



KILLER AMONG US

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PROLOGUE

Colleen Hunter had spent most of the day feeling like she was about to have some sort of a nervous breakdown. Of course, no one looking at her would know that she felt that way. She had learned over the years to hide her emotions behind a blank façade, and it had served her well so far- everyone thought Colleen was the type of woman who was always in control.

Colleen knew it was ridiculous that she felt like this really – a grown woman on the edge of a panic attack in case one of the details of a party didn't go right wasn't normal was it – but to Colleen, this was more than just a party. This was her annual December gathering, a Bennison Beach tradition that kicked off the Christmas festivities every year.

The December gathering was always held on the first Saturday in December and only the most elite of the elite were invited. In a place like Bennison Beach, that meant something. This year, the bash was even more exclusive than usual and while that was somewhat daunting – there would be nowhere to hide if anything went wrong - it was also going to be much easier for Colleen in some ways because there were a lot less moving parts for her to keep track of than there usually would be.

Colleen was starting to relax a little bit now that most of the preparation was done, but she wouldn't allow herself to relax completely until the event was over and people were talking about what a success it had been. She was already looking forward to the praise her guests would heap on her and

the looks she would get from the people who hadn't been invited – a mixture of hatred, envy, and a longing to be one of the elites.

“Where is the damned bar tender?” Colleen asked, looking around at the gathered staff before her.

She had another quick look around the room to make sure she hadn't overlooked the bar tender, but no, she hadn't. She could see the wait staff - Georgia, Eric, Callie, and Gabe - along with the catering manager, Rachel. Wayne Watson was sitting with them too. While technically neither wait staff nor bar staff, Wayne was still on the staff for the evening. Colleen had hired the actor to play the part of the victim in her murder mystery for tonight's party so that none of her guests had to be the victim and miss out on the fun of solving the murder.

“I'm here,” a voice said from behind Colleen. “And I'm a mixologist not a bar tender.”

“Right,” Colleen said, fixing him with an icy look. “And I'm a party planner not just a bored housewife.”

She could see Dave, the prodigal bar tender – sorry, mixologist - biting his tongue, dying to throw a retort back at her, but a warning glance from Rachel stopped him. Shame, Colleen thought. A little spar might have gotten some of this nervous energy out of me and calmed me down.

“Ok, now Dave has seen fit to join us, let me just run over the plan for the evening one last time,” Colleen said. “Dave you will obviously be in the bar area which has been set up in one of the rooms off the dining room. Start the drinks off nice and strong, get people merry, but use your discretion if people are getting a little bit too merry, ok?”

Dave nodded and looked bored, and Colleen wondered again why she put up with his attitude. He couldn't have been more than twenty-two and he already had this world-weary thing going on. It irritated Colleen to no end, but she knew deep down why she put up with him; when the guests arrived and he went into server mode, there was no one better for both mixing drinks and keeping the people happy as they waited.

This was the eighth event of hers he would have worked, and she had heard nothing but praise from her guests.

“Wait staff,” Colleen said, looking at each of them in turn as she spoke. “I expect to see you guys on the move constantly. Make sure no guest goes unfed but don’t be in their faces if they decline what you are offering.”

She was well aware of the fact that the instruction was contradictory but, in her mind, she knew what she meant and judging by the nods of agreement she was getting from the staff, they knew what she meant too – let no hungry guest go unfed but don’t bother anyone who has made it clear they didn’t want anything more to eat.

“Thank you,” Colleen smiled at them. “You can go and get yourselves set up.”

The wait staff and Dave stood up and left the room. Colleen turned her attention to Rachel.

“Keep an eye on them. Make sure everything runs smoothly. You know the drill,” she said.

“Of course,” Rachel said.

Colleen noted that her smile didn’t meet her eyes and figured the woman was a little bit insulted that she was getting told how to do her job, but Colleen didn’t much care. She wanted everything to be absolutely perfect and her giving a reminder of that to the staff she was paying wouldn’t hurt them. She dismissed Rachel, leaving just Wayne sitting in the room with her.

“Did you look over the character notes and your script for tonight?” Colleen asked.

“Yes, but none of it is really relevant to me. Don’t worry ma’am, I am perfectly capable of laying on the ground and looking dead,” he said.

“I hope so,” Colleen muttered. “But don’t forget you have a few scenes to play before you are murdered.”

“I know,” Wayne said with a smile that Colleen thought was meant to be reassuring. “I’ve done feature films and

managed to remember the script. I think I'll be fine for this."

"Ok," Colleen said, not entirely convinced, but knowing it was too late to change her mind now. Wayne had come highly recommended, and she knew deep down she just had to trust him to do his job. "Once you have been murdered, stay in place because the players might want to come back and check some detail or another about the way you were killed or how your body was placed or anything like that. Plus, I think it would take away from the moment slightly if the guests were to see you wandering around once you were meant to be dead."

"Got it, thanks," Wayne said.

He stood up and headed for the door before Colleen had dismissed him which irked her, but she had nothing else to say to him and she wasn't about to call him back just to dismiss him and let him see he had annoyed her. She waited until he had left the room and then she shook her head and let out a dramatic sigh.

Now she needed to go and find Vinnie, her husband, and convince him that it was time for them to get changed into their evening wear. If it was left up to Vinnie, he would go and get changed a minute or two after their guests were due, and Colleen wasn't going to be having that.

She left the room and headed for the lounge where she found Vinnie sitting in an armchair looking out of the large glass window. The light was just starting to fade from the day, but it looked brighter outside than Colleen had expected it to, and she instantly saw why. Snowflakes the size of her head were drifting down to form a blanket of white over the top of the existing one.

"Looking at this, we might need to call tonight off," Vinnie said as Colleen approached him.

She snorted down her nose.

"No chance," she said. "I have spent far too much time on making sure all of this is perfect to give up on it now. There

are plenty of guest bedrooms made up. If it comes to it, our guests will just have to stay over.”

“I’m not loving that plan,” Vinnie said. “What about Henry?”

“What about him?” Colleen said.

“Well, it doesn’t look professional, does it? Asking the man to invest in my business and then having him be snowed in here,” Vinnie said.

Colleen rolled her eyes. God, Vinnie could be frustrating at times.

“Unless you want him to invest in some sort of product that claims to control the weather, I really don’t think he can hold the snow against you,” she said. She clapped her hands. “Now come on. We need to get ready.”

“Don’t fucking clap at me. I am not a member of your staff,” Vinnie said.

“I’m aware of that. If you were, you would be much more efficient,” Colleen said snootily. “Now come on.”

She left the room without waiting for a response. She knew if she stayed any longer, they would argue, but if she walked away, he would follow in a moment or two and the moment of tension would be forgotten. And that’s what she needed. She was the perfect hostess, Vinnie the perfect host. She refused to have her guests picking up on the fact that they had been arguing about the party, the weather, and pretty much anything two people could argue about only an hour or so before their arrival.

CHAPTER 1

Sheriff Rhonda McCauley rang the doorbell at Colleen's place and stood and waited for someone to answer the door. She hopped from foot to foot as the icy cold wind buffeted around her and huge fat flakes of snow drifted down. She wondered, not for the first time, how she had allowed herself to be talked into this. Actually, that wasn't true. She knew exactly how she had allowed herself to be talked into this. Her position as the Bennison Beach Sheriff was an elected one, and it never hurt to have someone influential like Colleen Hunter on her side. Still though, she was starting to regret agreeing to do it.

She was debating getting back into her car, driving home, and getting into her fleecy pajamas, waiting half an hour, and then calling Colleen and saying the snow was too much for her to get through for the party, but before she could do it, the door opened and Colleen was there, ushering her inside. She stepped in almost eagerly. Now that it was too late to turn back, she was glad of the warmth of the house, and she was glad she hadn't backed off. It was worth a couple of hours or so to get Colleen's backing. And it wasn't like she had to do anything immoral or even hard.

"Come in, come in," Colleen was saying, directing Rhonda through to a large room where a real fire was lit in the fireplace. A giant green Christmas tree decked out in white fairy lights and red and gold ornaments stood beside the fire. Rhonda couldn't help but stare at the tree. It was mesmerizing. She nodded towards it.

“It’s beautiful,” she said.

“Thank you,” Colleen said. “I simply love this time of the year, don’t you?”

“Most definitely,” Rhonda agreed, smiling a faraway smile as she thought back to the Christmases of her childhood when the magic had still been a huge part of Christmas.

“Would you like a drink or anything before I brief you?” Colleen asked, coming back to the present moment. Rhonda saw her expression change, her eyes harden slightly as she went from Christmas loving woman to hostess of steel.

“I’d better not,” Rhonda said, nodding down to the fact she was in uniform. Even though she was outside of her hours and was wearing her uniform at the request of Colleen, it still carried a certain level of responsibility.

“How about a nice cup of tea or coffee? Or I have some lovely Belgian hot chocolate that’s just perfect for this weather,” Colleen said.

“A black coffee would be good please,” Rhonda said.

Colleen stood up and went to the door. She called out Rhonda’s coffee order and requested a gin and tonic for herself and then she came over to join Rhonda and sat back down. Rhonda watched the woman as she walked back to her seat. She was dressed in a long green dress which went perfectly with her auburn hair and green eyes. She looked immaculate, beautiful even, but Rhonda struggled to look at her and not see an older version of Jessica Rabbit.

“Thank you so much for agreeing to do this Sheriff,” Colleen said. “I know I could have employed an actor for the role, but I think having someone the guests recognize as an actual sheriff will make it feel much more realistic, don’t you?”

Rhonda nodded. She felt like this was a bit over the top for a murder mystery night, but Colleen’s December gathering was legendary in Bennison Beach, and she knew that the woman would never do anything the easy way if there was a better or indeed a harder way to do it.

The door to the room opened and a waitress came in with a silver tray. On the tray was a steaming mug of black coffee and a tall glass of gin and tonic. The waitress smiled at them as she put the drinks on the table.

“Would you like me to bring you some canapés?” she asked.

“Not until the rest of the guests arrive,” Colleen said to her and then she turned to Rhonda. “Unless you are hungry?”

“No, I’ve just had dinner thank you,” Rhonda said.

Colleen nodded at the waitress who took her cue and left the room. Colleen smiled at Rhonda and then she stood up and went to a drawer in a sideboard that sat at the edge of the room. She pulled out a sheaf of colorful papers and came back to her seat. She smiled again.

“Don’t worry, these aren’t all yours,” she said.

She shuffled through them while Rhonda patiently sipped her coffee and waited. Rhonda had only really accepted the coffee because she felt awkward saying no to everything she was offered, but she was glad of it now. It was strong and smooth and one of the nicest coffees she had tasted. She made a mental note to ask one of the wait staff if they knew what kind of coffee it was later on so she could get some.

“Ah, here we are,” Colleen said, pulling three sheets away from the others.

She put the main pile down on the coffee table and held the three loose ones out to Rhonda who took them.

“So obviously your character is the Sheriff. You will be called after the body is found and you will do some investigating. You will then talk a bit about how the victim was killed and what motive the suspect may have had. All of the information you will need will be on those sheets. Some of the players might have questions for you. If they do, you can answer them as long as the answers are in your sheets. Otherwise, please don’t make information up as it will skew the game. Just give a police type answer like we’re

investigating several lines of enquiries or whatever,” Colleen said.

Rhonda nodded.

“Yeah, that sounds simple enough,” she said.

Colleen smiled at her.

“Thank you again for agreeing to do this Sheriff. Now I will leave you alone to study your sheets and learn what you need to know. If you have any questions or you would like anything, please do let me know. Otherwise, feel free to use this room or to wander around as you see fit. I would just ask that you avoid the dining room until you are called for in the game. It would kind of ruin the realism if we had a Sheriff standing around just waiting to be called,” Colleen said with a business-like smile.

“Don’t worry, I’m quite happy to stay hidden in the shadows so to speak, and I have no intention of spoiling your night,” Rhonda said.

Colleen smiled again and then she stood up.

“Right. Well, if you’ll excuse me ...” she trailed off leaving the question unfinished.

Rhonda nodded, answering it anyway. The sooner Colleen was out of the room, the sooner she could learn what she needed to in order to play her part. And once that was over, she would get to leave knowing she had an ally in the bag come election day. She watched as Colleen left the room and then she began to read the notes. There was a lot to remember – information on who was playing which character, their motivations, and reasons for being suspects, and of course, who the actual killer was, information that only Rhonda, the killer themselves and one other person would be privy to.

It didn’t take Rhonda too long to go through the sheets she had been given. She retained most of the information on her first read through, something she had learned to do quickly when she became Sheriff. She had another flick through just to polish any of the finer details and then she checked the time. She sighed as she realized it was only just time for the guests

to start arriving. That meant that they still had to have a pre-dinner mingle and then a sit-down dinner before the body was found and Rhonda could do her part.

She decided, out of curiosity, to watch as the guests arrived and put them together with their characters. It might be fun, but also, she thought it would help her if anyone asked her any questions to know who was who, and what they knew already.

She left the room she had been sitting in and made her way through the house. It didn't take her long to find the ideal spot to watch on from. Several rooms opened off the reception room and one of those rooms was actually a short hallway that the serving staff would use to bring the canapés to the room straight from the kitchen. As long as Rhonda made sure she stayed to one side when the door opened for one of the wait staff to come in or out of the room, she would be safely hidden there, and she would have a good view and be able to hear everything.

Satisfied with her position, Rhonda waited for the first guest to show up. She found it quite ironic that the killer and his accomplice was already here. She wasn't sure how she felt about that. Had Colleen done it so that her and Vinnie could be the ones in the limelight even more than they would be by hosting the party, or had she done it so that all of the guests could play properly instead of one or more of them having to hide being the killer rather than getting to solve the clues. She hoped it was the latter but with Colleen, who could tell.

Colleen and Vinnie were playing the roles of Lady Marjorie and Lord TJ Mahoney, an aristocratic couple who were hosting a dinner party. When the body was found, the couple would present their alibi – one of the wait staff who had been with the couple getting instructions on what to serve when. It would be much later in the evening, as the clues came out, that it would be discovered that the alibi was a lie. The Mahoney's had bribed the waitress. The killer was in fact TJ. While Marjorie hadn't been involved in the physical side of the killing, she had known about it. The victim, Benjamin Lowestoft, had recently stumbled across the fact that TJ was his real father after a one-night stand with his mother. Marjorie

agreed to stay with TJ – the mistake had been a long time ago – but because of how the couple had made their fortunes – selling books and courses on how to have a successful and faithful marriage – Benjamin began blackmailing TJ and both he and Marjorie agreed that Benjamin needed to go.

Rhonda pondered whether this would be a decent motive for killing in real life. Maybe for people like the Mahoneys it would be. It wouldn't be the sort of motive that would get the sympathy of a jury though, so it was a good job it was all make believe.

Rhonda came to attention when the first guests arrived; Henry Patterson and Diana Morgan. Rhonda watched as Colleen showed them through to the reception room and a waitress appeared with canapés followed by a waiter with champagne. Both of the guests took a glass of champagne and Diana took a canapé. Henry passed on the food.

Rhonda thought about what she knew of these people, which wasn't a whole lot. Henry was obscenely rich, having made his money investing in the right things at the right times, which was as close as he ever got to elaborating about his business when he was interviewed. Diana was a twenty-one-year-old model, thirty-seven years Henry's junior. When the couple had first got together, there was of course talk of Diana being a gold digger, but over the year they had been together, the couple had gone from strength to strength and from what Rhonda had seen, Diana seemed to genuinely love Henry. As the people in Bennison Beach warmed to Diana, she came out of her shell a bit more and the residents of the town saw that she wasn't the diva they had expected. And they soon learned that Diana really didn't need Henry's money. While not quite a supermodel, Diana's career was very successful, and she was more than comfortable money wise in her own right. This would be the first time the couple had been to one of Colleen's December gatherings.

Rhonda had to laugh when she thought about the characters Henry and Diana were playing. Bernard and Melissa Blanchet, a rich man who married a young, beautiful woman against the advice of everyone, including his daughter,

Marjorie. Bernard believed in their love, although Melissa was merely acting. She secretly had a crush on Benjamin. Rhonda couldn't help but wonder how the couple would feel about openly playing the love fool old man and the gold-digging young woman. From their relaxed body language and genuine-looking smiles, Rhonda figured they had seen the funny side of it.

Bernard would become a suspect because after Melissa tried and failed to get Benjamin into her bed, she told Bernard it was Benjamin who was doing the seducing and that she repeatedly turned him down. Melissa herself became a suspect as a woman scorned.

The next couple to arrive were Valerie and Marcus Hall, who, strangely enough, weren't playing a couple in the game. It could have been that the characters just worked out that way, or it could have been that they were having some troubles and Colleen wanted to show them they were better together than apart. Or the opposite.

Or maybe Rhonda was just over thinking things. But Colleen seemed like the sort of woman who had a reason for everything and left nothing to chance, especially when it came to her entertaining. It looked to Rhonda like Marcus was already a little bit drunk when the couple arrived. He seemed to teeter on his feet when he stood still, but that didn't stop him from grabbing a glass of the champagne he was offered, and after a quick hello to Colleen, he staggered away, necking the drink, and taking another one.

Maybe Colleen thought Valerie deserved a night off from that. But from what Rhonda knew of the couple, Marcus was hardly a raging alcoholic. She got the impression it was more a case of him not really wanting to be here and getting drunk to make it feel like it was at least bearable. And she knew Valerie wouldn't turn up without Marcus and let Colleen point score that her husband was the perfect host and the perfect guest. Valerie was the one person in Bennison Beach whose events could even come close to Colleen's, making the women frenemies rather than friends.

Rhonda smiled to herself and shook her head when she thought of the character Valerie had been given. Colleen was hardly subtle in that respect. Valerie was playing Winnie French, a cougar divorcee who has slept with Benjamin. Rumor was that Winnie had been ready to stop playing the field and settle down with Benjamin, but then he ghosted her. It gave her an easy motive for killing Benjamin – if she couldn't have him, no one could. Looking at the way Valerie was dressed – in a skin tight red pencil skirt, red heels and a black blouse that showed more than an ample amount of cleavage, Rhonda couldn't help but wonder if she had been told in advance what her character would be about. The Halls, like the Hunters, were in their forties and the outfit was too young for Valerie, despite her having the figure to look good in it. Her platinum blonde hair and scarlet red lipstick finished the look.

Marcus had been given the role of Francis Neil, a mysterious billionaire who very little is known about, but plenty of rumors circulate about. One of the top rumors is that Marcus once killed a man with his bare hands and enjoyed it. This alone makes him a suspect in Benjamin's murder, although Rhonda believes it's not a very strong one. She thinks Marcus has been given a bit of a dud character, one who won't have much of a part to play, because Colleen knew he wasn't interested and didn't want him to spoil it for the others.

Rhonda stopped watching Marcus as he talked to Vinnie when a new arrival caught her attention. Mandy Warner, Colleen's best friend. Rhonda watched as the two women air kissed each other's cheeks and made a big showing of seeing each other. She thought they were trying a little bit too hard to say there were friends. In Rhonda's opinion, they weren't quite frenemies, but they weren't as lovey-dovey friends as they pretended to be. There had always been a certain rivalry between the women, each of them trying to outdo each other at their social events, but since Mandy had gotten divorced and had to downsize her home, there was a clear winner and Colleen wasn't one to be gracious about her win.

Mandy had been given the character of Simone Cherise, a French artist. Her motive for perhaps having killed Benjamin

was one of the weaker ones in Rhonda's opinion. Her motive was that she was jealous of Benjamin because he was better at painting than her.

If Mandy had been given any sort of head's up about her character, she had ignored it and dressed to suit herself. She wore a blue maxi dress and wedges, and she wore her long brown hair in curls that hung down her back.

The last guest to arrive was Luke Maddison, another divorcee, and someone Colleen was determined to pair up with Mandy, despite neither of them having any romantic interest in each other whatsoever. Rhonda shook her head in amusement at Colleen's lack of subtlety when she saw Luke's character, William Barnes.

William was big in banking and when he was starting out, one of his main rivals went missing one day and was never seen again. Rumors circulated that William had killed him, but there was no actual evidence of this, so he was never arrested or tried for it. But many people still believed it and that meant that William would be a suspect – if you would kill once, you would kill twice, and William had a strong motive. He was obsessed with Simone and killing off his competition had once worked for him. It would make perfect sense that he might kill off her competition in a bid to try and win her heart.

Rhonda was confident she had everyone down correctly and that she knew who was who. She had to admit that despite herself, she was interested to know how this would all play out and who would be the one to correctly solve the murder. She made a mental note to ask Colleen about it the next she saw her out and about around the town.

Colleen quickly handed out sheets of paper to each group member, presumably with notes on their character, their relationships with the other characters and either their alibi, or the fact they were indeed the killer. Colleen gave the group instructions that they had fifteen minutes to learn the details of their characters and then they would start to play, at which point they would be in character. Further instructions were provided on their sheets and after a half hour or so of getting to know each other, they would sit down to diner, still in

character. Once dinner was out of the way, the sheets would direct them to the next part of the game, and then once the victim was found, the rooms listed on their sheets were the playing rooms and the guests were encouraged to move around and look for clues in all of those areas.

Rhonda watched as everyone began studying their sheets. She was surprised to see that even Marcus looked over his sheet, although not with the enthusiasm of some of the other guests. Diana seemed particularly enthusiastic about the whole thing which surprised Rhonda – she always thought of these things as more for older people and she would have expected Diana to become bored quickly but maybe play along for Henry's sake.

Rhonda soon got bored watching the guests spread out across the reception room and learn their parts. And she was even more bored when they all started flitting off as they were directed to.

When the bell sounded to announce that dinner was ready to be served, Rhonda was glad that finally, the night seemed to be moving forward. She had stood in the hallway so long that the balls of her feet ached, and she was sure that if she had a chair, she would have dozed off by now.

There was a happy, relaxed mood amongst the guests as they made their way through to the dining room. Enthusiastic noises came from the group, particularly the women, when they were treated to the sight of another huge Christmas tree. The all-glass dining room wall had been covered with a sheet of thin gossamer and fairy lights hung from it, twinkling, and casting a soft glow over the table, making it feel magical.

Rhonda saw all of this herself after she had waited until everyone was in the dining room and then she slipped into the reception room that the dining room opened off from, ready to watch at the next door. The drinks had been flowing readily and the guests seemed happy to be playing the game, their cheeks flushed, smiles on their faces. Rhonda thought this bit might be a bit more interesting. If nothing else, she thought she might get a laugh at their attempts to act.

She soon realized it wasn't going to be as much as she had thought it might be. The dinner was a forty-five-minute affair, and by the end of it, Rhonda was starting to get a bit sick of the fake accents and the overdone roles the guests were playing. It had been funny at first, but it gotten old quickly. Rhonda wondered if she would feel differently if she was actually playing the game, but she didn't think she would. It had started out ok with Colleen announcing that unfortunately, Benjamin had confided that he felt a little bit ill, and he had been shown to a guest room to rest and they were to start their meal without him. This opened up the floor to every guest beginning to talk about Benjamin and what they disliked about him other than his rudeness at going to bed during dinner.

After the dinner was finally over, the players began to get up and move around and it wasn't long before a scream rang out from one of the playing rooms and a rather over the top Mandy appeared and pointed back behind herself.

"He's dead. Oh God, he's dead. Murdered," she shouted and then she put her hands over her face and began to fake cry.

The other guests shared looks, some of them obviously trying not to laugh at Mandy's performance. They all held back except for Henry who announced that he would go and see what the hysterical Mandy was talking about. Rhonda figured it must instruct this on their cards and she watched as Henry disappeared and returned seconds later to confirm that there was indeed a body – Benjamin's body – and that it looked very much like he had been killed.

This drew the rest of the group to the body and Rhonda began to feel a little bit nervous knowing that she was going to be brought in at any moment. She heard the players coming back into the dining room and then she heard Colleen making her fake phone call to the Sheriff's department. Rhonda waited five minutes from that point as instructed, and then she stood up, took a deep breath, and went and knocked on the dining room door as instructed.

Colleen came and opened the door.

“Oh Sheriff, thank goodness you are here,” she said. “Do come in. We have a rather delicate situation. Would you please come with me? TJ darling, perhaps you could move our guests through to the lounge where they will be more comfortable.”

Rhonda knew that the lounge the guests were being herded towards was the room with the huge Christmas tree that she had first started in. Navigating this house could well be one of the hardest parts of this game, Rhonda thought to herself as Colleen led her out of the dining room through a different door and down a short passageway, which Rhonda realized was a mirror image of the passageway she had hidden in to watch the guests arrive. At the end, there would be the kitchen, but Colleen didn't get that far.

Instead, she stopped about halfway along the passageway, opening the door to a huge library. Rhonda looked around, impressed by the sheer size of the book collection. She would have loved to take some time to take in all of these titles, but Colleen cleared her throat and Rhonda remembered herself and went to the body in the center of the room instead.

She knelt beside him and put her fingers on his throat. She expected the skin to be cold to the touch, but of course this was only Wayne, the actor playing dead Benjamin, and his neck was warm. Rhonda left her fingers there for a few minutes and then she hung her head.

“He's definitely dead,” Rhonda clarified. “Let's go and join the others so I can gauge their reactions to this news.”

Rhonda felt a bit silly playing her role in front of the actor and the host without any guests there to see, but if Wayne or Colleen thought anything of it, they didn't show it. In fact, Colleen nodded her agreement, playing along, and Rhonda got up and Colleen led the way back to the lounge. She waited until she was opening the lounge door, and with impeccable timing, said her line.

“You mean you think Benjamin was murdered?” Colleen said.

“Oh, I'm certain of it,” Rhonda said as she followed Colleen into the lounge, answering her as though they had

really been having that conversation on their way into the room.

The furniture in this lounge had been arranged so that all of the seating faced one empty armchair, a chair that Vinnie gestured for Rhonda to sit in. She sat down and Colleen took her seat beside Vinnie.

“Is it not possible he had a heart attack or something?” Colleen asked, prompting Rhonda, and letting her know it was time to start her spiel.

Rhonda shook her head.

“No,” she said. “His throat is marked with a ring of bruises. He was almost certainly strangled to death.”

A collective gasp went up through the group.

“But who would do a thing like that?” Colleen said.

“You would be surprised,” Rhonda said. She looked around at each of the guests. She swore she saw some of the shuddering under her gaze and she resisted the urge to smile. “Who would benefit from Benjamin being dead?”

“Simone,” Henry said. “Benjamin’s art was far better than hers and as such he always got the most coveted gallery showings. With him out of the way, Simone stands to get all of those things.”

Mandy snorted and shook her head.

“I’m not the one that kills off my business rivals. That would be William,” she said.

“It was nothing to do with me. Don’t believe everything you hear. And besides, even if I was in the habit of killing off my rivals, he was never my competition,” Luke said.

“But you have a thing for Simone. Maybe you did it to get on her good side,” Henry said.

“Or maybe you did it because your wifey there had a thing for him. Don’t think I didn’t see you having a go at him the other week in the local,” Luke said.

“Well, I never,” Henry said. “How dare you accuse me of such a thing? I am an upstanding member of this community. Unlike, for example, Francis who has killed before.”

Marcus looked up at his character’s name and mumbled something.

“Speak up,” Rhonda commanded.

“I said prove it old man,” Marcus repeated.

“Well, it sure seems like you were right Sheriff,” Colleen said, cutting off this line of everyone blaming each other. “It could definitely be anyone. Do you have a suspect in mind?”

“In my mind, you are all suspects,” Rhonda said, giving the answer from her sheet. “But I don’t know you all as well as you know each other, so maybe you will have a better chance of narrowing it down than I will. Before you try though, does anyone have any questions about the body or the murder itself?”

“How was Benjamin killed?” Diana asked.

“I can’t say for certain without an autopsy, but from the ring of bruises on his neck, I would say with ninety nine percent confidence that he was strangled to death,” Rhonda said.

“Ah. So, the killer has to be someone large and strong then,” Diana said, looking smug that she had essentially ruled herself out as a suspect. Her smugness didn’t last long though before Rhonda argued her point.

“Possibly,” Rhonda said. “If the killer throttled Benjamin with his or her bare hands. But it could have been done with a weapon. For example, a silk scarf. You don’t have to be overly strong to kill someone that way, not if you come up behind them and take them by surprise and get the scarf or whatever you are using around their neck before they have a chance to react.”

Rhonda answered a few more questions, none of which she thought were particularly insightful. She thought Colleen was going to be in for a long night waiting for this group to crack the case. Finally, Colleen rescued her.

“So, Sheriff, you’ll be wanting to get back to the station and discuss this with your colleagues then while we try and find out exactly what happened here right?” she said.

It was the exact opposite of what Rhonda would actually do in this situation but of course this was a game and she needed to be out of the way so that it could continue. She smiled and nodded.

“I’ll see you out,” Colleen said, smiling at Rhonda.

The two women left the room and headed for the front door. Colleen pulled it open and both women gasped. The snow hadn’t just continued to fall steadily since the arrival of Colleen’s guests, it had sped up threefold and the snow drift against the front door was easily as high as Rhonda’s hip. Even if she had been willing to smash her way through the wall of snow, she knew that her car would be buried, and she had no chance of being able to walk all of the way home in this.

“Oh dear,” Colleen said and then she smiled. “It’s a good job I had all of the guest rooms made up.”

Rhonda smiled back at her. The situation wasn’t ideal, but it wasn’t Colleen’s fault and at least she would have somewhere warm to stay. Colleen closed the front door and the two women headed back towards the lounge.

