

SLOANE MONROE STORIES

DEADLY SINS

P R I D E



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DEADLY SINS: PRIDE

New York Times & USA Today

Bestselling Author

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Every man is proud of what he does well; and no man is proud of what he does not do well. With the former, his heart is in his work; and he will do twice as much of it with less fatigue. The latter performs a little imperfectly, looks at it in disgust, turns from it, and imagines himself exceedingly tired. The little he has done, comes to nothing, for want of finishing.

- Abraham Lincoln

CHAPTER 1

PRIDE (N.) a feeling of deep pleasure or satisfaction derived from one's own achievements, the achievements of those with whom one is closely associated, or from qualities or possessions that are widely admired.

Nelly Fisher spritzed her washcloth with cleaning solution and began the mundane task of wiping down the nightstand in the master bedroom. Glancing at the fancy grandfather clock in the corner, she checked the time. It was four o'clock in the afternoon. Soon, friends and family would turn up at the house to celebrate the marriage of the Kingston's daughter, Ella, whose nuptials were happening now.

No matter how fast Nelly worked, she knew it would be impossible to finish all of the housekeeping duties prior to the guest's arrival. She scanned her to-do list, breathing out a sigh of frustration. There was no time to indulge in one of her favorite pastimes—snooping through the Kingston's things when the family was away, which didn't happen often.

Today there wasn't time, and yet the notion was tempting given the fact the family wasn't due to return for another hour.

Don't do it.

Not today.

As the seconds ticked by, the allure of poking around became harder to resist.

Nelly had worked for the Kingston family as a housekeeper for the past six years. In that time, she'd learned some things, secrets about the family that she'd stowed away in her mind. And that was exactly where they would stay—for now. There may come a day when she had to leverage what she knew as insurance.

Her job paid well, and she had no intention of leaving it anytime soon.

But in the unfortunate event that she was ever fired, she wouldn't hesitate to confess what she knew if it meant keeping her job.

Nelly finished dusting the master bedroom and crossed the hall. Twisting the doorknob to Mr. Kingston's office, she was surprised to find it had been left unlocked. He was a stickler for locking the door, so to find it any other way came as a shock.

Months earlier, Nelly had found the office door unlocked for the first time. Since she'd been alone in the house at the time, she'd shuffled into the room and discovered a hidden drawer beneath the desk in his office. She'd searched the office for the key to the drawer that day, and she found one inside a tall vase on the bookshelf.

The drawer contained a handful of items—documents, deeds, and the like. Most of the items were average, run-of-the-mill type stuff—nothing too interesting. But one envelope in particular called to her, and she opened it. Alastair Kingston had been keeping a secret, a secret Nelly believed could tear his entire family apart if revealed. She'd planned to snap a few photos of what she'd found that day, but before she could, his daughter arrived at the house, announcing her intention to stay for the weekend.

Nelly never got a second chance to photograph the drawer's contents ... until today. As she stood outside the office door, debating her options, she decided the temptation was worth the risk. She glanced at the time once more. If she hurried, she'd have just enough time to get in and out of the office before family and friends arrived.

Nelly entered the office and set the bucket of cleaning products she was carrying on the floor. Then she walked over to the vase, picked it up, and turned it upside down, tipping it over on top of her hand.

The key wasn't there.

For a moment, Nelly panicked.

Was it possible Mr. Kingston knew someone had been in his office and found the key to the hidden drawer?

It didn't seem possible.

How could he know?

And why was the key no longer inside the vase?

As Nelly's mind raced with various possibilities, she began snooping in earnest, looking inside trinket boxes and books—anything that might hide a key. Her eyes darted around and then fell upon a round, leather pen holder on Mr. Kingston's desk.

Perhaps the key was there.

Nelly walked over to the desk and dumped the pens out of the holder, and then glanced inside of it.

The key wasn't there.

Disappointed, Nelly was about to grab the pens and insert them back into the holder when her fingers brushed across what felt like a strip of tape stuck to the bottom. She tipped the holder on its side, and there, taped to the bottom, was the key.

For a moment, Nelly thought it best to leave it there, fearing she wouldn't be able to tape the key back up in the same way it was now.

It was a risk—a risk she was about to take.

With the utmost care, Nelly peeled the tape back until she freed the key. She stuck it into the lock, and *voilà* ... the drawer popped open.

For the next several minutes, Nelly riffled through the drawer until she found the envelope she wanted. She lifted her cell phone from her apron pocket and snapped a few photos, jolting back when she heard someone say, "What in the hell are you doing in here?"

She spun around, facing the person who'd addressed her.

“I ... I, ahh, the door was unlocked so I thought I'd dust Mr. Kingston's office. I noticed the drawer was open after I came inside, and I was just trying to close it.”

“You're lying. Looks to me like you're going through Alastair's personal documents.”

“I'm not. I swear.”

“The envelope in your hand ... give it to me.”

Nelly glanced at it and said, “I can't.”

“Give. It. To. Me.”

Nelly shook her head a second time, and the person crossed the room, ripping the envelope from her hand. As the contents inside were read, Nelly glanced around the room, looking for a way to escape while she had the chance. If she could make it out of the office, she could do what she needed to do—*run*.

She made a beeline for the door but didn't make it far before she heard the crack of a gun being fired, followed by the words, “You shouldn't have been in here poking around, involving yourself in private matters that are none of your business. But now you have, and to protect this family, you leave me no choice.”

CHAPTER 2

I'D ALWAYS BEEN a softie when it came to weddings, often finding myself in tears, even if I didn't know the bride and groom. Today was one of those times. I was my best friend Maddie's plus one at her cousin Ella's ritzy wedding in Park City, Utah. The ceremony was taking place on her uncle's property in a small chapel that had been erected for the sole purpose of today's nuptials.

A decade earlier I'd called Park City home, but several years ago, I'd moved away. I hadn't visited the festive ski town in some time and I'd forgotten just how frigid the winters were here. In a knee-length skirt and a thin, cashmere sweater, I was freezing and wishing I still had the jacket I'd left with the attendant when I entered the chapel.

The theme of today's wedding was white.

White chairs dressed in white satin bows.

White flowers.

Even the guests had been asked to wear white, which I'd found a bit odd. I was old school and of the mindset that white was reserved for the bride alone. But the bride's parents had

insisted on everyone matching, so to show my support, I'd honored their request.

Prior to the start of the wedding, Maddie had introduced me to her Aunt Violette. She seemed kind, albeit a tad on the nervous side.

As the ceremony drew to a close, Maddie leaned toward me and whispered, "Sloane, is it just me or does the groom look a lot like Finn Wolfhard?"

"Who?"

"You know, the Canadian kid from *Stranger Things*, that TV show with Winona Ryder?"

"Oh, him." I squinted, taking a closer look. The groom was tall and slender, and his long, dark hair was shaggy, falling at his shoulders. "I guess I can see the resemblance. I hadn't paid much attention to him until now. I've been too busy fixating on Ella's tiara. It's crooked. It's been that way ever since the ceremony began."

Maddie raised a brow and said, "Chill out, Miss OCD."

"I can't. It's taking everything in me not to walk up to her and adjust it."

"Don't you dare."

"I won't. I'll wait until after the ceremony, and then I'll find some subtle way to straighten it out without drawing too much attention."

"You know you have problems, right?"

I elbowed her and said, "So do you."

“It’s why we make such a perfect pair. We’re opposites, and opposites attract.”

Maddie smacked a hand to her thigh and snorted a laugh loud enough to attract the attention of others in the crowd. A few guests even frowned in disapproval, and we lowered ourselves into our chairs, remaining silent until the ceremony was over.

A few minutes later, the bride and groom were pronounced husband and wife. As they stared into one another’s eyes and took their first kiss as a married couple, I reflected on the innocence of young love, and how naïve they were about the degree to which their lives were about to change.

Maddie draped her arm around me and said, “Now the fun begins. I can’t wait to give you a tour of my uncle’s house. It’s massive. I heard they employ half a dozen people for the upkeep alone. I bet they went all-out on the food for tonight too. I can’t wait. I’m starving.”

Staring out the stained-glass chapel window, I could see the house in the distance. It was close but far enough away that trudging through the snow to get to it would prove to be a challenge. Maddie seemed to notice my concern, and she said, “They’ve hired a bus charter service for tonight to transport guests from here to the reception. Should be here any time. They’ll take us back to our vehicles once it’s all over.”

As the words left her mouth, several black vans pulled to a stop in front of the chapel. Maddie and I speed-walked past the other guests to be first for the ride. We made it onto the second

van, and once at the house, we headed toward the massive fireplace inside the sitting room to warm our fingers and toes.

A handsome middle-aged man smiled at Maddie and made his way over to us. They embraced, and he said, "I'm so glad you made it. You've always been my favorite niece."

"And you're my favorite uncle," Maddie said.

He turned toward me. "I'm Alastair Kingston. And who might you be?"

"Sloane Monroe."

He rubbed a hand across his chin and said, "Seems like I've heard your name before. Did you use to work for the city in some capacity?"

"When I lived here, I was a private detective."

He wagged a finger in the air. "Ahh, right. I remember now. You caught a serial killer several years back. What was his nickname again? Oh, yes. I remember. Sinnerman. Why did you move?"

"Park City's beautiful, and I have a lot of fond memories here," I said. "It's too cold for me, though."

Among other things.

"Makes sense, I suppose," he said. "Then again, I thrive in the cold."

Alastair engaged us in small talk for a few minutes and then excused himself to mingle with other guests. Ella entered the house with her husband. As she walked toward the staircase to the upper level, Maddie and I made our way over

to her. I planned to congratulate her and fix that tiara at the same time, but she raced up the stairs before we could get to her.

“She’s in a hurry,” I said.

“Ella has two wardrobe changes,” Maddie said. “A cocktail dress for dinner and something a bit more scandalous for the afterparty. It’s amazing. She sent me photos of it.”

“What time does the afterparty end?”

“Why? You tired already? They flew a band in from Ireland. You’ll stay, right?”

At the moment, all I could think about was how much I wanted to get back to my camper, put on a pair of sweatpants, and crawl into bed.

“What time does the afterparty begin?” I asked.

“Ten o’clock, I think.”

Most nights I was asleep by that time, but based on the pleading look in Maddie’s eyes, there was no way I was getting out of staying ... for some of it, at least.

“I’ll do my best to stay for—”

Before I could get the rest of the sentence out, a bloodcurdling scream rang out from upstairs, followed by the words, “She’s ruined it! She’s ruined everything!”

CHAPTER 3

STARTLED BY THE SCREAM, Maddie and I exchanged nervous glances, and then we raced upstairs to see what all the shouting was about. We found Ella in her father's office, standing over a woman who appeared to have been shot, not once, but twice. In the chest and in the head.

Alastair was quick to join us, clasping a hand over his mouth as he crouched over the dead woman's body.

He reached out, and it looked like he was about to touch her.

"Don't," I said. "Don't touch her or anything in this room."

"This is *my* office," Alastair said. "I'll do what I like."

Maddie placed a hand on her uncle's arm. "Sloane is right. Your office is a crime scene now. We need to keep everyone out of this room, including Ella and you."

