouts

with bacon.”

“It sounds illegal. You know the police chief’s coming for dinner, right?”

He grinned and squeezed my shoulder. “And then, because I couldn’t help myself, homemade dinner rolls.”

“Eric.”

“What?”

“It’s too much.”

He shrugged. “It’s Christmas Eve.”

Before I could respond, a knock sounded at the door.

Savannah exploded into motion again, barking this time, tail whipping.

“I’m getting the door before she tackles someone,” Eric said. He made it halfway before Savannah overtook him.

I followed at a more reasonable pace, arriving as Eric opened up to reveal Brittany and Olinski bundled up against the cold.

“Well,” Brittany said, stepping inside and bending to greet Savannah, who almost knocked her over. “Someone’s excited.”

“That’s an understatement,” Olinski added, shutting the door behind him.

Casper appeared at the edge of the hallway, observing the newcomers like a tiny, judgmental cloud.

“Where’s the kitten?” Brittany asked.

“Right there,” I said, pointing to him. “Judging you.”

“He looks like he knows secrets.”

I chuckled. “He probably does. He just won’t tell us what they are.”

Angus arrived a few minutes later, stomping the cold away and bringing with him his usual steady presence. “Smells incredible in here.” He shrugged off his coat.

“Blame Eric,” I said.

“I’ll be happy to take the credit,” Eric called from the kitchen.

We settled into the easy rhythm of coats being hung, drinks being poured, greetings overlapping. For a little while, we had noise and laughter and the simple comfort of being in the same room with old and close friends. Not all of them, though. Missing were our friends with children, at home wrapping presents from Santa Claus.

We gathered in the living room first, glasses in hand, Savannah brushing against legs, and Casper deciding our laps might be acceptable after all.

“So,” I said, glancing at Brittany and Olinski. “June is coming up fast.”

Brittany groaned. “Don’t remind me.”

“You’re the one getting married,” Eric pointed out.

“I know, and somehow that makes it worse.”

Olinski slipped an arm around her shoulders. “She’s got spreadsheets.”

“Multiple,” Brittany said, on the defensive. “Color-coded.”

“Of course you do. You wouldn’t be you otherwise,” I said.

“And yet,” Eric added, “I bet the cake decision is still unresolved.”

Brittany narrowed her eyes at him. “How did you know about that?”

“Jen, how else? And cake is serious business.”

I leaned forward. “Okay, I have to know. Have you decided? Spice cake with cream cheese frosting or chocolate?”

Olinski immediately said, “Chocolate.”

At the exact same time, Brittany said, “Spice cake.”

They both stopped. Looked at each other.

“You haven’t agreed,” I said, tickled.

“We’re working on it,” Brittany said.

“She’s wrong,” Olinski added.

“*He’s* wrong,” Brittany shot back.

Eric raised his glass. “To compromise.”

“Or tiered cake,” I suggested. “One layer each?”

Brittany’s jaw dropped. “Wait. That’s actually not a bad idea.”

Olinski considered, then shrugged. “I could live with it.”

“Look at that,” Eric said, grinning. “Crisis averted.”

“Add it to the spreadsheet,” I told Brittany.

“Oh, I will. In capital letters.”

Dinner pulled us to the table not long after, the food somehow looking even better than it’d smelled. For a while, conversation lulled under the weight of full plates and appreciative noises.

“This is ridiculous,” Angus said at one point, shaking his head. “You could open a restaurant.” He pointed his fork at Eric. “But you better not.”

Savannah stationed herself strategically near Angus, who pretended not to notice as he slipped her small, illicit bites under the table.

“Angus,” I warned.

“What?” he said, not convincing me at all.

Casper, meanwhile, had claimed Olinski’s lap and was making biscuits with determined enthusiasm.

“I think he likes you,” Brittany said.

“I’m honored,” Olinski said, wincing as tiny claws found their mark.

Eventually, the conversation shifted, as it always did, to what mattered most.

“How are you doing?” I asked Angus.

He leaned back, considering. “Better. It’s still strange. Being out. Being cleared. Having been accused of murder in the first place.” He glanced at Eric. “And I’ve got to say, Marcus kept the diner running better than I ever did.”

Eric grinned. “He’s a natural.”

“I walked in, and half the regulars hadn’t even noticed I’d been gone,” Angus said, a hint of amusement in his voice.

“That’s either a compliment or quite insulting,” I said.

“I’m choosing compliment. For Marcus.”