“Ok guys, forget the game for a moment please,” Colleen said. “The Sheriff has just tried to leave, and we are completely snowed in. But don’t worry. There are couches in here and there’s plenty of floor space.”

The guests looked at Colleen in shock and Vinnie looked at Henry and then at Colleen and he looked about ready to kill her. Colleen held a straight face for a moment and then she laughed.

“I kid of course,” she said. “We really are snowed in, but all of the guest bedrooms are made up. Once the game is over, please feel free to take a room of your choice. All of the guest rooms are on the second floor. There is a red cardboard hanger inside of each room. Once you have chosen one, hang that on

the outside of the door and others will know that room is occupied. Now, back to the game.”

The guests went back to chattering amongst themselves, although Rhonda suspected that right now, they were talking more about the being snowed in situation than about the game. Colleen smiled at her.

“Go on and choose your room. You’re getting first pick,” she said. “And feel free to help yourself to drinks or food.”

“Thanks,” Rhonda smiled.

She slipped out of the lounge and made her way to the large, sweeping staircase. She went up it to the second floor and went to the first guest room. She had been determined just to take the first one she came to, but her curiosity got the better of her and she began to peer into all of them, finally settling on a room with a red theme.

The walls were white with a feature wall that was also mostly white but had a delicate arrangement of red flowers painted on it. There was a fleecy red blanket on top of the white bedding and the curtains and rug were red. On the little table beneath the window, a mini-Christmas tree sat, all of the ornaments red on the white tree. Each of the rooms Rhonda had peeked into had a mini-Christmas tree that matched the theme of the room. Rhonda had to give it to Colleen – she sure knew how to give a room a theme without it being tacky.

The room Rhonda chose wasn’t the largest one she had seen, but it was more than big enough for her, and the fact that the bed was huge and took up most of the space, was to her, a bonus. She didn’t plan on doing an energetic dance around the floor space, but she did plan on spreading out in that giant bed and enjoying the space.

She found the red hanger that Colleen had mentioned to the guests and placed it on the outside of her door and then she went looking for a bathroom. She found one two doors away. She used the toilet and washed her hands and then she went back to her room.

She went and laid down on the top of the blanket on the bed to see if the mattress was as comfortable as it looked. She was aware that if it wasn't, she still had time to switch rooms without anyone noticing. That wasn't an issue for her though. She moaned in pleasure when she laid down; the mattress, like everything else in the room, was perfect; not too soft, and not too firm.

The next thing Rhonda knew, she was waking up feeling a bit cold. She moved to one side, her hand groping for her covers. She felt a fleecy blanket and frowned. She didn't have a blanket on her bed. That was when she remembered where she was and that she had only planned to lay down for a minute.

She yawned and sat up and looked at her watch. She had only been asleep for half an hour, but it felt like a lot longer. She got up and went to the window. She pulled the curtains open slightly and looked out at the falling snow and the pristine blanket of white it left behind. It looked so beautiful and yet Rhonda hoped it was gone quickly or she might be stuck here for days with no toothbrush, no clean underwear, nothing. Although it wouldn't surprise her if Colleen had everything every guest would need just ready and waiting to be handed out.

Rhonda went and sat back down on the bed, laughing to herself at the image in her mind of Colleen handing out emergency hygiene packages to all of the guests.

After that mental image went away, Rhonda sighed. She hadn't been awake five minutes yet and she was already bored. She knew if she just sat here, she would end up falling back asleep again and as it was barely nine thirty, if she did that, she would end up awake about three in the morning with no chance of getting back to sleep. She debated going back downstairs and joining the group, but she was worried that she gave something away that hadn't been on her 'to share with the group' sheet and spoiled the game.

She decided to go and get a drink and some nibbles and at least that way, she could talk to the other staff at the event.

Chances were that they would be more her sort of people anyway than the rich and elite party guests.

Her decision made, she stood up and went back downstairs and slipped through to the kitchen. She pulled up a stool and before long, she was chatting away to Callie and Gabe and nibbling on prawns and various cheeses with a glass of white wine in her hand. She had refused a drink earlier because of her uniform and she had no intention of having more than one glass of wine now, but she reasoned that one drink was ok. Literally the only reason she was wearing her uniform at this point was because she had nothing else to wear instead and she wasn't going to come down to the kitchen in her underwear.

Now she had some food and some company, and yes, some wine, Rhonda felt a whole lot better about being here over night. Her boredom was gone, and she had been right about the staff – they were definitely more her sort of people and she soon found herself laughing along with them like they were all old friends. She decided that maybe the night wouldn't be quite as bad as she had imagined it was going to be after all.

CHAPTER 2

I have waited for this moment for so long. Ever since I found out the truth really. I have craved my revenge and tonight, I will finally get it after so much time going into my careful planning. Tonight, will make my patience worthwhile.

My heart is racing, and adrenaline is flooding my body, yet I feel calmer now, than when I put this plan together. I am seeing everything so clearly now. I know exactly what I have to do and now the time is here, I am not afraid to do it. A small part of me worried that given this opportunity, I wouldn't be brave enough to act on it. But I am and I will do it.

Over the time I have spent planning everything, even on the days when I was sure I could do this, I still sometimes had my doubts as to whether or not I should do this. I kept hearing the voice of my seventh-grade teacher, Mrs. Lewis. She used to always say 'just because you can do something, doesn't always mean that you should' and I took that advice to heart with regards to my planning. I needed to be sure I was doing the right thing. I want to do what has to be done and I want to know it's the right thing to do because I don't want to be plagued with guilt for the rest of my life.

But the more I thought about it, the more I became convinced that I was doing the right thing, and here, in this moment, so close to doing it, I know that it is not only the right thing to do, but it is the only thing to do. It is the only way for me to get revenge. The only way to show everyone

that karma does exist. And it's the only way for me to be at peace.

So here I go.

I walk swiftly down the hallway, not wanting to be seen now. I pull the jacket I am wearing tightly around me. I don't look directly up, and I don't look directly down at the ground either. I want to appear inconspicuous, normal, if someone sees me. No one does. I make it to the library, the room I've been waiting for her to wander into alone and now she has.

Goose bumps scurry over my skin as I step into the library and pick up the huge, heavy vase that sits on a small table beside the door. I don't know if the goose bumps are from excitement or nerves or a mixture of the two; I think it's most likely a mixture. I'm not proud that I am excited at the thought of killing, but there you go. An unexpected surprise and I guess as bad as it seems, it will certainly make the process easier.

I cross the room silently to where she sits at a table looking at something, a book most likely. As I move across the floor, I raise the vase above my head. I am about to swing it and smash the back of her skull in when she must sense my presence behind her. She turns around as the vase comes down and for just a second, I see it on her face – the recognition that she is about to die. The vase smashes into her forehead and she goes flying off the chair. She lands on the ground on her back, one hand halfway to reaching for the wound the other one beneath her body. A cloud of red forms around her head.

I lean down and press my fingers against her throat. There is no pulse. She is dead. Colleen Hunter has gone from being the perfect hostess to the perfect victim.

I wipe the vase clean of my fingerprints and then stand it carefully beside Colleen's body. I head quickly for the door. I look both ways and see no one and I hurry away from the library.

That's it, done. I feel good. I finally got what needed to be done, done. But there is something else I feel. It is an emptiness inside of myself. I didn't expect to feel this way and

I have to take a moment to think about what it could mean. I think it's probably just that this moment has consumed my every waking thought for so long and now it's done, and I'll have to find something new to keep me occupied. And by that, I mean a new hobby, maybe sculpting or something like that. I don't want to make murder my thing. I am not going to become a serial killer or anything like that.

CHAPTER 3

Rhonda was sitting in the kitchen sipping another cup of the amazing, strong black coffee and nibbling on Colleen's hors d'oeuvres. She was talking to Rachel, the catering manager. She had already asked her where the coffee was from and which brew to get, the information safely stored away in her cell phone for later. She had been around the staff long enough now that she could remember who was who; Rachel has the sleek black bob, Callie was blonde but a natural blonde, Georgia had the blue streaks. And of the boys, Eric was black and Gabe was white so that one was nice and easy. And the bar tender was easy to differentiate, not only because he was behind the bar, but because he had a whole cynical vibe going on that the other staff didn't seem to have. It made him seem old despite how young he actually was.

"How long have you been doing this now then?" Rhonda asked Rachel.

"Oh years," Rachel said. "I've had my own company for eighteen years and before that, I worked for a catering company. I wouldn't know how to do anything else. I've worked in catering one way or another pretty much since I left college. Even my high school Saturday job was in a café. I think working with food is just in my blood somehow."

"Yeah, I get that," Rhonda said, nodding her head in agreement. "I couldn't imagine doing anything but working in law enforcement. I was a deputy for years before I put myself forward for being Sheriff."

“The Sheriff is an elected position, isn’t it?” Rachel said. Rhonda nodded. “So have you ever done anything questionable to get votes?”

“I have never done anything that violates or even bends the law, but yes, I have done things I’m not really proud of,” Rhonda said. She looked around to make sure no one was listening in. “Like tonight for example.”

The two women burst out laughing.

“Not your idea of fun then?” Rachel asked.

“Oh God, no. Not even close,” Rhonda said, shaking her head for emphasis.

“Colleen can be a tad overbearing,” Rachel started but she stopped when the door opened and one of the waitresses came in. Rhonda tried to think of her name but if she had ever known it, she didn’t anymore. She had spoken to the girl earlier too and just never caught her name. The girl looked a bit white, and even from where she was sitting, Rhonda could see the beads of sweat standing out on the girl’s face. Rachel seemed to notice this too and she frowned in concern. “Are you ok Callie?”

Callie nodded and smiled. The smile looked forced, and Rhonda thought that Callie really didn’t look too good at all.

“Are you sure? Because you’ve been to the bathroom three times in the last hour, and you look awfully pale. I don’t want to be personal, but if you’re sick, please just say so. You can’t be handling other people’s food if you aren’t well,” Rachel said.

“Honestly I’m fine,” Callie said. “Well, actually, that’s probably an over statement. I’m in agony but it’s nothing contagious. It’s just my period. It’s usually ok but every now and again I have a really bad one. And of course, it chose tonight for that to happen.”

“Ok, well do what you need to do,” Rachel said. “I can’t send you home because we’re snowed in but let me know if you need to rest or anything.”

“Thanks,” Callie said.

She flashed Rachel a quick smile and darted away.

“Sorry about that. Where were we?” Rachel said to Rhonda.

“You were telling me what it’s like working for Colleen and people like her every day,” Rhonda told her.

“Yes,” Rachel said. “So, the thing about Colleen is she’s very hands on with everything she does. It’s both good and bad really. It’s good for me because I put my heart and soul into my food and Colleen can see the evidence of that with her own eyes, but it’s not such good news for the wait staff. I mean don’t get me wrong, they aren’t awful at their jobs or anything, but Colleen is continually under the impression the wait staff are there to serve bar drinks. I tell her every time that with the package she chooses, the staff will mingle with appetizers, trays of champagne and the like, but they are not running drinks back and forth from the bar. Every time she agrees it’s perfectly fine until the event is fully going and then she will remind the wait staff that they are meant to offer a table service for drinks. You can imagine the fun and games this causes.”

Rhonda could imagine it only too well. She nodded in sympathy.

“Yeah, there’s a point where hands on gets in the way,” she said.

Rachel laughed and nodded.

“Yes,” she agreed. “And you can bet your bottom dollar that Colleen crosses that line and more every time we cater for her. The truth be told, I’m surprised she isn’t in here right now with some imagined issue or another.”

“I couldn’t imagine it,” Rhonda said sarcastically.

The two women laughed again, but the laughter was cut short. A scream rang out from deeper inside the house. It wasn’t the fun scream of someone getting too into the game either; it was a real, terrified scream.

Rhonda was up and running towards where the sound had come from before she was really even aware she was going to

do just that. It was her training kicking in, her reflexes working on auto pilot.

“Help,” a voice shouted.

Rhonda kept running towards the sound of the voice. She hadn't been able to identify the screamer by their scream and she couldn't decide whose voice was shouting either, but she knew from the shout that it was a man. She burst into the library and stopped abruptly when she saw the body on the ground with Marcus standing beside it.

For a second, Rhonda let herself believe it was a part of the game. The body on the ground belonged to Colleen. It made sense if there was going to be a twist, she would be a part of it. And Marcus was playing his part well, his face a mask of horror, his eyes wide, and his hands tugging at his hair.

But that pool of blood spreading around Colleen's head was real. Rhonda could smell the coppery smell of it. She moved quickly, by passing Marcus and moving around to the front of Colleen's body. She got down on her knees beside Colleen, swallowing back a mouthful of hot bile when she saw the wound on the woman's forehead. She knew for certain she was dead then. The wound had caved Colleen's forehead in, leaving her head misshapen. Small pieces of her skull had broken away and Rhonda could see the pinkish grey brains in the hole. Still, she reached out and pressed her fingers to Colleen's neck searching for a pulse.

“She's gone,” she said, more to herself than Marcus.

“Who should I call?” Rachel asked, startling Rhonda who hadn't realized that the other woman had followed her here from the kitchen.

“Call 911,” Rhonda said. “Explain that the Sheriff is here and has confirmed the victim is dead and that the circumstances are suspicious. We don't want to take up the time of an ambulance, but it would be nice to get some back up here. They'll most likely have to send the helicopter out.”

Rachel nodded once and stepped out into the hallway. Rhonda stood up and went to Marcus. She put her hand on his

arm. He jumped a little bit but then he seemed to come back to himself. He took his hands out of his hair, leaving it sticking up in several random directions.

“What happened?” Rhonda asked.

“I don’t know,” Marcus said. “I was just playing the game and I came in here. I thought it was part of the game. I ... I laughed when I saw her. Then I came around here to the front of her body and that’s when I saw ... saw ...”

He turned away from Rhonda and she watched as he fought to keep his gorge down. He won the battle and turned back to her, his eyes glistening with unshed moisture.

“I saw that wound. And that’s when I screamed,” he finished.

“And you didn’t see anyone else leaving the room as you approached?” Rhonda asked.

Marcus started to answer the question but then he stopped talking mid word. It was obvious to Rhonda he was in shock and would need to be treated gently. Rachel came back in before Rhonda could ask him anything else that might have gotten him talking again.

“So, with the weather the way it is, the only way any back up is going to be able to get to us is via helicopter as you said, Rhonda. It’s already out on another job and the dispatcher said we could be looking at anywhere from four to twenty-four hours,” she said.

Rhonda knew that they wouldn’t be a priority. The victim wasn’t savable, and the dispatcher knew that she was there and could start the investigation.

“She asked if you could start interviewing people and to make sure the scene is secured,” Rachel said.

Rhonda nodded and thought for a moment.

“Ok Rachel, can you take Marcus to the bar and get him a brandy or something. And then I’m going to need a bed sheet and a large zip lock bag if you can find those, please. Also,

who is your most trusted and levelheaded staff member today?” Rhonda asked.

“Probably Eric,” Rachel said. “He’s ex-military.”

“Right. He’ll be perfect. Can you send him to me please?” Rhonda said. “And please don’t say anything about Colleen yet. You either Marcus.”

They both nodded and headed off. Rhonda got her cell phone out and took a series of pictures of the body, making sure to get the angle at which Colleen’s body was laid clear in the photographs. She got down on her stomach and fired off several shots of the wound and then she took some aerial shots of the blood pool. Finally, she included the large vase in the photograph where it stood beside the body, and then she zoomed in on the smudge of what she assumed to be fresh blood on the base of it. It seemed that she had already located the murder weapon.

“In the library with the vase,” Rhonda muttered to herself in a parody of Clue. “But who is our killer?”

The pool of suspects was narrow enough. She quickly did the math. Six guests. Vinnie. Rachel. Four wait staff. One bartender. One actor. And herself. Fourteen people. She could obviously eliminate herself, and she was almost certain she could eliminate Rachel too because they had been talking at the time Marcus found Colleen, but she was no expert on judging how long someone had been dead and for all she knew, Colleen could have been killed while she was upstairs taking her nap and then Rachel was as fair game as anyone else.

After taking all of the photographs, Rhonda got up and went to stand at the door to the library to make sure no one could come in. She hadn’t been standing there long when someone approached the room. Rhonda braced herself, ready to have to break the news to a guest that the room was currently off limits without raising questions – she needed to break the news about Colleen to Vinnie first – but she relaxed when she saw the catering uniform – black pants and a black shirt - the man was wearing.

“Hi. I’m Eric. Rachel sent me?” Eric said, making the statement sound like a question.

“In a few moments, I am going to have to go and speak to Vinnie and then I am going to be talking to all of the guests. In the meantime, I need you to stay here and make sure no one who isn’t with me comes into this room. Can you do that?” Rhonda said.

“Sure,” Eric said. “How important is it? Like if they refuse to listen to me, am I to use force or not?”

“If necessary, but don’t go so far as to hurt anyone,” Rhonda said.

“Got it,” Eric said.

Rhonda thanked him and then she went back into the library and walked over towards the window where a table sat with two armchairs either side of it and a dining room chair between them facing the window. She tried to drag one of the armchairs away, but they were too heavy, and she had to settle for the straight-backed dining room style chair instead. She took it to the hallway and put it down beside the doorway.

“There you go,” she said to Eric.

He flashed her a quick smile.

“Thanks,” he said and sat down.

Rachel came back into sight with the zip lock bag and a sheet like Rhonda had asked her to fetch.

“Thank you,” Rhonda said, taking the two things. “Listen can you do me another favor?”

“Anything,” Rachel said.

“Can you find Vinnie for me and take him to a quiet room outside of the playing area,” Rhonda asked.

“Sure,” Rachel said. She thought for a moment and then nodded once as she made her decision. “I’ll take him to the second lounge. If you go into the main hallway and pass the staircase, it’s the third door on your right.”

“Got it,” Rhonda said.

“What shall I tell him?” Rachel said, looking wary suddenly.

“Nothing,” Rhonda said. “Except that the Sheriff wants to talk to him in private. Hopefully he will think it’s part of the game, but if he questions you just say you don’t know what I want him for.”

Rachel nodded and walked away, and Rhonda went back into the library once more. She pulled her cuff down over her hand and picked the vase up being careful not to leave any fingerprints on it. She dropped it into the zip lock bag and closed it up. She decided it was as safe here with the body as it would be anywhere else, and she set it back down on the floor in roughly the same spot as the one she had taken it from. She shook the sheet out and draped it gently over Colleen’s body, making sure her face was covered. She turned away quickly when she saw the red of the blood blooming out across the stark white of the bed sheet.

She left the room and made doubly sure that Eric was confident in his role and then she headed for the main hallway where she passed by the staircase and found the third door on the right. She knocked on it, and entered when Vinnie called out to her to come in. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly and then she opened the door and stepped into the room.

Vinnie stood up from a pink floral armchair as Rhonda entered the room. He gestured for her to sit down opposite him on a matching couch which she did.

“There’s no easy way to say this Vinnie,” Rhonda said. “But Colleen is dead. She’s been murdered.”

“Oh, murder most foul you say,” Vinnie said with a wink.

He pronounced murder like moy-der and under any other circumstances, Rhonda would have had to have laughed at his expression. She realized that it was going to take some work to make Vinnie believe that she was telling the truth and not just that this was part of the game.

“I’m serious Vinnie. This isn’t part of the game. I’m even using your real name and Colleen’s real name,” Rhonda pointed out.

“Don’t worry Sheriff, there’s only us here and I won’t tell Colleen about that if you don’t,” Vinnie said. “Anyway, it won’t matter will it if she’s dead.”

He put the word dead in inverted commas which he made with his fingers beside his head on both sides,

“Please don’t do that,” Rhonda said. “She’s really gone.”

Vinnie studied Rhonda for a moment, and he must have seen how serious she was about this. Her seriousness seemed to get through to Vinnie in a way her words hadn’t been able to.

“I want to see her,” Vinnie said.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Rhonda said. “I ...”

“I don’t care what you think,” Vinnie said, cutting her off mid-sentence. “If you want me to believe this isn’t part of the game then you will let me see my wife’s body.”

“Ok,” Rhonda said. She didn’t want Vinnie to see Colleen like that, before a mortician worked their magic and made her head look normal again, but she knew it was the only way he was going to be certain this wasn’t part of the game. “If you’re sure that’s what you want.”

“I am,” Vinnie said firmly.

Rhonda stood up and Vinnie followed her lead. She walked across the house to the hallway where the library door was. Eric was still seated on the chair she had provided him with, and he gave her a half smile. She smiled back at him.

“Anything to report?” she asked.

“No ma’am,” Eric said. “No one has been along here since you left except for one person, and I told her that this area was off limits for now and she grinned and walked away.”

“She likely thinks this is something in the works for the rest of the game,” Rhonda said. She turned from Eric to

Vinnie. “Are you still sure you want to do this. Eric and Rachel and Marcus can all confirm that this isn’t part of the game.”

“I guess I kind of know that it’s not really,” Vinnie said. “I mean you would have used our character names if it was part of the game. No one is sick enough to let someone think their wife is dead for a game. But, well, it was easier to think you were playing a mean trick on me that it was to think that Colleen is gone. But yes. I would still like to see her or there’s always going to be this tiny bit of doubt in my mind.”

“Ok,” Rhonda said with a nod of her head. “Would you like to go in alone or would you like me to come in with you?”

“I’d like to go in alone,” Vinnie said.

Rhonda went to the doorway and pointed to the white, blood-stained sheet.

“She’s under the sheet,” she said. “Please cover her back up when you’re done.”

“I will,” Vinnie said. He gave a snort of laughter but there was no trace of any humor in his laughter. “You know, I was going to say if you’re lying to me, I will have your job. But the truth of the matter is, if you’re lying to me, I’ll be nothing but grateful. But you’re not, are you? Lying to me I mean.”

Rhonda shook her head sadly. She really wished she was lying to Vinnie, that this was all part of the game, and that Colleen was only acting her role, waiting for Vinnie to slowly peel the sheet away so that she could sit up and scare the living daylights out of him. It wasn’t going to happen though. Rhonda knew that much for sure.

She stood with Eric as Vinnie went into the library. She heard the rustling of the sheet and a gasp as Vinnie saw Colleen.

“Oh God. Oh no,” Vinnie said. “Who would do something like this?”

He stayed in the room for a while longer and then Rhonda heard the rustling sound again and assumed he was covering

Colleen back up. Vinnie stepped out into the hallway with her and Eric.

“Why is he here?” Vinnie asked, nodding to Eric.

“Because I wanted to come and speak to you personally and I didn’t want any of the guests stumbling in here,” Rhonda said.

“Ok, well you can go back and do whatever it is you’re meant to be doing then,” Vinnie said to Eric. He pulled a set of keys from his pocket and pulled the library door shut and locked it. Eric glanced at Rhonda, and she nodded, so he made his way back towards the kitchen.

“So, what happens now?” Vinnie asked when Eric was gone. “Because I think it’s fairly obvious that Colleen was murdered.”

Rhonda nodded her agreement.

“Yes, it would definitely appear that way. We have been onto 911, but obviously with the snow the way it is, it’s not a simple matter of a squad car coming up here and the coroner. They will have to send the helicopter to retrieve Colleen and at the moment, it is already out on another job,” Rhonda said.

“So, in the meantime, any clues as to what might have happened can just be left to disappear? No, I won’t let that happen. You’re a cop. Can’t you start ... copping?” Vinnie said.

Rhonda resisted the urge to smile at his choice of words.

“I’ve already taken some photographs that show the exact position of Colleen and the wound, just in case they are needed, and I have bagged up what I believe to be the murder weapon,” Rhonda said.

“The vase?” Vinnie said. Rhonda nodded. “And before you go getting any ideas that it had to be me because I knew about that, I saw a vase in a bag beside Colleen in the library.”

Rhonda ignored his comment. She hadn’t really thought anyone would be dumb enough to give themselves away as a murderer that spectacularly.

“I could certainly start getting down some early statements while the night is still fresh in everyone’s minds,” Rhonda said. “That will definitely help with witness statements.”

“Yes. Please do that then if you think it will help,” Vinnie said.

Rhonda thought for a moment.

“With your permission, I would like to use the second lounge as an interview room,” she said.

“Of course,” Vinnie said. “Anything you need that will help you to find out who killed my Colleen, then consider it yours. Except a helicopter. I don’t have one of those.”

Rhonda was finding it hard to keep up with Vinnie as he went through a hundred different moods every minute. One moment he was depressed, the next he was angry and the next he was cracking jokes. Rhonda knew it was a known reaction to grief to act slightly out of character, but it was also a known reaction to guilt too, and Rhonda intended to keep an open mind on this one.

“Ideally, I would like everyone – guests and staff alike – to be gathered together in the main lounge so I can address them all as one group. After that, it might make more sense for the staff to back through to the bar and kitchen areas so drinks can still be obtainable if anyone needs one,” Rhonda said.

She also thought the staff would be a lot more comfortable in their own space with each other’s company instead of being forced to be all smiles and yes sirs if they were made to wait with the guests.

“Give me five minutes and call it done,” Vinnie said.

“Right. Thank you. I’m just going to go and check on Marcus so don’t worry about finding him,” Rhonda said.

“Why? What’s wrong with Marcus?” Vinnie asked.

“He was the one who found Colleen and I think he might be in a bit of shock,” Rhonda explained.

“Yeah, I can imagine it would have come as a shock, especially in this situation because I’m sure at first he thought

it was part of the game,” Vinnie said.

“He did,” Rhonda confirmed. “I think that’s going to be the hardest part of this; convincing everyone it’s real and not just a twist in the game.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll convince them if you can’t,” Vinnie said.

Rhonda thought he probably had a better chance of convincing the guests that this was for real than she did. His eyes were red and puffy where he must have been crying while he was in the library saying his goodbyes to Colleen. The rest of his face was pasty white to the point of almost being grey and he was shaking. No one was going to believe this was all part of the game after taking one look at Vinnie.

Rhonda and Vinnie split up as Rhonda headed to the bar area. She found Marcus sitting on a stool at the bar, two empty glasses and a third full one in front of him. The bar tender was behind the bar polishing glasses and keeping an eye on Marcus. He looked relieved when Rhonda appeared to take over that part of his duty.

“How are you doing Marcus?” Rhonda asked.

“Not as bad as I was, but I still could have done without seeing that you know,” Marcus said, trying to smile. He managed a half smile which Rhonda took as a good sign.

“I’m going to begin my investigation in a few minutes, so can you make your way to the lounge please,” Rhonda said.

Marcus looked longingly at the bar like he was being asked to abandon an old friend.

“Don’t worry, I’ll arrange it so you all can still have refreshments,” Rhonda said.

She watched as Marcus got down off his stool and wobbled a little bit and then headed for the lounge. Once he was out of the room, she turned back to the bar and spoke to the bar tender.

“I’m assuming Rachel has brought you up to speed on what happened?” Rhonda said.

The bar tender nodded.

“All of the staff are expected to be at the meeting in the lounge. Once I have gone over everything, you all will be returning to your posts. I know that might seem a bit harsh, but I think keeping these people fed and watered will keep things running smoothly,” she said.

The bar tender nodded again.

“That’s cool. I’d rather be working than sitting trying to make awkward conversation with the guests anyway,” he said.

“Good,” Rhonda said. “And while I am well aware it isn’t a part of your job, I’m going to have to ask you to do table service while the interviews are going on. I am trying to keep all of the guests in one place expect for bathroom breaks obviously and having the guests going in and out to the bar isn’t going to be helpful.”

“Yeah, I think under the circumstances I can make an exception and play at being a waiter. But how will I know when someone wants a drink?” he asked.

It was a fair question and Rhonda thought for a moment.

“Ask after the meeting is concluded and then as you bring drinks in, I’m sure other orders will come. When you have delivered the last one, maybe pop back in after fifteen minutes or so and ask if anyone needs a top up?” Rhonda suggested.

“Got it,” the bar tender said.

“Oh, and one other thing,” Rhonda said. “Marcus, the man who was sitting here a moment ago. I have a feeling he’s going to aim to get quite drunk tonight and I would very much appreciate it if you watered down any neat spirits he orders. I don’t want to have to cause a scene by cutting him off altogether, but I really don’t want him getting any drunker than he is now.”

“Yeah, I can do that with it being a private function and the drinks being pre-paid for by the hosts,” the bar tender said. “But I couldn’t do it if the customer was paying for the drinks.”

“I’m aware of that,” Rhonda said, and she smiled. “I can assure you I am not trying to get you in trouble with the licensing authority or anything. I just really don’t want the guy who is likely to turn out to be the chief witness to be too drunk to remember anything in the morning.”

The bar tender looked a bit sheepish, and he nodded his understanding. Rhonda smiled again.

“Do you want to go on through now? I think Vinnie will have rounded everyone else up by now,” Rhonda said.

The bar tender strolled out from behind the bar area and headed off in the same direction she had just sent Marcus in. Rhonda hurried along to the kitchen and made sure the other staff members had been told what was happening. It was deserted so Rhonda figured they had indeed been informed of the meeting. She set off back towards the lounge ready to address the group for the second time about a murder that had taken place underneath this very roof, only this time, it was no game and there was no cheat sheet for her to work from.

Rhonda opened the door to the lounge and a quick head count confirmed everyone was there. As she did the tallying up, several questions were shouted at her, one from Valerie and one from Luke, and another from someone who she couldn’t identify in the moment. She held up a hand for silence.

“I am going to explain what’s going on and then if there are any questions at the end, let me know,” she said.

