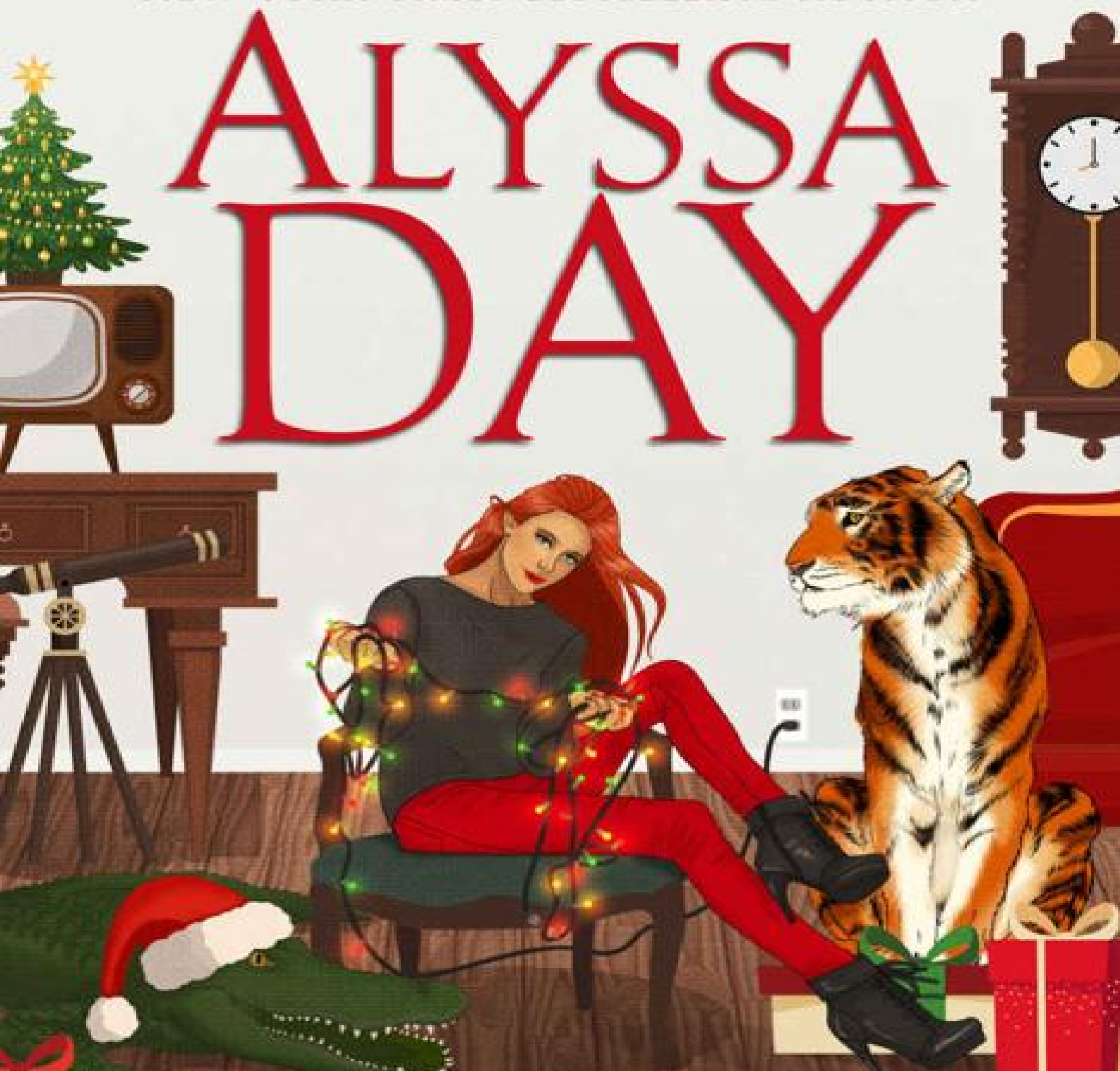


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ALYSSA DAY



A Dead End Christmas

A Tiger's Eye Mystery

A DEAD END CHRISTMAS

A TIGER'S EYE MYSTERY

ALYSSA DAY

This book is dedicated to Nichelle Nichols, whose Lieutenant Uhura made young girls around the world—including me—dream of reaching for the stars. Boldly go to your new explorations, Ms. Nichols. Boldly go. And thank you.

When I started this series, it was with the idea of doing some fun mysteries with Jack the tiger shifter going home to the quirkiest town in Florida. Light and fun and suspenseful!

Somewhere along the way, though, things changed. Dead End became more than an odd little town filled with funny characters. And the Tiger's Eye Mysteries turned into books about more than laughter, mystery, magic, and mayhem.

They became books about family. And community. And home.

I've been fighting depression for a long time, and you've all been so kind and patient with me. It makes me feel like we're all in our own community together, and my life is richer for it. Thank you also for the gift of sharing your stories about your struggles with me; I'm sending all my best wishes that you're doing well.

And now, every time I sit down at my computer or with a notebook and start thinking and daydreaming about these novels, I feel so happy to be coming home to Dead End. Coming home to Jack and Tess. Finding out what Aunt Ruby and Uncle Mike are up to these days. Or which delicious meal Lorraine is going to serve as the special at Beau's. How little sister Shelley's magic is progressing. And, always, what weird and wonderful items will show up at Dead End Pawn to keep Fluffy company.

So, this book is for everyone who wishes they lived in a quirky town like Dead End.

Come on down—y'all are welcome here. We have pie.

(And shout out to Lorna Drury, who gave me Pickles the pug's name.)

Xoxo

Alyssa

St. Augustine, Florida, September 2019 to December 2022
(This one took a while...)

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T_{ess}

A wild-eyed elf ran into my pawnshop, threw a bag of donuts at me, and started shouting:

“Tess! Santa Claus is in a fistfight at Mellie’s Bakery!”

Nobody can say we don’t have Christmas spirit in Dead End.

The elf wasn’t an actual elf—*they* prefer to be called Fae, and I hadn’t seen a human-sized one of *those* since we gave a Fae queen the key to the city in November. This elf wasn’t a Keebler elf, either, which was too bad, because it was ten o’clock, and I’d love a few post-breakfast chocolate-covered cookies.

No, this was my friend Lauren, who owned and ran Lauren’s Deli. She wore a Santa’s helper costume in green, red, and white stripes, complete with a triangle-shaped hat and curly-toed shoes. She’d dyed her hair candy-cane red, with the corresponding white stripes, which looked kind of cool on her spiral curls. My long, normal-red hair, blue jeans, and Dead End Pawn sweatshirt suddenly felt boring in comparison.

She’d even sprayed silver glitter on her dark brown cheeks, because Lauren was definitely a person who seriously committed to a role.

I took in this North Pole sartorial splendor with just a glance, because my brain needed time to catch up to “Santa Claus is in a fistfight.”

“Okay. But why are you telling *me* about it?” My pawnshop was clear out on the outskirts of our quirky little town of Dead End, Florida, population 5000. We could all fit in a single cruise ship, in other words, if anybody in town trusted cruise ships.

Town motto: *Your neighbors are weird. Get over it.*

Not the closest place to either the bakery or the sheriff’s office.

She paused, looking puzzled. “Huh. I don’t really know. While I was there, I got you some donuts, though. I know the sheriff is out of town, and I just ... I guess I’m used to you and Jack being sort of unofficial problem solvers this past year.”

While Jack Shepherd—shapeshifter, former soldier, current private investigator, and my new boyfriend—and I had been in the middle of more than one mystery during the year, it hadn’t been by choice. Things just kept *happening*.

“When Susan is out of town, Andy is in charge. Did you call him?”

She shrugged. “I’m sure somebody did. Anyway, it was pretty crazy, even for Dead End.”

Since the shop was in an afternoon lull and empty of customers, I waved Lauren to follow me to the back room, where I started coffee.

“Thanks for the donuts! Gingerbread?”

She grinned. “Is there any other kind in December? I already ate two, so the two in the bag are for you. I need to stop my daily donut run, anyway, or I won’t fit in this costume anymore.”

“You look great,” I said, admiring her generous curves. “If anybody can pull off an elf costume, it’s you.”

She glanced at the small mirror on the wall and smiled. “You’re not wrong. I thought the striped hair might be a bit much, but it’s Christmas, and—”

“It’s Dead End,” I finished, handing her a mug of coffee.

“Thanks! Oh, is this the new shop logo? It’s so cute!”

My little sister Shelley had helped design a logo for the shop, with a picture of our mascot, a somewhat beat-up taxidermied alligator named Fluffy, surrounded by the shop name Dead End Pawn. The tourists who escaped Orlando and traveled a little south to explore the “real Florida” loved buying Dead End Pawn merchandise. It still surprised me, but I was more than happy to provide shirts, tote bags, mugs, and whatever else Shelley could dream up.

Being a new business owner meant I had to focus on the bottom line. Especially since I’d had to discontinue selling the unlabeled potions left over from my former boss’s tenure—it had hurt; they were pure profit.

Turn *one* woman’s prize show cat into a ferret, and you’d think the world had ended.

It had been only *temporary*, after all. And not my fault that the National Cat Association judges didn’t let Zanzibar compete in the annual championship. All the other cats had gone after the ferret, who’d been lucky to escape unscathed.

Jack, who was a Bengal tiger sometimes, had laughed his head off when he’d heard about it.

“Tess. Cats are predators. They would have seen the ferret as an intruder in their territory.”

Whatever. Not my fault. There had been a warning on the potions case, after all:

INGEST AT YOUR OWN RISK.

And the guy who thought he was getting a sunburn cure and instead woke up with a fresh sunburn every day for a week? That’s why they have Super Target—for aloe. And Noxzema, which, as my Aunt Ruby has told me over and over and over, “actually lowers the skin temperature.”

Anyway, the shop merchandise was a nice additional source of revenue, especially in slow months. The pawn business wasn’t a huge moneymaker in a small town, after all. And I had to look at myself in the mirror at night, so I was always fair and honest, which ruled out any huge scores. I’d

watched some of those pawnshop shows on TV and wound up turning them off in disgust. Cheating the customers would never be the way I did business.

“Glad you like the mugs. Want one? I have plenty.” I handed her a new mug in its box. “But back to Santa. Who in the world would get into a fight with Santa Claus?”