Ella took it as her cue to leave.

With her gone, I pointed at the deceased and said, "Who is she?"

“Nelly Fisher, our housekeeper. She’s worked for us for several years. Don’t understand how she ended up in here, though. My staff knows my office is off-limits.”

“Do you keep the door locked?” I asked.

He raised an eyebrow and said, “Of course. Even if I didn’t, everyone knows the rules and should have respected them. It would seem Nelly did not.”

“Is there a reason why staff isn’t allowed in here?”

He blinked at me, but before he answered, his eyes came to rest on his desk. He walked around to the front of it, bent down, and his face went white.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

“It’s something. I can tell.”

He ignored me, so I walked over and stood beside him, trying to see what had prompted the change in his demeanor. A small drawer rather hidden beneath the desk was open, and it was empty.

“Is this drawer supposed to be empty?” I asked.

“It is not.”

“What did you keep in there?”

“Paperwork. Important documents.”

I glanced at the floor and saw a piece of paper beneath the desk. I bent down and picked it up. Before I got the chance to look at it, Alastair snatched it out of my hand.

“Was that paper kept in the drawer?” I asked.

“It was, but everything else is missing.”

Alastair removed his cell phone from his pocket, walked into the hallway, and made a call.

I made a call of my own.

Half an hour later, a familiar face came strolling into Alastair’s office, shaking his head at me as he said, “And here I thought we’d never find ourselves in this type of situation again.”

“Hey, Coop,” I said. “I’m just as surprised as you are.”

“Oh, I doubt that.”

At six foot five, Chief Drake Cooper, who went by Coop, was built like a Mack Truck, even though he was getting up there in age. He’d been a boxer in his younger years, and his jacked-up nose still showed evidence of that era of his life. We’d first met when he was a detective, and I was a private investigator.

In those days, we didn’t get along. He made sure I knew he didn’t consider me his equal and he never would. I liked to think I’d worn him down over the years, but in truth, that honor went to my grandmother, who had started dating Coop’s father several years ago. Their relationship went a long way toward softening his feelings toward me. I wouldn’t say we were the best of friends, but we weren’t enemies either.

In the years since I’d left Park City, Coop had been promoted to chief of police. He’d been after the position for as long as I could remember. As I looked at him now, beaming

with pride at the opening of a new murder investigation, it was obvious he relished his current position.

“The dead woman is Nelly Fisher, Alastair Kingston’s housekeeper,” I said. “He told me none of the staff were allowed in his office, so I’m not sure what she was doing in here. He also seemed taken aback when he noticed a hidden drawer in his desk was open, and it was empty. I wanted to ask him about it, but before I could, he left the room to make a call.”

Coop crossed his arms and said, “How do you fit into this mess, Sloane?”

“Maddie’s cousin, Ella, got married today. We attended the wedding, and we were supposed to be heading into the dinner reception when Ella found the dead housekeeper in her father’s office.”

“How long ago did this happen?”

I glanced at the clock on the wall. “Forty minutes, give or take.”

Coop’s attention shifted to Maddie, who was on her knees, assessing Nelly from every angle.

“My guy, Bentley, will be here at any moment,” Coop said. “We don’t need your help.”

“Your *guy* is not here now, and I am. Just because I’m a retired medical examiner doesn’t mean I can’t be of use to you until then.”

Coop went quiet for a moment.

I thought he'd have some clever retort, but he didn't. Instead, he crouched down next to Maddie.

"I'll be honest with you," he said. "The last medical examiner I had quit a few months ago. The new guy is as dumb as ... well, let's just say he has a hard time putting two and two together."

I considered asking Coop why the former guy had quit, but knowing Coop and how abrasive he could be, there was a good chance Coop was the reason. I left the topic alone.

Coop turned toward Maddie and said, "Tell me what you see."

"She hasn't been dead long," Maddie said. "Her body's flaccid, muscles are relaxed. Her skin is beginning to pale, but based on its current state, I'd guess she died sometime within the last hour, two max."

"Anything else?"

Maddie pointed at the bullet wound at the center of the victim's forehead. "This wound suggests the victim was shot at point-blank range. Looks to me like the gun was held right in front of her forehead when it was fired."

Outside the office, a woman shoved the male police officer standing in the doorway, demanding he let her through.

"Who's the broad?" Coop asked.

"My Aunt Violette," Maddie said. "This is her house."

Coop stood and started walking toward the door, saying, "Ma'am, this is a crime scene. It may be your home, but we

have a job to—”

Before he could finish, Violette used her body weight to shift the police officer to the side just enough for her to get past him. She dove for Nelly, sobbing as she reached out to her.

“I’m sorry!” she screamed. “I’m so sorry, my dear friend. This is my fault. This is all my fault.”

CHAPTER 4

AFTER VIOLETTE THREW herself over Nelly's body, Maddie placed a hand on Violette's shoulder and said, "I'm sorry you've lost an employee and friend, Aunt Violette, but this is a crime scene now. If we're going to find out what happened to Nelly, we need to preserve any evidence the killer may have left behind. Okay?"

Violette nodded and backed away, pushing herself into a sitting position. "I understand. I just ... I can't believe it, and for it to happen today of all days."

"Why did you say it's all your fault?" I asked.

Violette wiped the tears from her eyes and said, "Nelly wasn't supposed to be working today. She asked for the day off. Her son is in a holiday play at school. I should have allowed her to go. Instead, I was selfish. I said I needed her here, not just as an employee, but to give me support."

"What kind of support?" I asked.

"I ... I struggle with big gatherings sometimes. I have anxiety, which I'm embarrassed to admit sometimes leads to panic attacks."

“Don’t be embarrassed. I struggle with them too.”

“Nelly always knew what to say to keep me calm. I was so desperate to have her by my side, I sent another member of my staff to record the play so she could watch it later. I knew it wouldn’t be the same as her being there, of course, but I figured it was something.”

Coop, who’d sidled up to us, chimed in with a question of his own. “Who was in the house while the wedding ceremony was taking place at the chapel?”

“Hmm, let’s see. The caterers may have arrived. If so, they would have been coming in and out. We also hired a band. I assume they would have been setting up.”

“What about staff? Who was here?”

Violette tapped a finger to her lips, thinking. “Let’s see ... Richard, our chef, Rosie, who assisted Nelly with housekeeping, and Kit, my personal assistant.”

“Alastair said Nelly had worked for your family for years,” I said.

“Yes, six years or so. She was a wonderful employee.”

“And a friend, you said.”

“I considered us to be friends, yes. I even gifted her some of my jewelry from time to time.”

“In all the years you’ve known her, were you ever aware of any enemies she may have had?”

Violette gave the question some thought. “If she had issues with anyone, she never talked about it.”

“The drawer beneath your husband’s desk is empty,” I said. “I believe it contained some important papers.”

Violette shrugged. “I wouldn’t know. My husband is touchy about his office. He doesn’t like anyone in here, not even me.”

“What do you think Nelly was doing in his office, then?”

“I couldn’t say. She was a bit of a snoop at times, but I wouldn’t have thought she’d come in here when she knew she shouldn’t. It’s all very confusing.”

“How do you know she was a bit of a snoop?” I asked.

“I caught her fiddling around in one of my drawers once, looking at some antiques I keep in there. I asked what she was doing, and she apologized, admitting she sometimes couldn’t resist poking around.

“Did it bother you?”

“I could care less about any of my friends looking through my things. That’s all they are—*things*. She never stole anything.”

“I’m not so sure Alastair would have been okay with Nelly snooping around,” Maddie interjected. “It seems to me he’s big on privacy.”

“I agree, and I’d warned her about that. I made it clear she could peek at my things if she liked, but not Alastair’s. If he would have caught her, she would have been fired.”

Violette excused herself from the room. As she walked out, a man walked in. Coop looked at me, frowned, and rolled his

eyes. I guessed the man was Bentley, the medical examiner, and I was right.

Coop made the introductions, and Maddie gave Bentley a rundown of what she'd noticed so far.

I turned toward Coop and said, "What's happening downstairs? Any idea?"

"My officers are diverting guests away from the house. I can't have civilians traipsing through the place, contaminating my crime scene."

"Oh? Is the reception canceled?" I asked.

"I spoke to Alastair. He owns another house over in Pinebrook. It's about ten minutes from here. He's moving the reception over there."

"I bet he wasn't happy about it."

"He doesn't have a choice. Now, if you'll excuse me, there's a lot to be done. We'll take it from here, Sloane."

"Fine by me."

Maddie excused herself from the conversation she was having with Bentley, and she walked over, eyeing Coop as she said, "You *won't* take it from here. You conduct your investigation as you see fit. Sloane will conduct her own. She's every bit as good of an investigator as you are, if not better."

Maddie.

My constant protector.

I stifled a laugh.

Coop huffed an irritated, “She’s a better investigator in your opinion.”

“Yeah, well, this murder happened within my family, not yours, and I want Sloane to look into it.”

“Hey, I’m not going to stand here and argue with you about it. I have work to do.”

“There’s nothing to argue about,” Maddie said. “We’re staying in Park City until the murder is solved, and that’s the end of it.”

CHAPTER 5

COOP, a few of his fellow officers, a detective, and the medical examiner were all in various parts of the house, sweeping it for any potential evidence related to Nelly's murder. In the meantime, I stood in the Kingston's living room, sipping on a martini Maddie made me while she continued to assist Bentley.

My thoughts turned to all those who'd attended the wedding. Was it possible one of the guests had slipped out during the ceremony, just long enough to murder Nelly, and return without being noticed?

I doubted it.

I hadn't seen anyone leave the ceremony after it began.

No one had arrived late either.

The longer I thought about it, the more antsy I became.

Weeks earlier when Maddie had asked me to accompany her to the wedding, she'd suggested we stay at the Kingston's home. But I didn't relish the idea of staying with people I didn't know. Instead, I offered up a second option. I hitched my camper to the back of the classic car I'd bought earlier in

the year and parked it at an RV park in Heber City, a short twenty-minute drive from where we were now. All I wanted was to get back to the RV park, change into my winter jammies, and forget this day ever happened. But Maddie had requested my help, and for that reason, it seemed I had a new case to investigate.

I'd just finished the last of my martini when a woman poked her head into the room, her eyes darting around before they landed on me. She was young, had long, curly blond hair, and was in her mid-twenties I guessed. She looked frazzled, like she needed sleep even more than I did.

“Have you seen Violette?” she asked.

I nodded. “About twenty minutes ago. She was in Alastair’s study. She talked to us for a bit, and then she walked out.”

“Did she say where she was going?”

“She did not. I’m Sloane, and you are ...?”

“Kit Van Buren.”

“You’re Violette’s assistant.”

She nodded. “I need to find her. I’ve looked everywhere.”

“Has something happened ... well, something other than the recent murder, I mean?”

“Ella has shut herself in her room. She’s refusing to attend the reception and she won’t let anyone in. Not me, not her friends, not even her father. She needs her mom right now.”

“I can understand why she’s shook up,” I said. “But it would be a shame for her to miss her own wedding reception.”

Kit threw her hands into the air and said, “Between the murder and the fact tonight’s festivities have been moved to a location Ella’s not happy about, she no longer wants any part of it.”