Valerie tutted at her and normally Rhonda would have said something cutting and put the woman back in her place, but under the circumstances, she decided to let it go. She cleared her throat and addressed the group.

“I’m sure Vinnie has brought you all up to speed on what happened to Colleen,” Rhonda started.

“Sorry but if this is some sort of twist to the game, I think it’s sick and I want no part of it,” Mandy said.

Rhonda opened her mouth to reply to her, but Vinnie got there first.

“It’s not a joke Mandy. I wish it was but it’s not,” he said.

Tears spilled from Mandy’s eyes making Rhonda think she believed Vinnie. She went on.

“It’s going to be quite a while before the police and the coroner can get here. Obviously, I am your Sheriff and as such, I am permitted to begin the investigation despite this officially being my day off. I will be talking to each of you separately and taking a brief statement – more like a few notes - while your memories are all fresh. This isn’t anything to worry about unless you have something to hide,” Rhonda said.

“What will the rest of us be doing while you’re talking to each person?” Marcus asked.

“I would ask all of the guests to wait in here together. The staff will still be ensuring you are provided with snacks and drinks,” Rhonda said.

“So, the game isn’t being finished then?” Diana asked. Rhonda shook her head and Diana sighed. “Dammit. I was so close to solving that as well.”

“Oh, please allow me to apologize on behalf of Colleen,” Vinnie said sarcastically. “How fucking inconvenient of her to die and ruin your moment.”

“I meant ... I didn’t mean ... I ...” Diana stuttered, looking horrified now she had fully realized what she had said.

Vinnie sighed and waved his hand at her, waving away her stuttering explanation.

“It’s ok. I’m sorry. I was being a dick. I know you didn’t mean it that way,” he said.

Henry clapped Vinnie on the shoulder.

“You have a right to be a bit of a dick after losing your wife,” he said.

There was some mumbled agreement and then everyone seemed to settle down again.

“OK. Are there any questions?” Rhonda asked.

“Are we being held here? As in are we under arrest?” the actor asked.

“No,” Rhonda said. “Although I would strongly advise no one attempting to leave in this weather, no one is under arrest, and no one is going to be forced to speak to me at this point. I must warn you though, given the situation, it won’t look good for you if you do choose not to speak with me. And once the investigation becomes official you will be expected to give a statement then either way.”

“I have nothing to hide, I’ll speak to you,” the actor said. “I just don’t want an arrest on my record for nothing.”

“Has anyone else got any questions for me?” Rhonda asked.

No one replied and Rhonda nodded.

“OK. Vinnie, I’ll start with you if that’s ok?” she said. Vinnie nodded and got up. Rhonda turned her attention to the staff. “If you guys can keep people fed and supplied with drinks that would be great. Ideally, I’m thinking tea and coffee, water, soft drinks, if possible, but if they do want alcohol, then they can have it.” She focused on the bar tender. “Remember what I said.”

Rhonda and Vinnie left the room and headed for the second lounge. Rhonda could hear the guests giving the staff their drinks orders and it made her think of something she hadn’t thought really considered until now. Why hadn’t anyone else come to investigate that awful scream and then the cry for help when Marcus had found Colleen?

CHAPTER 4

“So, I guess I’m chief suspect then, am I?” Vinnie said as he took a seat opposite Rhonda.

Rhonda sat in an armchair, the pink floral one Vinnie had taken when she broke the news about Colleen’s death to him, with a notepad and pen she had asked for and Vinnie had grabbed from his office on the way to the second lounge. Vinnie was sprawled on the couch opposite her. Rhonda noted that he seemed closed off, his body language suggesting that he wasn’t completely comfortable with this, but he was trying hard to hide that fact by putting his feet up on the couch beside him and throwing an arm along the back of the couch. His attempt at a joke about being the number one suspect here did nothing to ease the tension in the room.

“Let’s not jump to any conclusion huh?” Rhonda said. “Unless of course you have something you would like to confess?”

“Nope,” Vinnie said. “Nothing to confess. Just these things usually end up with the husband or the butler as the chief suspect. And we don’t have a butler. Dammit. I knew we should have got a butler.”

Rhonda gave Vinnie a half smile, aware that he was probably only trying to use humor to make the awkward situation a little bit more palatable for them both. She decided to just get into her questions before he could try out another one liner and make the atmosphere in the room feel even more uncomfortable.

“Where were you when you heard Marcus cry out for help?” Rhonda said.

“I don’t know,” Vinnie said.

“Really? You hear a man scream like that and you don’t take a moment to register that?” Rhonda said.

“If Marcus was in the library when he screamed, no one would have heard him unless they were in the kitchen or one of the utility rooms along that hallway. We decided very early on when we first bought the house that the clanking sounds coming from the kitchen were fine when it was only us, but Colleen hated the idea of guests hearing them when we were entertaining. Colleen said it was about providing an ambient atmosphere, and I suppose it was to some extent, but I always thought the real reason for it was so that our guests could believe that Colleen had done all of the cooking and the staff were just there to serve the food. She never actually came out and said that, but she certainly implied it and if anyone complimented the meal, she took the compliment and never once said she hadn’t actually done anything except to hire the caterer.

“Anyway. I have gone off topic. Where was I? Oh yes. The sound proofing. We arranged to have the kitchen sound proofed for the reasons I’ve just mentioned, and I decided that if we were going to do that, I was going to have the whole hallway done so that I could sit in the library and read in actual silence,” Vinnie explained.

Rhonda made a note on her paper. That made sense suddenly why no one else had come running to the sound of Marcus’s scream and his call for help. She could understand the guilty party not wanting to come back to the scene, but someone who had nothing to hide would come to investigate, surely? And now she knew why they hadn’t, that was a little piece of the puzzle solved and another new piece of information to go on when she was questioning the guests.

“I can get you the details of the company who carried out the work for us if you need them to check that’s true,” Vinnie said.

“I have no reason to doubt that’s the truth,” Rhonda said with a soft smile that she hoped would help to put Vinnie at ease. The fact that he had given her something she could believe first of all was a good thing for her. It meant she could be seen to warm to Vinnie and once he thought she would believe anything he told her, he might just talk too much and slip up. “It’s a great idea. I can imagine that pots and pans clanking don’t make for relaxing reading time.”

“Exactly,” Vinnie said.

Rhonda smiled and then turned serious again.

“OK, so can you take me through what happened in the time between Colleen announcing we were snowed in and me coming to speak to you to let you know what had happened?” Rhonda said.

“Honestly, not much happened,” Vinnie said. “In the game, my character had witnessed my father-in-law, played by Henry, arguing with Benjamin.”

“Tell me more about that,” Rhonda said. “But use real names. I need to know who was where and I don’t want to risk making a mistake because I have the wrong character down for someone.”

Vinnie nodded. He reached up and tugged at his shirt collar. Rhonda could see the beads of sweat on his forehead too despite the fact that to her, the room was neither too hot nor too cold. She made a mental note of Vinnie’s discomfort and then he began to speak to explain:

I crept forward, moving closer to the door of the drawing room. I had been instructed to come here and I didn’t know why, but now I saw. I was about to witness a scene between Henry and Wayne – Wayne being the actor playing Benjamin and Benjamin’s dead body. Henry marched across the room and Wayne turned at the sound of his approach.

“Can I help you with something?” Wayne said snottily.

“You could start by staying the hell away from my wife,” Henry replied.

“I would love to be able to do that, but it seems everywhere I go, she appears. Perhaps you should be having this conversation with her rather than me,” Wayne said.

“Why you cheeky little devil,” Henry exploded. “How dare you insinuate that my wife would lower her standards to want you?”

“I hardly think she would be lowering her standards. Unless of course you’re comparing our bank balances. But your precious little Melissa has come on to me on more than one occasion and I have told her no, I’m not interested in her like that, but it doesn’t stop her trying again. Honestly, if it was the other way around, she’d be crying sexual harassment by this point,” Wayne fired back.

“That’s it,” Henry said, clenching his hands into fists by his sides. “You will not speak of my wife like that. And if I see you trying to get close to her again, then I will make you regret it. Do you understand me?”

Wayne rolled his eyes.

“Sure grandpa,” he said.

“I’ll give you grandpa. I swear one more word to me, one more glance at my wife, and I will end you,” Henry said.

Wayne must have seen at least some truth on Henry’s face because his demeanor seemed to melt away and he nodded meekly.

“I understand,” he said.

“I ducked out of the way then,” Vinnie said. “Because my sheet said I wasn’t to let my father-in-law know that I had overheard that conversation until later on when I would accuse him of murder.”

“And did you do that?” Rhonda asked.

Vinnie shook his head.

“No. I was still looking for him when all of this happened. He was meant to be on the main staircase, and I was supposed to confront him,” Vinnie said. “I figured maybe he was on a different staircase because it was Henry’s first time at the

house and it's easy enough to get a bit lost. I was making my way towards the back stairs to check for him when Rachel found me and said you wanted me.”

“How long would you say you searched for Henry?” Rhonda asked.

“I don't know,” Vinnie said. “Five minutes? Maybe ten? I would have given up, but Colleen had made it quite clear to me before the guests arrived that I was not to fuck this up for her.”

Rhonda made a note of the fact that Vinnie had been alone with no alibi for at least around five to ten minutes before the body was found, maybe more, meaning he was at least still a suspect. She decided to let that go for the moment and focus on his relationship with Colleen instead. Focusing on the game was needed for her to place the players, but she knew that she had a better chance of one of them slipping up when they were talking about their real lives.

“Would you say that Colleen was a bit of a perfectionist and that you were expected to do whatever she needed you to do to make sure that everything went flawlessly?” Rhonda said.

“Not really,” Vinnie said. He smiled at Rhonda, and she realized she had failed miserably at hiding her surprise at his answer. “Let me clarify that for you Sheriff. At these kinds of events that she hosted then yes, you are one hundred percent correct. Colleen was a control freak with her events, and I just followed instructions and tried to stop her from imploding. But bear in mind she throws – sorry, she threw – maybe four of these big events a year. Smaller events she was fine with. The rest of the time we were like any normal couple. Colleen wasn't the boss of me, and I wasn't the boss of her. We were equals. Partners.”

“How long were you two together?” Rhonda asked.

“Twenty-three years,” Vinnie said without hesitation. “We were married for nineteen of those years. We had a cruise planned for next year. Six months sailing all around the world to celebrate twenty years together. So, in answer to the

question, you are dying to ask me, no, I didn't kill my wife. I loved Colleen and I was looking forward to twenty more years with her."

Rhonda paused to think for a moment. She was sure that Vinnie was telling the truth about loving Colleen. But was love enough to rule him out as a suspect? She didn't think it was. The way Colleen had been killed was personal. Someone had gone into that room and picked up the vase with the intention of ending her life. No one hit someone that hard on the forehead if they didn't want to kill them. And the choice of murder weapon meant that the killer had to get up and close and personal with Colleen as they ended her life. They would have seen the light go out in her eyes. That was definitely personal.

Was it possible that Colleen had pushed Vinnie too far in the moment and he had grabbed the vase and hit her? It was, but something about it felt wrong, although Rhonda couldn't put her finger on what exactly felt wrong about it. The thing was, she got the distinct impression that Vinnie was hiding something from her. She didn't know what, but when he had been recounting the story of his part in the game where he was eavesdropping on Henry and Wayne, and then his subsequent fruitless search for Henry, he had been unable to meet her eye and he kept fidgeting in his seat.

Rhonda didn't think he was necessarily hiding the fact he was a murderer though. She didn't want to rush into the cliched assumption that the killer had to be the husband, but she also didn't want to be too quick to rule Vinnie out as a suspect on no grounds other than because she was conscious of the cliché.

"Did you see anyone hanging around the library at all?" Rhonda asked.

"No," Vinnie said. "Well, no one suspicious. Obviously once Wayne was murdered, we all hung around the library for a while, but Colleen was there and very much alive at that point."

Rhonda nodded. She was aware of that as she had seen Colleen alive after that herself when she had delivered her part of the game to the players.

“Wouldn’t he have seen something? Wayne, I mean? Or maybe he was the one who did it? He wasn’t meant to leave the library,” Vinnie said.

“He’ll be questioned along with everyone else and if he has anything to do with this, I will find out. Don’t worry Vinnie. I will find whoever did this, I promise you that,” Rhonda said.

Or maybe you should worry. That would all depend on whether or not you are guilty, Rhonda thought but didn’t say. Vinnie gave her a half smile. She wasn’t sure what that meant. Whether he had faith in her detective skills or not. She didn’t really care. She would find Colleen’s killer with or without Vinnie’s faith in her.

She did have one more question and it was one that was often very insightful. It wasn’t just about the answer, but about the logic behind it. It helped Rhonda to fathom out how a suspect, or a witness, thought about things.

“Off the record Vinnie, who do you think did this?” Rhonda asked.

“Well, I mean up until half an hour or so ago I would have said none of our friends would do something like this. If I seriously thought one of them was capable of such a thing, they wouldn’t have been invited into our home that’s for sure,” Vinnie said. “But obviously I was wrong about one of them. I mean out of everyone I don’t know Henry and Diana as well as I know the others. This evening was actually the first time I have met Diana. But it was also the first time Colleen had met her and Henry and I can see absolutely no reason why either of them would have done that to her.”

Vinnie went quiet and as much as Rhonda wanted to urge him to speak again, she bit her tongue, letting him think.

“Ok, off the record?” Vinnie said. Rhonda nodded her reassurance at him. “If I had to say who might have even

contemplated doing such a thing, I would have to say Valerie. Valerie Hall.”

“And why would you choose her?” I asked.

“On the surface, Valerie and Colleen acted like they were friends, and anyone who didn’t know them well would have had no reason to doubt that. But there was a lot more to their relationship than that. It was a complicated relationship to say the least. I guess the modern term for it would be frenemies,” Vinnie said. Rhonda nodded, remembering that she had thought something very similar about the women herself earlier in the evening. “Valerie is every bit as much of a socialite as Colleen was, and she would throw lavish events of her own, playing her role as hostess with pride. People said her and Colleen were always trying to outdo each other, but the truth is, Colleen didn’t have to try too hard like Valerie did. Her events outdid Valerie’s every time.

“Where Colleen’s events were classy, Valerie’s were tacky. Where Colleen’s guest lists featured the elite of the elite, Valerie struggled to get anyone of note to her events until Colleen and I started going to them. Colleen was the queen of events in Bennison Beach, and everyone knew it. Valerie was jealous. She wanted the crown for herself, and the only way she was ever going to get it was if Colleen was out of the picture altogether.”

Vinnie finished speaking and Rhonda took a moment to digest everything he had just said.

“And you really think Valerie was desperate enough to be the hostess with the mostess, so speak, that she was willing to kill for it?” Rhonda asked.

“Well like I said, up until this evening, I would have laughed at the idea. But I can’t think of any reason why any of the others would want to hurt Colleen, so it’s a flimsy motive or no motive at all to me,” Vinnie said.

“Ok, I get that,” Rhonda said.

She made a quick note of Vinnie’s suspicions and the reason he had given for them and then she looked up at him.

“Is there anything else you want to tell me? Anything at all that could help in any way?” Rhonda said.

Vinnie thought for a moment and then slowly shook his head.

“No,” he said. “I’m sorry Sheriff, I’m so shocked at this I just don’t know what might even help at this point.”

“Well if you do think of anything, someone acting out of the ordinary, or someone being in the vicinity of the library when they shouldn’t have been, that kind of thing,” Rhonda said. “Be sure to bring it to my attention, ok?”

Vinnie nodded and then he frowned and shook his head.

“No, that’s crazy,” he said, waving away his own thought.

Rhonda sat forward, her interest piqued. It was strange how often, on a case like this, the one thing that the witnesses thought wouldn’t be important turned out to be something major.

“No come on, tell me Vinnie. If it turns out to be nothing, then no harm done,” Rhonda said. “Even the stupidest little detail can be relevant.”

“Well, what if my theory is only half correct?” Vinnie said. “What if Valerie wanted Colleen out of the way, but she wasn’t the one to actually brain her?”

Rhonda waited for him to get his thoughts in order, a pattern she was becoming used to by now but which she still found to be incredibly frustrating.

“You said about people being where they shouldn’t be, right? Well Marcus shouldn’t have been anywhere near the library according to his character’s role. So, what if he decides to go and off Colleen. What if him and Valerie were in it together? And him calling for help and pretending to have found the body was the perfect cover because in the chaos, no one questioned why he was there,” Vinnie said.

Rhonda noted this down beside her note about Valerie. It was strange because this new theory was at the same time ridiculously far reaching, and yet also entirely plausible.

“Well if that was the case then his cover won’t be lasting for much longer,” Rhonda said. “Because you can bet your last dollar that I’ll be asking him what he was doing in there,”

Vinnie smiled, a more normal looking smile this time.

“Is that everything? Only I need to use the bathroom,” Vinnie said.

Rhonda thought for a moment. She had everything she thought she was going to get out of Vinnie for now, and it wasn’t like he was going anywhere if she thought of anymore questions for him.

“Unless you have anything else to share with me, then yes, I think we’re done here for now,” Rhonda said. Vinnie stood up and thanked her. “Don’t hesitate to come back to me if you think of anything else. And I will send for you if I think of anything else I should have asked you.”

“Yes, of course Sheriff,” Vinnie said.

He smiled again and then he hurried to the door. When he reached it, Rhonda spoke up again.

“Can you ask Valerie to come and see me next please?” she said.

Vinnie nodded and left the room, leaving Rhonda ambiguous about him. There was definitely something going on with the man, something he was hiding. But was it murder? He had certainly reacted within the realms of normal when he was told about Colleen and when he saw her body. Was he that good of an actor? Rhonda didn’t think so, but desperate situations sometimes allowed people to do things no one would have suspected of them. And there was no getting away from it – mostly, it was the husband in a case like this who was the killer.

Rhonda had already marked Vinnie’s name with a star, a code to herself that she would want to question him again later if there was time before the helicopter arrived, when there was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” Rhonda called.

The door opened and Valerie stepped in and closed the door gently behind her.

CHAPTER 5

Valerie crossed the room in quick, small steps. She sat down on the seat that Vinnie had just vacated, although she didn't spread herself out like she was there for a lounge around and a chat with a friend. She sat on the edge of the couch, her elbows on her knees and her hands together. In her hands, she held a crumpled paper tissue, although Rhonda noted that if there had been any tears from the woman, she wanted to know exactly what mascara and eye liner she was wearing because they were still absolutely perfectly applied, not even a smudge in sight.

"Thank you for coming to talk to me," Rhonda said.

"Of course," Valerie said. "Anything to help find who did this. I ... I just can't believe Colleen is gone."

"I know," Rhonda agreed. "Bennison Beach certainly won't be the same without her that's for sure."

"It won't be, but don't worry too much Sheriff. There are others amongst us who can throw a great party too," Valerie said.

"Oh, I don't doubt it," Rhonda said. "From what I've heard, with Colleen gone, you'll be the queen of the party scene now."

"I don't know about that," Valerie said. She cast her eyes down like she was embarrassed by the comment, but Rhonda could see by the way her lips turned up slightly at the edges that she was happy with the assumption.

“I hear you and Colleen had quite a rivalry going when it came to who threw the best parties,” Rhonda said.

Valerie laughed and shook her head.

“I don’t know where you heard that Sheriff, but you need new sources. Colleen and I were friends, not rivals. Look I get it. If we were both like Colleen, then maybe there would have been some rivalry,” she said.

“What do you mean if you were both like Colleen?” Rhonda asked.

“Well, I mean I don’t want to be seen to be speaking ill of the dead, and you keep in mind that Colleen and I were good friends, so nothing I say is said with malice,” Valerie said. Rhonda nodded her agreement and Valerie went on. “Colleen had to be the number one at anything she put her hand to, and over the years here, that has been entertaining for the most part. Colleen wanted her guests to leave any event she had hosted talking in awe about the décor, the food, everything. I want my guests to leave a bit tipsy and laughing their heads off. I just don’t care about everything being one hundred percent perfect in the way that Colleen did. Aside from anything, I didn’t have time for all that nit picking.”

“So, you wouldn’t have been upset if someone had told you Colleen’s event was better than yours?” Rhonda said.

“I might have thought them rude to point it out unless I had specifically asked them for their opinion on it, but no, I wouldn’t have been upset. I likely would have agreed with them,” Valerie said.

“Don’t you think it’s a little bit odd that so many people saw you two as almost frenemies?” Rhonda said. “A lot of people thought you and Colleen were fighting for the title of the best hostess in Bennison Beach.”

Valerie laughed again and shook her head.

“Frenemies. I love it. And no, I don’t think it was that odd, because for all I wasn’t competing, Colleen very much was, and she made a point of letting everyone know that there was an undercurrent of competition between us, because in her

mind, there was. I did nothing to dispel the idea. It was harmless, or it seemed like it was then. If it made Colleen feel better to hear that her cutlery was nicer than mine, then I didn't mind her hearing that. I mean imagine your life being so dull that you call that a compliment," Valerie said.

"So, you would say that you weren't jealous of Colleen and her success on the social circle?" Rhonda pushed Valerie.

"Jealous?" Valerie said. She laughed again, this time throwing her head back and slapping her hand off her knee. She got her laughter under control and shook her head. "Sorry. But that's crazy talk. I wasn't jealous of Colleen. I felt sorry for her for needing that validation off strangers and friends alike."

"Let's talk about tonight. Where were you in the time leading up to Colleen being found?" Rhonda said.

"Well, I was supposed to be in TJ's ..."

"Sorry," Rhonda interrupted her before she could go any further. "I realize you were in character and playing the game but if you could use people's real names so I can keep everyone straight in my head, that would be great."

"Ok, sorry," Valerie said. She cleared her throat and started again. "I was supposed to be in Vinnie's office talking to Diana. My character was supposed to be completely heart broken by Benjamin's death and I was to be bearing my soul to Diana and not realize until later in the evening that she was my competition with him. But Diana wasn't where she was meant to be."

"So, you just stayed in the office waiting for her?" Rhonda pressed her.

"I did for a few minutes," Valerie said. "But I was getting bored, and I decided to go and look for her. From what I gathered, she hadn't been to Colleen's house before and I thought she might have been having some trouble finding the office. Colleen slipped up there. She really should have provided floor layouts for the newcomers. Anyway, as I said I went to look for Diana. She didn't seem to be in any of the

playing rooms, unless we missed each other, like as I went into one room, she popped out of another. But I thought maybe she had nipped outside for a cigarette. The back porch is reasonably sheltered, and I went there to look for her, but she wasn't there either. I was on my way back to the office when Vinnie asked me to go to the lounge. And of course, the rest you know."

Rhonda thought about where the office was in relation to the library and she figured even without the sound proofing, Valerie would have struggled to hear Marcus shouting from that distance. She still wanted to know if she knew about it though.

"This might seem like a strange question, but did you know that the kitchen and the hallway behind it with the library in it is sound proofed?" Rhonda said.

Valerie shook her head.

"No. I had no idea. What does that have to do with anything..." she started and trailed off mid word and then she caught herself and answered her own partially asked question. "You want to know if I knew because if I did, then if I was going to murder someone, the sound proofed rooms might be just the place to do it. Well, sorry to disappoint you Sheriff but I didn't know and even now you've said about it I can't see any reason to soundproof a library. Isn't it meant to be a quiet room by its very nature?"

"I think it was more to stop noise filtering in rather than the other way around," Rhonda said.

"Ahh of course. Because Vinnie reads like a child. If there is even the slightest distraction he can't focus," Valerie said with a smile. "I honestly didn't realize it was a big enough thing for them to get a whole area of the house sound proofed though."

"I guess we all have our quirks," Rhonda said.

"Sure, we do," Valerie agreed.

"Let me ask you something off the record, Valerie," Rhonda said. Valerie sat even further forward and waited for

Rhonda to say more. “Who do you think killed Colleen?”

“I think it’s one of two people,” Valerie said. “Although I would hate for it to be Vinnie because the four of us – him and Colleen and Marcus and I – were so close I would just hate to think that of him. Plus, it’s such a cliché isn’t it to not bother investigating anything properly and just blame the husband, but I think his name has to be in the suspect pile simply for the insurance money he’d get from Colleen’s death.”

Rhonda frowned. Usually that would be something she would have already considered, but when it came to the likes of the Hunters, it hadn’t really occurred to her because they were already loaded.

“Would that be important to Vinnie do you think? I mean how much money does one person need?” Rhonda said.

Valerie leaned even further forward, and Rhonda thought that if she asked the woman one more question that she deemed interesting, she would end up on the ground. Valerie looked around before answering as though she suddenly thought that half of the household might have crept into the room to listen to what she had to say.

“Well, that’s just it. Vinnie isn’t as rich as he looks. His business has taken several hits over the years. He really struggled to stay afloat at all through the whole Covid lockdown. And Henry Patterson is really his last hope to save the business. But Vinnie has always hated the idea of having a single investor with enough shares in the company to have a bit of power. He likes the company ran his way. If he had the insurance money from Colleen’s death, he could save his business without needing any outside help,” Valerie said.

Rhonda noted that down with interest. It was definitely another angle worth exploring and one she might have missed herself. Rhonda looked back up from her notes and smiled at Valerie.

“And?” she said.

“And what? You don’t think money is a good motive for murder?” Valerie said with a raised eyebrow that suggested

she thought Rhonda was a bit of a fool.

“Of course, I do,” Rhonda said. “Money, sex, jealousy. It’s usually one or more of the three. I meant and who else did you suspect. You said it was out of two people remember?”

“Oh, yes, of course,” Valerie said. This time, she sat right back on the couch getting comfortable.

Rhonda could definitely see where her loyalties laid. When she had discussed Vinnie, who she classed as a good friend, she had literally been on the edge of her seat. Now she was about to discuss someone that she seemingly wasn’t friendly with, she was as relaxed as her posture. It actually gave her an air of credibility. She wasn’t just throwing names out to try to take any attention away from herself. It had really been hard for her to discuss the idea of Vinnie as a suspect.

“I think it’s Mandy,” Valerie said.

“That would be Mandy Warner?” Rhonda said, looking down at one of the sheets she still had on her lap with a list of the players and their characters within the game, and then looking back up in time to see Valerie nodding her head.

“Yes, Mandy Warner. Colleen’s best friend; at least on paper. Mandy and Colleen have known each other since college where they were roommates and they have remained friendly, but I wouldn’t say they were best friends. In fact, I think if anything I would describe their relationship the way the gossips in this town seemingly describe my relationship with Colleen,” Valerie said.

“You think they were frenemies?” Rhonda questioned her.

“Well yes and no,” Valerie said. “I don’t think Colleen thought they were. I think Colleen genuinely loved Mandy and really thought of her as her ride or die gal pal you know. But I think Mandy was hugely jealous of Colleen, especially once her marriage fell apart.”

“Did Colleen have anything to do with that?” Rhonda asked.

“Oh God, no,” Valerie said with a wave of a perfectly manicured hand. “Colleen was there for Mandy every step of

the way. She was her shoulder to cry on, and she helped her with all of the practical legal stuff too. But you see, Mandy had always been on a level with Colleen socially and financially, but once she got divorced, her status and her wealth both plummeted and she even had to downsize her home.”

“But that wasn’t Colleen’s fault though surely?” Rhonda said.

“No, no, it wasn’t Colleen’s fault at all and to give Colleen her dues, Mandy’s new lower status never bothered Colleen. She still invited Mandy to all of her events, they still had girlie nights out and weekends away. But you’ve seen Colleen in action tonight, how everything had to be perfect. And she had this way of kind of – I wouldn’t say bragging or gloating - maybe discussing how good she had it in front of Mandy without a thought for how she would make her feel,” Valerie said. “I genuinely believe Mandy was jealous that Colleen still had this perfect life while her own was falling apart. Now is that enough of a motive for Mandy to kill Colleen? I don’t know but Mandy is very hot headed. She tends to act before she thinks. Maybe Colleen made one too many comments about how good her life was, and Mandy just saw red?”

Rhonda wasn’t sure that was a strong enough motive for murder, but so far, all she had were flimsy motives. On top of that, she already had two people without alibis and two people who were seemingly missing for the whole time the game was being played. How the hell was this whole thing so messed up when there were so few people involved?

Valerie shifted uncomfortably in her seat all of a sudden and Rhonda’s instincts kicked in. There was more. Maybe a more solid motive. But Valerie wasn’t supplying it quite as willingly as she had supplied the rest of the information. Rhonda wanted to ask her something to draw her out of herself, but she had no inkling as to what it could be that Valerie was debating about keeping to herself or telling her, so she had no idea what to ask to get her to spill it. If she asked the wrong thing, she could spook Valerie altogether and never hear the rest of her theory. Impatiently, Rhonda waited, doing

her best to hide her impatience and appear casual. After thirty agonizing seconds, Valerie spoke up again.

“Is there anything else you need to know? Only you haven’t asked me anything in a while,” she said.

Oh clever, Rhonda thought to herself. Valerie had decided to keep the last bit of information to herself and now she was trying to pass her silence off as though she had just been waiting for Rhonda to speak.

“I was just waiting for you to finish telling me about Mandy,” Rhonda said. “It’s obvious you had more to say.”

“I ... I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Valerie said, her little stutter giving her away even more.

“Yes, you do,” Rhonda said. “Come on Valerie. This could be important.” She paused for effect. “And you owe it to Colleen as her friend to help me find out who did this to her and make sure they pay.”