Lauren’s eyes widened. “That’s the wildest part. Santa was fighting *another Santa!*”

The bells over my door rang, so we headed out into the shop before I could respond. Eleanor, my part-time employee, and WORLD’S GREATEST GRANDMA, according to the sweatshirt she wore, walked in and stopped at the sight of Lauren.

“Oh, honey! You look adorable! Was the battle of the two Santas over which one got you as a helper?”

I didn’t bother to ask how she’d heard. In small towns, gossip is an Olympic sport, and the folks of Dead End are all gold medalists.

“Who were they, though? Don’t tell me Rooster Jenkins was fighting! He’s the gentlest guy in the world!” I said, shaking my head. Rooster may have looked scary to somebody who didn’t know him, but he’d played Santa at Town Hall every Christmas since I’d been a little girl, and at the Holiday Lights Festival. He was in his late sixties and built like an offensive lineman—nearly seven feet tall and probably over four hundred pounds. But he loved kids, and I’d never seen him act violent a day in my life.

I mean, he’d threatened to shoot the earless goat, but he’d been kidding.

“Yes! It was Rooster,” Lauren said, putting her empty mug down on the counter. “This is what I was trying to tell you before we got distracted. Rooster and the Peterson brothers’ cousin Darryl.”

“No,” I said, shocked. “Darryl from Nashville? He never struck me as the fighting type.”

Eleanor shrugged, pragmatic as usual. “You just never know about people. I heard they were shouting about which one of them was the *real* Santa, and then it turned into a fight.”

“In their Santa Claus costumes? Please tell me there weren’t any kids there.”

Lauren shook her head. “No, not in their red suits, luckily. But *still*. It was unexpected and just wrong somehow. Santas shouldn’t be fighting in the bakery.”

“More like they shouldn’t be fighting at all, really. Not just in the bakery, right?” I said dryly.

“Eat your donuts,” Lauren said, blowing me a kiss. “I have to get back downtown and see if I’m going to have an elf shift this afternoon or not. With all the excitement, I forgot to check. I’ll let you know what Andy has to say about the Santa situation if I run into him. Later! Bye, Eleanor.”

With that, she hurried out the door, leaving a trail of floral perfume and glitter in her wake.

“I love that woman,” I said, biting a donut and closing my eyes in bliss. I also loved donuts and didn’t get enough of them, since Jack ate enough for any six normal people.

And he had a sneaky tendency to steal sweets. No donut, cookie, or pie was safe from the man.

Eleanor put her purse away, picked up a cloth, and started wiping the already spotless glass counter. We both spent a lot of time keeping the shop sparkingly clean, because nobody wants to hang out in a dusty, ratty-looking place.

Also, we were both stress cleaners, and there had been an awful lot of stress this year, so Dead End Pawn was probably sterile enough to do surgery in.

Not that I wanted to do surgery, I silently added, before a situation that required it turned up. Oddly enough, random thoughts had a surprising tendency to manifest into reality in my town. Not the kind where I wished I could win the lottery, sadly. Just the “oh, no, I hope an alligator doesn’t show up in my house” thoughts. (One had.)

So, it was better to be clear, even in the privacy of my mind.

“Did you hear where Andy was? Did he arrest anybody?” Andy Kelly was Dead End’s chief—and usually only—deputy.

Eleanor looked up from her polishing. “I don’t know. Where is the sheriff?”

I shook my head. “She said she had to go out of town for a while, because something from her past reared its ‘ugly, stupid head,’ but that’s all she told me.”

I’d been a little hurt. The newish Dead End sheriff and I were on the way to becoming close friends, or so I’d thought. If I’d had an emergency out of town, especially just before Christmas, I would have told her about it.

Not everybody was as open as me, though. I tried to remember that most days. Other people’s boundaries were there to respect, not to breach. Growing up in such a small town, it hadn’t been the easiest lesson to learn.

“I see you made real progress on decorating for Christmas,” she said, looking around the shop at the tinsel, twinkling lights, and trees.

“Speaking of which, thanks for decorating the new tree and putting the fake presents beneath it. You didn’t have to do that on the evening of your day off,” I told her. She’d wrapped the profusion of gifts in beautiful, shiny paper with big, glittery bows.

Glitter was turning out to be my word of the day, apparently.

I glanced at Eleanor when she said nothing, only to find her staring at me with her mouth open.

“What? What is it?” I whirled around, scanning the shop for danger. Nobody could blame me for being paranoid after the year we’d had. People really *had* been out to get us.

“Tess. I didn’t decorate the tree. And those gifts ... I had nothing to do with them.” She hesitated. “Ah ... do you think

this has something to do with the Fae? The last time Frazzle visited us in the shop, she mentioned gifts.”

Frazzle—not her real name, of course, because True Names had power over the Fae—was a pixie I’d rescued from freezing in my front porch flowerpot after a wonky portal had tossed her into our world. She loved, in order of passion: my cat, honey, bread, and daffodil tea, and she liked to visit, but I hadn’t seen her since before Thanksgiving.

“I think she meant we should give *her* gifts,” I said grimly. “Also, the Fae are not huge fans of Christmas. No, this is something else.”

I started toward the tree and then stopped, realization washing over me. “It must have been Jack! It’s our first Christmas together, and our first big holiday together. I mean, if you don’t count Thanksgiving—”

She groaned. I’d told her about the Thanksgiving disaster.

“And he likes to go above and beyond,” she said, starting toward the tree. “I mean, he gave you a swimming pool for your birthday, for goodness’sake.”

“Okay, it was Jack. Problem solved. And just in time because we have customers.” I could see the shadows of people walking up to the door. When the young family came in, I was ready with a smile and absolutely no donut crumbs on my face.

“Welcome to Dead End Pawn! If you have questions, let me know.”

They smiled and nodded, then browsed the aisles. Mom and Dad held their two little boys by the hand, I was happy to see. Unsupervised kids in the store had made me nervous ever since that time a little girl had climbed up on the shelf of magically taxidermied animals. She’d bitten the stuffed rabbit, which had been bad enough.

When the rabbit bit her back, things got dicey.

Eleanor, standing by the tree and holding a present, cleared her throat. “Tess? *I* have a question.”

That sinking feeling began in my stomach. “What is it?”

“If Jack put these gifts here, why does this one say, ‘to Jeri Lynn from Mommy and Robby Lee and Daddy and Bugle the Beagle’?”

Crap. I knew that family.

There was only one logical explanation.

My new *enchanted* Christmas tree was stealing presents.

Jack

A year ago, nobody in Dead End had really remembered who I was. Now, they were bombarding me with text messages about a fistfight between Santa Clauses at the bakery.

I ignored the texts and missed calls and tossed my phone over onto the passenger seat of my truck, because I had plans. Plans that didn't include trying to solve the mystery of the fighting Santas. I'd gotten myself into enough trouble the year before over a Santa.

That one somebody had shot.

A fistfight seemed mild in comparison.

Yeah. Back to my plans.

Important plans.

I paused at the stop sign. Left would take me to Tess's Uncle Mike and Aunt Ruby's farm. Right would take me to town, and I could use the Santa situation to avoid talking to Mike.

Alone.

For the first time since Tess and I had started sleeping together.

I sighed. I wasn't a coward, and the man was in his seventies. Even in human form, I could take him.

Probably.

I turned left.

Mike was home alone, and I'd called first. I'd even brought a pizza in case he was hungry. Difficult conversations always went better on full stomachs.

He was sitting on the porch in his usual flannel shirt and jeans when I drove up, waiting for me. I considered myself lucky that he wasn't holding a shotgun.

Holding the pizza in front of me like a shield, I climbed out of the truck. "I come in peace."

He said nothing, just studied my face, and I suddenly felt more nervous than I had during a fight with a trio of rogue vampires during the rebellion.

"I'm only here about building Tess a garage for Christmas."

Aha. That got him. His blue eyes—the same bright blue as Tess's—lit up in his weathered face, and he grinned at me. "Why didn't you say so? I've been wanting to add a garage to that house ever since she bought it. She's twenty-seven now. A woman that age should have a garage."

I wasn't sure what age had to do with garages. After all, I'd been thirty-two this year when I inherited the first house I'd ever owned. But I wasn't about to argue.

"I can do the work myself. Or hire Dave to do it. But I'd appreciate an engineer's eye."

Dave Wolf had been my best friend in high school, and we'd been rebuilding that friendship since I'd returned to Dead End. He owned a construction company and had built the building extension to Tess's shop that housed my fledgling private investigations business. But a garage was a fairly easy building, and I wanted to know that I'd put my sweat into the project, because it was for Tess.

Tess, whom I'd recently realized I was in love with.

So, I'd build her a garage. Nobody could say tigers weren't romantic.

“I’d be glad to help, if you want to do it yourself,” Mike said, nodding as he led the way into the house. “We’ll hire an electrician to do the wiring, but we can do the rest.”

“And someone to pour the concrete slab,” I said, juggling the pizza with the door, which Mike pointedly had not held open for me. “Dave can do that. What about building inspectors?”

In the kitchen, pouring glasses of sweet tea, Mike laughed. “Yeah, no. The last woman who tried to be a building inspector in Dead End retired after a month with a nervous condition. To Costa Rica, last I heard. Dead Enders don’t much hold with people interfering in our business.”

“Just for safety, though,” I protested. “We don’t want the thing to fall down on Tess’s head.”

Mike put a glass of tea on the table in front of me with a *thud*. “Wouldn’t be the first thing to fall on her head lately, would it?”

“Okay. Here we go,” I said calmly. “I know you raised Tess like your daughter—”

“And love her like one, me and Ruby both,” he growled.

“I love her, too.” I looked him right in the eye. “She is the most important person in the world to me. I’d die for her.”

He looked at me for a long moment, searching my face as if looking for evidence of sincerity, but finally, he nodded.

“I can’t say any different. I’ve seen you put your life on the line for my girl, over and over this year. You don’t deserve her—”

“I know,” I said honestly. “I’m a rough, overprotective ex-soldier, and a shapeshifter, which comes with its own set of problems. I could never deserve someone as wonderful as Tess. But she loves me, too, and I won’t give her up unless *she* asks me to.”