The warmth of his being here, of things being *okay*, settled over me. It didn’t erase what’d happened. Nothing could. But it made space around it. A space I could live in.

Eric cleared his throat, drawing our attention. “Speaking of things being resolved, Steve Adler pled guilty to second-degree murder. Twenty-five years, parole in fifteen.”

I rested a hand on his arm. “I’ve been meaning to ask you. What were you doing at the resort that day? How did you know I was in trouble?”

“Charlie called me after he got off the phone with you. When I didn’t hear from you after an hour or so, I tried calling your cell. It went straight to voice mail. You never turn your phone off, so I headed out there in case you’d found trouble. Or should I say, trouble had found you. As usual.”

“We located the stuff he used to implicate Angus,” Eric continued.

“Padding. Size-ten shoes. All at the back of a storage closet at the resort.”

Relief surged over Angus’s face.

“His DNA was all over it. Not much left to argue about after that.”

Brittany’s hand found mine under the table. No one spoke for a moment.

“Good,” Angus said finally.

I nodded.

Savannah chose that moment to leap up, front paws landing on the table edge.

“Absolutely not,” Eric said, standing.

Casper, startled, launched himself off Olinski’s lap and skidded across the table runner, avoiding a candle by a whisker.

“That’s it,” Eric said. “They’re going upstairs.”

A chorus of protests rose instantly.

“No!”

“They’re fine!”

“Leave them!”

Savannah froze, ears perked, aware she had all our attention.

Casper blinked from his new perch near the centerpiece, as if to say he had no idea what the fuss was about.

Eric looked around the table, betrayed. “You’re all encouraging this.”

“They’re part of the party. The family,” Brittany insisted.

“They’re bedlam,” Eric countered.

“Festive bedlam,” I said.

He sighed, long and suffering. “Fine. But if anything gets knocked over ...”

“It won’t,” I said.

Savannah wagged her tail.

Casper sat down right in front of a candle.

Eric pointed at them both. “I’m watching you.”

They didn’t appear concerned in the least.

“Did you ever find out who that big guy in the bookstore was?” Brittany asked me.

“Actually, no.”

Eric widened his eyes. “Oh! I forgot to tell you. He was the Bannister’s Bar and Grill’s bartender’s cousin, visiting from Toledo for the holidays.”

“Bet you can’t say that three times fast.” I laughed. “And they grow ’em big in Ohio.”

“No doubt.”

Dessert came later, and the conversation drifted back to lighter things. As we carried dirty dishes back to the kitchen, Brittany touched my arm.

“What did you end up getting Eric for Christmas?”

“A new chef’s knife, since he loves cooking so much. A really good one. The kind he’d never buy for himself.”

“Practical.”

“Yeah. But ...” I glanced toward the dining room, where Eric’s voice carried through the doorway. “I also had the handle engraved.”

Her eyes lit up. “With what?”

“The date we moved in here, and one line: *Home is what we make.*”

“It’s terrific, Jen.”

“It felt right.”

“It is. It’s perfect.”

We returned to the dining room, the glow of the candles, and the low hum of conversation wrapping around us again. I paused at the edge of the table, taking it all in.

Eric, mid-sentence, hands moving as he talked.

Angus, steady and always present.

Brittany and Olinski, leaning into each other, the future stretching out in front of them.

Savannah at my feet.

Casper now asleep in the center of the table runner for some reason.

It wasn’t perfect, but it was real. And it belonged to us.

I reached for my glass and tapped a knife against the side.

The room quieted, attention shifting toward me.

I swallowed once, steadying myself. “To Christmas, which you all know I used to hate, but ...” I smiled at Eric. “I’ve somehow learned to appreciate. And to everything it means. Warmth, and light, and the people who make both of those things possible.”

A few small smiles. A few nods.

“To second chances,” I added, glancing at Angus. “And to the truth finding its way out, even when it takes longer than it should.”

He inclined his head in acknowledgment.

“To love,” I said, looking at Brittany and Olinski. “And to the future you’re building together, whatever kind of cake you end up choosing.”

That earned a laugh.

“And to all of us,” I finished, my voice softening. “For making it through what we didn’t think we could. For staying. For showing up. For building something lasting.”

I lifted my glass a little higher. “May next year bring us more peace. More joy. And more reasons to sit around a table this way and remember why it matters.”

I paused, unsure how to end it. Public speaking had never been my forte.

“Cheers,” Eric said, bailing me out.

“Cheers,” we echoed.

Glasses clinked, and sips followed.