“Well, I mean it’s probably nothing, but it’s not just the jealous thing with Mandy,” Valerie said. “She had another reason to be mad at Colleen. Again, I don’t know if it’s a good enough reason to kill someone, but maybe to Mandy it was.”

“Go on,” Rhonda prompted her when she paused again.

“Well, Colleen decided to try and match make Mandy with Luke. He’s here tonight. He was playing the role of William Barnes tonight in the game?” Valerie said. Rhonda nodded. She knew who Valerie was referring to. “Mandy was really pissed off about it. Firstly, because she said it made her look desperate and also because it comes back to the same thing as before. Mandy felt as though Colleen couldn’t accept her as a single woman and she had to try and get her back into being in a couple as if that was the only way Mandy could be seen as successful.”

“Well, I can see how that would annoy someone, but murder? Could Mandy have not just asked Colleen to back off?” Rhonda said.

Valerie laughed and shook her head.

“Spoken like someone who doesn’t know Colleen very well. Mandy asked Colleen to stop it loads of times. She explained time and time again that she liked Luke as a friend and nothing more and that she wasn’t ready for another romantic relationship yet anyway,” Valerie said. “Colleen would just sort of steam roller over her objections telling her not to be silly, of course she wanted that someone special in her life and all of that. I remember her saying that Mandy just thought she didn’t want a relationship because she hadn’t found the person she wanted to have it with yet and when she did, nothing would stop her from being with that person.”

Rhonda still wasn’t sure it was a good motive for murder, but the more she heard about these people, the shallower some of them seemed to her and who knew how far they would go to be right. She still thought that Vinnie’s motive was the best of them all though, especially after hearing how close he was to losing his business. That would also explain what he had been holding back from telling her. He didn’t want her to know he was on the verge of financial ruin because he must have known that would make him even more of a suspect than he was now.

“Over the course of the evening, did you see or hear anything that struck you as suspicious?” Rhonda asked.

Valerie thought for a moment and then she shook her head.

“No,” she said. “I’m a bit of a nerd when it comes to these murder mystery things, and I get right into the game. I didn’t really notice anything outside of trying to solve the clues. I didn’t even realize quite how drunk Marcus was until after the game was called off.”

“Is that normal for him?” Rhonda asked, more out of her own curiosity than because it was important to the investigation.

“Oh goodness no,” Valerie said. “I mean don’t get me wrong, he’s not a teetotaller or anything, but he wouldn’t normally drink before coming to someone’s event. But he absolutely hates these things. He only came because he knew Colleen would never let him live it down if he didn’t show his

face. He did warn her beforehand not to give him much of a role in the mystery because he wouldn't be doing much more than eating dinner and getting drunk. She really could have saved herself the actor's fee and just had Marcus be her victim."

"I'm sure he would have loved that," Rhonda said with a soft laugh.

Valerie laughed with her.

"Yeah, she might have had a zombie on her hands when he decided he wanted a drink and got up and walked away," Valerie agreed.

"I think that's all of the questions I have for you for now," Rhonda said when they had stopped laughing. "Do you have anything you can think of that you want to tell me? Anything you can think of that seemed strange or out of place?"

Valerie shook her head.

"No but if I think of anything I know where to find you with all that snow," she said.

"Yes, indeed," Rhonda said. "Can you ask Marcus to come along next please?"

"Sure," Valerie said. "Although I'm not sure how much sense you'll get out of him. He's been drinking since you left the room."

"Don't worry, I'll take whatever he tells me with a pinch of salt," Rhonda said, knowing that in reality, they only thought Marcus was still drinking. He wouldn't be any drunker than when she had last spoke to him and with a bit of luck, time, and the soda that he was being fed, it might have sobered him up a little bit.

CHAPTER 6

Rhonda sat waiting for Marcus to arrive. She knew that he should be up there as the joint chief suspect with Vinnie, maybe he should be even more of a suspect than Vinnie considering he had been the one who had found Colleen's body, but despite that, something told Rhonda he wasn't the killer.

It was a gut instinct, something that wouldn't stand up in an actual investigation, but it had never failed her yet and she would base her questioning on that feeling. Marcus just didn't seem like a killer, and unless he was on a level of acting where he should be in Hollywood, the way he had reacted to finding the body said he was innocent. He even gave her the little detail that he had laughed at first, thinking it was a part of the game. Rhonda didn't think someone guilty would have made up that kind of detail because it was the sort of thing that they might think would make them look bad.

She was starting to think Marcus wasn't coming for whatever reason when the door opened, and he came into the room with an apologetic smile.

"Sorry, I had to have a toilet break on the way along," he said.

"It's ok," Rhonda said, nodding to the couch. "Have a seat, Marcus."

Marcus walked to the couch. Rhonda noticed he was slightly more stable on his feet than he had been earlier although she knew he was still far from sober. While she

wanted his view on what had happened as the one who had found Colleen, she hadn't been joking when she had told Valerie she would be taking Marcus's answers with a pinch of salt. Marcus sat down and looked at Rhonda, waiting for her to ask her questions.

"Let's start with the obvious," Rhonda said. "What were you doing in the library when you found Colleen's body?"

"Nothing really," Marcus said with a shrug of his shoulders. "I've been roped into playing in these stupid murder mystery things before, and I hate them. I find them cringey and stupid, but I knew I wouldn't be able to get out of this one without both Valerie and Colleen hating on me and it was easier just to agree to come you know. I did have a word with Colleen prior to the event and I told her about my thoughts on this kind of thing and said that she would be best off giving me a character that doesn't really make much of a difference to the game because I wouldn't really be engaged with it. The character she gave me was mysterious enough to have a part in the game for the others, but distant enough that I wasn't really involved, so as I'm sure you know, I spent most of my time at the bar."

Marcus stopped talking and smiled at Rhonda and she realized he was done even though he hadn't actually answered her question. That would have made her suspicious under other circumstances, but she genuinely believed Marcus was just drunk enough to think he had answered the question. She decided to ask it again rather than pointing out that he hadn't answered it and see what he said.

"Ok, so your character was happy at the bar and you yourself was also happy at the bar. So how did you end up in the library?" Rhonda said.

He had said earlier he was in there because he was just playing the game and yet now, he was saying that he didn't really know why he was in there at all.

"Oh, right, yes, the library. That was the one thing my character had to do in the game was go to the library at the right time," Marcus said.

“When you tell me this part, please use people’s real names so I know for sure who we are talking about,” Rhonda said.

“Yes, that’s the best you’re going to get because I have no idea who was meant to be who in the game anymore anyway,” Marcus said with a laugh.

Rhonda smiled. She could well imagine that. She was having trouble herself remembering who was who, at times, and she had only had half a glass of wine to Marcus’s who knew how many whiskeys and brandies. Rhonda listened as he went on to explain what his character was doing in the library.

I saw Colleen waltz through the bar area. She came in from the dining room side of the room and left by the door at the other side of the room, the library side. I didn’t think much of it until she turned around at the door and widened her eyes at me, a look that said, ‘come on now, you have one job, don’t let me down’. She left before I could question her about what that look was meant to mean, but I remembered that I had one little scene I had to do in the game, and I figured it must be that now.

I looked at my sheet thing, the reference list Colleen gave me, and my instruction was clear. I was to sit in the bar area and drink alone. At some point, Marjorie Mahoney, sorry Colleen, would enter the room, cut across it, and leave out of the other side without saying a word. Ten minutes after that, I was to go to the library where I would find Colleen. She would accuse me of having killed before and say that I was the chief suspect here. I was to shrug off her accusation and tell her that her whole theory was based on factless rumors. We would argue for a bit and then Mandy was meant to come in and accuse Colleen of being the murderer, and the two women would start arguing, at which point I was to slip back out and leave them to it.

I had such a tiny role, and I didn’t want to fu ... sorry ... mess it up. I figured three, maybe four minutes had passed since Colleen had come through the bar room at that point and I asked the bar tender to tell me when seven more minutes had

passed. I waited until he told me the time was up and I went to the library to play my part.

I walked in and I saw Colleen on the ground, and I laughed, because I thought she had set me right up. From this tiny bit part she had promised me, to instead being the one who finds the second victim of the night, none other than the lady of the house herself.”

“But of course, it wasn’t part of the game at all and it as sure as hell wasn’t funny,” Marcus said.

Rhonda made a note of what Marcus had said about the times, reminding herself to check that out with the bar tender when it was his turn to be questioned.

“So, what happened then?” Rhonda asked. “Did Mandy appear?”

“No,” Marcus said. “At least not while I was there. It was at that point that I screamed and well you know the rest because you came to see what was going on.”

“So, from the moment you left the bar area until the moment I came into the library, you didn’t see anyone except Colleen?” Rhonda asked.

Marcus started to nod his head, but then it was like a light came on inside of his head. His eyes widened and became brighter, more alert, and his face somehow looked animated, like he had somewhat sobered up in the last five seconds. It was quite bizarre to see Rhonda thought.

“No, that’s not true,” he said. “I did see someone. But it wasn’t Mandy though. Or at least I don’t think it was. I think it was a man. If not, whoever it was, they were definitely wearing a man’s coat.”

“Can you describe the coat for me?” Rhonda said.

“It was black,” Marcus said. “It had a hood and the person wearing it had the hood pulled up around their face. I remember because the hood was lined with a cream-colored fur, and I remember thinking at the time that fur would tickle my face and annoy me. It was a long coat. The coat wasn’t

fastened, but whoever was wearing it had it pulled closed across their front, and they had their arms folded over it.”

“That’s really good,” Rhonda said, writing down the full description of the coat. It struck her as odd that someone would be wearing a coat inside the house like that and when she had finished talking to everybody, she was going to go and see if she could find that coat. For a moment, she debated asking the others if they had seen someone wearing a coat of that description, but she decided against it. It could tip off the killer that they had something on them.

“Have you told anyone else about that person Marcus?” Rhonda asked.

Marcus shook his head.

“To be honest, I’d kind of forgotten about seeing anyone until your question sort of made me remember it,” Marcus said.

“That’s good,” Rhonda said again. “I think that could be really important, so for now, I need it to be kept between me and you. Can you do that Marcus? Can you keep this a secret from the others?”

“Sure,” Marcus said.

“Even Valerie?” Rhonda said.

“Sure,” Marcus said. “I think someone being murdered trumps me telling my wife things.”

Rhonda smiled. She liked Marcus and her gut still told her he wasn’t the killer. She looked down at her notepad and back up at Marcus.

“When was this?” Rhonda asked. “When you saw the person coming out of the library I mean. Was it before or after you found Colleen’s body?”

“Before,” Marcus said.

“Are you sure?” Rhonda asked.

“I’m certain,” Marcus said. “Because they came out of the library and for a moment, I thought it was Mandy but then I

saw the coat and I knew it wasn't her. I thought I was late for my part when I thought it was Mandy, that's how I can be so sure."

"And you're sure that this person came out of the library?" Rhonda asked.

Marcus nodded his head.

"Yes. As I came into the hallway from the bar end, this person left the library and practically ran to the kitchen end of the corridor."

That didn't really narrow it down. Rhonda had drawn a rough floor plan as she talked to everyone and the ground floor rooms that had been allocated as playing rooms was pretty much circular. There was the hallway with the library at the head of the circle. At one end, there was a door to the kitchen straight ahead, a small alcove to the left and a door to the dining room on the right. At the other end, there was a door to the bar area. And those areas joined together and linked with the lounge and the reception room and a few other rooms. So, whoever had escaped that corridor could have ended up anywhere from there. Dammit.

Still though, if Marcus was right, and Rhonda was aware that he had been drunk when all of this happened and he could have remembered it wrongly, but if he was right, he had almost certainly seen the killer leaving the library. After that person left the library, there was no time for anyone else to have slipped in and killed Colleen without Marcus seeing them and if Colleen had already been dead when that person went in there, surely, they would have raised the alarm. And if Marcus was also right in the timings for him to go through to the library, there was no way he had time to kill Colleen himself before he started screaming for help.

Rhonda gave Marcus a moment to see if he was going to say anything else, but it seemed that he was content that he had told her everything he knew. There was just one more thing she wanted to ask him. Her standard question about each person's suspicions had thrown up some interesting answers

and she would be equally interested in what Marcus had to say.

“Off the record now Marcus, who did you think killed Colleen?” Rhonda asked.

Marcus let out a long sigh and shook his head.

“That’s like standing in the desert and asking which grain of sand stung your eye,” he said. Rhonda raised an eyebrow and Marcus smiled. “Ok, that’s a slight exaggeration, but Colleen was one of those people who rubbed others up the wrong way, often without meaning to and just as often because she didn’t care who she offended as long as she was getting her way. On the surface, Colleen had a lot of friends, but I could probably think of a reason for any one of her so called friends to have killed her if I really wanted to.”

“Ok, let’s play the devil’s advocate. What reason would you have had for killing Colleen?” Rhonda asked.

“For making me play this stupid game,” Marcus smiled. “No, seriously, I genuinely think my life would be a lot quieter without Colleen in it. There wouldn’t be anyone for Valerie to compete with socially and that would mean we weren’t constantly throwing more and more lavish parties in the hopes of catching the queen bee. If I had to give myself a motive, that would be it. It would let me live peacefully and it would stop my wife being neurotic about a party.”

“What about Vinnie?” Rhonda said.

“Oh, come on, he had to live with her. Surely that’s reason enough,” Marcus said.

Rhonda bit down on the end of the pen she was holding to hide her amusement at Marcus’s comment. He wasn’t wrong but it would be very unprofessional of her to laugh openly at his comment about a victim.

“Look I didn’t mean it literally that I could make a case for anyone killing Colleen, I just meant she’s hard work and I don’t think it would have to be someone that had this like huge reason. It could be that resentments had built up over time and

something happened tonight that had them spilling over,” Marcus said,

Rhonda nodded and made a note of that, and then she looked up at Marcus and smiled.

“That’s about all I have for you,” she said. “Unless you can think of anything else I might need to know?”

Marcus thought for a moment and then shook his head.

“Nope,” he said.

“Then we’re done here. Thank you for your time. Please send Mandy along next,” Rhonda said,

Marcus got up and Rhonda watched him walk to the door. Any unsteadiness was fully gone now, and she thought that while he was still tipsy enough to say what he really thought, even if it was something inappropriate, she didn’t think he was drunk enough to discount what he had said. She still didn’t think he had anything to do with Colleen’s death and she believed that he had seen someone coming out of the library. She drew a circle around that point in her notepad, knowing that the whole case was going to be solved if she could just find out who that person was. If only Marcus had been more into murder mystery games, he might have thought that the person slinking around in doors in a coat was suspicious and followed them until he found out who it was. But it hadn’t gone down that way, and wishing it had, wasn’t going to make Rhonda’s job any easier.

CHAPTER 7

Rhonda didn't have long to wait before Mandy arrived. She got herself sat down and smiled nervously at Rhonda. She crossed and then uncrossed her legs.

"Sorry," she said after a moment. "I'm a bit nervous and to be honest I feel kind of broken. My best friend has just been brutally murdered and now I am a suspect in her murder. It really wasn't what I expected tonight to bring."

"Who said you're a suspect?" Rhonda asked.

"There are less than twenty people here. We're all suspects except you presumably. Not that I think you should be a suspect or anything. I'm just saying," Mandy said.

"I suppose in that sense you could be considered a suspect, but honestly, I am just trying to get to the bottom of what happened to Colleen. If we weren't snowed in, one of my deputies or I would have come to your home to take your statement likely tomorrow some time. You wouldn't have been called to come into the station and you certainly wouldn't have been arrested if that makes you feel any better," Rhonda said.

Mandy flashed her a quick smile.

"It does actually," she said. "On the one hand, I know I didn't hurt Colleen so in that sense I don't really care if I'm a suspect. There's no way you can prove I did something when I didn't do it. But I hate the idea of the real killer not being brought to justice."

"Oh, believe me, the killer will be found and brought to justice," Rhonda said. "And like you said, the people with

nothing to hide have nothing to fear. And as Colleen's friends, I'm sure everyone wants to know what happened to her and make sure justice is served here."

Mandy nodded and smiled, this time a more natural smile.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Like I said my best friend just died and now this. I really just want to go and curl up alone somewhere and have a good cry. But not only do I have to hang around to talk to you, which I don't mind at all, as you say, we're Colleen's friends and her real friends will help you to find out who did this in any way they can, it's more a case of even when this is done and I can go where I want to, I am afraid to go and be somewhere alone. Colleen has just been killed in her own home and that killer is still amongst us. I don't feel safe at all here."

Rhonda had to admit she hadn't thought of it that way, but Mandy was the odd one out. She wasn't part of a couple, so she didn't have the strength in numbers thing going on when everyone went their own separate ways after the interviews. She wasn't a member of the staff, so she had no group to stick with. And unlike Rhonda, she didn't have a uniform to make her feel safe.

"Let's just see how things go. Perhaps the helicopter will get here before us all going off alone becomes an issue and if it doesn't, don't worry. I will make sure everyone is safe," Rhonda said. "And before you say I didn't do that for Colleen, I am well aware that I failed Colleen, But I didn't know we had a killer in our midst then. I do now and they won't get to strike again. Not on my watch."

Mandy smiled and she seemed to relax a little bit.

"Thank you," she said. "I just ... Normally when I get in a panic like this, I would call Colleen and she would be the one to talk me down. But obviously I can't do that now can I?"

"I'm sorry," Rhonda said, because she didn't know what else to say. "It must be hard losing your best friend like this."

"It is," Mandy said. She sniffed and gave a half laugh and a half sob. "I never really imagined life without Colleen.

We've been friends since college and those friends that you keep in touch with after college, they are friends for life aren't they and that to me meant until we were both old."

Rhonda reached across the distance between the two women and gave Mandy's arm a squeeze. Mandy seemed genuinely upset, but did that mean she hadn't killed Colleen? Maybe she was a good actress, or maybe she had done it on the spur of the moment and now regretted it and just wanted her friend back. Or maybe she was totally innocent. Rhonda intended to find out which of these scenarios was the correct one.

Mandy looked up at Rhonda and smiled when Rhonda squeezed her arm. She gave a big sniff and wiped her eyes and straightened her back.

"Ok," she said, seeming more composed now. "Let's do this. Fire away with your questions."

"It's obvious that you and Colleen were close, longtime friends. But I have to ask Mandy, was there even a little part of you that was jealous of Colleen?" Rhonda asked.

"I'd like to say no, that's ridiculous. But you know as well as I do that there is often jealousy in friendship. But it comes and goes. Like in college, Colleen was always jealous of me because I could eat like a horse and not put on any weight. And I was always jealous of her skin because I got spots and she didn't," Mandy said. "But it wasn't like jealousy over anything deep and meaningful."

"I'm sorry to ask this Mandy, but it's important so I'm just going to be blunt about it. Were you jealous of Colleen's life when you got divorced and became financially worse off?" Rhonda said.

"No," Mandy said. "I know everyone thinks I was, but it just wasn't the case at all. I could never tell Colleen this without her getting upset so I kept it quiet, and I could never tell anyone else because it would have looked like I was scraping the bottom of the barrel, but I can tell you and I promise you this is the truth. When my husband left, for the first few weeks, I felt as though my whole world fell apart.

“Colleen was a rock for me. She helped me with all the legal stuff, and she was always there when I needed someone to tell me I deserved better or what a bastard Mick was. And in time, I saw that Colleen was right. I did deserve better. I realized that my relationship with Mick had been far from perfect and being single gave me a whole new lease of life. I felt free for the first time in years. I walked with a spring in my step again. I lost twenty pounds and dyed my hair. I just felt like me again. So no, I’m not jealous that Colleen was still married, and I wasn’t, although I will say that Vinnie was a much better husband than Mick ever was,” Mandy said.

“Ok,” Rhonda said. “I get that. Sometimes you don’t realize you’re unhappy until you start to be happy again.”

“Yes, exactly that,” Mandy agreed.

“And what about financially? Were you ever jealous that Colleen was still in this privileged life, and you were now struggling and had to downsize your home?” Rhonda said.

“I didn’t have to downsize my home. I chose to,” Mandy said. “Part of the divorce settlement was that we sell the house we shared, and each of us got half of the money. I had more than enough for a deposit on a house like this one, and I could have paid the mortgage easily enough. But there was just me and I didn’t want to rattle around in some huge house by myself. And I certainly didn’t relish the idea of cleaning it all or having a team of cleaners coming in for no reason. So rather than do that, I bought a smaller place outright. It’s perfect for my needs, I can clean it in a day easily and best of all, I have no mortgage hanging over my head.”

Rhonda had to admit that this had surprised her, although she felt like she was hiding it well. She jotted a few notes on her notepad.

“And your day-to-day money?” Rhonda said. “Is your alimony enough that you don’t wish you had more?”

“Really?” Mandy said. She rolled her eyes and shook her head, but she answered the question anyway. “Here’s something that would have blown Colleen’s mind. Mick doesn’t pay me any alimony. I pay him the alimony. The

company that everyone believed was Mick's is actually mine. I employed Mick. Now I don't. I had no reason to be jealous of Colleen's money because I genuinely believe I have more than her and Vinnie put together. And I am not jealous of her home or her lifestyle because I made a choice to not have any of that. If you need to contact my bank to verify any of that, feel free. I bank with Lloyds."

"I am more than happy to take your word for it at this stage Mandy, but I won't rule out the possibility of needing to see those records in the future if the investigation calls for it," Rhonda said.

"Whatever," Mandy shrugged. "So, I'm not jealous. What other motive might I have had? Or should I say, what other total bullshit has Valerie been feeding you."

Rhonda didn't say anything, and Mandy laughed.

"It's ok. You don't have to confirm or deny it. I know it was her. She's the gossip queen and she's never made any secret of the fact that she thinks I was jealous of Colleen. I think she was actually jealous of the bond Colleen and I shared. Valerie was always slightly on the outside, the third wheel to our couple. And no, I don't think she killed Colleen because of it. If anything, she would have killed me and had Colleen all for herself," Mandy said. "So come on. What other rumors do I need to dispel?"

"Well, now you mention it, I have heard that you were really angry with Colleen for trying to set you up with Luke Maddison," Rhonda said.

"Ok, that's a new one on me, but I suppose it's sort of a half-truth which is good for Valerie. She normally takes one lie and embellishes on it and then runs with that shit," Mandy said. She smiled, a humorless smile that didn't reach her eyes. "I'm going to be a bit nicer about Valerie for now. If she's next, you'll be handcuffing me without question at this rate. For the record, I don't dislike Valerie. I feel sorry for her. She's one of those women like you see in movies, rich and bored and a little bit mean. Right, enough about Valerie. Back to Luke.

“I think Luke is a lovely man. And I’m not blind. I can see he’s good looking and I know many women would kill to have a chance to date him. But I just don’t feel that way about him. There’s no chemistry between us at all, and that’s not just me. Ask Luke. He will tell you the exact same thing. Now where it gets complicated is how I felt about Colleen trying to set me up with Luke. At first, I thought it was sweet. She wanted me to be happy and she had genuinely picked someone who she thought I would like. It wasn’t like she just waved the first single guy she saw in my direction, you know?”

“But then it started to get awkward. Colleen doesn’t – sorry, didn’t - really take no for an answer, and she kept coming up with ways to try and push Luke and I together. I’ll be honest, I did start to get angry with her then, but was I angry enough to kill her? No. Not even close to it. She just wasn’t the sort of woman who was ever not part of a couple, and she couldn’t believe that I was happier single than I had ever been in my marriage. She thought I was just putting a brave face on. And I suppose that’s why I could never be too mad with her over it – even at her most pushy she was doing it for me because she wanted me to be happy and she thought that the only way for a woman to be happy was to be with someone romantically.”

Rhonda thought that Mandy was more than likely telling the truth, especially about Luke. Surely no one had ever murdered a friend in cold blood because they had tried to match make them with someone. The other part of it, the financial part, had been the most interesting part to Rhonda. Because plenty of people were killed over money and being jealous of someone for seemingly having it all while you feel like you have nothing is pretty common. But if Mandy was telling the truth about her finances, and Rhonda didn’t think she would lie about something that could be so easily checked, then she really had no motive for killing Colleen. Which led Rhonda to that fateful question that she had asked of everyone.

“So, off the record, who do you think killed Colleen?” Rhonda asked. “Who do you think had a motive to want her dead?”

“Well sticking with the money theme, there’s always Vinnie isn’t there. He could have killed Colleen so that he gets the insurance money off her death. But I don’t believe that for a second. I think Vinnie genuinely loved Colleen and therefore would have wanted her around for as long as possible, and secondly, and this had better stay off the record,” Mandy said. She waited until Rhonda nodded her assurance that it would indeed stay off the record. “Well, I don’t think Vinnie is clever enough to plot out a murder and actually get away with it. And for him to get the insurance money, he would have to get away with it, which in this scenario, means throwing out a more believable suspect. No, Vinnie isn’t the brightest one of us all, but he’s not that stupid.”

“Ok, that’s who you don’t think killed Colleen. I asked who you do think killed her,” Rhonda said, mulling over Mandy’s theory about Vinnie not being capable of planning this whole thing even as she spoke. She disagreed with Mandy on that one. She thought Vinnie was clever enough to plan this and if he had, then he was even cleverer than she had given him credit for, because he had managed to convince one of the closest people to Colleen that he wasn’t clever enough for this. Rhonda thought about Mandy’s other point; that in these closed conditions, it wouldn’t be enough to just get away with murder, Vinnie would also need a fall guy. Rhonda thought that anyone who had loose enough morals to kill their spouse for the insurance money likely had loose enough morals to blame someone else for their crime too.

Rhonda realized that Mandy was starting to talk again, and she forced herself to stop turning the Vinnie thing over and over in her head and instead, listen to Mandy. She could do all the thinking she wanted to when she had Mandy’s answers.

“I honestly don’t know,” Mandy said. “These people are meant to be her friends. Why would they want her dead? Vinnie, I’ve already covered. I’m not a huge fan of Valerie if you hadn’t noticed, but Valerie and Marcus liked Colleen, they wouldn’t want her dead. Henry and his girlfriend only met Colleen tonight, so they have no reason to want to kill her. Who does that leave? Me. And we’ve been over that one. And

Luke. Luke is another longtime friend of Colleen. He wouldn't want to see her dead."

"Ok," Rhonda said. "We're going to go down the who it isn't route. I'll play. It isn't me, because I would be able to make a body disappear under normal circumstances so I would never choose this setting for a murder."

Mandy laughed slightly at that, but she nodded her agreement, taking Rhonda off the list too.

"That leaves the wait staff, the bar tender, and their manager, plus the actor who played the victim in the game," Rhonda said.

"The manager woman," Mandy said. "What's her name?"

"Rachel," Rhonda provided.

"Yes, Rachel. I think maybe it was her," she said.

"Care to elaborate on why?" Rhonda asked.

Mandy nodded and started to talk:

I was just about to go into the kitchen and ask if they had any fresh juice. I wasn't drinking alcohol and I was sick of fizzy drinks. I pushed the door open, and I saw Colleen and I thought that was a good thing because I could ask her, and she would know what she had available. But then I heard a loud sigh and I saw another woman, Rachel, the catering manager, and I realized the two women were arguing. I didn't particularly care why. I just wanted my juice, but I figured if I interrupted them, I would just get told no to get me away from the kitchen, so they could finish their argument. I decided to just wait them out. I stayed on the outside of the kitchen door, and while I didn't mean to eavesdrop, I couldn't help hearing what the two women were saying.

"Look Mrs. Hunter, I'm sorry but you knew the price and you knew the service level being offered to you at that pricing level before we got here. It's too late to try and haggle now," Rachel said.

"I'm hardly haggling. Haggling is trying to get a discount just because you want one. I am demanding a discount

because your staff's service wasn't up to the standard I expect. The wait staff were great at circulating the food and the champagne, I will give them that, but when it came to individual bar orders, they just couldn't get it through their heads that they needed to go and get the bar tender to make those drinks and then bring them back to the guests. I heard one of them tell a guest to go to the bar if they wanted a drink. Can you imagine? How rude," Colleen said.

"I get that wasn't the right way to handle the situation and the staff member should never have said that to a guest," Rachel said. "Which staff member was it?"

"Oh no," Colleen said. "You're not coming that one with me. Get me to name the member of staff so you can reprimand them and make out that everything is ok now," Colleen said.

"Wait, what do you expect me to do about it if you won't even tell me who it is?" Rachel said.

"I expect you to have your staff trained prior to the event. And we both know that the staff member was only following your instructions, Rachel. We have worked together enough times now for me to know that you always try to have the wait staff refuse a drinks service," Colleen said.

"Yes, but there are polite ways to do it and there are rude ways to do it," Rachel said.

Colleen waved her hand.

"Oh, they were polite enough. It's the fact that you once more stopped them from doing it that's annoyed me," Colleen said.

"But I have told you at just about every event of yours I have worked. Drinks service is not something we offer unless you are willing to go for the gold bar package and you won't do that because you demand to have Dave and Dave refuses to play waiter," Rachel said.

"Yes, which is why I expect the actual waiters and waitresses to do that," Colleen said.

"Look," Rachel said. "We're just going around in circles here. I'm sorry you're not happy Mrs. Hunter, but my staff and

I have delivered everything you were promised, and I am not going to give you a discount.”

“Really?” Colleen said. “You are going to risk losing my business for the sake of fifty dollars?”

“I don’t want to lose your business Mrs. Hunter, but neither do I reward bad behavior and the way you have spoken to me this evening is not the way to go about asking for a discount. Now if you will excuse me, I have work to do,” Rachel said.