“You don’t deserve her,” he repeated. “But I can’t imagine I’d ever think any man would. Of anybody Ruby and I have ever met, though, we’ve decided you come the closest. And

we'd have to be blind not to see how you feel about her, and how she feels about you. So, treat her well, and we're on your side. If you ever hurt her, I'll hunt you down and make you very sorry, tiger or not."

He held out his hand, and I shook it, a lump in my throat. He'd just welcomed me to the family, in his own, gruff way. I'd do my best to deserve it.

"Now let's eat this pizza before Ruby gets home and makes me eat granola or some other dang thing. Meat Lover's?"

I grinned at him. "Is there any other kind?"

Then we settled in for an hour or two of pizza and drawing up plans for the garage, and it was one of the best mornings I'd had in a while.

"I thought a two-car garage," I said. "One bay for her car, and one for her tools and maybe a workbench."

"And a smaller bay over here on the right that would just about fit your motorcycle," he said, adding pencil marks to the sketch. "No need leaving it out in the rain when you visit."

A warm feeling spread through my chest, and I tried to pretend to myself that it was indigestion from the pizza.

All this emotion stuff was wearing me out. I'd spent ten years fighting and leading the rebel army against the rogue vampires trying to take over the United States. I'd never had to worry about anybody's *feelings*.

To discover I had feelings of my own had thrown me off balance.

Mike answered his phone about midway through our conversation, and Ruby, sounding like she was an inch away from hitting someone with a rolling pin, started telling him about a problem.

I stood. "I can go sit out on the porch." Tess's family knew that with my tiger hearing, no phone call was private if I was in the room.

He waved me back down. “This isn’t confidential. It’s about those fool Santas.”

Turned out it was about more than that. Ruby started out complaining about the Santas’ fighting, but then sharply segued into a dire problem facing the town council. UltraShopMart, a huge corporate conglomerate that wanted to be the next Walmart, was trying to move into Dead End, and the reactions from local business owners were mixed.

More than mixed, apparently. People were dividing themselves into two sides of a battle, according to Ruby’s side of the conversation. And all this after we’d all only heard about the USM outreach a handful of days ago.

“Honey, you can’t solve all the town’s problems in one day,” Mike said soothingly, but concern creased his face. “I think you’re right that a town hall meeting is the way to go. Can you set that up?”

Before Ruby could answer, my phone rang. I glanced down to see Tess’s smiling face on the screen and walked out of the room so as not to bother Mike when he was discussing important town business with his wife, the mayor. At the doorway, I paused and looked back at him. He raised one white eyebrow.

“It’s Tess. Remember, the garage is a secret, okay? I hope you’re good at keeping secrets from her.”

Mike grinned and asked Ruby to hang on for a second. “Jack, I’ve been keeping secrets from that girl since I had to hide her birthday presents when she was four years old.”

I was still laughing when I answered my phone. “Hey, Tess. What’s up? Did you hear about the Santas?”

“We have bigger problems,” she said, and I could hear the resignation in her voice.

“Oh, no. What now?”

“Remember the enchanted music box?”

How could I forget? Tess had acquired a magical music box in a Fae Bargain, which meant she couldn’t easily get rid

of it. It liked to pop into a room unexpectedly and play weirdly appropriate—or inappropriate—music.

The first time I'd spent the night with Tess, romantically, we'd woken up to the box sitting on her bedside table playing "Love Train."

She hadn't let me throw it out the window.

"What about the box? What did it do now?"

"Not the box. Another enchanted object. You know the Christmas tree I took in pawn yesterday?"

I'd seen it when I'd stopped by. It was a sickly looking artificial tree whose best years were behind it. She'd said she planned to put lights and ornaments on it so it didn't look like a "Charlie Brown tree," whatever that meant.

"How bad can a magical tree be? Does it play Christmas carols? I can see how that would get annoying, but—"

"It steals presents."

"What?"

"From children in Dead End."

I leaned against the wall and lightly banged my forehead against it.

Mike, who'd walked up behind me, took my phone out of my hand. "What did you say to the boy, Tess?"

"Uncle Mike? What in the world are you doing with Jack?"

"Never mind that. What's this about the tree?"

He listened as Tess repeated what she'd told me, and then he started laughing. "Life is never boring around you, kid."

You'd have thought Tess was a tiger, too, from the way she growled.

"Jack's on the way. Talk to you soon," he said and ended the call.

I held out my hand for the phone. "I guess I'm on my way to help return purloined presents. Let's complete the plans

soon?”

He rolled up the sketch. “Definitely. This will take hard work and some time.”

“Maybe not as much time as you think. I know some guys,” I said. “We might get more help than we need if we throw in some grilled steaks.”

A huge smile spread over his face. “I’m always up for grilled steaks. Just don’t—”

“Tell Ruby,” I finished. “Deal.”

Then I headed off to my girlfriend’s pawnshop to find out what bizarre situation had come crashing into our lives this time.

Never a dull moment in Dead End.

T*ess*

The shop got super busy, so I hadn't yet called the Pierson family about their missing gifts.

There was a teensy amount of cowardice involved, too. It had been a wonderful week, and I wasn't quite ready to blow that up yet. Being yelled at by Mrs. Pierson over Jeri Lynn's missing gifts was sure to do it.

Jack had spent every night this week but Wednesday with me at my house—and I'd spent that night with him at his. We were in what my best friend Molly called the "blissful first stage of love," and she'd been kind enough not to hint at other, potentially not-as-blissful stages, because she knew this was my first-ever serious relationship.

It's hard to find a boyfriend when you can see how someone will die just from touching them. It had put a complete stop to any casual dating I might have wanted to do. I hadn't been about to risk seeing how some nice boy would die just for the chance of a make-out session. My one actual relationship, with a very sweet man, had ended amicably in friendship. But I'd only considered dating Owen to begin with because he'd accidentally touched my hand at the pawnshop and I'd seen his future, sweetly peaceful death—he'd be very old and surrounded by friends and family.

I hadn't had to live in fear of kissing him and learning something horrible.

But Jack—I'd seen how Jack had died the very first time he'd touched me. How he *had* died because he'd died once before. It was a long story. Thankfully, I'd never seen his future death.

For all the hype in books and movies, trust me, knowing how and roughly when someone is going to die is not a gift. It's a terrible curse.

It's also why I was currently smiling and pointing to the small wooden tray on the counter while a sweet-faced elderly woman tried to hand me her credit card. I did *not* want to know how much of a future she did or didn't have.

When she hesitated, looking puzzled, I gave her my usual excuse. "I'm sorry, but immune system stuff. I'm sort of forced to be a germaphobe," I said. The vagueness of the explanation and the brightness of my smile almost always deterred any further inquiries.

I sighed when I saw her expression. *Almost* always deterred.

She frowned and clutched her card tightly. "Are you contagious?"

Eleanor, who'd watched me grow up and was as protective as a mother hen, swooped in to save the day—and the sale.

"Oh, no, of course not. She's just a little weak in the lungs," she lied, murmuring as if confiding a state secret. Then she gently nudged me aside and took the credit card. "She catches everything that goes around, and then I have to take over, and I can't do that right now. Did I mention I'm getting married soon?"

The customer's eyes widened, and she gave Eleanor a huge smile. "Oh, honey! That's so exciting! And at our age, too!"

Eleanor didn't even wince at the "our age" part, though the customer had to be at least two decades older than Eleanor's early sixties.

"I know! I'm thinking about lilacs, since it's a spring wedding ..."

I moved away, rescued again, and made a mental note to do something nice for Eleanor. Bake her some Christmas cookies, maybe. I was low on baking supplies, though. I'd need to make a Super Target run. I started mentally compiling a shopping list, grinning at the memory of Jack's great-grandfather calling Target the "venison store."

When a person had just revived after being a statue for three hundred years, he had some catching up to do.

I wandered over to ask the trio of college girls wearing matching University of Central Florida sweatshirts if I could help them with something, but then the bells over my door chimed behind me. I took one look at the expression on the girls' faces and grinned.

"Hello, Jack," I said without even turning around.

It had to be him; very few people I knew could make faces go instantly wide-eyed and open-mouthed like Jack could.

I blinked. That wasn't actually true, though. Carlos, the sheriff's vampire brother, was seriously hot. Sheriff Susan was beautiful. Our friends Lucky, Austin, Dallas. Molly. Lauren. Dave. The Fae queen. The ...

The list went on and on, didn't it? I was kind of the wren in a field of peacocks. And I was happy to realize that it didn't bother me at all.

Jack interrupted my epiphany by wrapping his arms around me from behind and pulling me to him, and then dropping a kiss on the top of my head. I swear at least one girl sighed.

I smiled and turned to face him.

"You know, you have to stop manhandling me at my place of business," I murmured, reaching up to touch his face.

His slow, wicked grin sent heat to my cheeks. "Whatever you say, sweetie pie."

"No." I rolled my eyes. He'd been playing at finding a pet name for me, and I'd hated all of them so far. "No pie, no cake, no cookies. No food names of any kind."

His gorgeous green eyes laughed down at me. “That rules out honey, my little dumpling.”

“Argh. No honey, no dumplings.” I raised up on my tiptoes to kiss his cheek. “Enough, already. We need to have a serious talk about that tree.”

He blew out a breath. “I’d say, ‘here we go again,’ but I don’t want to, because I’d be saying it every day, all day long.”

“Good thing the music box is off visiting Molly, or it would be singing Connie Smith,” Eleanor called out.

“Who?” Jack and I both looked at her.

She shook her head and tut-tutted. “One of Ruby’s favorite singers. Mine, too. She sang a song called ‘Once a Day’ and ... never mind.”

The three girls I’d forgotten about as soon as Jack hugged me squeezed past us in the aisle. The leggiest and *blondest* of them glanced up at him from beneath her lashes, like I wasn’t there at all.

“Do you want my Insta?” she murmured.

But he was so busy gazing down into my eyes that he never even heard her.

I *loved* that in a boyfriend.

Feeling magnanimous, I smiled at her and shrugged. “He’s not on social media.”

Her mouth fell open, displaying perfect teeth. “At *all*?”

“Sorry.”

When I glanced back up at Jack, amber sparks were flashing in the dark green of his eyes. “Isn’t it time for the shop to close? I haven’t kissed you in hours,” he said, his voice husky.

This time, all three of them sighed.