For the first time, I truly understood I was part of something solid. Something that would hold no matter what.

And I could live with that.

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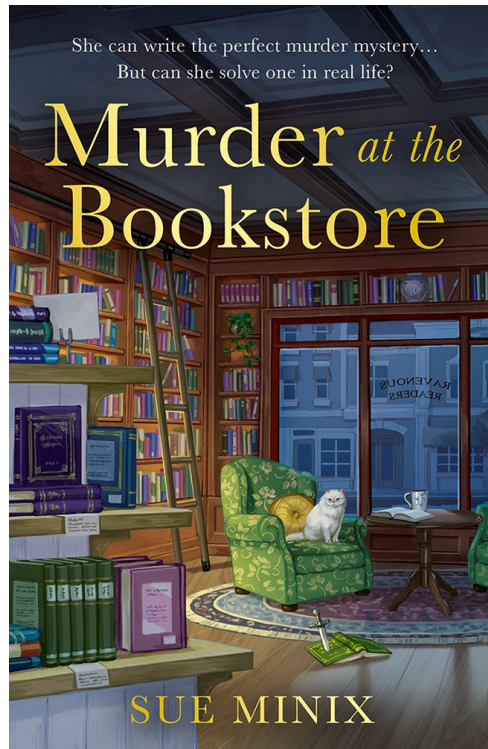
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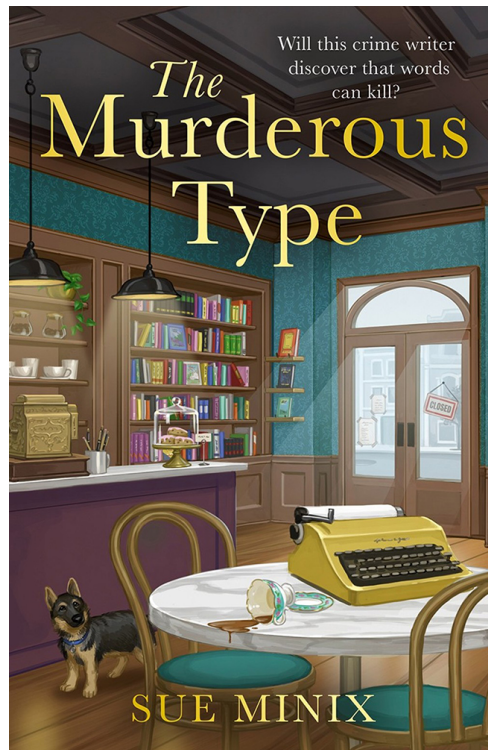
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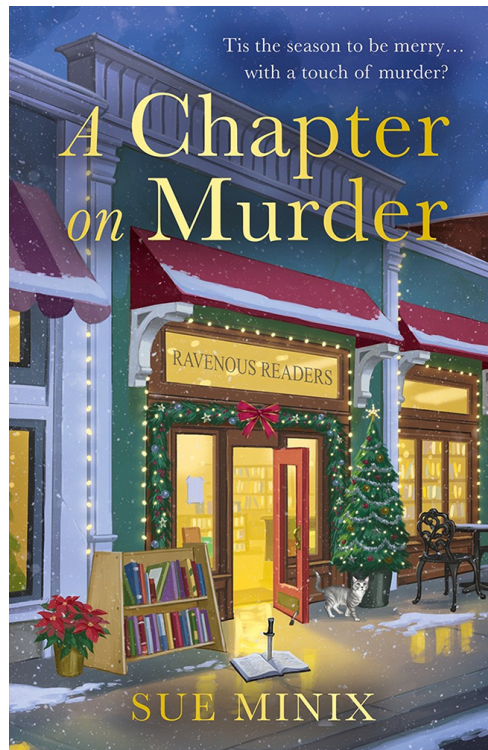
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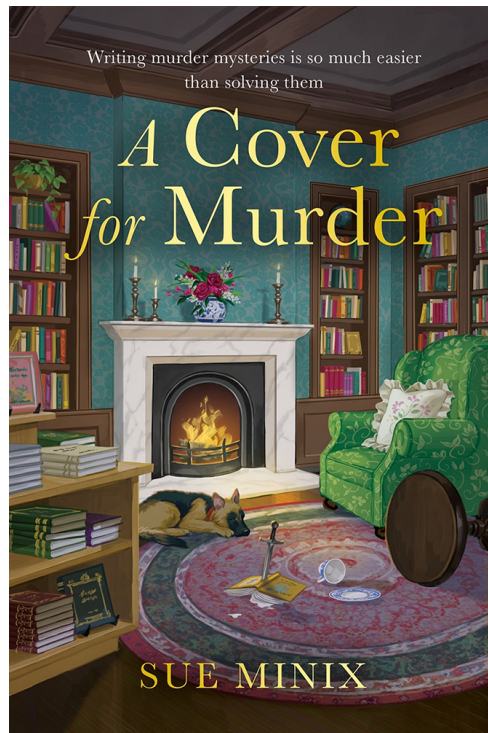