“I haven’t finished speaking to you,” Colleen said.

“Ok,” Rachel said with a smile that made me wince. I really thought Colleen might reach out and slap it off the woman’s face, but she didn’t, she just stood there. I could feel the anger radiating off both of them in waves. “But please remember this moment and the fact I told you I had things that needed to be done when dinner is served late.”

“Just get back to work,” Colleen snapped. “And don’t make me have to have this conversation with you again.”

“Read the contract you signed, and you won’t have to,” Rachel said.

I didn’t dare ask Colleen about the juice when she stormed out of the kitchen. Her face was full of thunder, and I thought she needed to go off somewhere and calm herself down before anyone started to speak to her.

I waited for a moment before going into the kitchen, so it wasn’t obvious I had been right outside of the kitchen door for the argument, and then I stepped into the kitchen to ask Rachel or one of the others for my juice. Obviously, they didn’t know I was there, and I heard Rachel speaking to another girl.

“I swear that woman knows how to rile me up. One of these days, I am going to really lose it with her, and I won’t be responsible for my actions,” she said.

When they saw me, I acted like I hadn’t heard a thing and asked for my juice, which I was given. And very nice juice it was.

“So yes. If I had to say who, out of the people here tonight, might have wanted to hurt Colleen, I would have to say Rachel. Because she admitted to wanting to harm her, didn’t she?” Mandy said. “I mean I know she could have just been venting, but it’s a little strange don’t you think that the night she is heard saying that, is the night Colleen is brutally murdered.”

“Yes, it’s definitely something to look into,” Rhonda said.

She wasn’t sure she suspected Rachel though. Aside from her motive being a bit flimsy – what person didn’t sometimes say things like that about the people they worked for – if Marcus’s timings all worked out, then Rachel would have been in the kitchen talking with Rhonda at the time the killer was leaving the library. Of course, she didn’t tell Mandy that.

“So back to the game. What time do you think it was when you entered the sound proofed part of the house?” Rhonda said. She worded it that way on purpose. Mandy already seemed to have her back up at the thought of being blamed for Colleen’s murder, which absolutely wasn’t what was happening here, but Rhonda didn’t want to set her off again by making the question ‘did you know about the sound proofing’ which might have come across as a bit more hostile or accusatory. The way Rhonda chose to ask the question made it sound casual, like she thought Mandy would know this detail.

“Sound proofed part of the house? I’m sorry, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Mandy said,

“Oh. Part of the house was sound proofed. The library area so that Vinnie could read in peace. I thought Colleen might have mentioned it to you when she was getting the work done. But never mind. Your character was meant to go to the library and have an argument with Colleen’s character?” Rhonda said. “Tell me about that but use real names please.”

“Yes. That was on my sheet, but it didn’t happen that way,” she said.

I knew I had to wait for the exact right moment. If I was too early or too late, it would spoil the moment, because I had to walk in on Colleen and Marcus arguing. I waited until I felt

like it was the right time, and then I made my way towards the library. I came into the hallway, but I don't know. It felt ... off somehow. I felt a shiver go down my spine and I suddenly didn't want to go on any further.

I had to, though. I told myself I was just being silly. There was nothing down there except for the library and two of my friends. I started towards it, and I noticed a man I didn't recognize at first sitting in a chair in the hallway. As I got a little bit closer, I realized the man was one of the wait staff and some of the fear left me. He shook his head as I approached and although I wasn't afraid of him, there was still that strange feeling in the air and to be honest, I was glad to have an excuse not to go in there.

“I mean if I had suspected anything was seriously wrong, I obviously would have gone in there, but I honestly thought it was all part of the game and I had just let myself get carried away and a bit spooked,” Mandy said. “If I had gone in there, I might have been able to save her.”

Mandy's eyes filled with tears and Rhonda quickly shook her head.

“No, she was already dead then,” Rhonda said. “The waiter sitting at the door? I asked him to sit there while I broke the news about Colleen to Vinnie, so he could make sure no one went into the library and saw Colleen's body on the ground. You couldn't have helped her even if you had fought your way in there.”

“Thank you,” Mandy said, blinking away the tears from her eyes before they could roll down her face. “That's very kind of you to say so.”

“Think about the night as a whole. Did you see or hear anything you thought strange except for anything we have already talked about? Did you notice anyone acting differently?” Rhonda asked.

“Well, we were all acting differently because we were playing characters, but no one was acting weird outside of that. No one made me think they were having a strange night

or anything like that,” Mandy said. “In fact, I was quite enjoying the night until ... Well until I wasn’t anymore.”

Rhonda felt like she had upset the poor woman enough. She didn’t really think Mandy had killed Colleen. She had never been at the top of Rhonda’s suspect list and now, after talking to her, she was even lower down on the list than she was before.

“If you think of anything that might be useful, you know where I am,” Rhonda said. “Thank you for talking with me. Can you ask Luke to come along next please?”

Mandy nodded and got up. She gave Rhonda a watery eyed smile.

“I wasn’t going to drink tonight as you know. But I’m thinking that juice would be heaven with a vodka or two thrown in it right now,” she said.

“That does sound good,” Rhonda smiled. “And if everything that’s happened tonight isn’t enough to make you want a vodka or two, then I don’t know what is.”

“Exactly,” Mandy said. “Exactly.”

And then she was gone, and Rhonda was once more left alone waiting for the next person to come and speak to her.

CHAPTER 8

Rhonda looked up from her notepad as the door opened and she smiled at Luke as he came in. He smiled back at her, and she nodded to the couch. He took a seat, his pose casual and his body language natural. He didn't look like he was trying too hard to look comfortable. He looked like he was just naturally comfortable with the situation. It was the way someone innocent should look, but it was also the way someone guilty could practice looking to help their case.

“So, Luke, have you known the Hunters for long?” Rhonda asked.

At this point in the interview process, she felt like she knew very little about Luke compared to the other guests. No one had decided he was likely Colleen's killer and he had barely come up at all except as someone that Colleen had tried to set up with Mandy.

“I've known Vinnie for ten years, maybe longer. And he introduced me to Colleen pretty quickly,” Luke said. “Back then I was still with Marina, my ex-wife. We spent some time together as a foursome going out for dinner and what not. We even went on holiday together a few times.”

“So, you would say that you were good friends with both of the Hunters?” Rhonda said.

“Yes, I would now,” Luke said. “Although I was probably more friendly with Vinnie and Marina and Colleen were closer. But when Marina and I split up, she moved to Europe

and Colleen and I became closer, although I would still have said Vinnie and I were closer.”

“How did you feel about Colleen trying to set you up with Mandy?” Rhonda asked.

Luke rolled his eyes.

“Annoyed mostly,” he said. “I told Colleen from the first time I met Mandy that she seemed nice enough but there was going to be nothing romantic between us. We just didn’t have that spark. At first Colleen played it like she understood and that should have been the end of it. But, of course, it was Colleen, and she isn’t used to being told no.

“She would engineer situations where Mandy and I were left alone together or in some sort of forced proximity to each other. I’m sure she thought she was being subtle, but she really wasn’t. I knew what she was doing. Mandy knew what she was doing. And I dare say the rest of our circle knew what she was doing. It was so awkward, and I told her several times to stop it, but nope, she never did.

“Like take tonight for example. My character in the game was supposedly besotted with Mandy’s character to the point where my motive for killing Benjamin was to please her. If that’s not the perfect example of Colleen and her cringey, meddling ways, I don’t know what is.”

“You talk as though you didn’t like Colleen much,” Rhonda said.

“Oh, no, as I said, I liked her plenty. We were good friends for the most part. I know she can rub people up the wrong way, but she has a wicked sense of humor, and she will go out of her way to make sure everyone is happy and having a good time any time that you are in her company. I just didn’t like being forced onto someone and having them forced onto me. I suppose really, I should just be grateful that Mandy and I at least got on as friends. Imagine how much worse it would have been if we hated the sight of each other. So yeah, I liked Colleen, but that was becoming an issue,” Luke said.

“So, you didn’t think that the match making was sweet then?” Rhonda asked.

“Sweet? No. Why would I think being pushed into a relationship I didn’t want was sweet?” Luke said, looking genuinely puzzled.

“Well, no, not that part. But the fact that Colleen cared about your happiness,” Rhonda said.

Luke laughed and Rhonda frowned.

“I’m guessing Mandy fed you that line,” he said. “She always sees the good in everyone and she said several times that we shouldn’t be angry with Colleen really because she just wants us to be happy and all of this shit. But here’s the thing Sheriff. Colleen Hunter didn’t give a shit about my happiness or Mandy’s happiness. She just didn’t want an odd number around her table at her dinner parties and she had to reason that at some point, Mandy and I will find other people to date, and she doesn’t want that to make things awkward for the group.”

“You really believe that and yet you were friends with her,” Rhonda said.

“Sure,” Luke said. “I have a mom. I don’t need another one. I didn’t need Colleen to care about my relationship status. In fact, I wanted her to be completely separate from it.”

“Right. See some people would think that could be a motive for you to kill Colleen,” Rhonda said. “Maybe you spoke to her again about her trying to get you and Mandy together and she wouldn’t listen, and you lost your temper and killed her in a moment of anger.”

“Wow, that’s quite the imagination you have there, Sheriff. If you ever get sick of this job, you should consider a career in writing fiction,” Luke said.

Rhonda raised an eyebrow at Luke, and he smiled and for the first time, Rhonda saw the good-looking man Mandy had talked about. His smile really lit up his face and made his eyes shine.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I shouldn’t have said that. But please tell me you don’t really believe that. There is a difference between being annoyed and homicidal and as Sheriff, I would really hope you know the difference between the two.”

“Well, I seem to have done ok on that score so far,” Rhonda said.

“I shouldn’t be shocked really. I know you have to ask these questions because chances are, whoever did kill Colleen has also sat here and told you that their motive isn’t a real motive for murder and of course they didn’t kill anyone,” Luke said.

“Something like that,” Rhonda agreed with a soft laugh.

“I found the whole matchmaking thing embarrassing because I hate being the center of attention,” Luke said, his face and tone of voice serious but not as cynical as before. “The last thing I would do is kill anyone; when I got caught - because undoubtedly, I would get caught at some point – I would become the center of attention in a way I have never considered even in my worst nightmares. There is no way I would invite that kind of scrutiny upon myself, Sheriff. Especially not for such a flimsy reason.”

This seemed believable to Rhonda and the Luke who spoke those words spoke softly and from the heart in Rhonda’s opinion. She felt as though the cynical Luke was a façade that he wore to hide the real him and that made perfect sense for someone who hated to be the center of attention.

“So, off the record Luke, what’s your theory? What do you think happened? Who do you think killed Colleen and why?” Rhonda said.

Luke pursed his lips up and Rhonda gave him time to think.

“I don’t think it was any of her friends,” Luke said after a moment. “Or that couple that Vinnie wants to do some sort of business deal with. I think if I had to choose, it would be the bar tender.”

“Really?” Rhonda said. That was a new one on her. No one had suggested him before. “And why do you think it would be him?”

Luke adjusted his sitting position and then he began to talk:

I stood in the hallway waiting to use the bathroom. I knew I could go and use one of the others – it’s not like the house was short on them – but this one was easy and convenient to get to from where I was, and it wasn’t like I was that desperate that I couldn’t wait for a few minutes.

As it turned out, I didn’t even have that long to wait. I heard the toilet flush and then the faucet switched on and then back off again and then the door opened. Dave, the bar tender, stepped out of the bathroom. He held the door open for me and I smiled.

“Thanks mate,” I said.

I stepped into the bathroom and closed and locked the door. As I moved across to the toilet, I heard the electronic sound of a cell phone ringing outside of the bathroom door.

“Hello?” It was the bar tender’s voice.

I lifted the toilet lid and the seat and stood there doing my business unintentionally hearing the bar tender’s conversation. He seemed to be having a good old rant about this job and I wondered if I should be offended, but the truth was, he wasn’t complaining about the customers, he was complaining about the client – Colleen. I wasn’t sure who he was speaking to at first, but then he called the person baby and started to talk about he knew they needed the money to save for their wedding and that Colleen always gave the biggest tips and I realized he was talking to his fiancé.

“Ok, I’ll make a deal with you,” I heard him say. “I’ll stick it out, but if that woman calls me a bar tender instead of a mixologist one more time, I swear I will kill her. And because I’m doing this for you, that makes you partially responsible, so you have to do half of my time for me ok.”

There was a pause while she presumably replied and then he laughed softly.

“Right, I’d best go. I’ve been gone a while. Love you baby,” he said, and I heard him moving away from the bathroom. I had long finished using the toilet and so I put myself away, flushed the toilet and washed my hands.

I went down to the bar and ordered a Cuba libre. Whilst the bar tender – sorry mixologist – was making my drink, I heard Colleen’s voice drifting in from the hallway.

“I know he’s allowed a break Rachel. And of course, he can go to the bathroom. Honestly, I’m not going to stop anyone from using the bathroom. But my guests don’t like to be kept waiting and if they are unhappy, I am unhappy. All I’m saying is that from now on, when your bar tender leaves the bar for any length of time, have one of the wait staff jump on instead,” Colleen said.

I saw the way the mixologist’s shoulders raised and the muscles in his back tightened as Colleen got his title wrong once more.

“I mean I don’t know if he was being serious or if it was just a turn of phrase, but that man said if Colleen called him a bar tender one more time, he was going to kill her. She called him a bar tender again and not long later, she was dead,” Luke said. “You can draw your own conclusions from that. And if you’re in any doubt, I’m with Colleen on this one. Mixologist? What the hell? There’s nothing wrong with being a bar tender and equally there is nothing wrong with saying that’s what you are.”

“I quite agree,” Rhonda said. “And I guess part of the investigation for me is working out just how much Dave hated it.”

Luke nodded. It was her problem now and they both knew it.

“Where were you when Colleen’s body was found?” Rhonda asked.

“I was in the storage closet in the main hallway,” Luke said. “My sheet told me I would find a clue there.”

“Was anyone with you?” Rhonda asked.

“No, but I do have a witness if that’s what you mean?” he said. Rhonda nodded and he went on. “One of the waiters. Gabe, I think he said his name was?” He paused and Rhonda nodded again. If he was telling the truth, it would have had to have been Gabe because Eric was in the kitchen and then in the hallway outside of the library. “Gabe saw the storage closet door was open and he came to close it without realizing I was in there. We had a bit of a laugh about it and then he went back off on his merry way and I remembered to close the door behind me to save him a job.”

Rhonda made a note on her paper and then she looked up and smiled at Luke.

“One last question. Do you know anything about sound proofing in the house?” Rhonda asked.

“Oh, yes I do,” Luke said. “What do you want to know?”

“I wanted to know if you knew about it like I said,” Rhonda said, a frown of confusion on her face.

“Oh, I get you. You wanted to know if I knew the library would be a good place for a murder because it’s sound proofed. Yes, I knew about that hallway,” he said. He smiled. “I kind of had to know. It was my company that did the work. If that makes you suspect me, then you are underestimating me. If I was going to off someone, it wouldn’t be somewhere we are all stuck with only a handful of possible suspects.”

“No, I suppose that would be a silly move,” Rhonda said, smiling at Luke.

There was something about Luke she wasn’t keen on. He seemed very cynical and very dismissive of everything. But despite not liking him, she didn’t feel like he had killed Colleen. His alibi was too easy to disprove.

“That’s it for now. Unless you have anything that you want to add?” Rhonda said.

Luke shook his head and got to his feet.

“I know I come across as someone cold, but Colleen was my friend Sheriff. Please find whoever did this to her and make the bastard pay,” he said.

It was the first passionate thing he had said since he entered the room and Rhonda thought that this, along with his hatred of being the center of attention comment, was the real Luke. The rest was likely a front to hide his pain at Colleen’s death.

Rhonda was so taken aback by the sudden glimpse behind the veil that Luke was already out of the lounge and into the hallway and pulling the door closed behind him when Rhonda realized that she hadn’t asked him to send the next person in.

“Luke, wait,” she called. Luke stopped shutting the door and poked his head back into the room. “Can you send Henry along please?”

“Sure,” Luke said.

He shut the door quickly this time and Rhonda figured it was because he didn’t want to risk being called back again.

While she waited for Henry to appear, she thought again of Luke’s story about Dave. Did it ring true? Yes. Did Rhonda think he had actually killed Colleen? No. It was a turn of phrase, something people often said. ‘I’ll kill her’, they would say when what they really meant was, I will silently fume about this. Or I will kick off about this. They rarely meant they would actually kill someone. Aside from anything, most people who killed other people wanted to get away with it and the chances of that happening would definitely be reduced if they announced that they were going to kill the person prior to doing it.

And surely no one resorted to murder over their job title. Rhonda thought it would be annoying having someone getting it wrong all of the time even when you’ve told them. And knowing what she did of Colleen, Rhonda could imagine the woman openly scoffing at the idea. But still. That surely wasn’t enough to drive someone to murder though, was it?

Rhonda didn't think so, but she would find out for sure soon enough, because when Dave was questioned and he either confirmed or denied what Marcus had said about being in the bar just before he found the body and Dave being there with him, he would unknowingly also be proving or disproving his own alibi.

CHAPTER 9

A light tap on the door got Rhonda's attention back from her notes.

"Come in," she called.

The door opened and Henry came in. She smiled at him, and he nodded to her and sat down opposite her.

"I'm not sure how much light I can shed on this situation Sheriff being that it's the first time I have ever met most of these people, but I'll do whatever I can," Henry said.

"Thank you," Rhonda said with a genuine smile. He didn't sound cynical or snarky or nervous and she believed that he would go out of his way to help her. Unfortunately, she also believed he was probably right in his assumption that he wouldn't be able to give her much in the way of insights about the others. "Let's start with the obvious. Can you give me a quick run through of your movements between finishing dinner and finding out that Colleen had been killed."

"Diana, that's my partner. She was really into the game in a way I hadn't expected. I thought she would find it boring. But no. That was me. She was like a regular little Sherlock Holmes running around and solving clues and what not. But she did grow bored of it in time. I think my moaning may have had something to do with that. We kind of sat out part of the game after that," Henry said. He smiled and his cheeks flushed slightly. "It sounds so vulgar now knowing what we know, but at the time, Diana and I thought we were merely hiding away from a game we had lost interest in. We had no idea the fate

that was about befall poor Colleen. So, yes, Diana and I sneaked away to our room and had sex.”

Rhonda burst out a laugh. She couldn't help it. Henry frowned.

“Oh wow, I'm so sorry,” Rhonda said. “But the way you were saying it sounded vulgar and you were hiding away. I don't know what I was expecting but it was something a lot worse than you two having sex.”

Henry seemed to see the funny side now he had realized that Rhonda wasn't laughing at the idea of Diana wanting to have sex with him and he joined her laughter.

“Yes, I suppose I didn't word that as well as I could have done,” Henry admitted when their laughter had wound down.

Rhonda made a note on her notepad. Henry's explanation for where him and Diana had disappeared to was perfectly reasonable and believable, and if Diana corroborated the story, then that would explain why neither of them had been where they were supposed to be for their parts in the game.

Rhonda didn't really know what else to ask Henry. Out of all of the guests, Henry and Diana had the least personal connection to Colleen and the least chance of having a good motive for murder. She didn't bother to ask about the sound proofing, because why on earth would Henry know about that, and even if he did, it didn't give him a motive for murder.

“Did you notice any strange behavior from any of the other guests this evening?” Rhonda asked.

“Not strange exactly, but notable might be a better word,” Henry said. “I told Vinnie tonight that I wouldn't be investing in his company. He was a bit upset as you can imagine, but overall, he took it well. Or I mean he seemed to. Who knows what he might have done in temper.”

“Are you suggesting you think Vinnie killed his wife Henry?” Rhonda said,

“I'm saying that the man has a cocaine habit that has left him close to bankrupt and without my investment, his company is going to go under in the next three weeks. I feel

bad about that, but business is business, and I can't invest my money in something I can't see being here this time next year even with a cash injection. I imagine in his position, if you fall low enough, maybe you would come to think your wife's life insurance package is the answer to your troubles."

"You're not the first person to suggest that theory," Rhonda admitted. "Tell me something though. How would he expect to get away with murder in such a confined space, with such a limited number of suspects?"

"Just like that," Henry said with a smile. "It sounds so absurd as to not possibly be true doesn't it. And that's precisely the reason it just might work."

Rhonda had to admit that Henry made a really good point and she smiled again.

"Thank you, Henry. This has been very insightful," she said. "Is there anything else you want to say?"

Henry thought for a moment and then he shook his head.

"No, I think that's everything that might help you," he said.

Rhonda smiled again.

"Then whenever you're ready, you can please send in Diana," she said.

"Thank you, Sheriff," Henry said.

He stood up and nodded to Rhonda once more and then he left the room. Rhonda didn't think for a second that Henry was her man, and she also didn't think Diana was going to turn out to be guilty either. She could think of no motive at all for Henry and the only one she could think of for Diana was her being angry about the obvious dig in giving her a gold-digging character to play. But that wasn't a reason to kill someone. That was a reason to leave the party. Maybe even to yell a bit. But not to murder someone.

If Diana agreed with Henry's sex story, Rhonda had decided to discount the two of them as suspects. However, she had to admit to herself that there was a chance that one of

them was lying for the other one, but if one of them had committed the murder, they surely would have come up with a better cover story. Either that or they were both in it together and their stories would match because they had been planned. She still thought they were innocent though and she had put a small I (for innocent) next to Henry's name in her notepad by the time the door opened, and Diana poked her head around it.

"Am I ok to come in?" she said.

"Of course," Rhonda said, indicating that Diana should come and sit on the couch. Diana stepped into the room and closed the door and came and sat down. "So, Diana. I am told by another player that your character was supposed to be found in Vinnie's character's office, but you weren't there. Can you tell me where you were?"

Diana looked down at her lap.

"I was having sex," she said quietly. She continued to look down into her lap for a second and then her head came up quickly and she met Rhonda's eye. "Goodness, that reaction must have you thinking terrible things about me. I was having sex, but it was with my partner. I made it sound like some sordid affair, didn't I? I just ... well it doesn't seem right saying you were feeling a bit frisky when someone has been killed."

"Well in fairness no one knew at that point. I might think less of you if you had sneaked off for sex instead of coming to talk to me, but not when you didn't know anything was amiss," Rhonda said.

That got a smile out of Diana and Rhonda had already put the I mark next to her name too. The alibis matched up and they had no motives. Except for the stupidly flimsy one for Diana. Rhonda didn't think for a second that Diana was guilty, but she was interested in her feelings about her character all the same.

"Henry said that you were quite into the game at first but then you got bored of it," Rhonda said. "Was that because of the character you were playing?"

“I wasn’t bored. I was loving the game and I was so close to winning. But I knew Henry was bored and I knew what was on his mind, and given the choice, I’d rather be having sex with Henry than playing a game,” Diana said. “And why would my character bore me?”

“Well, I thought perhaps you had used the word bored rather than telling Henry you were upset about the characterization that had been assigned to you. The young gold digger?” Rhonda said.

“Oh, I see,” Diana said. She laughed then; a humor filled laugh that Rhonda could tell was a genuine belly laugh. “In case it was a bit too close to home you mean?”

“Yes,” Rhonda said. “I’m not saying you are a gold digger, but you must have been called it.”

“Oh, dozens of times,” Diana said. “It really doesn’t worry me too much. I don’t care what other people think for starters, but more importantly, I think to be offended by something, you have to see the truth in it, and they couldn’t be further from the truth with Henry and I.”

“I like that way of looking at it,” Rhonda said.

“It took me a while to be quite that Zen about it,” Diana laughed. She pulled her cell phone out and pressed a few buttons and then turned the screen to show Rhonda. Rhonda saw a bank account with over two million dollars in it and then Diana locked her cell phone again and dropped it back in her pocket. “That’s my personal bank account. I mean I’m not Henry level rich, but who is? But you can see from that I have no need to rely on anyone for money, let alone shack up with some guy for money. I have more than enough of that. I am with Henry because I love him.”

“I wasn’t judging,” Rhonda said.

“I know,” Diana said and smiled. “That’s why I showed you that. I don’t mind genuine people with a curiosity perhaps. But those people who think they know me, they don’t know a thing and they will never be shown that account. I trust you will be discreet Sheriff.”

“Yes, of course,” Rhonda reassured her. “Now, speaking of discreet, let me ask you something off the record. Who do you think killed Colleen?”

“I have no real idea,” Diana said. “With the exception of Henry, this is the first time I have met any of these people.”

“What does your gut say? You don’t always have to know people well to get a feel for them. Don’t worry, this is off the record, I’m just curious to hear what everyone thinks,” Rhonda said.

Diana thought for a minute and then she gave a half shrug.

“I really don’t know. But gun to my head?” she said.

“Gun to your head,” Rhonda agreed.

“Then I would have to say Vinnie,” Diana said. “For no reason other than the fact he’s Colleen’s husband and it’s always the husband, isn’t it?”

“You don’t think he had a real motive?” Rhonda asked.

Diana shook her head.

“Henry and I have talked briefly about it. I know he thinks it’s Vinnie because of money, but I don’t think money has anything to do with it. Like I say I don’t know any of these people so I could be wrong, but Vinnie seemed to love his wife and I don’t think money is more important than love. Obviously, they could have been putting on a front because they had guests, but I didn’t get that impression,” Diana said. “Like anything she asked him to do, he was up and doing it and doing it without complaint too. It was like he just wanted to please her. Anyone that eager to please someone doesn’t kill that someone that same night. In my opinion obviously.”

Rhonda smiled.

“I like that idea. That love is more important than money,” she said.

“Don’t you think so?” Diana asked.

“No,” Rhonda said sadly. “I’ve seen too much evidence to the contrary. But how I wish I could believe it.”

They sat in contemplative silence for a moment and then Rhonda caught herself.

“Is there anything else you can think of that might be helpful?” Rhonda asked.

Diana thought for a moment and shook her head.

“No. I’m sorry. I wish I could be of more help,” she said.

“Thank you,” Rhonda said.

Diana stood up.

“Who do you want sending in next?” she asked.

She was the first one to ask before Rhonda got it in. That made sense, her and Henry had obviously had a quick chat about his interview before Diana had come along whereas the others had all kept their talks close to their chests.

“Actually, I hope this isn’t too cheeky, but I’ve spoken to all of the guests now. Could you please go to the kitchen and find a member of staff and ask them to come along now. I don’t mind who comes first, just whoever you find or whoever wants to come first,” Rhonda said.

“Sure, I can do that,” Diana said. “And it’s not cheeky at all.”

She flashed Rhonda another smile and then she was up and gone and Rhonda had eliminated two people from her enquiry.

CHAPTER 10

Rhonda had a slightly longer wait this time for her next interviewee to arrive. She was starting to think she should go and find out what was happening, that maybe Diana had gotten herself lost looking for the kitchen, when there was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” Rhonda called.

The door opened and the mixologist appeared. He stepped into the room and pulled the door closed. He smiled at Rhonda and sat down on the couch where she indicated he should sit.

“Ms. Morgan asked me to apologize for her. She said to tell you she’s sorry, it took longer than she expected to find it. She said you would know what she meant,” the mixologist said.

“I do, thank you,” Rhonda said. “Let’s start with an introduction, shall we? I’m Sheriff McCauley when I’m on duty. Rhonda when I’m off duty. And I’m not really sure in this limbo. And you are?”

“I’m the mixologist from behind the bar,” he said. “Dave Dawson when I’m on duty. Dave Dawson when I’m not.”

Dave smiled and Rhonda couldn’t help but return his smile. His good humor would do him well behind a bar, Rhonda thought. She could imagine he did well with tips.

“How well did you know the Hunters?” Rhonda started.

“Not well,” Dave said. “I’ve worked for them a lot over the last two years – maybe seven or eight times – but we’re not

like friends or anything. I know very little about them as people, I just know them as the frazzled housewife who won't give in and hire a party planner if she wants all of this elaborate stuff, and her long-suffering husband that just lets her get on with it."

"Do you know anyone else here?" Rhonda asked.

"Only Rachel and Georgia," Dave said. "I haven't worked with any of the other wait staff before. And some of the guests have been at other functions I've worked but I wouldn't say I know them. I know their drinks orders and that's about it to be honest."

"So, it's probably a waste of time to ask you who you think killed Colleen then," Rhonda said.

"Yes," Dave said. "It would be about as much use as if you put the names in a hat and pulled one out at random."

"I've asked everyone that question tonight, and strangely enough, I have had a whole range of answers. People you would never suspect. Do you think your name popped up amongst them?" Rhonda asked.

"Well, I do now, but only because otherwise why would you have brought it up. I know I haven't done anything wrong tonight, let alone killed anyone," Dave said.

"Your name came up because earlier on this evening, you said that if Colleen called you a bar tender instead of a mixologist one more time, you were going to kill her. And she did it didn't she? She called you a bar tender again. Not long after that, her dead body was found. Can you see now why someone has named you?" Rhonda prompted him.

He sighed and ran his hands over his face.

"It sounds really bad when you put it all together like that. But honestly, you have to believe me Sheriff McCauley. I didn't do this. I'm not going to lie to you, Colleen was a royal pain in the ass. Especially my ass. I mean, seriously, who employs someone and then doesn't even get their job title correct. That's why I make such a fuss about it you know. I don't really care if she calls me a bar tender. I am a bar tender.