“Come *on*,” one of the other girls said, tugging at the blonde’s arm. “You don’t have a chance with this guy. He’s *so*

taken.”

The blonde gave me a friendly smile and shrugged. “Can’t blame a girl for trying. Lucky you.”

I narrowed my eyes. Actually, I could blame her. I mean, I was standing *right there*.

When the door closed behind them, after Eleanor rang up their purchases, Jack followed me over to the counter and started laughing.

“Did you hear that? Lucky *you* ... pudding.”

“I will punch you in the head and it will hurt,” I threatened, but I couldn’t keep from laughing. Luckily, I had a great sense of humor. I could see I was going to need it, because Jack got this reaction from lots of women and a few men wherever we went.

Not that I could blame them.

Jack was six feet, four inches of muscle. He’d spent a decade as a soldier and rebel leader, and he’d never lost the desire to stay in shape. Plus, being a shapeshifter gave him a racing metabolism that burned calories so fast it let him consume as much as the entire hot-dog-eating championship team at the Dead End Swamp Cabbage Festival and still be hungry again a couple hours later. He had bronze hair, high cheekbones in a starkly beautiful, very masculine face, and eyes the color of polished emeralds.

He also weighed about five hundred pounds—when he was a Bengal tiger.

In jeans and a chocolate-brown sweater, though, he was one hundred percent gorgeous, dangerous, sex appeal.

And he was a born protector and still learning how to be a boyfriend without trying to wrap me in a bubble when anything dangerous happened. In Dead End over the past year, that would have been a lot of bubbles.

So. Many. Bubbles.

“We all know that I’m the lucky one,” he said, his grin fading and his eyes turning serious. “You are beautiful. And

kind. And mine.”

I felt myself blush. “Um. Thanks?”

Eleanor groaned. “You two are impossible to be around these days, and I’m a newly engaged woman, so that’s saying a *lot*.”

I put my hands on my hips and gave her a pointed stare. “Didn’t I fire you?”

She just laughed. She was my best—and my only—employee. She waved a hand in the tree’s direction. “Go. Figure that out. I’ll handle the customers.”

I led Jack to the tree and pointed to the pile of gifts beneath it—which seemed to have grown.

“Oh, no.” I grabbed the present on top, which someone had beautifully wrapped with flower-pressed parchment paper and tied with gold-flecked raffia ribbon. “This is new.”

I looked at the tag and groaned.

“What?” Jack took the gift out of my hand and read the tag. “‘To Baby Boo from Grandma Q.’ What does that even mean?”

“It means Mrs. Quindlen, who is famed in at least three counties for her handmade gift wrap, is missing this present she got for her new granddaughter. And all these others with that same paper, if I’m not wrong.” I started piling packages into Jack’s arms, reading off the labels as I did so.

“Grandma Q, Grandma Q, Mama Q, oh my goodness. We’re in so much trouble.”

“Can’t we just take them back?” He stared at me over the growing pile of gifts in his arms. “It’s not our fault. Everybody who has lived in Dead End for more than a week understands that weird stuff happens here.”

“I know, but this is *Christmas*. And those are kids’ presents. It would really tick me off if they were gifts I’d gotten for Shelley. I don’t know what to do about the tree. Clearly, it’s enchanted, but we don’t have any witches in town anymore to deal with it, or at least none that are openly

practicing. If it's going to keep stealing things, we need to get rid of it."

Jack shrugged. "We can burn it behind my office, in the gravel next to the dumpster. Maybe inside a circle of salt?"

A couple who looked to be about Aunt Ruby and Uncle Mike's ages gave us apprehensive looks, dropped the DVD they were looking at back in the movies bin, and scurried out of the store.

Jack watched them go, a mischievous look on his face. "They probably thought we were talking about something nefarious."

"We usually are," I muttered. "Let me grab a box from the back. We can pile these gifts in them and make deliveries and apologies if you don't mind coming with me. If you don't want to be associated with stolen Christmas presents, I totally ___"

"Tess." He put a hand on my arm. "Your felonies are my felonies."

We were still laughing when the woman came running into the store, holding a dog in her arms.

"Somebody help me! She ... she just ran out in front of me. I couldn't stop in time! I slammed on the brakes, but—my tire is flat, so I ran over here holding her. Please help me!"

T*ess*

Jack made it across the shop almost before I understood what was happening. By the time I got to them, he'd already gently lifted the unconscious dog into his arms.

"Are you hurt, ma'am?"

"No," she gasped, out of breath. "Just shaken. That poor dog. I love dogs. I would never—"

"Everything will be okay," I told her, waving Eleanor over. "Eleanor is going to get you a cup of tea and help you figure out your car situation. Jack and I will take the dog to the vet."

I didn't even have to ask Jack; I knew he'd be in total agreement with me on this. He nodded and strode for the door as Eleanor handed me my purse.

"We'll be back as soon as we can," I said, but Eleanor shook her head.

"You don't worry about that. I'll be here."

Jack put the dog in his backseat on an old blanket. I climbed in back with her, so I'd be there in case she woke up scared. Up close, I could see that the accident had broken her left front leg; it was bent at an unnatural angle that made my stomach roil around just looking at it. Luckily, it wasn't a compound fracture—no bone punctured the skin.

She was a beautiful dog. A golden retriever with silky fur—and that fur didn't look at all like that of a dog who'd been

running around loose in the fields or woods.

“Jack. This dog clearly belongs to somebody who takes good care of her, and she can’t have been loose all that long. She looks like she just came from a groomer.”

“Somebody dumped her by the side of the road? Again?” His voice was grim, and he took the turn out of our parking lot too fast.

The dog whimpered, still out but obviously in pain.

“Sorry. I’ll be more careful.”

I reached over the seat and touched his shoulder. “I know. I hate this, too. And I don’t know why it keeps happening. At least it’s a sunny day. Those cats we found in the rain were so cold and miserable.”

The dog was the fourth stray we’d found on the road near the shop in the past few weeks. A young German Shepherd, two cats, and now this pretty girl—all of them in good shape, not at all like the condition my cat Lou had been in when she’d showed up on my porch one rainy night. Lou had been painfully thin, with ragged fur and a mangled tail, and she and I had taken one look at each other and known we’d be together forever.

Lou, though, had looked like what you’d expect a stray animal to look like.

The three—four, now—animals dropped off on the road by my shop, though, hadn’t shown any signs at all of having been stray or lost for very long, which is what I could not understand. We’d checked for microchips—none—and then put out notices trying to find their owners with no success. Eleanor had found friends in her cards club to foster and adopt them if nobody came forward, but this really needed to stop.

“I wish the security cameras you put on the shop could reach as far as the road,” I said, gently stroking the dog’s head.

Jack made a humming sound. “That’s a great idea. I’ll get the twins to put some hidden cameras by the road and we’ll see what we can see.”

The twins—Dallas and Austin Fox—were former Army Rangers who lived on the outskirts of Dead End and ran a computer consulting business from home. I didn't understand most of what they told me about their job, but basically, they were among the best hackers in the world when they wanted to be. And they loved all things gadgets. They'd put the security systems in place around my house and shop.

I sighed. "I'm going to have to pay them a monthly retainer, as much as they help me out."

Computer and security specialists were definitely not in my budget. Maybe I could learn to love eating ramen noodles.

Jack took the turn into town and glanced back at me. "No, you don't. I already have them on retainer."

"Jack. We've talked about this. You don't get to pay for random things for me," I said, trying to think of yet another way to explain to a very rich tiger shifter who cared nothing for money that he couldn't just spend it on me anytime he felt like I needed something.

He'd given me an *in-ground pool* for my birthday, for Pete's sake. I'd rationalized keeping the gift, because:

1. It's awfully hard to return an in-ground pool that's already installed, and
2. I really, really loved it, and
3. I'd offend a cranky river nymph who'd helped design it if I did, and
4. Jack really, really loved it, too, because:
5. Tigers, unlike a lot of other cats, *love* water.

"The security system wasn't only for you. My office connects to your shop, remember?"

"And the cameras at my house?"

There was a pause.

Then, all in one breath, he tried out a ridiculous excuse: "They're for me, too, because I sleep better when I know

you're safe. You wouldn't want to give me insomnia, would you?"

I was spared from answering *that*, because we were turning into the tiny parking lot at the new vet clinic.

"What now?" Jack said grimly, and then he muttered something beneath his breath that could have blistered paint.

I looked up from the dog and gasped. The cute little cottage that held the new vet in town's clinic had graffiti painted across the windows in large, uneven letters:

DOGS RULE, CATS DROOL

"I—do you suppose it's some weird marketing thing she's doing?"

"I would seriously doubt it." Jack jumped out of the truck, opened the back door, and gently lifted out the injured dog. I followed him inside.

The interior of the clinic was bright and cheerful. Butter-yellow walls sported framed prints of various happy-looking dogs, cats, rabbits, and even ferrets. Notices of dog training and pet sitting covered a bulletin board near the door. A smiling man wearing a shirt patterned with balloons and puppies sat behind the reception desk, but the waiting area was empty.

"Phin!" I rushed over to the desk. "I haven't seen you in forever!"

We'd gone to high school together, where he'd been one of the kindest people on the planet, and it had been far too long since we'd caught up.

Phineas Hunter's golden-brown eyes sparkled in his brown face. He strode out from behind the desk—as tall and skinny as he'd been when he was president of the Dead End High Science Club—and hugged me, which was safe, since I'd touched him before I knew much about my gift. He was a null to me—I'd never seen a vision of his death, and it had always only happened on the first time someone touched me.

“I know! I just moved back last week to work here and take care of Mom.”

“Welcome home.”

He patted my arm and then stepped over to Jack. “Hey, Mr. Shepherd. Let’s look at your dog. Charithra is free right now, not that she wouldn’t stop for an emergency.”

I blew out a breath. Phin had been a vet tech for years, and his air of calm and compassionate confidence helped relieve a bit of my concern for the dog.

“Charithra?”

“Dr. Kumari,” he said absently, his gentle fingers examining the dog’s leg.

The dog, awake now, her liquid dark eyes filled with pain, whimpered and panted, but made no move to bite or even growl, both of which I might have done if I had a broken leg and strange people were messing with it. This dog was as heroic as she was beautiful.

I wondered how Lou would feel about a dog joining our household.