It made sense—her evening had been ruined.

After Ella’s outburst earlier, she struck me as the type of person who was far more dramatic than she needed to be at times. Then again, every bride dreamed of their perfect wedding, and today had been anything but.

“I’m not doing anything right now,” I said. “I can help you look for Violette, if you like.”

I’d said it because I meant it, but I also had an agenda in mind. Pairing up with Kit gave me an opportunity to ask her a few questions.

“I’d appreciate the help, thank you,” Kit said.

“Where have you looked so far?”

“I’ve searched most of the house. No one has seen her.”

We exited the living room and decided to retrace Kit’s steps, but we saw no sign of Violette.

“You were in the house when Nelly was murdered, weren’t you?” I asked.

She nodded. “I was in the reception hall, organizing tables while the band was setting up.”

“And you didn’t hear the gun being fired—either time?”

“The drummer was messing around while the rest of the band set up. I couldn’t even hear what they were saying to each other, let alone hear gunshots coming from the opposite end of the house.”

“Violette was upset about Nelly’s death,” I said. “She called her a friend.”

“Yeah, I suppose they were friends ... in their own way.”

“And what *way* would that be?”

Kit crossed her arms, thinking. “Violette can be clingy at times when she’s feeling anxious. That side of her could be a bit too much for me, but it never was for Nelly. She seemed to love being Violette’s go-to when Violette needed someone to lean on.”

Kit appeared to be a no-nonsense type of woman. I didn’t doubt she was good at her job, but I got the impression she was a bit cut-and-dry when it came to emotions.

“How long have you worked for the family?” I asked.

“Three years.”

“Do you like working here?”

Kit looked at me and grinned. “Let’s put it this way ... I like the money I make. Being Violette’s assistant pays well.”

“Three years seems like enough time to get to know a family.”

“I suppose. I tend to see it for what it is—a job. I’ve always found it’s better not to get too close. I set boundaries, keep my personal life private.”

“Speaking of private things, I believe some papers in Alastair’s office went missing today. He has a hidden drawer beneath his desk. It’s empty, and I get the impression it wasn’t at the start of the day.”

Kit went quiet for a time. It was almost like she was trying to respect the family by answering the question but not saying too much. “Doesn’t surprise me—I’m not talking about the missing papers. That *is* a bit of a surprise. I’m talking about the fact he has a hidden drawer. Ask me, it’s one of many. I bet he has hidden drawers all over this place.”

I sensed a touch of disdain in her voice, and I said, “You don’t seem fond of him.”

“Oh, he’s all right. He’s just more concerned about his own interests than he is about anything else. If he gave Violette a smidgen of the attention she deserved, I don’t think she’d need to lean on anyone else for emotional support. I get the feeling he’s all the support she’s ever wanted, but he’s far too caught up in his life to see it. Or maybe he does see it, and he just doesn’t want to do anything about it.”

“There are problems in the marriage then?”

“It’s ... well, not for me to say.”

“But if you had to give an overall impression, what would you say?”

“It sometimes seemed like a marriage where two people stay together for, in this case, Ella. I’ve often wondered if he’d divorce her once Ella no longer lived at home.” She paused,

then added, “I feel like I’ve said more than I should have.
Let’s focus on finding Violette, okay?”

CHAPTER 6

KIT MAY HAVE SHUT our conversation down, but the information she'd given me was a lot more than I'd expected. I wondered if there was any truth about Alastair and Violette's marriage being on shaky ground. If there was, and if Violette suspected as much, I assumed it would have had some impact on her anxiety. As for Alastair, it seemed to me he was keeping secrets, but what kind of secrets?

Ones that were deadly?

As I pondered those thoughts, we finished our search of the first floor. Having failed at locating Violette, we made our way upstairs.

Kit pointed and said, "That's Ella's room."

She approached the door and knocked.

There was no response at first, and then Ella said, "Whoever you are, go away. I'm in bed with my husband, and we've decided we're done with today. You can let the guests know the reception is off unless they want to attend it without us."

It was a relief to know Ella was no longer alone, but we still had a missing person on our hands. We continued down the hall, and Kit opened another door and stepped inside a massive bedroom. In the center of the room was a white, four-poster bed. The entire room had been decorated in an elaborate theme featuring one specific color—pink.

I turned toward Kit and said, “Do Violette and Alastair have different rooms?”

Kit nodded. “They are across the hall from one another. Violette says it’s because Alastair snores so loud she finds it hard to sleep.”

“If she’s across the hall, can’t she still hear the snoring?”

“His room is soundproof. She can’t hear a thing.”

“Do they ever sleep in the same bed?” I asked.

“If they do, I wouldn’t know. I’m not here at night.” Kit cupped a hand to the side of her mouth and said, “Violette, are you in here?”

We were met with silence.

We entered Violette’s boudoir, which included an expansive closet that opened into a sitting area adjacent to the bathroom. Violette was nowhere to be found.

Walking back into the hallway, we met Alastair as he exited his bedroom.

“You haven’t seen Violette since she left your office, have you?” I asked.

“I have not.”

He'd changed clothes and was wearing a long, wool overcoat. I assumed he was heading out to attend the reception.

"Are you aware Ella and her husband are in bed and are refusing to leave it?" I asked.

"I am, but many of the guests have arrived and I'm sure they're wondering where we are, among other things. I'll head over now and do what damage control I can. If you see my wife, tell her that's where I've gone." He started to walk away, but then stopped, spun on his heel, and added, "Maddie said I should come to you, Sloane, if I learn anything that might help with the investigation. I may have one piece of information for you."

"Go on."

"I was just looking through my nightstand drawer. I keep a gun in there. It's missing."

"What kind of gun is—"

My question was cut short, as Alastair was on the move. "I must go. I'll fill you in on the details later. Sorry to be abrupt, but ..." With that, he dashed down the hall and disappeared around the corner.

Odd.

Kit and I exchanged glances, and I said, "Is there anywhere we haven't looked yet?"

She gave the question some thought. "There's a basement in this house, but it's used for storage, old furniture, and things

they're not using anymore. I can't imagine we'd find her down there."

"It might be worth checking, just to be sure."

"I'm starting to wonder whether Violette may have slipped out and headed to the wedding reception without telling anyone, though that would be surprising. Without Nelly for support, she would have found it overwhelming to interact with all the guests on her own given what happened today."

"Is there anyone we can call to ask whether she's at the reception?" I asked.

"Rosie should be there. When the venue changed, I overheard Alastair ask her to head to the other house and get it tidied up as fast as she was able."

Kit pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and made the call.

Rosie answered and confirmed she hadn't seen Violette.

Out of ideas, Kit and I made our way to the basement. Upon opening the door, we heard voices. After exchanging curious glances, I led the way, tiptoeing down the shadowy stairs.

I froze, and Kit grabbed my shoulder.

There, across the room, was Violette.

And she wasn't alone.

A man was with her.

A man who looked much younger than herself. He was tall, with an athletic build and a thick goatee. He was standing

in front of Violette, wiping tears from her eyes. He told her to take a breath and then he emphasized that he was there for her, and everything was going to be okay.

She nodded and wrapped her arms around him, and then they did something I didn't expect—he leaned in and they kissed.

CHAPTER 7

HAVING FOUND myself in a peculiar situation, I stood for a moment, as I thought about what to do next. We'd barged in on a private, intimate embrace, with Violette and a man who *wasn't* her husband.

Who was the man?

Why were they kissing?

Was she having an affair?

If so, how long had it been going on?

Did Alastair know?

I needed answers.

Before I had a chance to ask them, Kit spoke up, moving past me and into the room, her hands on her hips. "Violette, what in the hell are you doing? Who is this ... this guy who just kissed you?"

Violette turned toward us and gasped. "You're not ... no one is supposed to be down here."

"The fact we're here isn't the point," I said, as I came down the last few steps. "Answer the question."

“Whatever you think you saw, forget it,” Violette said. “It was nothing.”

The man frowned, his expression pained.

Violette noticed the brisk change in his demeanor and placed a hand on his arm. “I didn’t mean it, okay? It wasn’t nothing. You’re not nothing.”

“Who am I then, Violette, because I’m tired of playing this game,” he said.

“It’s not a game ... not to me,” Violette said. “It’s complicated.”

I faced the man. “Who are you?”

Violette looked at him and shook her head, which seemed to irritate him even more.

“My name’s Gabriel. Gabriel Renner.”

“Are the two of you having an affair?” I asked.

“It’s none of your business,” Violette spat.

Gabriel looked me in the eye and said, “Yes, we’re having an affair. But like Violette said, it’s complicated.”

Violette sighed, disappointed with his confession.

“You weren’t supposed to say anything to anyone,” she said. “Not yet.”

“It’s a bit late now,” he said. “We’ve just been caught in a compromising position.”

“Will someone please explain what’s going on?” Kit said. “I had no idea about any of this until now, and I don’t

appreciate the fact that it was kept from me.”

Given her earlier statement to me about setting boundaries and keeping her distance, the comment struck me as odd. She did care, more than she wanted to admit.

Violette backed away from Gabriel, leaning over as she struggled to catch her breath. Then she looked at Kit and me and said, “How do I know what we say won’t leave this room?”

“You don’t,” Kit huffed. “But I need to know what’s going on here. You might as well come clean.”

“I don’t understand why I need to tell either one of you anything,” Violette said.

“Your housekeeper was murdered today,” I said. “Maddie asked me to investigate her murder, and I need to know neither of you had anything to do with it.”

“Of course, we didn’t,” Violette said. “I loved Nelly.”

She may have loved her.

Or it could have all been an act.

Had Nelly become aware of Violette’s affair, and she’d been silenced?

Gabriel looked at me and said, “Why are *you* investigating the murder? Isn’t that a job for the police?”

“I’m a private investigator, specializing in homicides. I don’t take cases much anymore, but in this instance, I’ve made an exception.”

There was a long pause, during which time Gabriel tried to approach Violette. She held a hand out in front of her, stopping him.

“I just ... I need a minute ... please,” Violette said.

One minute passed.

Then two.

And then Violette blew a long breath out and began to talk.

“I met Gabriel a year ago while on a trip to Aspen. He was my ski instructor. We spent the entire day talking, and I didn’t get much skiing in by the end of it. When we parted that evening, I didn’t expect I’d see him again. But to be honest, I haven’t had a conversation like that with another man like that in years. The more I thought about it, the more I wanted to keep our conversation going. I decided to book a few more private sessions. We’ve stayed in touch ever since.”

“When you say you’ve stayed in touch, do you mean you talked on the phone, or have you been seeing each other in person?”

“Both. We’ve been discreet about it, or at least we had been until now. I didn’t expect Gabriel to show up here tonight, but as you can see, he did.”

I turned toward Gabriel. “When did you arrive?”

“I was making my way here when the housekeeper died.” He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and showed it to me. “This is my receipt from the car service I hired at the airport. It shows my arrival time.”

Indeed, it did.

If the roads were clear, he still could have arrived right before the wedding ceremony ended.

“What made you come here today, on a day meant for family?” I asked. “Seems like a risky thing to do.”