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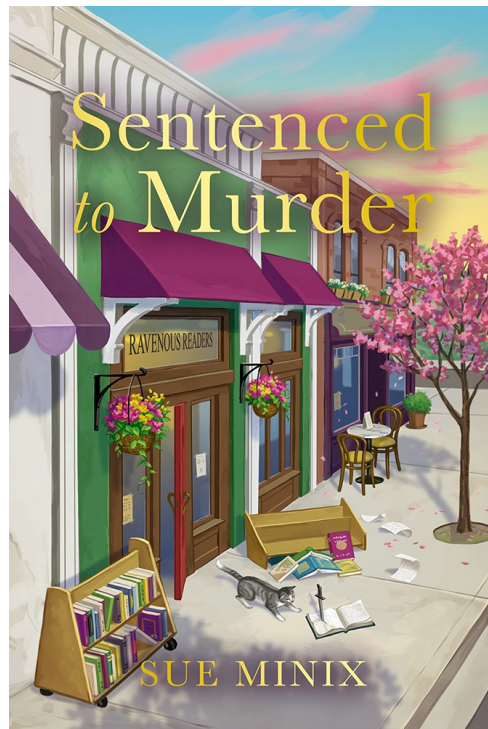
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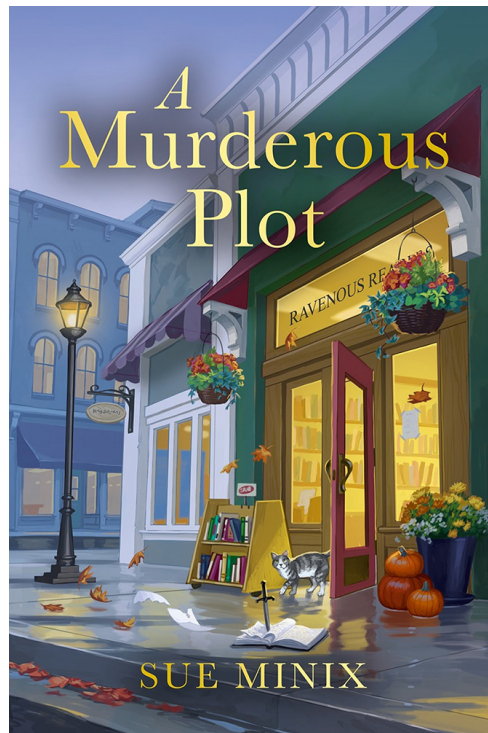
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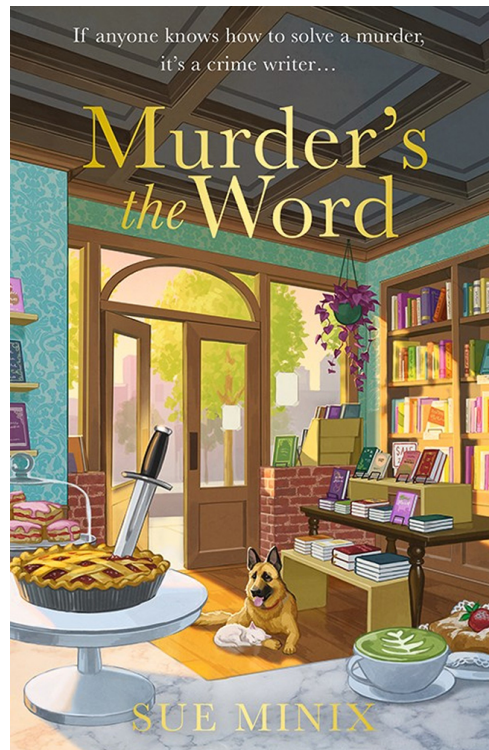
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About the Author

Sue Minix is a member of Sisters in Crime, and when she isn't writing you can find her reading, watching old movies, or hiking the New Mexico desert.

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