“I don’t want to add to her stress by taking her from you and jostling that bone,” Phin said. “If you’d bring her back with me, Mr. Shepherd—”

“Call me Jack. And of course. She’s not our dog, though. Someone may have dumped her on the road across from Tess’s shop. A woman accidentally struck the dog with her car and then carried her over to the shop to get help.”

I didn’t question how Phin knew who Jack was. This was Dead End. He’d probably heard about Jack from his mom approximately five minutes after Jack had moved back to town in January.

I followed them to the exam room. It had the expected metal table, posters of dogs and cats and what they should weigh, and cabinets undoubtedly filled with supplies. The bright green-and-white striped walls were unexpected, though.

I had a feeling the vet would be somebody I would like a lot if this was how she decorated.

Jack gently placed the dog on the table, and Phin murmured soothing noises to her while stroking her head. Her eyes rolled around, though, and her panting and whimpers sped up.

“Poor girl,” I said. “Pain, stress, and fear are not a great combination.”

The door opened, and a woman in a long white coat with *Dr. Kumari* embroidered over the chest pocket entered, her eyes going straight to the injured dog.

“Hello, lovely girl,” she crooned, gently touching the dog’s head, quickly examining her, and then giving her an injection. “Here’s a bit of pain medicine for you, sweetheart. We’ll have you feeling better in no time, won’t we? Who’s a good girl?”

The dog’s tail lifted in a hesitant wag. The medication must have taken effect immediately, thank goodness.

Dr. Kumari raised her head and smiled at me and Jack. “We’ll fix her right up, I promise. Phin, if you’d bring the portable x-ray? This looks like a simple fracture, but there may be internal injuries. How did this happen?”

“Car accident,” I told her. “She darted out in front of a woman’s car by my shop, and we brought her right here.”

Dr. Kumari’s shoulders relaxed slightly, and I realized she may have been concerned that *we* had hurt the dog. Vets probably saw awful things.

“I’m Tess Callahan. I own Dead End Pawn. And this is Jack Shepherd, from Tiger’s Eye Investigations.”

“Charithra Kumari. The new vet in town, although you probably knew that,” she said, with a lovely, lilting accent, flashing a bright smile at us.

As they moved the machine into place, Jack and I retreated to the corner of the room, out of the way, and I studied Dr. Kumari.

She was tiny, as short as Molly, with dark hair rolled up in a chignon and golden-brown skin. She had gorgeous dark brown eyes that shone with intelligence as she focused her gaze on the dog.

I started to ask her about why she'd moved to Dead End to start her practice, but I'd barely opened my mouth to speak when Jack suddenly grabbed my arm and pushed me behind him.

"You just told her: 'You're going to be okay. You're safe. What a beautiful girl you are,'" he said in a flat voice.

Dr. Kumari's eyes flared wide, and she looked almost ... afraid?

But why?

I pulled my arm out of Jack's grasp and moved to stand next to him. "What is going on, exactly?"

"I'd like to know that, too," he said in a dangerously low voice. "Dr. Kumari, are you a witch?"

T^{ess}

The vet straightened her shoulders, her mouth flattening into a grim line. “I am not. I simply have a gift with animals. Which you somehow heard. So, my question, Mr. Shepherd, is this: are *you* a witch?”

“Okay. What is happening? I want to know right now,” I said firmly.

Dr. Kumari blew out a shaky breath. “Your friend heard what I said to the dog and just repeated it word for word.”

I shrugged, relieved. “Oh, is that all? He has superior hearing—”

“What she said telepathically, Tess.” Jack’s face was grim. “What kind of gift?”

“I can communicate with animals on a nonverbal level,” she said. “What I don’t understand is how you heard me. Are you a telepath, too?”

Phin’s mouth made an O of understanding. “No, or at least I don’t think so, Charithra. He’s a tiger.”

Her eyes widened. “*You’re* the tiger shifter?”

Jack nodded, the tension in his face relaxing. “I am. So that’s probably why I heard you.”

She nodded. “Okay. This is fascinating, but we’ll have to discuss it later. Right now, I need to set and cast this sweet girl’s leg. Please wait for us in the waiting area.”

I wrapped my fingers around Jack's and led him out of the exam room. I took a seat, but he paced restlessly.

"Not everybody is a potential enemy, Jack," I finally said, after he crossed in front of me for the tenth time. "There are many people in Dead End with supernatural gifts, you know. It may be why she moved here."

He turned away from the window and looked at me, his eyes shadowed. "After ten years of constantly having to be wary of danger, it's not always that easy to turn it off. When I heard her voice in my head, it triggered memories of some ... *unpleasant* experiences."

I could only imagine. "Vampires trying to enthrall you?"

"Yes. And worse. There are magic practitioners in the world who make the ones you've met seem like amateurs."

Since the witch who'd tried to kill my sister, me, and Jack had practiced blood magic—the worst of the worst—this was not welcome news. Not all that surprising, since I read a lot and knew what was going on in the world, but definitely not welcome.

Since the vampires, shifters, Fae, witches, and other supernatural creatures had announced their existence to the world more than a decade ago, humanity had realized that most fairy tales were based on actual history, not myth.

It hadn't been the easiest truth to swallow for most people in the world. But here in Dead End, we'd known about—and lived next door to—supernatural creatures and people with special "gifts" for a very long time before that, so we weren't surprised by the news.

"It feels like having a Dr. Doolittle gift is pretty benign," I ventured. "Especially for a vet. What could be more perfect?"

Jack's forehead furrowed. "Who's Dr. Doolittle? Is she the vet who had this practice before?"

I laughed. Sometimes, Jack's confusion about cultural references caught me off guard. He'd grown up with an uncle who was more interested in seeking historical artifacts than sharing movies, TV, or books with a growing boy. I'd loved

Jeremiah, but he hadn't been anywhere near a "normal" father figure.

He'd loved Jack and fiercely protected him even when puberty had hit and Jack's shapeshifter gift had manifested, though, which made him a star in my book.

"Not Dr. Doolittle," Phin said, grinning as he walked back into the waiting area. "Dr. Sackham ran the practice here, which is why I left."

"He was a bad employer?" I hadn't heard that.

"No, but he had an addiction problem."

"Drugs?" Jack asked.

"Bowling."

Jack blinked and then rolled his eyes. "Sure. Why not?"

"Yeah, he got out of the vet business altogether, and now he drives around the country in an RV competing in bowling tournaments."

I nodded. "Oh, I remember now. Uncle Mike and Aunt Ruby said he was in a big fight at the national bowling association level over whether werewolves could compete with ordinary humans or needed their own league."

"They have superhuman strength," Jack said. "But is that an advantage in bowling? I'd think *aim* would be more important."

He looked at me, and I shrugged. I'd never bowled a game in my life. The idea of wearing rented shoes gave me the creepy crawlies. Before we could discuss bowling and werewolves any further, Dr. Kumari walked out into the room.

"She's going to be just fine. We've put a cast on her leg, and I've given her another sedative and have an IV going. She's a touch dehydrated, but other than that and the leg, she's in perfect shape. Hard to believe she was a stray."

"Thank you so much," I said, standing. "Of course, I'll pay for any treatment."

Jack raised an eyebrow. “Technically, I brought her here. I’ll pay.”

“We *both* brought her here,” I protested.

“My truck,” he said, as if that settled the matter, and walked over to reception to settle up with Phin.

Dr. Kumari glanced back and forth between the two of us, looking bewildered. “Okay. We’ll bill you only for our cost since she’s a stray. And we’ll take wonderful care of her, don’t worry.”

“Thank you,” I said. “She has to stay overnight?”

“Yes. I have a nighttime tech. We’re just getting started, as you can see.” She nodded to the empty waiting room. “But I’m hoping things will pick up, as people learn there’s a vet in town.”

She turned to Jack, a challenge in her flashing eyes and raised chin. “Are *we* all right?”

He studied her for a long moment and then nodded. “We’re all right. Sorry for the suspicion. I’m trying to get over that.”

The vet’s expression gentled. “Yes. I can imagine it’s difficult. Thank you for everything you did for all of us during the war. My brother ... my brother almost died in a rogue vampire attack. Your people saved him. I actually met Quinn Dawson. She is quite extraordinary, isn’t she?”

Jack smiled. “Yes, she is.”

I stood there, feeling awkward and trying not to look as *un*extraordinary as I felt whenever Quinn’s name came up. She and Jack had been the co-leaders of the rebellion and had been closer than best friends for a very long time.

“Her husband healed Arjun,” she said, her eyes looking at a memory only she could see. “He was quite terrifying, but an amazing healer.”

Jack laughed. “Yeah. That describes Alaric.”

“Back to the dog,” Dr. Kumari said, all business again. “I scanned her, but she has no microchip, which makes it harder

to find where she belongs.”

“You can’t . . . ask her?” I asked. “I mean, if you can talk to animals...”

She smiled but shook her head. “It only goes one way. I can get general things like where it hurts, or if they’re afraid, but they can’t give me their addresses or owners’ names.”

“I’ll put her information out on the Dead End text loop and get my sister and her friends to do flyers,” I said. “But we didn’t have any luck with the other pets.”

When she raised an eyebrow in question, we explained about the strays.

“That is disturbing,” Phin said. “And we’ve got our own unpleasant mystery going on here.” He waved a hand at the graffiti on the windows.

“We were going to ask about that,” Jack said. “Any ideas, or do you think it’s just kids?”

“I think—”

The door flew open, and Deputy Andy Kelly rushed in. “I’m here! We’ll find out—”

He caught sight of us, and his pale white cheeks turned fire-engine red, which contrasted wildly with his red hair and freckles.

“Tess. Jack. I’m here on official police business,” he stammered.

“Okay,” I said, puzzled. Then I glanced at Dr. Kumari, whose cheeks also held a touch of red.

Oh.

Andy had told us the month before that he was taking his mom’s cat to the new vet. Maybe there was an attraction between them?

Or maybe I was just trying to match-make, since I was so happy? I held in my grin and said nothing. Discretion and all that.

My phone buzzed. I pulled it out of my pocket, read the screen, and touched Jack's arm.

"Jack? Lorraine says we need to get to Beau's."

His face lit up. "I'm always ready for lunch. What's the special?"