“I was concerned for Violette, worried about how she’d do today with so many people to entertain. I figured I’d fly over, hang back at the reception, and blend in. Then I got here, and I learned about Nelly.”

“Gabriel was concerned about me because ... well, there’s no easy way to say this, but several months ago, Alastair asked for a divorce,” Violette said. “At the time, Ella had just become engaged. I didn’t want the news of our parting to affect her as she made plans for her wedding. Alastair agreed to wait until Ella was married to tell her and everyone else the news. In the days leading up to today, I’ve leaned on Gabriel a lot. The thought of telling my daughter about the divorce has not been easy.”

Violette began to weep, and Gabriel rushed to her side.

I stood silent, giving myself a moment to take it all in, and then I glanced at Kit, whose irritation had subsided. She was now looking at her employer with an expression of compassion.

“I’m sorry, Violette,” Kit said. “The fact I didn’t even know this was happening makes me feel like I’ve failed you as your assistant.”

“You haven’t failed at anything,” Violette said. “It was I who failed you. I didn’t know who to trust, so I trusted no one.”

Upstairs, I heard Maddie calling my name.

“Please,” Violette said, “you can’t tell her. She won’t understand.”

“She *will* understand,” I said. “I have no doubt she’ll agree to keep this between us for now.”

“I won’t speak to anyone about it either,” Kit said. “You have my word.”

I turned and headed upstairs.

As I did so, I had a chilling thought.

What if Alastair had learned of the affair?

What if he’d hired a private investigator?

And what if said investigator had taken photos of the pair, photos which had been locked away in Alastair’s hidden drawer? Once the divorce proceedings began, he could have used them to ensure he got everything, and she got nothing.

I didn’t want to believe my theory was true.

But in the back of my mind were those two little words:
What if?

CHAPTER 8

MADDIE PLOPPED down next to me on the bed, pulling a knee-length wool sock over her leg. “Whose idea was it to stay in a tiny camper in the middle of winter?”

She was laughing when she said it, but I had to admit, I was questioning the idea myself.

“At least it gives me the chance to speak to you in private,” I said.

“You haven’t said much since we left the house. What’s up?”

“I need to tell you a couple of things—things you might not want to hear.”

“On a scale from one to ten, how juicy are we talking?”

“Twenty out of ten juicy.”

Maddie pulled the other sock over her other leg and leaned toward me. “Ooh, spill it. Tell me everything.”

I’d been trying to come up with a good way to deliver the news, but the truth was the truth, no matter how I tried to spin it.

“Your aunt is having an affair with a ski instructor,” I said. “I met him tonight. His name is Gabriel.”

“You met him *tonight*? When?”

“Right before we left the house. They were talking in the basement. She met him a year ago. They’ve been seeing each other ever since.”

“Alastair and Violette’s relationship has gone through some rough patches in recent years, but I always thought they’d pull through. What’s the other thing you wanted to tell me?”

“Alastair asked Violette for a divorce some months ago. They’ve been waiting until Ella got married before sharing the news.”

Maddie shook her head, huffing an irritated, “How’s that for a wedding present, huh? Congratulations, honey. PS: We’re getting a divorce. The affair started *before* he decided to divorce her, right?”

“It did, which leads me to wonder ... If Alastair got suspicious somehow, do you think he’s the type of person who would have hired a private investigator?”

“One hundred percent yes. With him, trust is hard to gain and easy to lose. He’s suspicious by nature, always has been. He and I always got along great, though.”

“I’d guess it’s because *what you see is what you get* when it comes to you,” I said. “You never pretend to be someone you’re not.”

Maddie smiled and said, “Why, thank you.”

“Let’s say Alastair did get wind of the affair, and he hired a private investigator to take pictures and all that. He may have kept the photos in the hidden drawer beneath his desk.”

“It makes sense.”

“I wonder if Nelly knew about the hidden drawer. It’s possible she got into it today, and then she was caught. Or maybe she didn’t know about it, and someone else was coming to clean out the drawer’s contents during the wedding. Nelly could have been in the wrong place at the wrong time, and that’s why she was killed.”

Maddie crossed her legs and considered what I’d just said. “Well, we know my aunt and uncle didn’t kill Nelly. When she was murdered, they were at the wedding. Who do you plan on talking to tomorrow?”

“Chef Richard and Rosie, Nelly’s assistant, for starters,” I said. “Kit would have been overseeing things at the time, so I’ll follow up with her too.”

“Who’s Kit?” I asked.

“Violette’s assistant.”

“I have a way of getting through to Alastair, getting him to open up, at times. I can work on him tomorrow, see if I can get anything out of him, if you like?”

“I told Violette we wouldn’t tell anyone about the affair ... but secrets like this one are bound to come out sooner or later.”

CHAPTER 9

I GLANCED out the camper's window the following morning, dismayed to find an additional six inches of snow had fallen throughout the night. Using my small car to get around was a risk I didn't want to take, so we decided to get an SUV instead. After picking it up from the rental agency, we were starting to make our way to the house when Maddie received a text message from her uncle. They were all at their other home while Coop's team finished processing the crime scene at the main house.

The family was all sitting around the breakfast table when we arrived, eating the most delicious-looking French toast I'd ever seen.

Alastair glanced up at us and said, "Ah, I was wondering when you two would show up. Come, join us. I'll have Richard make up a couple of additional plates."

Based on the aroma wafting around the room, it was impossible to resist his offer, so we didn't.

I sat down and glanced over at Ella, who looked like she hadn't gotten much sleep last night. Maddie seemed to notice how pasty she looked too. She walked over to Ella, throwing

her arms around her as she said, “How are you doing this morning, hun?”

“About the same as I was doing yesterday,” Ella said.

“Where’s your hubby?”

“Brandon’s with his family. They’re still shaken up over what happened.”

“It’s understandable. Are you two still leaving for your honeymoon today?”

The question brought a smile to Ella’s face. “Oh, yeah. We can’t wait to get out of here.”

“Where are you guys headed?” I asked.

“Tahiti for ten glorious days where the last thing I’ll be thinking about is my disaster of a wedding day.”

Ella may not have wanted to talk about Nelly’s murder, but I did, and given I didn’t know when I’d have a chance to question her again, I went for it. “How would you describe your relationship with Nelly?”

“I don’t know if I’d define it as a relationship, but yeah, I guess I knew her a fair bit.”

“Did the two of you get along?”

“We got on all right. Truth is, I didn’t have an opinion of her one way or the other. She wasn’t family. She was the help.”

Violette tossed her napkin down on her plate and glared at Ella. “How could you say such a thing after all Nelly did for you? She doted on you like you were her own child, always

doing what she could to make you happy. She may not have felt like family to you, but she was family to me.”

Ella turned toward Violette. It looked like she was about to say something harsh, but when she saw the tears welling up in her mother’s eyes, she said, “I’m sorry, Mom. I know Nelly was your friend. It wasn’t my intention to be mean.”

Violette nodded, then stood and excused herself from the table.

Richard entered the room with two plates of French toast, and he set one of them down in front of me. As I grabbed my knife and fork, eager to take a bite, the doorbell rang. Seconds later, Coop came strolling in.

“Good to see you again,” Alastair said. “Even if it is under strange circumstances.”

Coop ignored the comment and focused his attention on me. “I see you’re still hanging around.”

“I am.”

“It’s like I said last night,” Maddie chimed in. “She’s not going anywhere until the case is solved.”

As if attempting to keep the heightened conversation from escalating further, Alastair said, “Chief Cooper, would you like to join us for breakfast? I can have my chef whip up more—”

Coop responded with a firm, “No. It wouldn’t be appropriate.”

Alastair swished a hand through the air and said, “Oh, live a little. Seems a bit stuffy to me to spend time worrying about what’s appropriate and what isn’t all the time now, doesn’t it?”

“I’m here to do a job, not to fraternize.”

“Okay, then,” Alastair said. “Let’s get right to it. What can we do for you today?”

“You can point me in the direction of your wife.”

Maddie and I exchanged worried glances.

Was it possible Coop knew about Violette’s dalliance with Gabriel?

“Might I ask *why* you need to speak to my wife?”

“I have a few questions.”

“I’ll get her for you then,” Alastair said, “and we can move to the living room and talk there.”

“I’ll be speaking to her alone,” Coop said.

“I’d prefer it if I was in the room with the two of you.”

“And I’d prefer it if you were not. Your wife is free to give you the details of our conversation when we’re done, if she likes.”

It seemed they were at an impasse.

Both went silent but remained steadfast in their interests.

Violette entered the dining room, glanced at all of us, and said, “Why is everyone so quiet?”

“The chief of police wants to speak to you—alone,” Ella said. “But Dad wants to be part of the conversation.”

A look of worry swept across Violette's face. "I appreciate your concern, Alastair, but I am fine to speak with him on my own. I know just where we can talk, Chief Cooper. Follow me."

They left the room, returning about thirty minutes later. Violette's face was red and puffy, her anxiety on full display.

Coop looked at Alastair and said, "Now that I've spoken to your wife, I'll need to speak with you."

Alastair nodded, and the two of them left the room.

"What's with all the secrecy?" Ella asked. "I get the feeling I'm being left out of something."

"It's nothing, dear," Violette said. "Nothing to worry about."

It was clear that wasn't true.

Ella glanced at the clock on the wall and said, "Shoot, I need to get moving. Brandon will be here to get me in a couple of hours, and I haven't even showered yet."

Ella left the table. As soon as she rounded the corner, Violette leaned in, looked at Maddie and me, and said, "We need to talk. Follow me."

CHAPTER 10

WE STOOD next to Violette in her room, anxious to hear what she had to say.

“When the police were going through my nightstand drawer this morning, they found a series of photos,” she said.

“What kind of photos?” I asked.

“A private investigator has been following me for some time now, no doubt to prove I’ve stepped out on my marriage. It seems Alastair hired someone to screw me out of what’s mine in the divorce. What I don’t understand is how the photos came to be in my nightstand drawer. I was in that drawer right before the wedding. Those photos weren’t there.”

I could think of a couple of reasons why someone had placed the photos in the drawer for her to find. For one, it was possible they were placed in the drawer as a warning, to let Violette know her husband was onto her affair.

Or they were left there not for Violette to find, but for the police to find—

Though I didn’t understand why, or how they were connected to Nelly’s murder.

Or Alastair had placed them there himself as a way of toying with his wife, feeding into her anxiety.

“Tell me more about what was in the photos,” I said. “Were they enough to prove you and Gabriel are having an affair?”

Violette nodded. “There’s no doubt. While none of them depicted us in a bed or without clothing, there were a few of us kissing. There were also several shots with the two of us coming and going from a hotel room we often rented whenever Gabriel came to town to see me.”

“I’ve always known Alastair to be a reasonable man,” Maddie said. “Maybe he suspected you were seeing someone, and he wanted to be sure. He’s never said anything to you about it, has he?”

“Not a one. To be honest, I’d convinced myself he didn’t care what I did either way, which is why I believe the photos were being kept to use against me in our divorce.”

“You don’t know for sure, though,” Maddie said. “Might be a good idea for the two of you to talk, hear each other out.”