But when she first employed me and I used the term bartender, she shook her head and said anyone could be a bartender. She wanted mixologists, the best of the best, and if that was going to be me, I needed to start referring to myself as a mixologist.,” Dave said. “And all of that aside, you must know that ‘I’ll kill her’ or him as the case might be as a statement of annoyance at said person doesn’t actually mean the person is going to murder them,” Dave said.

Rhonda was more than ready to believe that. Dave was right. Lots of people used the phrase, herself included. It was just unfortunate timing that the woman should turn up dead minutes after he had threatened her life. She didn’t think for a second Dave was the killer and his answer to the next question might be about to prove that and give Marcus an alibi.

“Let’s forget about that for a moment,” Rhonda said. “Tell me what happened when Marcus came into the bar area before Colleen’s body was found.”

Dave thought for a moment and then he began to explain:

I was behind the bar cutting up limes and getting set up with everything I would need when Marcus came in. He ordered a neat whiskey which I gave him. He sat down on one of the bar stools. He already looked a little bit worse for wear, but not so much so that I would need to think about cutting him off.

He finished his drink and asked for another one, which I gave to him. He was about halfway done I would say, when Colleen came into the bar area. She was acting a little strange. She came in at one side of the bar area and swept through it, not acknowledging me or Marcus. I found it odd she would ignore her guests, but then I realized she was in character, and it probably had something to do with the game they were playing. She got to the other side of the room and gave Marcus a look, the kind that said, ‘get it together or God help you’. Marcus didn’t react at first. He finished his drink and ordered another one.

He sat quietly, as he had since he arrived, but then something in his demeanor changed. He looked like he had

something in mind.

“Excuse me,” he said.

“Yes sir?” I replied.

“Can you tell me when seven minutes have passed by, please?” he said.

I kept an eye on the time for him and told him when the seven minutes had passed. That must have made it about ten minutes since Colleen had left the room. He got up and followed her out, and then maybe five minutes later, he was back with Rachel. From what I can remember, he had found Colleen dead in the library.

Rhonda listened with interest. Dave’s story aligned perfectly with Marcus’s story, and she put a small ‘I’ next to both of their names, essentially wiping them from the suspect list. She had never believed Marcus was responsible for the killing, and realistically, it just didn’t make sense for it to be Dave. But it still felt nice to be able to cross them off from the list officially and legally, knowing that she was able to back up her reasoning with evidence, and not just because it felt right in her gut.

“Is there anything else you can think of that might be relevant? Anyone acting strange or anything like that? An overheard comment?” Rhonda asked.

Dave shook his head.

“No. I mean they were all acting a little weird because they were in character, but there was nothing that stood out to me as weird, above and beyond that,” he said.

“Ok, thank you for your time, Dave,” Rhonda said, before giving him a big smile. “Can you do me a favor and send Rachel in next please? If she’s busy or you can’t find her, any of the wait staff will do instead, please.”

“No worries,” Dave said. He got up but he hesitated, and Rhonda smiled encouragingly at him as it was clear he wanted to say something but was holding back. “Do you know who it is? Who killed her?”

“Honestly? Not yet,” Rhonda said. “I am eliminating people but there is more than one person who it could have been.”

“Ok,” Dave said. He still stood there and again, it seemed that he wanted to say something but was holding himself back.

“You can ask me whatever you want to ask,” Rhonda said, smiling at Dave. “It may be that I can’t answer but I won’t be offended or anything.”

“This person, whoever it turns out to be. Do you think it was personal that they wanted to specifically kill Colleen or was it someone turned psycho that just wanted to kill?” Dave said.

“I believe it was someone who specifically wanted to kill Colleen. I could be wrong, so obviously be vigilant, but I really don’t think we have a psycho serial killer running through the house. I would say on that score, you have very little to worry about,” Rhonda said.

“Good,” Dave said. “See me and Georgia, the waitress, we have a little something going on and if anything should happen to her ...”

He trailed off but Rhonda got the message loud and clear.

“I would say with ninety nine percent certainty that Georgia will be fine, and the other one percent is only because claiming one hundred percent certainty on this feels like tempting fate,” Rhonda told him.

“Thanks Sheriff,” Dave said, and he smiled at her, and she could see that a ton of worry had been lifted off his shoulders. “I’ll be going now, and I’ll find Rachel for you.” He headed for the door. “Thanks again.” He opened the door and stepped out of the room.

“Thanks Dave,” Rhonda called out.

She had been wrong about Dave. She had thought him to be somewhat surly earlier on in the evening when he wasn’t serving behind the bar, but she realized now that he was that way around Colleen because he could probably feel her looking down on him. When he spoke to someone like Rhonda

who didn't judge a person by their job, he was actually a nice enough man, and she thought it was sweet that he had been so worried about Georgia like that.

Rachel came into the room shortly after Dave left. She brought a glass of wine with her, but she seemed to be sober.

"Did you want a glass?" she asked, nodding at her drink as she sat down on the couch.

"No thanks," Rhonda said. "I don't think it would go down too well with the investigation. It's bad enough I had that one small one earlier."

"Oh nonsense," Rachel said. "No one can moan about that. You were on your night off and no one had been killed then. Give yourself a break Sheriff. You are still perfectly capable of doing your job."

"Thank you," Rhonda said.

She knew herself that Rachel was right – she wasn't intoxicated, and she was perfectly capable of doing this – but it was still nice to hear someone else say the words.

"I'll even make this one easy for you," Rachel said. "I didn't kill Colleen."

Rhonda smiled. For what it was worth, she believed Rachel. She didn't think Rachel would have had enough time to kill Colleen and be in the kitchen talking to her because of the timing of Colleen walking through the bar which had been confirmed by not only a drunk Marcus, but also the sober bar tender.

"I mean I'm sure you would say that even if you had," Rhonda pointed out.

"Most likely," Rachel agreed with a smile.

She took a sip of her wine and Rhonda realized that she would actually love a glass of cold white wine right now, but of course she wasn't about to have one. Maybe when this whole thing was wrapped up, she'd treat herself to a full bottle in front of the TV one night.

“But why would I want to kill one of my most lucrative clients?” Rachel asked.

“Well, it has been brought to my attention that you and Colleen were arguing earlier in the night, that she wanted a discount because the service wasn’t up to par or something,” Rhonda said. “Maybe you let that argument fester inside of you, and it got you so angry that you lashed out without thinking.”

“Don’t even get me started on what’s wrong with all of that, because it doesn’t matter does it? I have the perfect alibi. At the time of the murder, I was in the kitchen with the actual Sheriff,” Rachel said.

“I’m pretty sure that’s the case, but there might be a slight margin of error with the timings, so humor me. Tell me what’s wrong with that as your motive for killing Colleen,” Rhonda said.

“Well for starters, I wouldn’t have much of a business left if I went around offing my clients every time they got on my nerves,” Rachel said. “The argument we had, which wasn’t really an argument but more a slightly heated discussion, was about the fact that the wait staff won’t be offering a table service for drinks which you and I had discussed earlier in the night. It’s quite ironic that she got her own way because she died. Do you honestly think I would kill someone because they were trying to sneak in a bit of extra work from my team?”

“No,” Rhonda said. “Of course not. But from what I have heard, Colleen had a way of getting under people’s skin making the smallest things feel bigger than they were because of the way she dealt with them.”

“I took her complaints with a pinch of salt, just like I always have,” Rachel said. “She can’t expect me to take her seriously when she’s complaining that she’s not getting something she isn’t paying for and isn’t part of her package.”

“I was told she demanded a partial refund from you as well,” Rhonda said.

It wasn't a question so much as a statement, but Rachel answered it anyway.

"It was only fifty dollars she wanted back. I refused because of her attitude, but I wasn't about to become a murderer for less than the price of a decent steak dinner," Rachel said.

"It could have been about more than the money though," Rhonda said. "We all know how influential Colleen was in the Bennison Beach social scene. What if she had started telling other people that you weren't as good as you once were."

"It's funny but in that scenario, Colleen's popularity actually worked against her," Rachel said. "See the sort of people who can afford my services are the sort of people who will be at Colleen's events. So, while she might be able to say things about me and my team, my clients know it's not true because they were at the event and saw us themselves."

Rhonda considered this and then she nodded her head.

"Ok, that makes sense," she said. "So, who do you think might have done this?"

"I don't know," Rachel said. "All I know is it wasn't me and it wasn't any of my staff."

"You seem very sure about it not being any of your staff," Rhonda pointed out.

"I am sure," Rachel said. "With the exception of Dave, who has a witness to where he was at the time of the murder anyway, none of the staff had even met Colleen before tonight so it's not like any of them could have had a long-term grudge against her. And yes, she has her moments and yes, she probably shouldn't speak to the staff the way she sometimes does, but these guys work with that sort of person every day and they let it all go over their heads. If I am happy with their work, that's all that matters. If they started killing people off because they were a bit snotty to the staff, half of Bennison Beach would have been slaughtered in this last year alone."

"Did you see any of the guests acting in a way you would think of as suspicious or out of character for them?" Rhonda

asked.

“Only Marcus,” Rachel said. “And it wasn’t that he was behaving suspiciously, it was just he was drinking more heavily than I have known him to drink at these sorts of parties before. I wondered if there was something going on with him, but he and I certainly don’t have the kind of relationship where I could ask him if he was ok or anything.”

“I hope you don’t think this is me gossiping because that’s the last thing I intend to do, but just so you know, Marcus is ok. He said he was drinking more than usual because this murder mystery stuff isn’t his thing, and he was bored. I have no reason to not believe him,” Rhonda said.

“Oh, that’s good,” Rachel said. “I do rather like Marcus. I’m glad he’s ok, and no, I don’t think of that as you gossiping at all, so please don’t worry about that.”

“Thank you,” Rhonda said with a smile. She looked down at her notepad. “I’m going to need to speak with each of the waiters and waitresses. I don’t mind which order they arrive in, but can you send them to me one by one please.”

“Yes, no problem,” Rachel said. She finished the last of her wine and held the glass up to Rhonda as she stood up. “And do let me know if you change your mind about the wine.”

“I won’t, but thank you,” Rhonda said.

She looked down into her notepad again when Rachel left the room. She really did want to rule Rachel out, but could she? She had a motive, no matter how flimsy it was, and although she had been with Rhonda at the time that Marcus found the body, there was ten minutes between Colleen last being seen alive and Marcus finding her. Rhonda didn’t know for certain if she had been in the kitchen that long. She thought she had, but she couldn’t swear to it, so she couldn’t rule Rachel out. She decided to put a small circle beside Rachel’s name. That circle would mean that it was incredibly unlikely that they were the killer but as yet, there was still a tiny possibility of it.

Rhonda drew the circle and then she scribbled it out and put an I beside Rachel's name instead. This wasn't just intuition. The timings were just too tight for Rachel to have killed Colleen. Even if Rhonda hadn't been in the kitchen for that full ten minutes, she had been there a decent amount of it and if Rachel had managed to kill Colleen and then get back to the kitchen before Rhonda got there, she would have been breathless if nothing else from the rushing around. She would likely have had blood on her clothes too.

The door opened and Eric appeared. He nodded to Rhonda and took a seat on the couch. Rhonda had already ruled Eric out completely. He had been in the kitchen with her, and Rachel and she knew for a fact he had been there longer than the ten minutes because when she entered the kitchen, he was part of the way through making meringue, which wasn't something you could just start and then leave halfway through and return to. He had to have been in the kitchen at the time of Colleen's murder. He might still be able to offer some insight on the others though and plus, Rhonda didn't want to make it obvious who she had ruled out and who she hadn't by only questioning certain people.

"Did you notice anything strange or out of place this evening?" Rhonda said.

"What? You mean other than the dead woman in the library?" Eric said. Rhonda was a little bit taken aback by this comment and she felt her mouth open slightly in shock. Eric shook his head and held his hands up in front of him, the palms facing outwards. "Sorry. I shouldn't have said that. It's military humor. In the military, if you don't learn to laugh about death, you would go completely mad."

"Yes, I get that," Rhonda said. "A lot of cops have a similar humor, especially the homicide cops who see bodies every day. So let me try again. Other than the dead woman in the library, did you see anything strange or out of place this evening?"

Eric shook his head.

“No,” he said. “But this is the first time I’ve worked one of Colleen’s events, so I don’t really know her or her husband enough to know if they were acting out of character. I don’t know the old man with the rent a bride either so again, I have no idea what is normal for them.”

Rhonda had to bite her bottom lip to keep herself from smiling at Eric’s description of Henry and Diana.

“The others I recognized from their events or events they’ve been to that I’ve worked and while I wouldn’t say I know any of them well, nothing struck me as out of the ordinary,” Eric finished up.

“Ok,” Rhonda said. “Is there anything you think might be relevant that you want to tell me?”

Eric shook his head slowly.

“No. I’m just glad that I have the most iron clad alibi of all time, or the FBI would definitely be trying to pin this on me. I was with the Sheriff at the time of the murder has to be believed when the Sheriff backs it up doesn’t it?” Eric said. Rhonda nodded and then Eric frowned for a second. “Wait, you are going to back me up if it comes to it aren’t you?”

“Of course,” Rhonda said. “I want to catch a killer Eric not lock up anyone convenient. I am curious though as to why you assume they would try to pin it on you.”

“Well firstly, I’m Black, which doesn’t help. Secondly, I’m the hired help, which again doesn’t help. And thirdly, and the most damning thing, is that I am ex-military. They’ll say I had post-traumatic stress order or something and that something startled me, and I snapped in the moment and hurt Colleen. They might even go so far as to say that I likely wouldn’t remember the event. And suddenly there is a file with solved stamped in the front of it, and there is one less black man on the streets. Sure, there is one more murderer on them, but no one cares about that,” Eric said.

“I have to admit I hadn’t thought of any of those things,” Rhonda said.

“That’s because you are neither racist nor black. If you were racist, you would have assumed it was me, regardless of the fact I was in your line of sight at the time of the murder. And if you were black, you would just be waiting for some other cop to point the finger at me,” Eric said.

“I’m really sorry that is the way you are treated by the very people who are being paid to serve and protect you,” Rhonda said, meaning it. “And if any of my deputies ever give you a reason to think they are discriminating against you for any reason, you come and see me, ok?”

“Thank you, I will,” Eric said. “Although I have to say your deputies seem pretty cool. In the last year, I’ve only been pulled over once and to be fair, I was speeding so that one wasn’t motivated by anything other than my own stupidity.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Rhonda said. “Not that you were speeding. Don’t do that ok.”

“Ok,” Eric said.

“Well, you can go if you have nothing else to tell me,” she said.

“Thanks,” Eric said.

He left the room and Rhonda wrote an I next to his name. She didn’t have long at all to wait before Gabe was in the room and sitting down opposite her. It was almost as though he had just been hanging around waiting to come in here. She supposed he likely had been for the most part.

“Hi Gabe,” Rhonda said.

“Hi,” he said back.

Rhonda double checked her note pad. This was the waiter who Luke had said had seen him in the closet. If Gabe confirmed that, then that was both of them with an alibi.

“Where were you when Colleen was murdered?” Rhonda said.

“I ... I’m not sure exactly. While we are out of the serving areas and amongst guests, we’re not allowed to look at our watches unless a guest asks us for the time because it can be

seen as rude, like we're wishing our shift, and with it, their event, away. No one asked me for the time tonight so I can't be totally sure," Gabe said.

"Ok," Rhonda said. "Why don't you talk me through what happened after the dinner was finished and the plates and silverware was all cleared away and washed."

That should allow enough time to have Gabe in the vicinity of the closet if he was going to be there and not enough time for him to have already been there and gone back again.

"I took a tray of drinks around. Champagne. Most people didn't take one, so I circled around again, and again, most people didn't bother. I think everyone was full up from the dinner. I went back to the kitchen and dropped the tray off. I debated taking a tray of hors d'oeuvres around but if everyone was full, no one was going to want them either, so I decided to have five minutes break while I could.

"I was heading towards the back door to get a bit of cool air in a place that was covered enough that I figured I might be able to open the door without a ton of snow falling inside of the house. As I went down the hallway, I saw a closet door that was open that shouldn't have been, and I went to shut it and – this sounds crazy I know – but one of the guests was in the closet. He said his character in the murder mystery game had been told to go there and find a clue.

"I left him to it and when I came back from getting my bit of air, he was gone, and the door was closed. I'm sorry, I don't know his name, but I could point him out to you," Gabe finished up. "And then Rachel came to find me and asked me to come to the lounge with everyone else."

Rhonda thought for a moment. Gabe had an alibi witness now, so he was off the hook, and she was ninety nine percent certain Luke had the same in Gabe, but there was a small chance that Luke had played it clever. There was a chance he had noticed that scene playing out with another guest and used it as his own story.

“The man in the closet. Can you describe him for me?” Rhonda asked.

“Sure,” Gabe said. “He was well built, but I wouldn’t say he was fat you know. He was like solid. And he had black hair that was long enough to sit on his shirt collar. I don’t know how tall he was because he was kneeling down when I saw him, but I feel like he would be tall. He was wearing a suit, but I think all of the men were wearing suits.”

The description matched Luke, but it could also pass for Vinnie and Rhonda had to be sure that she had the right man be assigned this alibi witness.

“Do you know Vinnie on sight Gabe?” Rhonda asked.

“Mr. Hunter?” Gabe clarified and Rhonda nodded. “Yes.”

That confirmed it. The man in the closet had been Luke and that was now another two people off her suspect list. She didn’t bother asking Gabe for his opinion on who had killed Colleen. If he didn’t even know the guest’s names, he didn’t know them enough to know who might have had a reason to kill Colleen. He might still have seen something though.

“Over the course of the evening, did you see anyone doing anything that struck you as strange, other than the strange things players were required to do for the game,” Rhonda said.

Gabe thought for a moment and then he shook his head.

“No. Except for the guy looking for clues in the closet, all I really saw the other guests do was eat dinner and then stand around talking about the clues and stuff. I suppose by the time they started acting on the clues I might have been mostly in the kitchen cleaning the dinner pots,” he said.

“Ok, thank you Gabe,” Rhonda said.

“Sorry I couldn’t be more helpful,” Gabe said with a sheepish smile.

Rhonda waved away his apology.

“Don’t be silly,” she said. “You have told me everything you could, and you have actually corroborated an alibi for one of the guests which was useful in itself.”

“Oh. Oh, good so I’m not totally useless then,” Gabe said with a laugh that made Rhonda feel a bit sorry for him.

She shook her head.

“Nope. Not useless at all,” she said.

Gabe smiled and then stood up. He looked between Rhonda and the door as though he wasn’t completely sure he was allowed to leave.

“Thanks again Gabe,” she said. “Is there anything else?”

Gabe shook his head and took his cue to leave. He hurried out of the room and Rhonda felt that pang of sorrow for him again. The fact he had assumed he would be useless made her feel sad for him.

She didn’t have long to dwell on her sympathy though because there was a knock on the door.

“Come on in,” Rhonda shouted.

The door opened and Callie came in and took her seat. She smiled at Rhonda and Rhonda was pleased to see there was some color in her cheeks now.

“Are you feeling any better?” Rhonda asked her.

“Yes, thank you,” Callie said. “I’m still in pain but not enough to knock me sick now.”

“That’s good,” Rhonda said. “So obviously you were in the kitchen when Marcus called for help. Where were you before that?”

“In the bathroom,” Callie said. “Remember I came back into the kitchen and Rachel asked if I was sick, like contagious sick, because I kept going to the bathroom? I was in there for a good, few minutes because of the pain and the nausea.”

Rhonda could still remember the grey color of Callie’s face and the sweat standing out on her skin when she had come into the kitchen. There was no way she could have killed someone while she was feeling that ill, especially not in such a tiny window of time.

“Do you remember seeing or hearing anything out of the ordinary over the course of the evening?” Rhonda asked.

Callie shook her head.

“No,” she said. “Everyone seemed to be enjoying the game and having a good time apart from one gentleman and he seemed happy enough to sit at the bar and drink.”

A thought occurred to Rhonda. She felt a flash of excitement go through her. Was it going to be possible that Callie might have heard the killer in the hallway or even seen him or her?

“Sorry to back track, but when you were in the bathroom, where was the bathroom located?” Rhonda said.

“Sorry, I don’t know what you mean,” Callie said. “It wasn’t like a special staff only bathroom or one that was off limits to staff or anything, it was one anyone could use.”

“No, I don’t mean that,” Rhonda said. “I mean whereabouts in the house, was it?”

“Oh,” Callie said. “So, you know if you come into the kitchen from the library side of the room?” Rhonda nodded. “If you were in that hallway, you come to the end and that’s the kitchen door. Next to it on the left is a little alcove and inside of that alcove is the bathroom.”

“Ah ok,” Rhonda said, the moment of excitement gone. She wouldn’t have been in the main hallway to have seen anyone and that alcove she was talking about was part of the sound proofed part of the house.

“Sorry,” Callie said.

“What for?” Rhonda asked.

“I don’t know,” Callie said with a self-conscious smile. “Just you looked disappointed with my answer.”

“Oh, no, I’m not disappointed” Rhonda said. “Well, I am in a sense, but not with you. You can’t help where the bathroom was. I was hoping it was more in the body of that hallway in which case, there would have been a chance that you saw the killer.”

“Oh,” Callie said, a visible shudder going through her body. “Well, no offense, I mean I want to help you catch whoever did this if I can, but I’m kind of relieved that I didn’t come face to face with a killer who had just murdered someone.”

“Yes, I guess in hindsight that might not have ended well for you,” Rhonda said. “Well, unless you can think of anything else I might need to know, you can go on back to wherever you were.”

“Thanks,” Callie said,

She stood up and scurried from the room without glancing back. Rhonda sighed and put a small I next to Callie’s name. If only that area hadn’t been sound proofed, there was a chance Callie might have heard something. If she had gone to see what it was, she might have been able to save Colleen’s life by interrupting her killer. But then again, she might have ended up as another victim if she walked in and seen the killer in action.

It was crazy to think that one simple thing could have changed everything in more than one possible way. Rhonda knew she couldn’t let herself think of that though. It was too much like a ripple effect and she would end up blowing her own mind. She needed to focus on the black and white facts of what had happened, not the never-ending rainbow of different possible outcomes.

She was grateful when the door opened again, and Georgia came in.

“Hi,” she said softly.

“Hello,” Rhonda said, smiling and trying to put the girl at ease.

Georgia had nothing to worry about. She was another person who had already been given the little I on Rhonda’s notebook because Rhonda herself had seen her in the dining room collecting dirty glasses as she was heading into the kitchen, and then Georgia had come into the kitchen herself and began to clean all of the glasses she had carried in. There

was no way she had time in between Rhonda seeing her in the dining area to her arriving at the kitchen to have dumped all of those glasses, went, and killed Colleen, and came back and got the glasses back again and gotten to the kitchen.

“Don’t look so afraid,” Rhonda said. “You have a good alibi – you were with me.”

Georgia smiled but she still looked as nervous as all hell.

“I guess ... I never thought someone I knew, no matter how fleetingly I knew them, would end up being murdered. Especially not with me in the same building. I know it’s terribly selfish of me, but I keep thinking that it could have been me. And then I am grateful that it’s not me but that makes me feel awful, like I am happy Colleen is dead or something and I’m really not,” she said.

“No one knows how they will react in this situation Georgia. And what you’re feeling is totally normal. It’s called survivor’s guilt. You are happy to be alive but then you feel guilty because someone else died,” Rhonda said.

“Yes. That’s it exactly,” Georgia said. “And I just talk myself down from that and then I start to panic that whoever killed Colleen isn’t done yet and I could be next.”

“No one is going to be next,” Rhonda said. “Not if I have anything to do with it.”

Georgia smiled and she looked a little bit less like she was about to have a nervous breakdown. Rhonda decided to question her quickly and let her get back to the others where she would hopefully feel a bit safer because there were more people.

“Did you see or hear anything odd tonight?” Rhonda asked. “Anything that you thought was suspicious or out of place?”

Georgia shifted uncomfortably in her seat and then she met Rhonda’s eye for the first time since she had come into the lounge.

“If I tell you this, you have to promise it will stay between us that it came from me. I could find that I would never work

again if it got out that I told you this,” Georgia said.

“Don’t worry Georgia. Anything you tell me is confidential unless it leads to the conviction of the killer, and in those circumstances, you would be a hero and you would certainly work again,” Rhonda told her.

Georgia stayed quiet for a moment and Rhonda was starting to think she wasn’t going to tell her what she had been going to but then she began to speak:

I was helping to get set up in the kitchen when Rachel realized that we hadn’t brought the crate of red wine up from the wine cellar. She asked me to go back down and get it. I went down the stairs, noting that we had also forgotten to turn the light out.

I went to the wine rack and grabbed the crate that Rachel had already filled with the pre-selected dinner wine. I turned to go back up the stairs and I heard a noise coming from deeper in the wine cellar. I went to call out to make sure no one was down there before I turned the light out, but then I thought about it and I thought how unlikely it was that we had forgotten the wine and the light, and I decided that Rachel and the others were playing a trick on me. They were trying to scare me.

I decided to play them at their own game. I went and put the crate of wine down on the bottom stair, because that wasn’t a joke, we really did need it. Once I had put the wine down ready to go upstairs, I crept across the cellar, keeping my footsteps as quiet as possible and being sure not to giggle or anything.

There is an archway in the wine cellar, which separates the room temperature area with the red wines from the refrigerated area with the white and rose wines and as I approached it, I pressed myself back against the wall. I figured one of the others was on the other side of that archway and they were going to jump out and scare me and my plan was to jump out and scare them first.

I moved around the wall and stepped out and clapped a hand silently over my mouth to keep my shout in. It wasn’t any

of the staff trying to scare me. It was Vinnie, the hostess's husband, and he was standing to one side of one of the oak barrels. I wondered what he was doing at first, although I was sure he wasn't there to scare me, but then as he leaned down towards the lid of the barrel, I saw the line of white powder. Vinnie sniffed and snorted the line. He straightened up and rubbed his nose a few times and then he began to lay out another line.

I had seen enough. and I crept back the way I had come, grabbed the crate of wine, and got the hell out of there. I left the light on in the wine cellar because if I turned it off, it would draw attention to the fact I had seen something I shouldn't have seen.

“I don't know if it's related to the murder. In fact, it probably isn't but you asked if I saw anything weird and that was it. It definitely felt weird, partly because Vinnie was hiding away in his own house, making me think his wife had no idea about his habit. And there was also the fact it was so early. The guests hadn't even started arriving at that point. I have worked parties where everyone is doing coke, but it's a social thing, and it's usually later in the night when the party is getting started,” Georgia finished.

That confirmed Henry's thoughts that Vinnie was on the verge of bankruptcy due to his coke habit then. Rhonda was leaning more and more towards Vinnie as the killer. The insurance money would not only save his company, but depending on how much he got and how big his habit was, it could keep him in coke for months. Or maybe he had debts to dealers and needed to pay them off quickly. Whatever the reasoning, it didn't look good for Vinnie right now.

“Thank you, Georgia. That's really helped,” Rhonda said when she was sure that Georgia had finished talking. “Is there anything else you think I should know?”

Georgia thought for a moment and then she shook her head.

“No,” she said.

“Ok,” Rhonda said. “Then you’re free to go. Can you send Wayne in for me please? And if you’re nervous about wandering around alone, use the buddy system, ok? Take someone you trust with you. If Rachel questions it, tell her I said it’s a safety thing.”

“Thank you,” Georgia said. She stood up and started for the door and then she turned back around. “Oh, wait. Who is Wayne?”

“The actor who played the victim in the game,” Rhonda told her.

“Oh yeah, I know who he is. I’ll go and find him now,” Georgia said and just like that, she was gone.

Before too long had passed, Wayne came into the lounge.

“Hi Sheriff,” he greeted Rhonda. “Georgia asked me to come and talk to you.”

“Thank you, Wayne,” Rhonda said. She pointed to the couch. “Take a seat.”

Wayne looked like he was to say no to the seat, but then he walked over and sat down.

“I don’t know how much help I’m going to be. I spent most of the game dead,” Wayne said.

“Yes, that’s right,” Rhonda said. “Your character was murdered in the library, right?”

Wayne nodded his head.

“Yeah. I had a few short scenes prior to that where various people accused me of things, basically so they all could have some sort of reason to want me dead, because without that, the game would have been over pretty quickly, wouldn’t it?” he said.

Rhonda wished it worked that simply in real life, but she got Wayne’s point, and she nodded.

“Yes, it would rather spoil the game a bit if there was only one or two real suspects,” she said. “So, after your character was killed, what happened then.”

“I laid in the library until my body was found and then people were in and out pretty much constantly looking for clues. I got prodded and poked and of course I was meant to be dead, so I just had to take it. Still, not to worry, I’ve played worse roles.

“After a while they seemed to have exhausted all of the clues in the library and they were seemingly bored of harassing me and I found myself alone. I was bursting for the toilet, so I sneaked out and went to use the one in the main hallway. I figured none of the players would be hanging around there. I was right and I was able to use the bathroom. I was done and about to sneak back to the library when I heard Colleen telling everyone we were snowed in and that there were bedrooms available for everyone.

“I was already bored of laying on the floor, and I honestly thought people would be too busy thinking about that than to carry on with the game and I thought sod this, so I went upstairs and chose a room and went to sleep for a bit. In hindsight, I probably shouldn’t have moved.

“If Colleen hadn’t died, I’d likely be in a ton of trouble for breaking the rules of her game. Oh. Wait. That’s not a motive, is it? Like one to get me onto the maybe list?” Wayne said.

“I sincerely hope it would take more than the thought of maybe getting told off at work to make you murder someone,” Rhonda said with a smile.