I sighed. "The special is apparently a big fight between everybody in the place over UltraShopMart. Plus, another fistfight between the two Santas."

Andy groaned. "Not again. I warned those idiots I'd lock them up if they started that again. Charithra, I'm sorry, but I need to go. I'll be back to take your report about this new graffiti."

"Of course," she said. "This town, though—is it always this exciting?"

"You have no idea," I drawled. "Hey, if you and Phin have time, both of you please come to my place for dinner tonight. Just pizza, but I can introduce you to a few friends."

"I'll try," she said. "It always depends on how the animals are doing, of course, and any emergencies that may come up."

Phin nodded. "I'll definitely try. Looking forward to seeing your new house!"

"Andy, you're invited over for pizza tonight, too, if you have time, with Susan out of town," I said.

He bit his lip and glanced at the floor. "I'm not sure I—"

"Charithra may come by," I reminded him.

"I'd love to," he said, his entire face lighting up.

I waved goodbye, and then Jack and I headed out.

"Can we still get lunch?" Jack asked wistfully when we were in the truck, buckling our seatbelts. "I'm hungry."

I started laughing, despite everything. "Jack. You're always hungry."

"You're not wrong."

He pulled out of the parking lot and headed toward Beau's. I almost stayed silent, but I really needed to know.

“Jack?”

“Yeah?”

“I think we need to talk about Quinn.”

He blew out a breath. “Okay. But we're going to need more time than just on the drive to Beau's.”

Somehow, this did not reassure me.

T^{ess}

I pushed open the door to find Beau's in a state of pure chaos with a side order of irrational.

The only diner in town was always the center of gossip, but I'd never seen it filled with people shouting at each other until today. Even when the Irish mob came to Dead End and threatened me, people had been fairly well-mannered about telling them to back off or risk dismemberment.

This? This was about a half-step away from a riot.

And I didn't understand why.

Jack followed me in, took one look around, and roared.

He *roared*.

A tiger's roar was a primal declaration of power and threat. Even other dangerous predators backed down at the sound. Though he was still in human form, Jack's roar nearly blew the roof off the place.

The residents of Dead End were no match for it at all.

Silverware clattered onto tabletops. All conversation and shouting stopped, and every pair of eyes in the restaurant turned to us.

I waved and smiled. "Hey, y'all. How's it going?"

Lorraine, the heart of Beau's for the past half century, grinned at us and hustled over as fast as today's neon-orange

orthopedic shoes could carry her. She handed us menus, not that she'd ever allow us to order from them.

The special was the special at Beau's.

"It's about time someone with sense showed up," she said, her short silver hair shining. "I figured you'd be here. Saved your table by the window."

She turned to the room and waved an arm. "It's only a week till Christmas. Let's have some darned Christmas spirit around here!"

In the corner near the entry to the kitchen, two Santas in full regalia stood inches apart, fists clenched, red-faced, and out of breath. One of them—Darryl—had what was definitely going to be a real beauty of a black eye, and the other—Rooster—had a bloody nose.

"What is going *on*?" I'd thought I was whispering, but everybody in a ten-foot radius answered me, all of them speaking simultaneously and so fast it was hard to make out who was saying what.

"Rooster said he was the only Santa—"

"Darryl swung first, after Rooster said people from Nashville were wimps—"

"That UltraShopMart guy is offering money to everybody, but—"

"Don't want no corporate overlords in Dead End," a very familiar voice shouted. I turned to see Otis hunched over a table with the Peterson brothers from Dead End Hardware. Otis had brought Fluffy into my life in a roundabout way that had involved multiple pawns and a few hundred dollars. Since Otis hadn't had a job in maybe forty years, I wasn't sure exactly what he thought corporate overlords might be and didn't really want to find out.

Jack shook his head. "This is worse than I thought."

"That our peaceful little town is devolving into shouting and fist fights?"

"No. Lorraine just told me they're out of strawberry pie."

I heaved a sigh and sank into a chair, but then popped right back up out of it when Santa Darryl took a swing at Santa Rooster.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” I shouted. “Santa, leave Santa alone! What is *wrong* with you two?”

Jack reached for my hand, but I easily evaded him and stormed over to the angry Clauses and turned first to the one I knew.

“Rooster! I’m surprised at you!”

Rooster Jenkins, who was roughly the size of a fire truck, gave me a sheepish look and wiped blood from his nose with the back of his hand. He was far too old for shenanigans like this.

“Aw, Tess. I’m sorry. We just got carried away. Darryl’s been telling everybody he’s the real Santa, and I’m just a ... fake. He even used foul language, but I won’t repeat that in front of a lady.”

A harsh bark of laughter interrupted whatever I’d been about to say. Darryl, who was maybe a foot shorter than Rooster and all stringy muscle and scowl, sneered at me. “What *lady*? That’s just the freak who owns the pawn shop and pretends she knows how you’re gonna die.”

I turned to face the rude Santa, only to see his hand coming right at me, as if to shove me out of the way. But, just then, a different, very familiar hand shot out between the two of us and slammed Darryl’s arm away.

This hand had claw-tipped fingers.

Darryl gulped loudly and stumbled back. “I wasn’t going to touch her. I just—”

“You will *never* touch her,” Jack said in a quiet, deadly voice that shimmered with violence. “You will also apologize to her for what you said.”

Darryl’s eyes tightened, but he looked at Jack’s face and muttered an “I’m sorry” in the direction of my shoes. Then he turned and stomped through the restaurant and out the door.

I gave Jack a look but pitched my voice low. “Remember how we talked about your overprotective tendencies?”

His brows drew together. “*That* man was about to slam his grocery cart into you.”

I sighed and pinched my nose between my fingers and thumb. “Jack. That man in Target was probably eighty years old.”

“Which is why I simply blocked his way,” he said, giving me his best innocent face.

He was trying. I knew he was. Since we’d been ... intimate, he’d become about a thousand times more protective than before, which was saying a lot.

I just shook my head and resolved to discuss it with him later, at home. Meanwhile, I patted Rooster’s arm. “Maybe Lorraine can give you some ice for that nose?”

Jack stared at Rooster. “What is this Santa beef about, anyway?”

“I’ve been Santa at City Hall for over forty years. But about ten years ago, Emeril and Harold Peterson started having their cousin from Nashville come down to spend the holidays with them. They got him to dress up and give out candy to the kids at the hardware store. Which is fine. I don’t mind a little friendly competition. But this year, that rat *b—boy* has been telling the kids that I’m a fake. I asked him to stop doing it when I ran into him this morning and things got ugly.”

The rat boy was probably forty-five or fifty years old, but I was sure *boy* was better than whatever Rooster had been about to say.

“I’m going to get ice,” he muttered, before trudging toward the kitchen.

I sighed and threw my hands in the air, then followed Jack back to our table. The Peterson brothers talked to Rooster for a few minutes before making their way over to us.

Both were frowning.

“Jack, Tess,” Harold said. I’d finally learned how to tell them apart. Harold parted his hair on the left, Emeril on the right. I just called them both Mr. Peterson, but I liked to know.

“We’re sorry about Darryl. That boy was always a problem, but since his wife left him, he’s been going around looking for fights. And now, with this UltraShopMart thing, it’s worse.”

“What *is* going on with the UltraShopMart?” I knew Aunt Ruby would fill me in, but I’d been out of the shop when the USM rep had stopped by to talk to me. Eleanor had said he had a face like a ferret and that she’d “gotten a bad feeling about him.”

I’d learned that Eleanor’s instincts were usually pretty good when she wasn’t caught up in some crazy scheme with Lorraine or my Aunt Ruby, so I was hoping he didn’t stop back by.

I doubted he would. It was probably just a courtesy call.

Or a chance to laugh at the small business owners before he bankrupted us all.

“They want to put in an enormous store, one of their all-in-one places, right on the edge of Dead End. All the business owners in town have been getting mail about it. Didn’t you?”

I shook my head, but then thought about it. “I got a couple of letters from them, but I figured they were junk mail. They’re on my desk back at the shop.”

Speaking of the shop ...

“Excuse me,” I said politely, and then I called Eleanor, filled her in, and asked her what I could bring her for lunch.

“Nothing, dear. Bill is making me his famous chicken dumplings for a late lunch, and then we’re meeting the travel agent to talk about honeymoon plans.”

I smiled. It was lovely when good things happened to good people, and Eleanor was one of the best. Nice to hear a moment of joy on an otherwise crappy day.

I sent up a silent prayer that the dog was doing okay, too.

“Okay, I’ll see you—” I glanced out the window and jumped up again. This time, the Santas were rolling around on the sidewalk, throwing punches at each other. “Jack!”

He looked, muttered something, and shoved his chair back. Then we both headed for the door, the Petersons hot on our heels. Just when we got to the door, it swung open and my new sister, Shelley, walked in carrying her backpack, wearing jeans, a Dead End Elementary jacket, and pink sneakers.

Her gaze immediately arrowed to me, and her little face crumpled.

“Tess! Why is Santa Claus fighting?”

T_{ess}
Oh, no.

Shelley was only nine years old, at least for the next few days, and I'd never thought to find out if she still believed in Santa Claus. My brain stuttered to a stop.

“Um ...”

Jack gave me a sideways glance, then strode over to Shelley and scooped her up for a hug.

“Jack! I'm too old to be picked up,” she scolded him, but the giggles undermined her attempt to be stern.

Beyond them, I could see through the glass door that Andy had arrived on the scene and was dealing with the dueling Santas. I caught Jack's gaze and nodded to the door, and he quickly caught on, turned, and carried Shelley, who was still giggling, to our table. He gave her the seat next to him, and I sat back down and took a deep breath.

“You know, Shelley,” I began cautiously. “Neither of those guys is the *real* Santa. They're just helpers. The real Santa lives at the North Pole, and—”

She dumped the sugar packets out onto the table, slid half of them to Jack, and rolled her eyes at me.

“I *know* Santa's not real, Tess. I'm almost ten.”

I slumped in my chair, not sure whether I was relieved or disappointed. Children *should* have magic in their lives.

Especially those who'd suffered tragedies, like Shelley. They should dream of dancing on stars, sliding down rainbows, and flying through the night sky on winged unicorns.

And—now that we knew unicorns really existed—kids should believe in Santa, too. Of course, Shelley had her own kind of magic, so maybe she didn't need Santa? Still. It made me a little sad.