“I have no interest discussing the matter. Alastair’s always been good at getting things out of me. Anything I say will just put me in more hot water than I already am.”

“I could speak to him on your behalf,” Maddie said.

“I’d rather you stay out of it, sweetheart. This isn’t your mess to clean up.”

“Maybe not, but I’d like to help.”

There was a light rapping on Violette's door. The three of us exchanged glances, remaining still, unsure of what to do. Seconds passed, and then Maddie walked over to the door and opened it.

Alastair looked at the three of us and said, "Ladies, I'd like to speak with my wife."

"Your wife would not like to speak with you," Violette said. "Please, just go away. I'm in no mood to have a conversation with you right now."

Alastair stepped inside the bedroom and closed the door behind him.

"I assume you all know why Chief Cooper stopped by this morning," he said.

"We do," Maddie said.

"Good," Alastair said. "There are a few things I'd like to discuss."

"There's nothing to discuss," Violette said.

Alastair walked over to a blue-velvet lounge chair and sat down. "I understand how you're feeling. If you don't wish to speak to me, I suppose I have no choice other than to speak for us both. All I'm asking is that you listen."

Violette huffed a frustrated, "All right. Fine. Say whatever it is you came to say if you must. The sooner you speak your peace, the sooner you can leave."

Alastair crossed one leg over the other and said, "Violette, for about nine months now, I suspected you were seeing

another man. Little things here and there tipped me off. Things I could go into detail about right now, but I won't. It pained me to learn my suspicions were true."

Violette blinked at Alastair, a look of shock on her face as she said, "I didn't think me seeing another man would matter to you one way or the other."

"Of course, it matters. I've felt you have been unhappy in this marriage for a long while now, and I blame myself. I'm gone too much and for too long. I'm sure those times left you feeling alone and discarded. For that, I'm sorry. It feels like you've been slipping away from me in recent years. It's been tough to watch and even tougher for me to realize I haven't been doing enough in this marriage to make you feel loved and appreciated."

"You're right. I do feel discarded and like you don't love me anymore."

"I have always loved you, and I always will."

"Then why don't you tell me? When I was *slipping away*, as you say, why not take steps to fix things and make me a priority?"

"I should have. I'm sorry."

"I feel like all you care about these days is your work. If you love me as you say you do, why did you ask me for a divorce?"

It was a good question, and I found myself leaning a bit closer in anticipation of his answer.

“I thought I’d failed you,” Alastair said. “When I learned you’d been in the arms of another man for heaven knows how long, I convinced myself *you* no longer loved *me*. I suppose part of me thought I drove you into the arms of another man because I didn’t fight hard enough to keep you.”

Violette wiped a tear from her eye. “And I convinced myself the reason you hired someone to spy on me was to expose what I’d been doing so you could get more out of the divorce.”

“How could you believe I would be so cruel after all the years we’ve shared together?”

“I don’t know, Alastair. I just did. Not that it matters anymore.”

“That’s just it. It should matter, darling. Shouldn’t it?”

They stared at each other for a time, and then Violette said, “I don’t love him, the other man, you know. I’ve always loved you. I suppose I was with him because I was getting from him what I used to have with you—moments and memories I’ve missed for far too long.”

As I stood there, listening to them go back and forth, I started to feel a level of discomfort, like it wasn’t right for me to be there. Their conversation needed to be continued in private.

“I think it’s best Maddie and I go now,” I said. “You two need time to yourselves, time to talk.”

“It may sound crazy, but having you here is more comfortable to me than if it were just the two of us alone,”

Violette said.

“I believe the thought of talking to him alone is uncomfortable because you have both been living two separate lives for far too long,” I said. “You’ve been leaning on other things in your life instead of leaning on each other.”

“Wow,” Maddie said. “Well done, Sloane. I don’t think anyone could have said it better.”

I was on a roll, so I decided I may as well keep on rolling.

“Alastair, do you want a divorce, or do you want to work things out?” I asked.

He looked at Violette and then at me and said, “I want to hit the reset button, to have a chance to begin again, to do the things we used to do.”

Violette turned toward Alastair. “Do you mean it? Do you really mean it?”

“I do.” He went to her, taking her hands in his. “I want to at least try. What do you say, darling? Are you willing to close this chapter in our lives and start a new one with me?”

She stared up at him, smiling as she said, “I ... I ... yes. I am.”

CHAPTER 11

“WE NEED to add matchmaker to your resume,” Maddie said.

“I don’t know about that,” I said. “Listening to those two talk about their marriage was making me uncomfortable. I spoke up to move things along.”

“I’m glad they’re going to try to work on their marriage.”

“Do you think they will?”

Maddie gave the question some thought. “Mmm, I dunno. I hope so.”

“I was surprised he forgave her as easily as he did.”

“I’m not. He’s always been ... hmm, what’s the right word ... *lenient*, I guess. With practical matters anyway. What’s on the agenda for today? Who are you planning on speaking with first?”

“I’ll start with Richard the chef.”

“Want me to tag along?”

I shook my head. “No need. I can speak to him on my own.”

“All right, I’ll go see if Ella needs my help with anything before Brandon gets here to pick her up.”

We parted ways, and I walked toward the kitchen. I found Richard stacking dishes into the sink, whistling to the tune of Jack Johnson’s “Better Together” as he tidied up. His dark hair was peppered with bits of gray and styled into a manicured buzz cut. I guessed he was in his mid-fifties.

He acknowledged my presence with a smile and said, “How was breakfast? Did you enjoy it?”

“I did. It was the best French toast I’ve ever had.”

“Glad to hear it. I hear you’re a private investigator. What do you make of all this murder business?”

“I’m not sure yet.” I pointed out a wound on his right hand. “Looks like you cut yourself.”

He glanced down and made a fist. “Yeah, chopping too fast and not paying enough attention to what I’m doing will do it every time.”

It seemed like a plausible answer, but was it?

“How well did you know Nelly?” I asked.

“I considered her a friend. Why?”

“Violette told me you were in the house, preparing the food for the reception around the time Nelly died.”

Richard dried his hands on a towel and leaned against the counter, folding his arms. “That’s accurate, yes. I was working in the kitchen, waiting for the rest of the catering staff to arrive.”

“Nelly was shot twice. You didn’t hear anything?”

“My hearing’s not what it used to be. I also had my earbuds in, listening to music. If shots were fired, I didn’t hear it.”

“Were you alone in the kitchen?”

He nodded.

“Did you see anyone or talk to anyone during that time?” I asked.

“Let’s see ... Rosie came in and got a glass of water.”

“She’s the other housekeeper, right?”

“Right.”

“Did you speak to her?”

“For a minute or two. She seemed stressed. But then, we were all racing around, trying to make sure we were prepared for the reception.”

“What can you tell me about Nelly?” I asked.

“Well, she was always nice to me. Sometimes on her lunch break, I’d fix her a plate, and we’d catch up on our lives, talk about our kids.”

“Was Nelly married?”

“No.”

“How many kids did she have?”

“Just one. A boy. He’s ten years old, I believe. They were living with Nelly’s mother, Helen, while Nelly saved up to get a place of their own.”

“Where’s the boy’s father?”

“In jail. Not sure why. Nelly mentioned him to me once, but she didn’t offer details, and I’m not one to pry.”

“What about the Kingston family? Did she get along with them?”

Richard nodded. “Nelly was a likable person, so yes.”

“Did Nelly get along with the rest of the house staff?”

“Hmm ... for the most part. She got into a few arguments with Rosie.”

“Did you overhear any of their arguments?”

“Nah, Nelly told me about a few of them. The spats were always over silly things, like Rosie not wanting to do things the way Nelly wanted them done because she thought her way was better.”

“Can you think of any reason anyone would want to kill Nelly?” I asked.

“I should say not, but there is one thing that’s been bugging me. Why was Nelly in Alastair’s office? No one is allowed in there. Not even to tidy it up. Alastair sees to it himself. In fact, I think he keeps it locked up.”

It was a good question, one I’d been asking myself.

“Alastair had a hidden drawer beneath his desk. Were you aware of it?”

“Nope.”

“When we discovered Nelly’s body, I spotted the drawer and noticed it was empty,” I explained. “I asked Alastair about it, and he told me documents and other things were kept in there. But now they’ve disappeared, it seems.”

Richard shrugged. “I know nothing about that, sorry.”

I wondered if the drawer had also contained the photos the private investigator had taken—the photos that had ended up in Violette’s nightstand. It was a question I planned to ask Alastair later.

“What did the Kingston’s think of Nelly?” I asked. “Violette said they were friends.”

“They were. Violette sometimes had—”

His expression soured like he was worried to say anything more.

“Violette sometimes has anxiety,” I said.

Richard walked to the kitchen’s entry and poked his head out, looking both ways to see if anyone was around.

“Alastair and Violette are talking in her bedroom,” I said.

He turned toward me, lowering his voice as he said, “Violette has bouts of depression, though she’s never spoken about it, not to me. She used to talk to Nelly about it, and Nelly mentioned it to me from time to time.”

“Why do you think Violette chose Nelly to lean on, a woman in her employ, instead of her own friends?”

“Violette doesn’t have many friends, not to my knowledge. She never brings anyone to the house, never goes out much.

She and Alastair are opposites that way. He enjoys having people around—any excuse to throw a party.”

I had hoped to learn a lot from Richard, but so far, nothing he said got me any closer to who murdered Nelly. Then again, Richard admitted to being alone in the kitchen around the time the murder took place. The only person who saw him was Rosie when she dropped into the kitchen for a glass of water. Beyond that, Richard had no alibi, which meant, there was no way to know if what he was telling me was the truth.

“What do you think Nelly was doing in Alastair’s office?” I asked.

“Beats me. I will say this ... I caught her eavesdropping once. Alastair and Violette were having an argument in the living room. I came around the corner and there was Nelly with her ear up against the door.”

“Do you think she could have been looking for something in Alastair’s office right before she died?”

“If she was, I don’t know anything about it. If she was poking around where she shouldn’t have been ... well, I guess I always thought she was smarter than that.”

It seemed like he was going to say something more, but then he went quiet.

“Is there anything you want to tell me?” I asked.
“Anything you haven’t said?”

I waited, hoping it would pay off, and it did.

“It might be nothing, but I suppose it warrants mentioning, so I will,” he said. “A couple of weeks ago, Nelly made a

comment that struck me as odd. She was talking to me about Robert, the chef who was hired before me. Mr. Kingston fired him a few years ago, and that's when I took over his position."

"Did Nelly say why he was fired?"

"She sure did. Alastair had thrown one of his lavish summer parties. Several of the guests who'd eaten the free-range chicken Robert made got food poisoning. Alastair fired him the next day. I cracked a joke about taking extra measures so I never suffer the same fate. Nelly laughed and said she was bulletproof. I asked why, and she said she had insurance."

"Insurance? What kind of insurance?"

"I don't know. When I asked her about it, she just smirked at me and walked away."

CHAPTER 12

“DO YOU HAVE A MINUTE TO TALK?” I asked.

Alastair bent the cover of the newspaper he’d been reading so he could look over at me and then nodded. “For you, I have several. Come on in. Take a seat.”

I did as he requested.

“What’s on your mind?” he asked.