She had already worked out that for Wayne to come down from the guest bedrooms, he either would have had to walk through the bar area and neither Marcus nor Dave had mentioned it and one of them would have, or he would have had to walk through the kitchen where Rhonda herself was, and if it was before she had gotten there, she was sure one of the staff might have mentioned in their interviews when asked if anyone was being weird, that the actor had marched into the kitchen.

“Yeah, I’d like to think so too,” Wayne said.

“So, from your vantage point as dead body everyone forgets isn’t actually dead and says anything in front of, who

do you think is most likely to have killed Colleen?” Rhonda asked.

“I didn’t hear anything that would sway me one way or another,” Wayne said. “But everyone is assuming it’s someone in this little group here. What if someone broke in and hid somewhere biding their time? The house is easily big enough for that and the whole place is like a maze. You could hide in here for weeks if you wanted to.”

“I think that’s a little bit far-fetched, but stranger things have happened,” Rhonda said.

In truth, she didn’t think it was the case at all. Maybe without the blizzard she would have been more ready to hear it, but even then, would it really be possible for a complete stranger to walk through a house filled with people and kill someone and then just leave without anyone noticing them? Rhonda didn’t think so.

“If you did have to choose from someone in the house, who would your best bet be?” Rhonda asked.

“Vinnie,” Wayne said after a moment. “I think he’s the only one really close enough to Colleen to have a reason to murder her instead of just stopping seeing her if something has made the person hate her enough to want to kill her.”

Rhonda nodded. That theory made much more sense and not just because Vinnie was being named by more people than not. Wayne’s reasoning made sense too. Unless you were already swinging towards being a bit of a loose cannon, if someone bothered you to the point where you were seriously thinking about killing them, you would just stop being friends with them and you certainly wouldn’t go to one of their parties.

“Thanks Wayne,” Rhonda said. “You’ve been very helpful.”

Wayne nodded his acknowledgment of her thanks and left the room. He left the door slightly ajar, but Rhonda was done interviewing for a moment, so she didn’t bother getting up and

closing it. She wanted to review her notes and her suspect list and see exactly where she was at with this.

CHAPTER 11

Rhonda sat and went through all of the notes she had taken as she had talked to everyone. She didn't have all of the answers yet, but she was starting to build up a real picture of what had happened. She looked at the first list she had made: Not suspected. Beneath the title was a list of the names of the people she had ruled out completely and the reason for them being ruled out:

Marcus Hall – Has an alibi witness (Dave Dawson)

Luke Maddison – Has an alibi witness (Gabe Foley)

Henry Patterson – Has an alibi witness (Diana Morgan)

Diana Morgan – Has an alibi witness (Henry Patterson)

Dave Dawson – Has an alibi witness (Marcus Hall)

Rachel Arnison – Has an alibi witness (me)

Callie Lewis – Has an alibi witness (me)

Eric Potts – Has an alibi witness (me)

Georgia Riley – Has an alibi witness (me)

Gabe Foley – Has an alibi witness (Luke Maddison)

Wayne Watson – Geographically impossible for him to have gotten to Colleen without being seen.

That left Rhonda with another list. This list was the potential suspects that remained, the ones with no concrete alibis:

Vinnie Hunter

Valerie Hall

Mandy Warner

She looked at the list for a moment, quite pleased to have narrowed it down to just three suspects at that point. She had thought there would be more. She thought for a moment longer and then she made notes next to each name.

Mandy Warner – Technically, Mandy could have done it. She was in vicinity of the library, and she had no witness to her movements. But she doesn't have a motive. She was a half decent suspect when I thought she was financially ruined and jealous of Colleen, but she is far from ruined and is genuinely happy. Happy people don't murder their friends.

Valerie Hall – I can't decide if Valerie really was jealous of Colleen's parties or whether she meant it when she said she couldn't care less as long as her guests enjoyed themselves. Either way, I don't feel like it's a strong enough motive for murder – her parties were better than mine so I'm going to off her? No, I'm not buying it.

Vinnie Hunter – Vinnie is the most likely suspect. He had plenty of time to kill Colleen – he could have already been waiting in the library for her – as no one knew where he was, and his alibi wasn't really an alibi because no one witnessed him where he claimed to be. I have reason to believe he has a cocaine habit and is about to lose his business. The insurance money he would gain from Colleen's death would be a major motive for murder. He knew about the sound proofing and made damned sure to kill Colleen somewhere no one would hear anything.

Rhonda read over the two lists one more time. It was obvious from them what she had to do. She had to talk to Vinnie again. Or would she be best off calling it done at this point until her back up arrived? No, she thought, she couldn't do that. It was bad enough that the murder had happened in her town, on her watch and in a building she was actually in. There was no way she was having some FBI agent stroll in, take her work and 'solve' the case without giving her any

credit. Fuck that. This was her town, and she wasn't about to lose face twice in one night.

She put down the notepad and pen and sighed and ran a hand over her eyes. Who would have thought this would be how she would end up spending her night off.

She got up and was almost at the door when a head popped around, startling Rhonda.

“Sorry,” Callie said, stepping fully into view. “Are you finished with your interviews now?”

“No, but if you have something you want to talk to me about you are welcome to do so,” Rhonda said.

Callie shook her head.

“No, no, it's nothing like that. I was just wondering if you would like a coffee or a tea or maybe a tonic water?” Callie said.

“Oh, I'd love a black coffee please,” Rhonda said. “Thank you. If I'm not here when you come back, just leave it on the coffee table please.”

“Ok,” Callie said, and she headed back towards the kitchen.

It struck Rhonda how dry her mouth and throat were now that she had been offered a drink. Or was it more because her nerves were firing now that she felt like she was close to solving the murder. She figured that this next interview with Vinnie would be as far as she would be able to go tonight and when she had finished it, she planned on bringing everyone together and getting them to use the buddy system where everyone stayed in small groups of two or more people so that no one was left alone. She didn't honestly think it would be necessary, but she thought for the more nervous people like Mandy and Georgia, it might put their minds at rest somewhat and there was also a part of her that just thought safety was best, because if someone had told her this afternoon that tonight she would be investigating Colleen Hunter's murder at her own party, she would have laughed them out of the town. And yet here she was.

CHAPTER 12

Rhonda left the second lounge and made her way along the main hallway to the main lounge. She stood in front of the closed door for a moment, wondering if she should knock. She told herself not to be so ridiculous and she opened the door. The conversation that was going on, a quiet hum where several people were talking at once, all to different people, filled the air for a second and then everyone seemed to stop talking at once and all eyes were on Rhonda.

“Let me guess,” Valerie said. “Miss Scarlet, in the library, with something fucking heavy.”

Rhonda thought perhaps Marcus wasn't the only one of the Halls to have had too much to drink by this point. She didn't even bother to answer Valerie and none of the others laughed. Several of them gave her disgusted looks and Marcus actually shushed her.

“Vinnie? There are a few things I'd like to clear up. Would you mind coming for a second interview?” she said.

“Not at all,” Vinnie said, already getting to his feet.

“Ooooooh,” Valerie said in a sing song voice. “Vinnie's in trouble.”

“Can you arrest her for being drunk and disorderly or some shit,” Vinnie said.

Valerie cackled with laughter behind him and then Vinnie slammed the door shut with a bang and Rhonda could barely hear her anymore.

“I mean I could, but let’s prioritize the murder investigation first, huh?” Rhonda said.

“Fair enough,” Vinnie said. “I had to try it though.”

“Oh, believe me, I get it,” Rhonda said. “And I am tempted.”

They walked the rest of the way back to the second lounge in silence. Rhonda’s silence was full of adrenaline pulses. Was she currently escorting a murderer to be questioned again? Was she going to be arresting him soon? They reached the lounge and resumed their earlier seating arrangement, with Vinnie sprawled out on the couch and Rhonda sitting opposite him on the armchair.

“So, let’s cut to the chase Vinnie,” Rhonda said. “How much does your coke habit run to a month?”

“My coke habits?” Vinnie said with a raised eyebrow. Rhonda nodded her head, refusing to back down on this one. Vinnie was silent for a moment, but he soon started to talk to fill the silence, just like Rhonda had known he would. “Ok, so I like a line or two of coke on social occasions. Doesn’t everybody?”

“Well, I for one don’t, but I get your point. But if it’s so common place, then why did you feel the need to hide it?” Rhonda asked.

“Because the Sheriff was here,” Vinnie said, raising an eyebrow as though she was some sort of idiot.

She bit her tongue. Getting annoyed with him now wouldn’t get him talking. She had to keep him onside for as long as she could so he would talk, because while he was talking, he could trip himself up. If he remembered that actually, he didn’t have to answer any of her questions, he could literally get away with murder.

“Oh, come on now don’t try it. You and I both know how that works. I catch you dealing, you’re going down. I catch you snorting coke in public, maybe you go down, maybe you bribe a judge. I see you snorting coke in your own house at

your own party and we both know I turn a blind eye to it. Don't bullshit me Vinnie," Rhonda said.

She let out just enough anger to let him know she was being serious but not enough to get him to clamp up.

"Ok, fine," Vinnie said. "Colleen didn't like it, ok? And it was easier to just go and snort a line in private than it was to have her harping at me. Of course, now, I would give anything to have her harping at me."

Rhonda thought Vinnie was just feeding her a line by that point, but she gave him the benefit of the doubt and gave him a sympathetic smile. She was more sure by the moment he had killed her, but there was a chance it had been on the spur of the moment and that he now regretted it and really did want Colleen to be back alive and telling him off for his coke-taking ways.

"Ok. Maybe I'm a bit slow on the uptake, but isn't coke the sort of thing you take at a party where there's music and dancing rather than this sort of party that you had here tonight?" Rhonda said.

"Sure," Vinnie said. "But we had all of that planned for after the murder mystery. I was just getting a head start, a little pregame if you will."

That didn't ring true to Rhonda. She didn't think for a second that Colleen would ruin her ambient murder mystery night by having a drunken, drug fueled disco after it, but she couldn't prove it, so she pretended to believe it.

"Ok, that makes sense," Rhonda lied, before going in for the kill. "But help me to understand one more thing. Your wife, who you loved, hated you doing coke so much you felt the need to hide from her when you were snorting a line. True?"

"Maybe not the way I would have worded it, but for the most part, yeah," Vinnie agreed.

"And you used coke socially. You didn't have a habit? True?" Rhonda said.

Vinnie nodded his head,

“So, if you didn’t have an addiction, why were you snorting coke in secret, before dinner was even served on a night that meant so much to your wife? If you aren’t an addict, surely you could have gone one night without partaking in any coke?” Rhonda pushed.

“Ok, ok,” Vinnie shouted, getting to his feet, and starting to pace the floor. “So, I have a coke habit. Is that a crime?”

“Well, yes, of course it’s a crime,” Rhonda said. “But it’s not the one I’m interested in tonight.”

“So, you’re not going to arrest me for possession or anything like that?” Vinnie asked. He stopped pacing the floor and looked at Rhonda through narrowed eyes.

“Nope,” Rhonda said. “I would advise you to check yourself in somewhere for rehab but that’s all it is – advice. It’s not like a legal order or anything. Now please sit back down.”

For a moment, Rhonda didn’t think Vinnie was going to sit back down, but after staring her out for a moment and her holding his gaze easily, he must have seen that her authority was the real deal and he sat down. Rhonda was glad because if he had refused to, she had no real way of making him do it. Not in their current circumstances.

“So back to the original question. How much does this habit of yours run to a week on average?” Rhonda asked.

Vinnie shrugged.

“I don’t know,” he said. Rhonda was about to call bullshit, but he kept going and she let him. “No, really, I swear I don’t know. I don’t dare try to work it out, it’s gotten that bad. It’s well over three thousand dollars I know that much, because that’s how much it was the last time, I did dare to do the math and I told myself then I’d stop, but I didn’t and of course gradually I started taking more and more.”

“So how much do you owe your dealer?” Rhonda asked.

“Nothing,” Vinnie said, and Rhonda could see the truth in the relief in his shoulders. “That’s the one thing I am thankful for. I have always been able to pay for my habit. I have seen

what has happened to guys that have owed dealers money in the past and it's not pretty and I do not want to experience it myself."

"And this habit of yours. Is this why you wanted Henry to invest in your company so badly? So that you could funnel his funds back out at the other end and keep yourself in drugs for a while longer?" Rhonda asked.

"Surprisingly no," Vinnie said. "I do actually still care about my business and that money would have gone on exactly what I told Henry it would go on. Henry isn't a man to rush into that kind of decision though and he obviously had his people look into me and I am of the mind that my habit is what stopped him from investing. He most likely thought I was planning on doing the exact same thing as what you thought."

"So, drug habit aside, your business is about to come crashing down around you and you are a paycheck away from bankruptcy. Is that about, right?" Rhonda said.

"No," Vinnie said. "I do need an investor to keep the business going, that's no secret, but I have plenty of time to find someone else. And the paycheck thing, I'm not sure what you mean by that."

"Well if you didn't get any wages this month, would you have cash available for all of your bills?"

"Oh, of course not," Vinnie said, like he was surprised that Rhonda would even have to ask that. He spoke like it was normal to live that way even when you were one of the most affluent people in an affluent town. Rhonda's confusion must have shown on her face and Vinnie smiled. "Sheriff, everyone in my position, everyone in my social and financial circle are the same. We are what is called asset rich and cash poor. Like even before my business had its issues, I probably wouldn't have had twenty dollars in my wallet, but I had a portfolio of properties worth over seventeen million dollars."

"But now you don't, right? So now what? You're cash poor and asset poor?" Rhonda said.

“It’s getting that way,” Vinnie agreed. “But I don’t see what any of that has to do with Colleen’s murder.”

Oh, don’t worry Vinnie, I’m getting to that,” Rhonda said. “I mean I’m just thinking aloud here, but I can’t help but think that someone in your position might become desperate enough to kill their wife so that the life insurance money would be enough to get them out of their mess.”

“Someone in my position might indeed do that. But that doesn’t mean I have. Someone in my position might also look for an investor, a way to get the cash without hurting anyone. And you have your proof that I am trying that by Henry’s presence here,” Vinnie said.

“Well unless you were completely cold blooded, I wouldn’t expect murder to be your first solution. But after Henry said no to your offer, you knew you had to do something and fast. And I know you said you’d look for another investor, but you would need someone as rich as Henry and people like that don’t invest their money in people or business’s without doing their due diligence. If Henry found out about your coke habit, any other potential investor could do the same thing, right? This way, as long as you can wriggle out of the charges of murder, you are guaranteed the money and you don’t even have some other guy telling you what you can and can’t do with the money because it will all be yours,” Rhonda said.

“Wow. That’s quite the little story you’ve made up for yourself there,” Vinnie said.

“No, Vinnie. That is the story that this night and all of the people I have spoken to have told me. I have had to piece it together, but all of the moving parts were there,” Rhonda said. “Now are you going to continue to insult my intelligence, or are you going to man up and admit to what you have done?”

Before Vinnie even got a chance to answer, there was a knock at the door. Fuck, Rhonda thought angrily. The timing of that really couldn’t have been any worse. She was about to shout not now, but Vinnie beat her to it, shouting for the person at the door to come in. It was obvious why. The

interruption would take some of the heat off him and stop him from blurting out something in the panic of the moment that he then couldn't take back. And when it came down to it, this was Vinnie's house, and it really was up to him whether a person was given access to a room or not.

The door opened and Callie came in with a cup of steaming coffee in one hand and a coat in the other. Rhonda glanced at the coat and then looked away and then a realization hit her, and she looked back again. It was a black coat with a cream, fur lined hood, and it looked about the right size to come to somewhere below the knee on the average person.

"Umm Sheriff?" Callie said and Rhonda realized Callie had been talking to her.

"Sorry love, what were you saying?" Rhonda asked.

"I was just saying I was sorry your coffee took so long. Georgia was a bit upset and I sat and talked to her for a bit before I made it," Callie said again.

"Oh, that's fine. I would much rather Georgia be ok than have a drink. Is she ok now?" Rhonda asked.

Callie nodded and, relieved, Rhonda got onto the question she most wanted to ask.

"Callie, where did you get that coat?" she asked.

"Oh, it's a strange one actually. I went in the cupboard in the storage room beside the kitchen to get some more coffee out, and this was rolled up in a ball in there. I figured someone had put it down and forgotten about it and then it got shoved away and I was returning it to the coat closet," Callie said.

"That's my coat," Vinnie said. "Why the hell would it be in that storage cupboard?"

Because you were wearing it when you killed your wife in the room two doors down and you wanted to hide it in case it was covered in blood, Rhonda thought to herself. She didn't say that though. Instead, she addressed Callie.

“Callie, can you do me a favor?” she said. Callie nodded her head. “Can you just pop the coat down for a minute and go to the lounge and ask Marcus to come along here and join us for a moment please?”

Callie nodded. She put the coat down over the back of an armchair, the twin of the one Rhonda was coming to think of as her chair. Callie left the room and Vinnie looked confused. Rhonda could see no reason not to let him in on what was going on. She would warn him not to say a word to Marcus and if he did, she would take that as his confession of guilt.

“Marcus saw someone leaving the library just before he found Colleen’s body,” Rhonda explained. “He described the coat that the person was wearing, and it was a lot like that coat. So, now we’re going to get Marcus in here. If you speak a word to him, I will take that as a sign of your guilt and arrest you. If you don’t say anything and Marcus confirms that’s the coat, then I will arrest you. And if Marcus confirms that isn’t the coat, then I will apologize to you and go back to the drawing board,” Rhonda said.

“I swear I didn’t do this Sheriff,” Vinnie said. “No matter what Marcus might say about that coat. I had no idea it had even been moved from the coat closet.”

“No offence Vinnie but you would say that whatever the truth was at this point,” Rhonda said.

They waited out the rest of the time in an awkward silence. Finally, Marcus and Callie came to the room.

“Marcus, the person you saw leaving the library before you found Colleen’s body. Is that the coat they were wearing?” Rhonda asked, nodding to the coat on the back of the armchair.

Marcus moved over to the coat and looked it over.

“I think so,” he said. “If it wasn’t this exact one then it was one the same.”

He kept looking at it, moving his head this way and that and then he gasped and beckoned to Rhonda.

“Look Sheriff,” he said, still beckoning with his hand even as Rhonda stood up and walked towards him. “Look.”

Rhonda looked where he was pointing and at first, she saw nothing, but she moved her head slightly so that the light shone differently, and she saw it. The coat was covered in splashes of something that had dried dark and crusty on the coat. Something that looked awfully like blood.

“Callie, would you please go and get me a refuse sack,” Rhonda said.

Callie nodded and rushed from the room. Rhonda got the impression she was pleased to get away from the rather awkward scene that was unfolding in the room. She half expected Marcus to make an excuse to leave but he didn't, and she was grateful for that, because she suddenly didn't want to be alone with Vinnie until she had the handcuffs on him.

She reached around to the part of her belt just above her hip and unclipped her handcuffs. She approached Vinnie.

“Are you going to give me trouble, Vinnie?” she asked him.

“Here and now, physically? No. Later, when they prove I didn't do a thing, I will see you in court and you will see what trouble means,” Vinnie said. “Unless you rethink this whole thing right now.”

“Sorry Vinnie. I'm afraid I'll have to take my chances at seeing you in court,” Rhonda said. “Please stand up and put your hands together behind your back.”

Vinnie did as she asked with no arguments. Rhonda wondered for a moment if she had somehow missed something because Vinnie was so calm, but she couldn't think of anything. She decided it was one of two things. Either Vinnie was bluffing to make her doubt herself— which had almost worked, or he had accepted his fate and didn't want to make it any worse by making a scene at this point.

Rhonda snapped the cuffs closed on Vinnie's wrists.

“You may sit back down,” Rhonda said.

Vinnie did so, although now he was forced to sit upright with his back straight instead of taking his casual, slouched position.

“Vincent Hunter, I am arresting you on suspicion of the murder of your wife, Colleen Hunter,” Rhonda said. “You have the right to remain silent, but it may harm your defense if you do not mention something when questioned which you rely on in court. Anything you do say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney, and if you can’t afford one, one will be provided for you. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Vinnie said.

“Good,” Rhonda said.

“Sheriff?” Callie said from behind Rhonda. Rhonda turned and Callie held out a large refuse sack.

“Thank you,” Rhonda said. “Callie, when forensics get here you will need to be fingerprinted and you might also need to give a DNA sample. Don’t worry, it’s just to eliminate your fingerprints and possibly your DNA if a loose hair or something from you fell on the coat where you were carrying it.”

“OK,” Callie said.

“For that reason,” Rhonda went on. “You have already touched the jacket. Would you be so kind as to fold it up small enough to go into this bag?”

Callie stepped forward and Rhonda watched her as she tucked the sleeves into the front of the coat and then folded the bottom of it up. She folded the coat in half from there and then Rhonda opened out the bag and held it open for her. Callie slid the coat into the bag.

“What are you going to do with it?” Marcus asked her.

“Ideally, I’d like to put it in the library behind a locked door so no one can tamper with it, but there’s two problems with that. I can’t leave the suspect and I certainly can’t ask anyone else to go into the library,” Rhonda said.

“I’ll go,” Marcus said. “It’s not like I haven’t already seen what’s in there. And now I know where she is, I know where to not look.”

“Are you sure?” Rhonda said.

Marcus nodded.

“But there’s the second problem,” Rhonda said. “Vinnie has the keys and he’s hardly going to give them to us, is he? And I refuse to take them against his will. He deserves his dignity.”

“Umm, excuse me? I am still here you know,” Vinnie said. “Why would you assume I wouldn’t give you the keys?”

“Well why would you want to help me after I’ve arrested you?” Rhonda said.

“I don’t want to help you,” Vinnie said. “You’re right about that. But I do want the evidence preserved because that’s my only chance of proving my innocence. Marcus, come and get the keys. They’re in my front trouser pocket.”

Marcus looked at Rhonda and Rhonda nodded. Marcus went over to Vinnie who stood up to make access to his pockets easier. There was a moment of tension where Vinnie could have kicked out at Marcus, but it passed, and Marcus got the keys without any harm coming to him.

Marcus took the bag from Rhonda and left the room. Rhonda smiled at Callie.

“Thanks love,” she said. “You can go back to your friends now.”

Callie nodded and left the room leaving Rhonda and Vinnie alone. Rhonda picked up her mug of coffee and finally started to drink it. It wasn’t as hot as she liked it, but it was drinkable. She kept her eye on Vinnie as she drank. She had already decided that he was going to sleep in here on that couch tonight and she was going to take up a position at the door to stop him leaving or anyone entering.

“You don’t have to watch me like I might attack you at any given moment,” Vinnie said.

“I wasn’t,” Rhonda said. “I was assessing whether or not that couch is long enough for you to sleep on tonight.”

“Oh,” Vinnie said. “Yeah, it’ll be fine. I’ve slept on a couch before.”

“You’re incredibly calm,” Rhonda said.

“I’ve hit rock bottom Sheriff. I have a drug habit and I am about to lose my company and most likely my house. My wife has just been killed and I haven’t even begun to get my head around that and now I have been arrested for her murder. I think at some point you have to be calm, or you’ll break,” Vinnie said. “And as for the arrest, I’m not really worried about that.”

“You’re not?” Rhonda said.

“No,” Vinnie replied. “I said it earlier and I will say it again now. I didn’t kill Colleen. You can’t prove I did because you can’t prove something happened when it didn’t. I realize you need to do an investigation and see that for yourselves. Me kicking off and acting like a lunatic isn’t going to help to speed that process up, is it?”

“No, that it won’t,” Rhonda agreed.

They sat in silence and this time it wasn’t uncomfortable. It felt strange to Rhonda almost like two old friends just keeping each other company.

It was almost three in the morning when the helicopter arrived. Rhonda explained everything and the team took the bagged evidence, Colleen’s body, and Vinnie. They told the others to hang tight and someone would come and get them out the next morning.

Once there was no murderer in the building, Rhonda could have thought of worse places to be and it seemed that everyone felt the same way because within ten minutes of the helicopter taking back off again, everyone was in bed and the house was silent.

CHAPTER 13

- THREE MONTHS LATER

I finally did it. I got revenge for me, but most importantly, I got revenge for my mom. I remember I was twelve when my mom first told me the story that set me on the path to revenge. Of course, at that age, I felt the injustice of it, but I had no real plan. That came later. With each retelling, my mom made me want it more. I suppose I should tell you the story. I'm sure once you hear it, you will get it. You will understand why I did what I did.

When my mom was younger, she fell in love with a boy. But there was another girl on the scene. She also loved the boy. The boy chose my mom, and she couldn't have been happier. But then disaster struck. My mom found out that she was pregnant and rather than being the supportive, loving partner, she expected my father to be, he promptly dumped her and started dating the other girl.

Throughout the years, my mom struggled financially, but she always worked her hardest and she always did her best for me. I didn't have the latest cell phone and the latest Xbox, but I was clothed, fed and warm. And I had my mom. That was all I needed.

It wasn't until my mom first told me the story that her mental health started going downhill. She would tell it to me over and over again, and she sank into a deep depression that just wouldn't let her go. It was all his fault. My rat of a father. She made sure I knew that.

I tried so hard to tempt her out of her funk, out of her bed, but nothing worked. Then on my eighteenth birthday, I came

home from college and went to my mom's bedroom and the bed was empty. I was happy. My mom was finally getting better, and she had done it for me. She had gotten out of bed so that we could celebrate my birthday.

If only that had been the truth. I went to use the bathroom before I went and looked for my mom downstairs. I opened the bathroom door and there she was, laying in a bathtub full of water that was icy cold by then, blood pouring from each wrist. I screamed and pulled out the plug and then I went and called 911, and then I ran back to the bathroom and dragged my mom out of the bath. I wrapped her in towels to try and get her warm and I desperately tried to stop her wrists from bleeding.

The ambulance came and took her to the hospital. It was touch and go, but she made it. I thought maybe that would be the turning point for her. That she had hit rock bottom and now she would get better and be the mom I remembered, but it didn't work that way. She was kept in the institution because she was never really not suicidal again after that.

I went to see her daily at first, but it was hard to see her like that and it was even harder to hear her. She would see me and sob and ask me why I hadn't just let her go. She blamed me as much as my bastard of a father for her misery now. But I was going to make it right, and I told her I was.

And now I have, and things will be different this time. I have thought this before and been wrong, but I am right this time. I know I am. How can my mom still be depressed now when I have fixed everything for her?

See when I first started planning this, it was simple enough. I was going to kill my father. He ruined my mom's life and that hurt me, and now, he was going to pay. I tracked him down easily enough, watched him, and learned his ways. And as I did, I realized that killing him wasn't the right move. No. I was going to kill her. His wife. The woman who stole him away. I was going to take the most precious thing in his life and fucking kill it, just like he had done to me. My mom wasn't physically dead, but he had killed the spark in her and that was just as bad. Maybe even worse.

The night of the murder rolled around quickly, and I thought I should be afraid, but I wasn't. I was excited. I knew just what I had to do, and I did it. For a moment afterwards, I felt overwhelmed by what I had done and not in a good way. I felt like I was going to pass out and I remember my boss asking me if I was ok and I had to think quickly and I told her I was on my period, and it was a bad one. She bought it. Why wouldn't she? Who would ever suspect sweet little Callie of lying let alone murder?

I have a confession to make though. The fact that my bastard of a father got the blame for the murder – that wasn't planned, it was just a happy accident. When I grabbed that coat and put it on, I had no idea it was his – I just knew that I needed something to stop any blood from getting on my uniform, and it was a good job I thought ahead because I took quite a splattering. When I reintroduced the coat that night, I knew it would put the blame onto someone, but I never ever imagined I would be lucky enough for that person to be him.

And the Sheriff. A lovely woman. Easy to fool, but lovely. I liked her. When she told me the police would need my fingerprints and DNA to eliminate me from the enquiries, that made my night. Bringing the coat back into play had definitely been the right move because people, including the Sheriff, had seen me innocently tidying the coat away. There was every reason for my prints to be on it.

All of this goes through my head as I sit in the prison visitation room. I didn't want to ever see the bastard again, but it was eating at me knowing that he didn't know why he was here, why his precious little wifey had been killed. I needed him to know. I needed him to know that in the end, Alice had won.

My heart skipped a beat when I saw him coming towards me. I couldn't help but smile. He had lost weight. His face looked haggard, and his hair was greying at the temples. He was sporting a black eye and a bruise on his cheek. It looks like I wasn't the only one who wanted to teach him a lesson. I had no idea what he had done to upset his fellow prisoners and I didn't care. I just liked their response.

He sat down opposite me and frowned.

“Callie, right? I’m sorry but what the hell are you doing here?” he said.

I tutted and shook my head,

“Now, now Vinnie. Is that any way to greet your daughter?” I said.

“Huh?” Vinnie said.

He clearly had no idea what I was talking about, so I decided to refresh his memory.

“Do you remember when you first got with Colleen? You dumped another girl to be with her,” I said.

“Oh sure. Crazy Alice. That was a damned lucky escape,” he said. “I hardly would call it dumping her like. You have to be with someone for that. But that’s sure what she told everyone. Yes, Crazy Alice, she loved a tall story or two.”

“That’s my mother you’re talking about. And if she’s crazy, it’s only because you made her that way. How could you dump her like that knowing how she felt about you, knowing that you had sat there and told her you loved her and wanted to be with her forever only the night before. Was the thought of having a child really so terrible?” I said.

I was mortified to discover tears filling my eyes, but I blinked them away and waited to hear Vinnie’s attempt at an explanation for all of the damage he had done.