Jack, who'd immediately started building a complicated tower with his share of the sugar packets, a few tiny butter tubs, and all the strawberry jam containers, shook his head. "That's actually not true. I've met Santa Claus," he said absently, his focus on his slightly leaning construction. "Lives in a palace in the Winter Fae lands. The only known portal is on Kaffeklubben Island, off the northern tip of Greenland."

Shelley's eyes narrowed. "Don't mess with me, Jack. I'm not a *child*."

She looked like a tiny schoolteacher reprimanding a roomful of rowdy kids. I had to bite my lip against the laugh bubbling up.

"Neither was I when I met him," he said. "I was on a rescue mission."

"You had to rescue *Santa Claus*?" I knew better. I really, truly knew better than to ask him about his many and mysterious past adventures but come *on*.

He laughed. "Of course not. Don't be silly, Tess."

I sat back in my chair. "That's what I thought. The—"

"I had to rescue two of the elves."

I dropped my head to the table and banged it gently on the surface a few times.

Shelley's bright blue eyes gleamed, and when she opened her mouth, I knew at least a hundred questions would come flying out, so I was relieved to see Lorraine come back to our table.

"Andy took both of them to the sheriff's office to talk some sense into them," she said grimly. "What are they

thinking to act like this where children might see them?”

Shelley sighed. “Aunt Lorraine. I know there’s—”

“I wasn’t talking about you, sweet pea,” Lorraine said, ruffling my sister’s light brown hair. “I was talking about Jack.”

Jack grinned. “We’ll discuss this later, Lorraine. Right now, I’m too hungry to argue with you.”

“Me, too! What’s the special?” Shelley asked, sitting up straight.

“Wait,” I said. “Why are you here? Shouldn’t you be in school?”

“There was an unexpected half day because of the stampede.”

I blinked. “Did you say stampede?”

“Yes! Since Mr. Washington retired last month, the high school has had temps for their science teacher. Today they got their new permanent teacher, Mrs. Dempsey.”

Mr. Washington, a snake shifter, hadn’t exactly retired. He’d been captured by a Fae queen after stealing her dagger and kidnapping my Aunt Ruby. He’d done some pretty awful things, but I still had mixed feelings about him. He’d been my science teacher, too.

Lorraine tapped a finger on the table. “Shelley. What happened? Mrs. Dempsey caused a stampede?”

Shelley stole a sugar packet from Jack and added it to her own tower. “I heard she brought some classroom decorations, and one was a small stone gargoyle sculpture, and—”

Jack groaned. “Oh, *no*.”

I looked at the two of them. “Oh, no, what?”

“Gargoyles hibernate, Tess.” He winced. “And they’re huge on family. If a young gargoyle woke up in an unfamiliar place, he’d panic and put out a psychic call, and—”

“And a hundred giant gargoyles stampeded through the high school to rescue him,” Shelley finished, grinning wildly. “It was *outstanding*. We could see it from our windows at the elementary school.”

“I ... what ...” I gave up. I had nothing.

Jack’s forehead furrowed. “What happened to Mrs. Dumpster?”

Shelley giggled. “Mrs. *Dempsey*. She quit. Just packed up her stuff and stormed out, shouting about how she’d heard Dead End is a dangerous place, which isn’t really fair, since she was the one who brought the gargoyle, right?”

“Absolutely,” Lorraine said staunchly. “Now. The special is roast turkey, mashed potatoes and gravy, stuffing, cranberry sauce, and your choice of pumpkin or apple pie. How many do you want?”

I sighed. We’d eaten so much turkey lately I might start gobbling at any minute. “Just a salad for me, please.”

“Please,” I repeated, when she gave me a disapproving look. “I can’t look at another slice of turkey for months. Maybe not even until *next* Thanksgiving.”

Understanding dawned on her face. “Oh. I heard about the Thanksgiving disaster.”

Of course she had.

“Let’s never speak of it,” I mumbled.

“Okay. One salad. Shelley?”

“The special! Can I have both pumpkin AND apple?”

“Yes, you can. Jack?”

He snatched his sugar packet back and grinned at Shelley’s outraged expression. “Four specials for me, please. Two pumpkins, two apples.”

“And ice cream?”

“Is there any other way to eat apple pie?” Jack and Shelley chimed in together.

“JINX!” Shelley shouted. “Now you owe me a favor, Jack.”

Lorraine patted Shelley’s head and headed off to put in our order.

Jack leaned back in his chair and raised an eyebrow. “Is that how that works?”

“Definitely,” she said.

He looked at me for confirmation, and I nodded. “Yep. You said the same thing at the same time, and she clearly called jinx first. You owe the favor.”

Shelley opened her mouth, and I pointed at her. “Nothing that involves skipping school.”

She gave me an injured look. “I wouldn’t. I *love* school.”

Actually, she did. Weird kid.

“So, what’s the favor, princess?” Jack nudged her arm with his. “Help with homework? A trip to Atlantis? Puppy sitting the new pug?”

She bit her lip, looked down at the table, and mumbled something too softly for me to hear. I glanced at Jack, who clearly *had* heard her—his eyes were wide with shock.

I reached over and touched her arm. “What did you say, honey?”

She took a deep breath and looked me in the eye. “I want Jack to go to the Father-Daughter dance with me.”

Jack

I'd taken knife wounds that stunned me less than that single question from the mouth of a nine-year-old girl.

I turned in my seat to face her. "The Father-Daughter dance? I—wouldn't you rather ask Mike?"

She shook her head, hair flying with the vehemence of the motion. "Nope. Uncle Mike and Aunt Ruby went to Grandparents' Day at my school. I ... if you don't want to go ..." Her face, already pink, turned a fiery red, and she bowed her head, her voice trailing off. "It's just, I've never been to this dance. I never had a dad."

I looked at Tess a little wildly. I could face the most dangerous of enemies without flinching, but nothing in my life had prepared me for this courageous, fragile, proud little girl. Tess smiled at me but said nothing, clearly leaving it up to me.

I swallowed past the enormous lump in my throat and put an arm around Shelley's thin shoulders, drawing her to me for a hug. "I'd be honored to go, honey. When is it?"

Shelley beamed at me with her entire face, and her smile lit up the world and cracked my heart wide open.

"It's after New Year when we get back from winter break! YAY! I have to text all my friends!" She pulled out her phone, fingers flying. "This is SO AWESOME!"

As Tess liked to put it, Shelley was at the stage where she said most things in capital letters. Not quite a shout, but

definitely ... enthusiastic.

After that, thankfully, the conversation turned to less emotionally fraught subjects. Lots of people stopped by to see what Tess and I thought about the UltraShopMart, to chat about the dueling Santas, or just to say hello, while we ate our lunch. Tess knew everybody, of course, but it surprised me to realize I knew most of them, too. The year in Dead End had turned me into something I'd never been since I was a kid: a member of a community.

I liked it. Shocked the heck out of me, but I really liked it.

I glanced at Tess, whose beautiful blue eyes sparkled as she talked to Sherlock Ermintrude, who was alone for a change, without any of the animals he frequently rescued. Her salad sat, mostly untouched, because she'd been too busy talking to eat.

Shelley finished her second piece of pie and stealthily reached for one of mine.

I narrowed my eyes and pointed at her. "Busted!"

She grinned. "I might be a tiger, too, Aunt Ruby says, because I eat so much."

"You'd be the cutest tiger cub, ever," I told her, nudging the pie toward her. "Just don't get sick. Remember the funnel cake."

She rolled her eyes at me. "Jack. That was because of the ride, not the funnel cake."

When she turned her focus to the pie, I listened in on conversations all over the restaurant while pretending to look out the window. Most of the sentiment seemed to lean toward "no way" on the UltraShopMart issue, but a few people were talking about the jobs and the influx of money to the town from the corporate taxes.

There were also pockets of chat about a lot of petty crime like the graffiti at the vet's, which surprised me. Dead End wasn't a hotbed of crime—various murders in the past year aside—and usually people pretty quickly caught any kids acting out.

I paid for lunch, Tess insisted on leaving the tip, and then we slowly made our way back out, stopping to say hi to anybody we hadn't talked to yet.

"I need to get to the shop," Tess said as we climbed into the truck. "Shelley, want to come hang out with me?"

"Nope. I have to go to Zane's. We're going to work on our film."

"Your film?" I glanced at her. "Let me guess: horror?"

She shuddered. "No way. We're doing a documentary about the history of Dead End. Grandpa Jed said he'd help."

"You're doing a documentary?" I didn't try to hide my admiration. "At your age, I think I was still eating paste."

Shelley turned a puzzled face to me. "What's paste?"

Tess and I both started laughing, and then I explained paste to a girl who'd grown up with glue sticks. By the time we arrived at Dave and his son Zane's house, Shelley was "totally disgusted."

I climbed out of the truck to walk her to the porch, but before Shelley followed me, she leaned toward me and kissed my cheek.

"Thank you, Jack," she whispered.

I hugged her, feeling a strange pang in my chest. "You're welcome, sweetheart. And don't forget, we have to find you the fanciest dress in Florida for that dance."

"Really?" Her eyes lit up. "I LOVE sparkles!"

"All the sparkles."

"What will you wear?"

I tilted my head. "I can't wear a sparkly dress, too?"

She shrugged. "Of course you can. You can't borrow any of Tess's, though—you're too tall. We can shop together!"

I grinned. "Maybe I'll wear a tuxedo, instead. I don't want to frighten anyone with my hairy legs."

Just then, Zane burst out the front door and waved. “Shelley! We have ALL the junk food!”

Tess sighed. “Oh, goody. Shelley, remember the funnel cake—”

Shelley groaned. “Will everybody stop bringing that up already?”

“*Bringing that up.*” I chuckled. “Get it? Because you *brought up* the funnel cake?”

Shelley put her hands on her hips and frowned at me. “Enough. Also, if you have to explain a joke, it wasn’t very funny.”

“Ouch,” Tess said, her eyes dancing with amusement. “She told you.”

We waved goodbye to the budding Spielbergs and headed for Tess’s shop, so she could relieve Eleanor and finish the day.

At Dead End Pawn, I kissed Tess goodbye for at least five minutes, but that probably doesn’t belong in a case report.