“Can I ask you about your relationship with Nelly?”

“I’d say she was far closer to Violette than she was to me, but we got on all right. She was a good worker. A hard worker. Never gave me any problems. Why do you ask?”

I leaned back in the chair and said, “Nelly had a conversation with Richard a couple of weeks ago. She was telling him about the previous chef, the one who was fired. She made an odd comment—to him, something about being bulletproof, and she said she’d never be fired because she had insurance.”

“I’m not sure why she would say that, but no one is immune to being let go if the situation warrants it.”

“The photos the private investigator took ... did you keep them in the hidden drawer in your office?”

“Sure did.”

“Along with what other documents?” I asked.

“Passports, important papers, and the like.”

“What important papers?”

He stared at me for a time, crossed one leg over the other, and said, “I don’t see what the papers I kept in that drawer have to do with Nelly. Do you?”

“She was murdered in your office, an office she wasn’t allowed to be in. It makes me wonder what she was doing in there in the first place. Was she looking for something, perhaps the ‘insurance’ she’d mentioned to Richard about?”

“What are you suggesting?”

“I’m suggesting Nelly knew something, a family secret she thought ensured her job security. It makes me wonder if she’d been in that drawer in the past.”

“She would have had to have a key to the door and the drawer, and she did not.”

“Are you saying you never left the door to your office unlocked, not even once?”

He raised a brow and said, “Not to my knowledge.”

A flicker in his eye when he’d responded question gave me pause. He *had* left it unlocked before, on accident, I assumed. He didn’t want to admit it.

“Maybe Nelly knew about the photos the private investigator took,” I said. “She could have thought it was a big enough secret that in the event she might be fired, she could reveal what she knew and keep her job.”

“The photos wouldn’t have been enough to spare her if we needed to fire her. It’s like I said before, I hired a private investigator because I had suspicions, and I wanted to know if they were true. I planned to tell Violette. I just hadn’t gotten around to it. I suppose I wanted to wait to see if the affair would fizzle out first or if she would admit it to me.”

“You were quick to forgive her for it.”

“Yes ... well, I’m not without fault. We all have our demons, I suppose.”

And there it was—an omission that told me nothing and something at the same time.

“I have a theory,” I said. “I believe Nelly knew about the hidden drawer in your office. I also believe she’d seen the contents of the drawer sometime in the past. What I’m not sure about is why she wanted to look at the contents of that drawer a second time. Or it’s possible she thought you’d added something new.”

“Interesting theories. Go on.”

“At some point when Nelly was in your office, someone else entered the room, she was murdered, and the contents of the drawer were taken. It seems plausible to me that she was killed because she saw something she wasn’t supposed to see. And given you were at the wedding at the time of the murder,

you didn't kill her. But the look on your face when you realized the drawer was empty was a look of fear. And you don't strike me as a man who is afraid of anything."

While I was relaying my thoughts about Nelly's death, he'd started rubbing his hands together, a nervous reaction, and a telling one.

"I'm not sure what you're getting at, but it's like you said. I was at the wedding," he said. "Her murder has nothing to do with me."

Alastair was a man of means—a man who could hire someone to murder Nelly during the wedding, while at the same time, provide Alastair with an alibi.

It was a theory Maddie wouldn't want to believe, so until I knew more, I'd keep my thoughts to myself.

I did have one last question, though.

"Was there a document in that drawer, a document detailing a secret you've been keeping, one which might explain why it and the rest of the papers were taken?"

The question caused some discomfort, and he stood and said, "I have a meeting in a few minutes. It's been nice talking to you, Sloane, even if the conversation has been heavier than I would have liked. We'll have to do it again sometime, but let's agree to make it lighter when we do."

With that, he left the room, leaving me to wonder about the secret I was sure he was keeping and wondering just how far he'd go to protect it.

CHAPTER 13

I FOUND Rosie making up the bed in one of the guest rooms. She glanced over at me and then jerked her head in the opposite direction, as if hoping I wouldn't strike up a conversation.

“You worked with Nelly in housekeeping,” I said. “She was your superior, right?”

“What about it?”

“What was it like, working with her?”

“It was fine.”

“You two got along, then?”

Rosie smoothed her hand over the quilt and said, “We did what we needed to do to get the job done.”

It was an answer, but not the answer to the question I'd asked.

I considered a different angle, a way to frame the question so it sounded different but it was still the same.

“Did you like Nelly?” I asked.

“Does it matter whether I liked her or not?”

“It might.”

She breathed out a long, heavy sigh, and said, “I have a lot of work to do. I don’t have time to chitchat.”

“As far as the chores you still need to finish today, there’s no rush. I spoke to Violette on my way to see you. She’s fine with me taking the staff aside to ask a few questions.”

“She’s fine with it, eh?” Rosie plopped the pillow she was fluffing against the headboard and then turned and sat down on top of the bed. “If she’s fine with it, I’m on break. But I don’t have anything useful to share with you. I just do my job.”

“I understand Nelly had a particular way about how she wanted things done when it came to the upkeep of the house.”

I’d hit a nerve.

Rosie rolled her eyes. “Oh, yeah. The woman had OCD. Big time.”

So do I.

“You say it like it’s a bad thing,” I said.

“Isn’t it? I mean, why did everything have to be placed in such a specific way all the time? The family didn’t care, so why did she? Ask me, it was a bit over the top.”

“I have OCD,” I said. “It has its disadvantages. It also has its advantages.”

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to offend—”

I swished a hand through the air. “It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it. I heard there were times when the two of you

argued over the best way to do things.”

She paused a moment, then said, “I’d say we saw eye to eye most of the time, just not *all* of the time.”

“Did the arguments ever escalate?”

“If you’re asking if we yelled at each other—no, we didn’t.”

I wasn’t getting anywhere with my current line of questioning.

Time to switch subjects.

“You were inside the house while the wedding was taking place, right?” I asked.

Rosie nodded. “I was in the laundry room, steaming the dresses Ella and Violette were supposed to wear to the wedding reception.”

“Nelly was shot twice,” I said.

“I’m aware.”

“Richard said he was in the kitchen with his earbuds in, listening to music, and he didn’t hear any shots fired. He also said he may not have heard anything because he’s hard of hearing.”

“Oh, he is. Sometimes he asks me to repeat myself multiple times. I don’t speak loud enough, I guess.”

“What about you? Did you hear any shots being fired?”

She shook her head. “This is a big house. The laundry room is on the lower level, as I’m sure you know. Oh, and

Alastair's office is soundproof.”

A fact no one had mentioned before now.

I knew about his bedroom being soundproof but not his office.

“How do you know the office is soundproof?” I asked.

“Nelly told me.”

“Do you have any idea why Nelly would be in Mr. Kingston's office when staff was told it was a restricted room in the house?”

“I haven't the foggiest.”

“Have you ever seen her in his office before?”

She tapped a finger on top of the quilt and said, “Not *inside* the office ... but once I stepped out into the hallway, and I saw Nelly with her hand on the doorknob to Mr. Kingston's office. She sort of startled when she saw me. I guessed she wasn't expecting us to run into each other. I asked her what she was doing, and she said she was disinfecting all the handles in the house. But she had no cleaner in her hand. No washcloth either.”

“Did you point it out to her?”

“Nope. I just went about my business.”

“I assume she was checking to see if his door was unlocked,” I said. “Any idea why?”

“None.”

“I was told Violette confided in Nelly,” I said. “What was their relationship like?”

“They seemed close. Nelly trotted off with Violette from time to time to chat, leaving me to pick up the slack.”

“I’m sure that didn’t make you feel good.”

“No, but what was I supposed to do ... complain to the boss when the boss was the person Nelly slipped away with in the first place? I don’t think so. Violette favored Nelly. I could have lost my job.”

“I bet it caused some resentment, didn’t it?”

Rosie wagged a finger in the air. “I know what you’re doing. I had nothing to do with what happened to Nelly. Nothing at all. And I know nothing about who murdered her or why they did it. So while I appreciate the break in my workday, it’s like I said before ... I don’t have any useful information.”

“You seem unfazed by her death.”

“Hard to be upset when Violette pulled me aside today and said she’d like to talk to me about taking over Nelly’s position.”

It hadn’t even been twenty-four hours since Nelly’s murder, and the family seemed to be concerned with moving on than anything else.

“During the wedding, you were in the house with Richard and Kit. Did you see anyone else?”

“I didn’t. I spent most of the wedding getting those dresses ready. Had the washer and dryer going at the same time. It’s no wonder I didn’t hear any gunshots.”

“You weren’t in there the entire time,” I said. “You went to the kitchen for a glass of water.”

“I ... uhh, did I?”

“Richard said you did.”

“Huh. Guess I forgot.”

Forgot something that had happened the day before?

I doubted it.

It also seemed strange to me that several people were in the house at the time of the murder, and yet no one claimed to see or hear a thing. Someone was lying to me, and they wouldn’t get away with it for long.

CHAPTER 14

I FOUND Maddie in the living room, waving goodbye to Ella at the window. Bride and groom were leaving for the airport to start their honeymoon. Once the truck was out of sight, Maddie turned toward me and said, “I hope they have a good time after all that’s happened.”

“Me too,” I said. “Do you know if Alastair’s office is soundproof?”

She shrugged. “It could be. I’m sure he does a lot of business dealings from there. Why didn’t you ask him when you talked to him?”

“I didn’t know it was soundproof until a few minutes ago. Rosie told me.”

“How would she know?”

“She said Nelly told her,” I said. “I talked to Alastair as well.”

“What did you talk to Alastair about?”

“I asked him what he kept in the hidden drawer.”

Maddie crossed her arms, eyeing me with curiosity. “And what did he say?”

“He didn’t. It makes me think he’s keeping something from me. I asked him about it, and it was obvious the question made him uncomfortable. He said he had a meeting, and he left the room.”

“You think he’s keeping a secret, don’t you? Something connecting him to Nelly’s murder in some way.”

“I know you’re not going to want to hear this, but yeah ... I do.”

“I suppose all I can think to say right now is that I hope you’re wrong.”

“What if I’m right? You asked me to investigate Nelly’s murder, and I can’t do that unless I question everyone. I don’t want your family to be suspects any more than you do.”

“Let’s hope they’re all in the clear then.”

I paused a moment, taking a breath before I said, “If questioning your family is too hard for you, I can leave the investigation to Coop. I don’t want this to cause any problems between us.”

Maddie pulled a piece of gum out of her pocket, unwrapped it, and popped it into her mouth. “It won’t. Keep doing what you’re doing.”

“Even if Alastair has a secret he doesn’t want to come out?”

“I guess it depends on the secret. Some secrets are better off staying hidden. If he has one, maybe he has a good reason for keeping it.”

Or maybe Maddie didn't want to believe there was a side to her uncle that she didn't know about, that *no one* knew about.

I was sure he was hiding something—something dark.

But just how dark was it?

CHAPTER 15

MADDIE and I left the house and drove to a condominium where we were told the band who'd been hired to play at the wedding reception was staying. It was one o'clock when we arrived, but when we knocked on the door, no one answered. I banged on it again, and a middle-aged man with long, wavy, black hair swung the door open. He was dressed in a pair of boxers with yellow happy faces on them and nothing else.