“You have it all wrong,” Vinnie said. “I went on one date with your mother, with Alice. I picked her up and drove her to the bowling alley. We hadn’t even started our first game when she told me she loved me. It was too much. I freaked out, took her home and that was the end of that. Or at least I thought it was. When I got with Colleen, Alice was not impressed. She began turning up at my house, watching me through the windows, and then she told me she was pregnant. She told everyone she was pregnant and that the baby was mine. I had never so much as kissed her, let alone had sex with her, but she insisted, and people believed her. I demanded a DNA test

which of course she refused and then she finally left the city and left me alone.”

“That’s not true,” I said. “It can’t be true. She used to say you ruined her whole life. How could you have ruined her life if you weren’t even my father?”

“I don’t think she meant anything nasty by it,” Vinnie said. “I think she was mentally ill, and she needed help and she never got it.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head, refusing to believe it. “She needed revenge. And now she’s got it. Because of me. I got revenge for her.”

“You killed Colleen,” Vinnie said.

He didn’t sound angry, more resigned.

I nodded.

“I did it for her, so that we could be a family again. I just wanted my mom back,” I said. “It was bad enough that I didn’t have a father because you walked away, but now I have lost my mom to this deep depression that you caused too.”

“Callie, please listen to me. I would never have walked away from a child I fathered. But I am not your dad,” he said.

“Prove it,” I said, knowing he would relent because he couldn’t prove he wasn’t my dad because he was. He was damn it.

“How?” Vinnie asked.

“Pluck a hair out of your head. I’ll have a DNA test done,” I said.

“And if it turns out I am right, are you going to do the right thing Callie?” Vinnie said.

I looked down at the table for a moment, looking at the place an inmate had scratched his initials – MD – into it. I made up my mind and I looked up and I nodded. My face must have shown how serious I was because Vinnie reached up and plucked a hair out of his head and gave it to me. I slipped it into my jeans pocket.

I would show him that he couldn't fool me. And he couldn't fool my mom. Not anymore.

EPILOGUE

I sat down on my couch and rocked back and forth, holding the envelope in my hands. This was it. The results of the DNA test I had done with Vinnie's and my hair. The results were here – the lab's name was in the return address.

Part of me wanted to just put the letter in the bin, believe my mom, and live happy that I had gotten revenge for her. But I couldn't. Because a part of me had believed Vinnie. Some of the things he said, they just sounded so like my mom.

No, I couldn't throw the letter away. I had to know.

The decision made, in a flurry of movement, I tore the envelope open and pulled the letter out and quickly started to read it:

Dear Miss Lewis,

We have conducted the required DNA testing and there is less than a 0.01% chance that this man is your father.

The letter went on, talking about accuracy and what not, but I didn't read anymore. The letter fell from my hand and hit the ground and my tears fell from my eyes and ran down my face, dripping off my chin and hitting my chest and arms like warm rain.

I let myself have a moment to let it all out and then I went to the bathroom, blew my nose, and washed my face. I looked at myself in the mirror and I saw that my steely resolve was back. I was going to do what I had told Vinnie that I would do if he turned out not to be my father – the right thing.

I was pretty sure that he meant that I should confess to Colleen's murder and take his place in jail. But what would that achieve? That wouldn't punish the person really responsible for this. No, I was going to do the right thing. I was going to kill my mom.

Don't get me wrong, I still love her with all of my heart, but I have to ignore that feeling, because she made me into a killer. And now she will be the one to feel my wrath.

THE END.

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“Prove your love for me with a sacrifice”

Her voice replaying in my head.

Hands covered in blood, I drag the body to the center of the room.

Candles are placed around the corpse to form a circle.

People begin dancing around it,

While others sing in a language I've never heard.

Father Red begins the ritual,

I stand in the corner dissociated from reality.

All I could think about was the last words the dead man said to me.

“You'll be next! They always turn their backs on you!”

I look over at the love of my life, her eyes lock with mine & with a big grin on her face,

she mumbles to me,

“Until death do us part...”

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SNEAK PEEK - CHAPTER 1

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Cameron Renner's hands were stained crimson. He could almost see it there, splattered across the knuckles and the lines of his palms. His hands were long-fingered and tanned by the summer sun. But as he held them up in front of his face in the bright light of day, they trembled like the leaves of the ancient oak that stood watching from above. He wondered how many years the great tree had stood at the edge of town like some protector of old, like the hero of a fairy tale caught under a witch's spell, trapped in the crawling roots that cut through the warm soil. Cameron once thought he could be the hero of his own story, that maybe he could be the one to pull his family out of the dark. Somehow, it seemed that nothing could have saved them with their skeletons dangling in between dusty coats and stiff dresses, and their melancholy that would forever hang like a fog over their home. For that reason, he concluded that it was pointless to even try. He found out very early on that he could never be the one—the savior. He was the villain of the bedtime story, one of the dark creatures that cowered in the shadows and watched the light as it flitted away.

When Cameron was seven years old, a short and pudgy child, he fell off of his hand-me-down bike and grazed his hands on the pebbles at the edge of the winding driveway. His father lectured him on his balance and his mom wrapped his hands in soft gauze and kissed them to make him feel better.

On the day he turned eleven he got in a fight at school with some big, lumbering bully, and was the only kid involved that was not punished by his parents. His parents taught him and his sister to stand up for what they believed in, for what they thought was right, at least in the beginning. He was reprimanded for not controlling his temper, not keeping himself in check, but he was never grounded like the others kids were that week.

He was sixteen years old when he lost his virginity to Katie Johns. It was awkward and he wasn't sure where to put his hands, but he would never forget it. Old sadness still held him like a vice, but that night, everything was warm and golden.

He was seventeen, at the end of his senior year of high school when he fell in love slowly and for the first time with the same girl. It took months. It was still awkward, disconcerting, but it was also all sorts of wonderful and exciting for them both.

Katie was a lot of things that Cameron was not. She was generally an optimist. She had faith in Cameron that he always felt like he didn't deserve, that he didn't really earn. Katie looked after the people she loved and Cameron had never really been taught how. His father was never the soothing, caring sort when he was a kid. His mom, before her accident, seemed like she wanted

to be more and she was certainly more likely to give her kids a hug than their dad. But neither of them was ever overly loving, at least not the way Katie's parents were. Katie was the kind of girl poets write about. She was sharp-tongued and strong-minded, yet she was a comfort to him. She was like some sweet waking dream with her soft, dark hair, her bright brown eyes, and her wide smile set in her round, pink cheeks. She looked at him like he hung the moon, as if he could do no wrong in her eyes. She made him happy, loved, and excited about the things yet to come. Her enthusiasm for him was infectious.

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

“What are you looking at?” Katie asked, standing beside him with her hands on her hips, her pretty face tilted to one side in question. “Your hands are clean.”

If you only knew. But he would never put it on her shoulders, he would never make his darkness her own. If he could give her anything, anything in the world besides his heart, it would be the oblivious idea in her head that he was a good person. He would like that version of himself to stay there, warm in the cocoon of her happy thoughts. In her mind, he was golden, like some bright ray of sunshine that never dimmed. He was the man she loved without conditions, without obstacles. Katie Johns was his soulmate, his equal in every aspect, and one of the reasons he kept going, kept trying. One day, he would make a life for them that was worth living. One day, he would be the man that she saw him as. For now, the mask of *hero*, of *protector*, would have to be good enough.

He could remember clearly him and Katie, dancing around each other for years. That first summer, though, when Katie was back from school and Cameron had been at some dead-end

restaurant miles outside of town to see Olivia, something grew between them. His sister never showed and then he got a text from her telling him she was too busy in the city to come. They were all staying at Sam’s house while his parents were on some sort of mission trip and Sam and Katie had already been back for a few hours. It was almost two in the morning by the time Cameron finally got to the house, the fatigue of sadness and regret casting a sickly pallor over his normally bright face and shadowing his eyes. Katie was sitting at the kitchen table, having gotten up from the couch when she heard the sound of tires on the driveway. She was waiting

for the kettle to boil, the light from her computer illuminating the otherwise dark room. Cameron could hear the bubbles.

“There’s pajamas fresh from the dryer in the bathroom, I think,” Katie called out to him as Cameron shrugged out of his jacket and hung it in the hall closet. “Do you want something to eat?”

“No, thanks,” Cameron sighed, and he knew he sounded so flat, so defeated. Katie looked at him and he knew that she heard it too. She followed the sound of his voice and met him at the bottom of the stairs.

“What do you need?” She asked him. There was barely enough light making it into the hall to see her by. Her hair was tucked into the fold of her hood and the ends of her pullover nearly covered her hands. She was thinner than she had been when she left for school months earlier, and the hollows under her cheekbones were stark in the shadowed lighting.

Cameron was silent for a long moment before he smiled faintly, raising his hand to run the backs of his fingers against Katie’s jaw. “I don’t need anything really,” he said eventually. He could smell Katie’s soft perfume and it felt like home. “Just a cup of tea, please. Lots of sugar. I’ll be back down in a minute after I change.”

“You can take your time,” Katie murmured, trapping Cameron’s hand against her face with her own hand, turning and pressing her lips lingeringly to the palm of it before Cameron disappeared upstairs. Katie returned to the kitchen and made a cup of the strong black tea that Cameron favored in the absence of coffee, adding spoonfuls of sugar and just a little milk when

she heard the shower shut off. Resting her chin in her hand, Katie yawned widely as she waited for Cameron. He watched her as he descended the stairs.

“You shouldn’t wake up just because I came back,” Cameron told her as he shuffled tiredly into the kitchen.

“This is the best part of my day,” Katie said softly, hooking an arm around Cameron’s waist and drawing him close to where she sat so that she could press her face to the warmth of his belly, rubbing back and forth like a tired child. “Having you come home to me. Even if it’s not my

house,” she said with a small laugh.

He pulled in a long, tired breath. One of Cameron’s hands splayed over the top of Katie’s back, the other gently cupped

the back of her head as he sighed. "You have to stop saying things like that," he finally said, his tone pleading. "Katie..."

"Why?" Katie asked him tiredly, as if it was no big deal. She pulled Cameron a little closer. "It's true."

"That's exactly why," Cameron explained patiently, shaking his head. "Because it's true, but it means something different to you than it does to me. And I don't think I can do that anymore." The words must have finally penetrated the sleep-dazed haze of Katie's brain and she pulled back a little to rest her chin against his side and look up at him. "No, I don't think it does," she said after a beat. The look on Cameron's face and what must have been the desperate want in his eyes seemed to finally make Katie brave enough to say what he'd been aching to for years. But maybe she was teasing him. They had both been each other's first time, and that held weight, but it wasn't fair for her to use it against him.

"You don't get to—" Cameron began, trying to pull away, but Katie held him firmly in place as he got to his feet, sticking herself squarely in his space.

"I think I do," Katie told him firmly, pressing herself against him where his back was against the table with his tea going cold on the counter. "Because," she said with a sharp breath, "because I think maybe you're in love with me. And maybe I'm in love with you too." The way Katie had paled and then flushed at the confession was fascinating and beautiful, and Cameron wanted to taste it.

"I want to kiss you all the time, for no real reason. It doesn't make sense, I know. But I want to kiss you in front of Sam, in front of the church, even in front of your dad and the whole town, okay? I want you to kiss me when you're laughing at me, when you're angry at me, when you're half asleep and can't be bothered to even open your eyes enough to find my mouth. I want it without either of us thinking about it. I want to take it for granted. I want it to become a habit between us. I want it for the rest of our lives," Katie continued, out of breath. She was shaking. Cameron stared at her wordlessly for so long that he knew Katie must have begun to think she

had misread the situation, but then he smiled, wide and unrestrained and joyous, the shadow lifting from his eyes. His voice came to him finally and all of that emotion boiled down to one thing. "I love you."

"You're not the best with words," Katie said, laughter in her voice, "but by god you make them count when it matters most, Cameron Renner."

Matching Katie's smile with one of his own filled his chest so full with something terrifying and all-encompassing that he felt his breath hitch. This was the woman he wanted for the rest of his life. This was his life, his whole world.

"How many kisses do you think it'll take before we take them for granted?" Cameron asked her playfully, winding both arms around Katie's back and lifting her up to sit on the table. She hooked her ankles around the backs of his knees, grinning.

"More than either of us will ever have time for, even if I kissed you a thousand times a day," Katie promised him.

"Katie," Cameron said and smiled, love and promise turning the word into a sigh.

"I guess we could get started on making it a habit, though," Katie suggested, and the laugh in her kiss was just as sweet as Cameron had always imagined it would be.

"I was just making sure before we ate," Cameron told her in the present, admiring the way the sun glinted off of her brown hair, turning it a warm coppery color.

"It's a picnic, Cam," Katie told him, smiling in a way that made him want to kiss her. Most things she did had that effect on him though. "A little dirt never hurt anybody."

"When we do decide to have kids together," Cameron returned with a crooked grin, folding himself to sit cross-legged on the checkered picnic blanket in front of her. "We won't let them eat dirt. I'll leave all of that to you."

Katie laughed, high and pretty. "Are you already thinking about kids, Renner?"

“Oh yeah,” Cameron told her, leaning over to kiss her. Against her mouth, he said, “I can’t wait to show them what a weirdo their mom is.”

“*You* are the weirdo,” Katie said with a laugh, shoving him back playfully. It almost seemed like a change of subject. She brought out the containers from the picnic basket, pointing inside the sandwich holder. “A turkey and salami with tuna and mayo. Yuck.”

“Oh, and a banana and peanut butter sandwich is so much better?” Cameron countered, making a face at where her sandwich sat in the basket, gooey and oozing. “Only kids eat that, you know. We’re 23, we need sustenance to live our hard adult lives,” he said, and he liked the laugh that it pulled from Katie’s pretty mouth.

They were right at the edge of town, the forest spreading out at the base of the mountains seemingly filled with shadows, an impenetrable fortress that even the bright, bright sun could not break through. Cameron had once hunted small game there with his father, under the cover of the shifting trees, but those days were long gone. His dad was just a wraith now, lit by alcohol and filled with a lonely sort of sadness. Cameron almost couldn’t stand to be in the house with him anymore, even when it was just to drop by with dinner that Katie cooked, after all, he knew his dad would probably just let it sit. The once-warm food would wait and rot on the kitchen table and Ben Renner would never give it a second thought. That was the way of things for the Renner family.

Guilt, Cameron had discovered, was not easy to live with. It was so damn heavy in his heart

every day. He wondered how murderers walked around with it for so many years and even lived new lives afterward. When he was a kid, there was a story on the news about a man who committed a string of brutal slayings across the mountains. He remembered it clearly because his mom had covered his eyes and screeched at him to leave the room with his sister in tow. Despite her warnings, Cameron snuck down the stairs that night while the killer’s face flashed

across the screen. He dreamed of blood that night, of death, and of the slow tick of a dying heartbeat before it stopped altogether. The next morning he could only imagine if the killer could live every single day without a thought about the amount of grief and destruction he had caused. In his darker moments, he thinks maybe the killer across the mountains didn't feel any guilt. The thought only made him feel worse for some reason.

Cameron felt guilt, he felt it like a leaden weight over his shoulders every day that he walked the streets of the town. He felt remorse, and resentment, and anger, and fear. They mingled

together to form the person that he had become. He was so afraid of that person he had been that day, and what the strength inside of him was used for. He didn't know then. He didn't understand the repercussions of his actions back then.

Earlier in the year, he had rearranged his old room in his father's house and searched beneath his desk for all the papers and things that he had never thought to keep. He went through dusty bins stuffed in the back of his closet and picked out the photograph of himself and his sister. It was a good one. Their small, child's hands and arms were thrown over each other's shoulders and they were smiling in their winter caps and boots. In his mind, he remembered Olivia like that, jolly and sweet and still filled with childlike wonder. She didn't know the things that he did. She had no burdens to hold her down, he made sure of that. She was only twelve when their mom died, and after that, their dad always tried to keep her home. She wasn't allowed to go out and Olivia always resented them both for that. It had probably been one of the reasons she wanted to leave. Cameron wondered if their father knew that if Olivia was too involved in the town, too intertwined, the same thing would happen to her. He had pushed thoughts of his sister from his mind and read through some of his old school books, reminiscing over his childhood. Under the cover of dust-flecked papers and old letters, he found an empty journal and ran his

hand reverently over the pressed paper. He remembered laughing at the blue-dyed leather with its silver, glittering *CR* when Olivia gifted it to him, but he held it in his hands and it felt like his sister was right there, handing it to him with a big smile that last Christmas morning. She had been seventeen and just graduated when she took off. He left the journal on the table, not wanting to think of how much he missed her.

A tattered copy of Hamlet lay half open on the floor, its pages dog-eared and spine damaged by years of use. Cameron's hands trembled as he reached down to brush the dust bunnies from the yellowed pages then tucked the book into the nook of his desk. Thinking of Hamlet and his motivations felt like he was eating cut glass, shattered and tearing through him. His chest ached with it and he had to pace the length of his childhood bedroom more than once to shake off the unease he felt. A surge of guilt shivered up his spine. It was the worst sort of play to be reading when his own life seemed to so resemble a damn tragedy. He thought about his father and

everything he had lost. He thought about everything *he* had lost and he wondered if he felt right about the person that he was; if maybe his family had finally paid the price for his stupid actions. Maybe it was easier to just be the bad person instead of fighting.

Coming back to the present, he admitted that though Hamlet ended up destroying himself more than anyone else, and could have taken a lot less time making his decisions; there was something noble in his actions. There was something so tragic in his story, but there was a correlation there that Cameron couldn't quite shake. As he stared at Katie across from him on the picnic blanket and watched the play of shadow across her face, he felt that Ophelia's actions were the most powerful in the end. She was the deciding factor, and she was the light snuffed out in the all-consuming darkness. Cameron shook his head. It wouldn't happen like that. She would be safe as long as there was breath in his lungs. Cameron didn't really want to relate to any of Shakespeare's characters, as flawed and twisted as they all were. He had left the books and papers in a pile by his bed on the nightstand that

day, and he resolved to finish going through the memories of his life before the autumn winds could chill the mountain air.

Katie hummed across from him, a bright melody that broke through his dark reverie. She had always been reminiscent of a daydream in his mind, so very warm and safe. This town was

poison, a toxic reminder of his most harrowing sin. Katie Johns would never be touched by the rot that permeated the town of Amelia.

“Oh, great,” Katie complained with a groan. She was staring over Cameron’s shoulder, toward the town’s winding streets that met the edge of the low foothill. A car headed up the road,

followed by a trail of dust. Her back was to the forest and Cameron had the oddest urge to block her from its hungry gaze. “Here’s the calvary.”

Cameron glanced behind him to see red and blue lights, flashing and dancing over the sky. The siren wailed and the outdated cop car rolled to a stop, skidding on the grass close by. There was a small parking lot farther down the hill, where Katie’s little red car that she had been given in high school was parked and waiting for them, but the officer, whoever it was, had foregone the road in favor of getting as close to them as possible.

“Oh, it’s the boy scout,” Katie told him, rolling her eyes. “What does he want?”

Harry, or *Officer Harlow*, had only been in Amelia for about a month. He was a transfer from another town, farther into the state and not so sheltered by the mountains. He had a sharp look to him, and even though he was far from being a social butterfly or a big talker, Cameron could almost tell there was something else underneath. He always got the impression that Harry Harlow knew something that everyone else didn’t and that maybe he took pride in that knowledge, whatever it was.

“Is there something we can help you with, officer?” Cameron asked the blue-garbed cop in an even voice. He stood from the picnic blanket, wiping his hands on his jeans.

“What do you want?” Katie snapped and Cameron put a hand out, waving his fingers discreetly for her to relax. For some reason, Harry Harlow annoyed her to no end. Cameron could only assume it was for the same reason that Cameron didn’t trust him. “If my dad sent you here, you can go on back and tell him that we’re fine. Thanks.”

Harry, with his cut-glass green eyes and thin mouth, looked to Cameron like some evil character in a Tim Burton movie. He looked a little nervous though, and Cameron knew that in reality, he was just some kid learning how to be bigger than he was. He decided to cut him some slack so

he gave Officer Harlow a reassuring smile, wide and welcoming. Katie didn’t offer to afford him the same kindness.

“The sheriff wants you at the town hall meeting,” he told Katie, glancing over at her one time before he looked back at Cameron. He knew Katie’s eyes must have been narrowed and her

mouth a thin line of annoyance. Cameron was the easier of the two to deal with, the officer must have realized. “He said to tell you that it’s important.”

“Isn’t it always?” Katie said with a sigh. Without another word, she turned and crouched, picking up the picnic blanket and the basket with sharp, quick movements. “It’s funny that my dad thinks everything is important when I don’t want to be there. Let’s go, Cam.”

“Uh, okay,” Cameron stuttered, following her as she stomped by, giving the officer in front of him an awkward wave. “Thanks for the help there, man.”

“Thanks for the help, man?” Katie asked him, looking annoyed at him.

“Well, what else was I supposed to say?” Cameron wondered, giving her a wild-eyed look. “There’s not exactly a

handbook for talking to a legal gun owner whom your girlfriend doesn't like. Can't be too careful, you know."

Katie sat with her arms crossed in the car and when Cameron plopped down in the seat, she said, "You know what, Cam? We need to go feed Heathcliff first and I've decided, I don't trust him," she continued, jerking her hand in the direction of the disappearing patrol car.

"Well, your dad trusts him. That should mean something," Cameron told her, which she seemed to take as it was and stared out of her window for the rest of the drive.

Truth be told, Cameron didn't want to go to the town hall meeting. He wished they could go back to their apartment and watch some movies, maybe even cook together. Funny how much he had grown to love the apartment in a few short months. Their apartment was in the middle of town, just above what used to be the hardware store. It had once been the owner's home, but when he died in a freak accident in the forest, the whole place was up for grabs. Katie filled the open floor plan with mountains of antiques and rusty decor. She loved old things and she enjoyed the feeling that came with owning something that had once been sought out by

someone else. Cameron just laughed when he saw the stacks of creased, well-loved used books and old, cracked leather couch that she had filled with handmade throws and quilts. Her grandmother had owned an antique store in town that had once been an apothecary, and Katie had spent years and years there, growing up around old things. When her grandmother retired to a living facility leaving Katie with just her father, the store fell into the hands of Emily Carlisle

and she molded it into her own little coffee shop called *Valley Grounds*. Katie still made a face every time she walked into the refurbished shop, even though it had been years and it must have been an apothecary for much longer than it had been her grandmother's, and no one seemed to remember the old things that had once called it home. Cameron knew it made Katie sad to think about it. They had been living in a motel in town for a few months, just to get away from their

respective father's influences. It just made more sense to get away from their home lives together.

"So, I've been looking at apartments," Katie had stated one day as soon as Cameron returned from his grocery run, a case of soda and cheese chips under his arm. She arched an eyebrow at his "grocery" shopping. "That doesn't look like a nutritional dinner, Cameron. You talk about my peanut butter sandwiches and then you want to eat that?"

Cameron rolled his eyes and waved a brown paper bag filled with slightly healthier groceries at her. "You do know that I know where the supermarket is, don't you. I know how to get things. I can provide us sustenance."

"Yes, I know that you can, caveman," she said with a grin. She kissed his cheek and grabbed the chips from him before she threw herself back on the motel's thin bed. "So, apartments," she said again.

Cameron wrinkled up his nose. He had never heard of anyone renting out apartments in their small town. "Here? You found one of those in Amelia?"

"We can't live in a motel forever, Cameron, no matter how fond you've become of pretending you're some kind of nomad." Katie gave him a soft look from where she was scrolling on her laptop, beckoning him over.

"I'm not—" Cameron started and then sighed. "I would have to leave my dad all by himself in that big house."

Katie snorted in disbelief. "Cam, he's been by himself in that house for months now. Even when you were there, he wasn't around. He didn't seem to care much either way, motel or not."

"It doesn't matter, Katie. He's still my dad," Cameron snapped. It came out a little harsher than he had intended and he sighed, sitting down beside her. "You know better than anyone what

he's like when he's alone. He feels like he has no one and he turns to drink. I don't want that for him. It's not fair to

him.”

“He’s a grown man, Cameron. At what point do you get to be the child and him the parent? I don’t know,” Katie said quietly as she picked at the garish floral bedspread. “Don’t you want a home?”

Cameron swallowed before glancing at his phone for any new messages to avoid answering. He didn’t even know how to have a home anymore, if he was being honest. What he had at the

Bluebird Inn with Katie was more than what he had in years with his father. His dad put him on a pedestal when compared to Olivia, but after he stuck him up there, he completely ignored his entire existence.

Beside him, Katie sighed. She said in a defeated tone of voice that he absolutely hated to hear, “You want to go back to your dad’s house.”

“No,” Cameron said immediately, rubbing a hard hand across his face. “Maybe. I don’t know. I just feel like we left a lot unfinished between us, and my dad—”

“He’s an adult,” Katie said in a surprisingly gentle voice. “He can handle anything going on. He’s done it for years, Cam. Give him some credit. He’s okay by himself.”

“I just worry about him,” Cameron told her finally. “I don’t want to be the one that drives him over the edge or something. I don’t want him to waste away in that house.”

“Well then, it’s a good thing you don’t really drive much then, huh,” Katie told him teasingly in an obvious attempt to lift the heavy mood in the room.

Cameron let out a laugh. He stole the bag of chips back from her and swung her legs onto his lap as he crawled back onto the bed. “Shut it, Johns.”

“I’m just saying,” Katie continued, half an hour later as they were both watching an ancient

episode of *Friends*. Cameron was pretty sure life as a twenty-six-year-old was not as simple as sitting around a

coffee shop and complaining about one's relationships. But, it was a completely banal, background noise to his thoughts and he needed the distraction. Katie continued, with a soft thread of hope in her voice, "We could try?"

"Yeah, babe," Cameron said quietly, rubbing his fingers over the bridge of his nose where he could feel a tension headache begin to take form. "I'm gonna think about it."

"I get it," she said softly. And then, with a playful grin, she said "don't hurt yourself, big guy." Cameron did think about it. He was in the middle of brushing his teeth, marveling over how easy it was to do something so domestic when he decided that he wanted to do it. He would talk to his dad, but it wouldn't matter what his reaction was. Cameron wanted a life with Katie and he wanted to wash himself clean of past mistakes. He wanted Katie and he knew Katie itched for a home.

"I'm just going to run this stuff inside and I'll feed Heathcliff," Katie told him and Cameron imagined their soot-black cat on the windowsill, watching them with bright, orange eyes and waiting for them to fill his bowl with cat food. "It's been like a whole hour since he last ate. He probably thinks we abandoned him. Poor thing."

They had found him in an alley the previous year, cowering and hissing at them both as they walked home from dinner at the only diner in town. Katie had been reading *Wuthering Heights* and Cameron could almost hear her voice in his mind, *He just looks like a Heathcliff, doesn't he? Dark and broody.* Now Heathcliff slept at their feet every night or curled up right beside Katie on the pillow, snuggled into the spread of her brown hair across the soft cotton. He liked to twine himself around Cameron's feet, yowling at him as he stood by the window drinking his morning coffee and nearly tripping him on his way to the bathroom. Cameron had never thought he was a cat person, not that he was a dog person either, mind you. The only dog he knew as a kid was Oakley, his father's hunting dog that didn't care much for people, besides Cameron's dad. But he saw how happy the little cat made his girlfriend and that cemented his love for Heathcliff

pretty quickly. Anything or anyone that could make her smile like that was an absolute

treasure in his book.

“Give Heathy a kiss for me,” Cameron told her in a simpering voice and he was rewarded with Katie’s bright smile, the one with all of her teeth showing.

“I’ll give him two for you,” she said in the same way, bending to give him a quick kiss.

“Hurry back, babe,” Cameron told Katie with a wink, watching her go.

He sat back in the seat and not for the first time, he thought of his sister. She called sometimes, half in the middle of something and rushed, and she texted, short responses about nothing at all. It had been almost five months now since he had heard her voice. He could remember how close they once were when they were kids. He counted on his hand, ticking off the number of years since his sister’s face was more than just memory, living only in pictures and thoughts. It was almost as if she had died or gone missing. They had lost her either way, he and their father. Cameron and Olivia had once been best friends, their lives intertwined like two branches

growing together. When Olivia said she needed to leave, that she didn’t *fit in*, Cameron yelled at her that she shouldn’t come back. If she left, she should stay gone. She didn’t come back, she never did. In his mind, he had protected her. If she knew what the town was, what the people she grew up with were, she would run for the hills anyway, and there was no telling if they would chase her down. Like Katie, she needed to be kept apart. She was something different, something more. Cameron would always be a sticky fixture to the town of Amelia, someone who could never escape who he was, not really. He could never escape what he had done. Some things were forever branded to the soul and could never be scrubbed clean. Cameron could almost feel the crawl of his sins beneath his skin and he itched all over from them. Olivia would never know who her brother really was. He knew that it would kill her to have that weight on her shoulders. She would never be

able to cope with the horrible truth of what he had done when he was still just a kid. He hadn't known any better and he thought he was just helping, but it didn't matter. It was done. It was his burden to bear and he would never tell anyone the horrors of his memories. No one would ever know what happened that day. No one could know that Cameron Renner had killed his own mother.

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I've always hated this church. Father Red's creepy chanting echoing through the hall. The eerie locals follow his lead like sheep. No bible in sight, but the sermon continues. I feel the hairs on my skin rising with the high pitch sound of the choir.

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