The rancid smell of cigarette smoke wafted from inside the house, and I took a step back, just as the man said, "Yeah? What you want?"

"Are you the band who was hired to play at the Kingston's wedding reception?" I asked.

"Who wants to know?"

"I want to know."

"Who the hell are ya?"

"I'm a private investigator."

"So? We already talked to the cops, to the grumpy big guy."

Coop seemed to have been one step ahead of me all day.

“You talked to Chief Cooper, and now I’d like you to talk to me,” I said.

“Why? We don’t know nothin’ about nothin’ that happened that night.”

“Maybe not, but I’d still like to ask a few questions.”

“I’m too tired to deal with this dead woman crap right now.”

He tried shutting the door, and I stuck my snow boot in the jamb, preventing it. At the same time, someone behind him said, “Who’s there, Eduardo? Who’s at the door?”

“A lass and her friend. They want to speak to us about the dead woman. One of ’em’s a private eye.”

“Why don’t you go back to bed? I’ll handle it.”

Eduardo walked away, and a bald, freckle-faced young man came to the door. He looked at Maddie and then at me and said, “Ladies, the two of ya’s must be freezing. Come inside. I’ll make some coffee.”

The thought of entering the smoke-filled condo gave me pause. Maddie noticed what I assumed was a repulsed look on my face. She looped her arm around mine and said, “We’d love to come inside, thanks!”

He smiled. “I’m Iggy, by the way.”

Iggy swung the door all the way open, and we walked inside. And while the smell wasn’t a favorable one, the condo itself was impeccable.

Iggy stretched his arms out to the side and said, “Digs aren’t bad, right? Alastair set us up good. Why don’t you ladies take a seat? I’ll get the coffee going and see you both in two shakes.”

I raised a finger and said, “I don’t drink coffee. Do you have tea, by chance?”

Maddie looked at me like it was the most uncool thing I’d ever uttered. I assumed it was because Iggy was easy on the eyes, and she’d been eyeing him ever since he greeted us at the door.

I figured I’d embarrassed her until he pointed at me and said, “A woman after my own heart. I drink green tea with a skosh of lemon and honey before each gig. You okay with that?”

“Green tea’s perfect,” I said.

He clapped his hands together. “You got it, babe.”

Iggy disappeared around the corner, and Maddie said, “Babe, huh? May I remind you that *babe* is married?”

I shook my head and said, “I’m not trying to flirt with the guy. I’m trying to get some tea and then some answers.”

Maddie burst out laughing. “You know I’m joking, right? You’re the most moral person I’ve ever met. I’ve never even seen you so much as look at another man since you and Cade married.”

“Yeah, well, Iggy’s all yours, even if he is half our age.”

“Age is just a number after a certain point, right?”

Iggy returned to the living room a few minutes later with two cups of tea and a cup of coffee for Maddie. He set them down in front of us and, plopped down on a chair, and said, “I apologize for Eduardo. He’s an ornery old bastard.”

“He’s fine,” I said. “Your ... umm ... your *band* was hired to—”

Iggy raised a hand in the air. “Now hold on a minute, lassie. Seems like you’re saying the word *band* because you don’t know who we are.”

“You’re Agents of Insanity,” Maddie blurted. “My favorite song is ‘My Heart Belongs to Molly.’”

“Ahh, a fan then,” Iggy said. “I like it. Like my ladies older too, if you don’t mind me sayin’ so.”

Maddie curled a lock of her long, blond hair behind her ear and said, “I don’t mind at all.”

I was beginning to feel like the third wheel in the conversation, and then Iggy said, “Alastair hired us to play this gig. Flew us over from Dublin. Paid all our expenses. I guess we’re the groom’s favorite band. We were hired to play as a surprise wedding gift for him.”

“Alastair’s my uncle,” Maddie said.

“Cool, cool,” Iggy said. “What can I do you ladies for ... I mean, I assume you’re here to talk about the poor woman who died.”

“We are,” I said. “I’m not sure if you’re aware, but your band was setting up during the time she died.”

“Yeah, one of the people who work for the family said something about it.”

“Did you happen to hear any gunshots go off while you were setting up?”

He shook his head. “Can’t say we did. We were making a lot of noise on our own at the time, so it’s not surprising.”

“Kit was with you while you were setting up, wasn’t she?”

“The drab assistant lady? Yeah, she was there.”

“The entire time?”

He scratched his forehead and said, “I mean, I guess so. I don’t remember her leaving. We were mad busy, though. It’s not like I was paying attention to details, like who was coming and going at the time.”

“Aside from your band and Kit, did you see anyone else in the house while you were setting up?”

“I don’t think I ... hang on. There was this other woman. I remember seeing her when I was testing the mic.”

“What did she look like?”

“Kinda on the shorter side. Brown hair in a bun. Had a little bit of weight on her. If you know what I mean.”

It sounded like he was describing Rosie.

But Rosie had said she was in the laundry room while the wedding was taking place. She’d failed to mention she went to the kitchen for a glass of water when I questioned her before. And now it seemed she was also in the reception hall. Another thing she’d failed to mention.

“What do you remember about the woman?” I asked.

“Not much. She walked over to Kit and started talking to her. It looked like they may have been arguing for a minute, but then Kit put her arm around her, and the lady seemed a lot happier.”

“How long would you say the woman was there?”

“No idea. Why?”

“Just wondering,” I said.

“You must be wondering for a reason.”

“There weren’t many people in the house at the time of the wedding. Which means, her murderer has to be one of the people who were in the house while the wedding was taking place at the chapel.”

“I can tell you one thing—it wasn’t any of the guys in my crew.”

“So ... ahh, just curious, how long is your crew in town?” Maddie asked.

“We leave tomorrow. You have any plans tonight, darlin?”

Maddie grinned. “I do now.”

As the flirting continued, a third band member entered the room. He was a lot shorter than the other two and dressed like he was preparing for a blizzard. He walked over to the fireplace and stood in front of it, closing his eyes as he absorbed the warmth of the fire.

“This is Oscar,” Iggy said.

“Hi, Oscar. I’m Sloane, and this is Maddie.”

“Hey,” Oscar said.

“They’re here about the dead woman,” Iggy said.

“Ah, okay,” Oscar said. “Sad, what happened, and on such a fine day too.”

“Sloane was asking if we saw anyone in the house other than a few of the staff,” Iggy said.

Oscar crossed his arms. “There was one person. I don’t know if he was staff or someone else. I realized I’d left my wallet in the rental van, and I went out to get it. This guy walks by. I turned to say hello, but he went out of his way to avoid me. He walked into the house and disappeared. I never saw him again.”

“This guy—what did he look like?”

“He was fit, like he works out at a gym. He had dark hair and a goatee.”

I knew the man he was describing.

Now I needed to track him down.

CHAPTER 16

MADDIE and I were sitting at a table for two in Gabriel's hotel room, watching him pack a bag.

"I don't know why you're here," he said. "I'm about to leave. Violette just let me know it's over between us ... in a text, if you can believe it."

"What were you hoping would happen?" Maddie asked.

"I love her. I hoped once the divorce proceedings began, we could start our lives together. I feel used, like I was a placeholder until Alastair decided to give their relationship another go. So, if you don't mind, I'm done talking. I have a flight to catch."

"I do mind," I said. "You were seen entering the Kingston residence right around the time of Nelly's murder."

"Yeah, so? You already know I was waiting at the house as a surprise for Violette. I planned to lie low until the reception."

"Did you ever have any interactions with Nelly, or did you see her?"

"Nope."

“Violette confided in Nelly a lot over the years. Perhaps she told Nelly something you didn’t want her to know. The time of your arrival seems a little too convenient to me. You knew the wedding was taking place at that time. Why not wait and show up during the reception?”

“I wanted to be there for Violette when she arrived. Planned on letting her know I’d flown in as soon as the ceremony was over.” He zipped his suitcase and then leaned against the wall, his head shaking back and forth as he said, “I know why you’re asking these questions. What reason would I have to kill the housekeeper and then steal all of the contents out of the drawer?”

“There were photos of you and Violette in that drawer.”

“Even if there were, Alastair has known about us for some time. What point would there be for me to remove photos he’d already seen?”

“Maybe you weren’t after the photos,” I said. “Maybe you were after something else.”

“Something like—”

Before he could finish his sentence, there was a knock at the door.

“What now?” Gabriel asked. “This is ridiculous.”

Maddie opened the door and said, “Afternoon, Coop. Fancy meeting you here.”

“I wouldn’t say there’s anything fancy about it,” Coop said. “You two have been busy today.”

“As have you,” I said.

He smirked and turned toward Gabriel. “We need to talk. Alone.”

It was our cue to exit.

“He’s all yours.” I stood and slung my bag over my shoulder. “Besides, there’s somewhere else we need to be.”

CHAPTER 17

ROSIE WAS on her way to her car when Maddie and I arrived back at the house. She wasn't happy to see me, or to learn she was the reason I'd come back.

“Do you have a minute?” I asked.

“My husband is taking me to dinner tonight. What do you want?”

“When we spoke earlier, you said you spent most of your time getting the reception dresses ready while the wedding was taking place. Aside from going into the kitchen to get a glass of water, you also went into the reception hall to speak to Kit. Why?”

Rosie fiddled with the keys on her keyring, which told me the question had made her nervous.

I wondered why.

“If you don't tell me about your conversation with Kit, I'll ask her about it, so you may as well tell me now,” I said.

“Okay ... look, I needed to vent.”

“About what?”

“Nelly. She’d checked on me to see how the dresses were coming. I’d finished Ella’s and was starting on Violette’s. Nelly inspected Ella’s dress and decided it wasn’t good enough. She asked me to go over it again. It didn’t *need* to be gone over again. It was fine.”

“Did you go over it again?”

“No. I’m not going to do my work twice for no good reason.”

“Instead, you went to Kit to complain about Nelly.”

“Yep.”

“And you didn’t say anything before now because if you’d admitted you’d complained about her, it would imply you were angry right before she died. Anger which I see as a motive for murder.”

Rosie moved a hand to her hip. “I don’t have to stand here and listen to your crazy theories. I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“I didn’t say you did.”

“You sure don’t act like you believe I’m innocent.”

“I don’t know what to believe right now.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not staying here a second longer to be interrogated by you.”

She pivoted and stormed off toward her car, leaving me standing there wondering if I’d just stared into the face of Nelly’s killer.

CHAPTER 18

I CHECKED in with Alastair to ask if their employees filled out any paperwork when they were hired. He said they did, and he allowed me to borrow their application forms.

I dropped Maddie off at a bar downtown where she was to meet Iggy and then I drove a couple of blocks away and parked in front of the library. Armed with the names and other basic data of all those I suspected, I sat in front of a computer and accessed a database full of documents, including birth certificates, death certificates, and marriage certificates—anything that could help me get to know them all better.

Going down the list of subjects, I typed each name in one by one, looking into their backgrounds, and seeing what information I could find. Most of what I discovered wasn't anything out of the norm. And then I came to the last name on my list. When I entered it into the system, it failed to produce a birth certificate. In all my years as a private investigator, I'd never run into that problem.

I checked the home address on the application form and decided to take a little drive. The house was dark when I arrived, but the porch light was on. I walked to the door and

pressed the doorbell. No one answered. I pressed it again and again. Still nothing. The door had a regular lock and no deadbolt, making it all too easy for me to slide my credit card against the lock and let myself in.

“Hello,” I said. “Anyone home?”

The house was quiet.

I turned on my cell phone’s flashlight on and looked around.

As I felt my way down the hall, I rounded the corner into a small office. There wasn’t much in the way of décor. A few artificial plants resting in front of a series of fantasy books in a bookcase. The desk was simple, without drawers or items of any kind. Nothing to see there.

I moved on, continuing down the hall until I reached the bedroom. The bed was unmade, and as I scanned it from bottom to top, I saw what looked like a piece of paper poking out from beneath one of the pillows. I lifted the pillow and hit the jackpot, my eyes coming to rest on a handful of documents—some of which contained Alastair Kingston’s signature. I looked over a few of them and then an envelope slipped through my hands, falling onto the bed.

I picked it up and looked inside, pulling out a letter wrapped around a few photos—photos of a baby. Opening the letter, I began to read:

Alastair,

I know you asked me not to contact you, and I promised to honor your request. But part of me feels

like you'd want to at least see what she looks like. She is yours, after all. Don't you want to know her? Don't you want her to be part of your life?

You said you loved me. You said you wanted us to be together, and now, you've left me with nothing but a broken heart and money to ensure she has a good future. But what is money without your love? It's nothing, and I am nothing without you.

Please, reconsider. If not for me, for her sake. She deserves to know her father.

Yours, Libby

“Find what you’re looking for, Detective?”

I turned to see Kit standing in the doorway, with a gun aimed at my chest.

“You’re Alastair’s daughter,” I said.

“How did you figure it out?”

“I couldn’t find your birth certificate. When I typed in the name ‘Kit Van Buren,’ along with your birthdate, nothing came up. I’m guessing your mother listed your name as Kit Kingston on your birth certificate.”

“She did. But when I turned eighteen, I changed it back to Van Buren, my mother’s maiden name.”

“When did you discover he was your father?”

“Four years ago. I’d asked my mother who he was for years, and she wouldn’t tell me. Then she got cancer. At one

point, she thought she wasn't going to make it, so she gave me his first name and told me all about him."

"You've been working for them all this time without them knowing who you are? Why?"

"I just wanted a chance to get to know him. I wanted to be around him, to see what he was like."

"Did you ever plan on telling him who you are?"

"I thought about it, but he rejected me once. What would stop him from doing it again after he learned I'd been keeping it from him? Even if he wanted to know me, he allowed his stubborn pride to get in the way."

"Maybe he would have been happy to know you now. He kept the letter and your photos all these years."

"I never knew, not until Nelly broke into his office, and I saw her reading the letter. I looked on the desk and saw a photo I recognized—a photo of me. She didn't see me enter the room at first, so I went into Alastair's bedroom and took the gun he kept at the back of his sock drawer."

"How did you even know it was there?"

"Violette mentioned it once when she was talking to me about her distaste for firearms."

"You took his gun, you returned to his office, and you shot her?"

"I didn't know I was going to shoot her, and then I started thinking about her telling everyone about me. I ... I closed the office door, aimed, and fired."

“Why shoot her twice?”

“She was still alive, so I walked over to her, and I shot her again. I was trying to find the key so I could put everything back in the desk drawer, but I couldn’t find it, and I panicked. So I just grabbed everything, and I took it.”

“Why leave the photos of Violette and Gabriel in her nightstand drawer? I assume it was you who put them there.”

“She’s always looked out for me, even when I wasn’t there for her the way Nelly had always been. I felt she deserved to know.”

“When we were downstairs and you discovered Gabriel with Violette, I have to admit, you did a good job of acting surprised.”

She tipped her head to the side and smiled. “I sure did, didn’t I?”

“What now? Are you going to shoot me too? There’s no way you’ll get away with it. Not this time.”

“I ... I don’t know. I didn’t want it to come to this, but I’m not going to prison.”

“You’ll go to prison either way. Kill me, you’ll go for longer.”

“Guess it’s a chance I’m willing to take.”

The bullet struck me in the shoulder. I pressed a hand over it, crouching on the ground as I grappled to remove my gun from its holster. I heard her footsteps, fast and heavy, getting

closer and closer. There wasn't enough time—not enough to grab my gun and aim it.

“I'm sorry it has to be this way,” she said. “You should have never stuck your nose where it didn't belong.”

I inched toward her, wrapping my hand around her ankle to knock her off her feet. Before I could, a second gunshot rang out, and Kit fell forward, sagging to the ground.

CHAPTER 19

I PEEKED over the bed at Coop, who was looking at me with a giant smile on his face.

He nodded toward one of his officers and said, “Better cuff the woman before she comes to, don’t you think?”

I blinked at him and said, “How did you—”

“Know you were here? I didn’t.”

“Then why are you here?”

“We lifted a print off one of the photos of Violette and Gabriel that we found in Violette’s nightstand and got a match.”

“Your timing is impeccable,” I said.

“How about you? What brought you here?”

“Alastair gave me the application forms of all their employees. I was running searches on each one of them, and when I entered Kit’s full name and date of birth, I was unable to find a birth certificate.”

Coop holstered his gun and crossed his arms. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Kit is Alastair’s daughter.”

“You don’t say? Makes a lot more sense to me now, I suppose.”

“The day Nelly died, Kit caught her in Alastair’s office reading over a letter from Kit’s mother. On the top of his desk, Kit spotted photos of a baby—a baby that looked just like her baby photos. Kit worried Nelly would tell Alastair what she’d found, and that once he knew who she really was, he wouldn’t want anything to do with her. She knew where he kept his gun, and she grabbed it, returned to the office, and she shot and killed Nelly.”

I pushed myself to a standing position, wincing in pain as I did so.

“You all right?” Coop asked.

“Oh yeah, I’m fine. It’s just a scratch.”

“You’re losing a lot of blood. Come here. Let me take a look.”

“I’ve had worse. I’m sure I’ll be ... I’ll be ... just ...”

Before I could say anything more, the room swirled around me, and everything went black.

CHAPTER 20

I WOKE in a hospital room to find Maddie sitting next to me, holding my hand.

“This is what happens when I leave you for five minutes,” she said. “I swear I need to wrap you in bubble wrap and never leave your side again.”

I tried to laugh but stopped when the pain in my shoulder offered a sharp reminder of the wound I’d sustained.

“You asked me to find the killer, and I did,” I said. “How’s Kit doing? I’m assuming she’s here too. Did she survive?”

“Yeah, Coop made sure not to hit any vital organs when he shot her.”

“I’d like to say this isn’t the first time he’s come to my rescue, but I’ll just say, I hope it’s the last.”

Maddie laughed.

“He was worried about you. I could tell.” She pointed to a counter opposite me. “He bought you those flowers too.”

“You’re not serious.”

“I am.”

“Have you talked to your family? Do they know what happened and why?”

“They do.”

“How are they taking it?”

“Turns out, Violette knew Alastair had a child he’d never met. He told her several years back.”

“It makes perfect sense. I couldn’t understand how he was so quick to forgive her affair. It was because he’d had one himself.”

“Well, sorta. I guess there was a time when Alastair and Violette had called off their engagement. That’s when he met Kit’s mother, Libby. By the time she got pregnant, the wedding between Alastair and Violette was back on.” Maddie shook her head. “Just when you want to believe your family is squeaky clean ... this happens.”

“How do they feel now that they know Kit’s real identity?”

“They’re a bit numb, though I overheard Alastair ask Coop if she was going to be all right. My guess is he might come visit her wherever she winds up once he’s had time to process it all.”

“Speaking of visits, how long until we can blow this joint?” I asked.

“Doc says at least one more day.”

“Well, one thing is for certain—the wedding turned out to be the exact opposite of what I expected.”

Maddie squeezed my hand and said, “Yeah, but you know how it is with us. Every day is another adventure.”

THE END

Thank you for reading *Deadly Sins: Pride*, book five in the Sloane Monroe Stories Novella Series.

I hope you enjoyed getting to know the characters in this story as much as I have enjoyed writing them for you. This is a continuing series with more books coming before and after the one you just read. You can find the series order (as of the date of this printing) in the “Books by Cheryl Bradshaw” section below.

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ABOUT CHERYL BRADSHAW

Cheryl Bradshaw is a *New York Times* and 11-time *USA Today* bestselling author writing in the genres of mystery, thriller, paranormal suspense, and romantic suspense, among others. Her novel *Stranger in Town* (Sloane Monroe series #4) was a Shamus Award finalist for Best PI Novel of the Year, and her novel *I Have a Secret* (Sloane Monroe series #3) was an eFestival of Words winner for Best Thriller.

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Grace Ashby wakes to the sound of a horrifying scream. She races down the hallway, finding her mother's lifeless body on the floor in a pool of blood. Her mother's boyfriend Hugh is hunched over her, but is Hugh really her mother's killer?

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[Deadly Sins: Sloth](#) (Book 1)

Darryl has been shot, and a mysterious woman is sprawled out on the floor in his hallway. She's dead too. Who is she? And why have they both been murdered?

[Deadly Sins: Wrath](#) (Book 2)

Headlights flash through Maddie's car's back windshield, someone following close behind. When her car careens into a nearby tree, the chase comes to an end. But for Maddie, the end is just the beginning.

[Deadly Sins: Lust](#) (Book 3)

Marissa Calhoun sits alone on a beach-like swimming hole nestled on Australia's foreshore. Tonight, the lagoon is hers and hers alone. Or is it?

[Deadly Sins: Greed](#) (Book 4)

It was just another day for mob boss Giovanni Luciana until he took his car for a drive.

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A cryptic message. A missing niece. And only twenty-four hours to pay.

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[Little Buried Secrets](#) (Book 8)

In a split-second, a car collides with Margot, and she finds herself hurdling through the air, her bike going one way as she goes the other. Her mind whirls in this moment, as she thinks about her life and just how much she doesn't want to die.

[Little Stolen Memories](#) (Book 9)

In a secluded cabin deep within the woods, an ominous stranger is about to change the lives of six unsuspecting teenagers forever.

Addison Lockhart Series

[Grayson Manor Haunting](#) (Book 1)

When Addison Lockhart inherits Grayson Manor after her mother's untimely death, she unlocks a secret that's been kept hidden for over fifty years.

[Rosecliff Manor Haunting](#) (Book 2)

Addison Lockhart jolts awake. The dream had seemed so real. Eleven-year-old twins Vivian and Grace were so full of life, but they couldn't be. They've been dead for over forty years.

[Blackthorn Manor Haunting](#) (Book 3)

Addison Lockhart leans over the manor's window, gasping when she feels a hand on her back. She grabs the windowsill to brace herself, but it's too late—she's already falling.

[Belle Manor Haunting](#) (Book 4)

A vehicle barrels through the stop sign, slamming into the car Addison Lockhart is inside before fleeing the scene. Who is the driver of the other car? And what secrets within the walls of Belle Manor will provide the answer?

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