[Sorry, Tess, I’m just feeling smug.]

On my way home to do chores, Dave Wolf called.

“Hey, sorry I missed you when you dropped Shelley off. I was out back doing some painting. How’s it going?”

“I’m going to a Father-Daughter dance,” I blurted out.

“What? You have a kid?”

“No! I mean with Shelley!”

“That’s great. Shelley deserves to have nothing but wonderful times after what happened to her.”

“I’m not really father material. I’m more ‘point me toward the bad guys, so I can rescue the hostages.’”

He laughed. “You’ll be great. I think Tess is civilizing you.”

I caught myself grinning at the thought.

“Hey, not to change the subject,” Dave said, “but have you heard anything about a theft ring operating in Dead End recently?”

“A little, at Beau’s.”

“They hit one of my construction sites. Stole about two grand in tools. I filed a police report for my insurance, and Andy said there has been a spate of minor crimes. Somebody keeps painting graffiti on the vet’s clinic, for example.”

“Yeah, we saw that. Most of what I picked up at Beau’s was about the UltraShopMart and the Santas fighting, though.”

“USM has already been in touch with me about doing some of the work for the construction. Minor stuff, of course. They have major contractors who do the big stuff. But a quick scan of the contract shows that it is *heavily* in favor of them. It’s the worst, most unfair contract I’ve ever seen, to be honest.”

“Are you going to turn them down?”

He blew out a breath. “I don’t know. It’s a lot of work, even with the bad terms, so we’d pick up a lot of money. I have people on the payroll who’d appreciate the extra work. I just don’t know. But you and Tess need to watch out.”

I could feel a growl rising in my throat. “Why is that?”

“There were some preliminary blueprints attached to the copy of the contract. I don’t think he meant for me to see them. They had a big garden center plotted out right where your office and the pawnshop are.”

“Not a chance,” I told him. “We’re not moving.”

“Yeah, that Craven guy is pretty weaselly. Just watch your back.”

I thanked him for the heads-up, and we hung up. Before I’d even put the phone down, it rang again. I answered without thinking, figuring he was calling back.

“Dave?”

“No, Mr. Shepherd. This is Delvaney Craven from UltraShopMart. I’d like to talk to you about your property—”

“Nope.” I hung up.

Then I drove home, wondering where exactly I was going to get a sparkly tuxedo.

T_{ess}

Eleanor headed off to her lunch date and travel agency appointment with Bill, and I waited on the steady stream of customers looking for a unique Christmas gift. In between sales and a few pawns, I called the Piersons and Mrs. Quindlen about the presents.

Mrs. Pierson was understandably miffed and said she'd already reported the theft to Andy. I told her I'd talk to him and apologized again.

Mrs. Q just laughed, though. "If it's not one thing, it's another in this wacky town."

I loved that woman.

Everybody I'd invited over for pizza backed out on me. Aunt Ruby was too busy with UltraShopMart stuff. Uncle Mike had a donkey with an earache. Charithra and Phin took in an emergency surgery for a goat who'd eaten a wrench. Andy, after he found out about Charithra, said he'd be too busy with Susan out of town. I asked them over for Saturday, instead, and then I texted Jack:

Just you and me for dinner. Don't need as many pizzas.

Jack:

Got it. I'll be there around 7. Doing some work at the house.

Me:

Is your granddad back yet?

Jack:

LOL. No, he's still basking in the undivided attention of the entire history department at UCF. He should be back tomorrow.

Right before closing, Otis ambled in with Beauty, the retired greyhound he'd adopted. The dog deserved her name; she was silky gray with huge brown eyes. She immediately headed over to me and sat patiently at the right edge of the counter, which is where the drawer that held dog treats was. I suspected the dog might be smarter than Otis.

To be fair, my cat was probably smarter than me, too.

I smiled at them and handed her a dog biscuit. "Otis, Beauty."

She delicately took the treat from my hand and munched on it while I studied Otis. He looked better than he had in a while—not that he ever looked bad, just sort of worn. He was in his seventies and might weigh a hundred twenty pounds—if he was carrying a five-pound bag of sugar—and usually dressed in various forms of camo and khaki. But today he was wearing newish blue jeans and a sweater with no holes in it.

He flashed his gap-toothed smile at me, and I got nervous. Whenever Otis tried to be charming, it usually cost me money.

"Saw you down at Beau's, Tess. Made me think about this coin I found. Maybe it's worth something?" He dug around in his pocket for a few seconds and then placed a gold coin on the counter.

This was new. Otis was usually more of a "pawn my badly taxidermied animal" customer. That's how I'd gotten Fluffy, our shop mascot.

"Okay," I said. "Let me put up the sign and get my magnifying glass."

The shop was empty, since it was just before six, and I was ready to go home, anyway. I walked over to the door and turned my sign from OPEN to CLOSED.

After I crossed back to the counter, petting Beauty's head on the way, I pulled my glass out from the drawer. Then I put the coin on a small piece of black cloth I kept for looking at jewelry and coins and studied both sides.

Then I whistled and looked up at him. "Otis. This is a serious coin, I think. I'm not a particular expert, but I've learned a bit over the years from all the coins Shelley dug up with her metal detector. But I think this is Spanish gold. Where did you find it?"

He put his hands in his pockets and leaned back on his heels, not meeting my eyes. "Oh, you know, Tess. I'm always wandering about. Serious coin, huh?"

I nodded, examining it. "You'd be better off contacting—"

I froze. I'd been about to mention Dr. Parrish, the coin expert I'd used in the past. But she was dead. Another Dead End murder.

There'd been a lot of that going around this year.

I sighed. "I need to find a new expert. Or you can take it to a shop that specializes in coins. I'm not—"

He shook his head. Vigorously. "No way. I don't trust them people in the big cities. You've always given me a fair shake. I want you to do it."

It was nice to hear he trusted me, but I'd need to do some research. "Okay, then. How about I take pictures of it and—"

"Nah." He scratched Beauty's ears, and she looked up at him with total adoration. "You keep it. Just let me know what you find out. I've got enough for Christmas presents."

An uncomfortable feeling squeezed my heart. "Otis? Do you have plans for Christmas dinner? If you're on your own, you're more than welcome to come have dinner with me and my family."

He grinned at me. "Tess, that's awfully sweet of you, but I'm going to my cousin's in Orlando. They always have everybody over and make a huge spaghetti for Christmas

dinner with tons of meatballs. It's like the true meaning of Christmas."

"Family?"

"Meatballs."

"Sure. Okay, I'll give you a receipt for the coin—"

"Don't need one."

"I need one. I have to be sure to keep all my records in tip-top shape, or I get in trouble."

He shrugged, his attention on the bin of Dead End Pawn hats. "Okay. Hey, how much for a hat? I sure like that picture of Fluffy."

"No charge for you, Otis. I wouldn't have Fluffy without you."

He glanced at his former alligator, who was sitting on a high shelf behind the counter overseeing the store.

"Thanks, Tess. I kinda miss her."

"Shelley really loves her, too," I told him, hoping to head off any chance of him asking to buy her back. Now that she starred in my shop logo and merchandise, I'd grown kind of fond of the old girl.

I took digital photos of the coin and a few Polaroids, too, and attached two of them to Otis's receipt. We signed the paperwork to make everything official. I just needed to lock the coin in my vault until I had time to have it appraised.

"Do you—would you like an advance on funds?" I didn't want to embarrass him, but Otis had needed cash more often than not in the past.

"Nope." He raised his chin and squared his thin shoulders. "Got a part-time job out at the nursery. The plant kind, not the little kid kind. I don't know much about kids."

I pressed my lips together to hold in the grin. "That's great! How do you like working with the goblins?"

Folk-singing goblins owned and operated the Dead End Nursery. They were super nice people and Dead End's only hippies.

"Oh, they're great. They're always trying to feed me up, though. And they sing. Lots and lots of singing." He shook his head. "Least they got nice voices."

I narrowed my eyes. "What are you trying to say?"

My ... less than optimal ... singing voice was well known in Dead End.

He blinked and then seemed to realize what I was asking. His cheeks flooded with pink. "No! No, I wasn't saying anything about you. I heard you're getting better, even. Singing at church and all. Emeril Peterson was saying he hardly had to stock ear plugs at the hardware shop anymore."

"Gee, thanks," I said dryly.

"Anyway, let me know. I need to get Beauty home for her dinner."

"I will. It may not be until after the holidays, though," I warned him. "It's hard to reach experts this time of year."

"No worries." He shrugged. "I've got eleven more, just like that one, by the way. Merry Christmas, Tess."

He let himself out, leaving me staring after him in shock. Twelve Spanish gold coins! If they were authentic, they might be worth a small fortune.

Enough to buy all the meatballs he and Beauty could ever eat.

I packed up and headed out, looking forward to getting off my feet. I was halfway home in my new Mustang when my phone rang.

"Hey, Jack. What's up?"

"I'm finishing up painting the porch swing. I'll stop by and get the pizza, and I should be over in half an hour."

"That's fine. I'm looking forward to a long shower and a giant glass of iced tea. Maybe a nap."

There was a pause.

“Jack?”

His low, raspy chuckle gave me the shivers.

In a good way.

“Tigers *love* showers, Tess. Maybe wait for me?”

I almost ran my car off the road.

T*ess*

I dropped off the stolen gifts at the Piersons' house and at Mrs. Q's. Both Mrs. Pierson and Mrs. Q invited me in for cookies and tea. I thanked them, but I was just too tired to be sociable. In fact, I was even glad everybody had backed out of pizza tonight. I still had to work tomorrow, after all.

Driving up the little road to my house, I honked as I passed Carlos's place to let him know it was me. Having a vampire for a neighbor meant I never saw him during the day, but it was oddly reassuring that he was just down the street during the nights. He and Jack had even become friends after some early wariness. Carlos was on the vampire high council, and Jack had certainly had some run-ins with that group during the rebellion. But Carlos had assured us he and others had purged the council of its rotten apples.

It had led to a silly discussion about vampire apples, but I blamed my extra glass of Shiraz for that.

My little house was more of a cottage. One story painted white with deep blue storm shutters and a flower bed out front. Plus, of course, a swing on the front porch. That had been one of my first improvements to the house when I'd bought it.

I loved every inch, and every bit looked and felt and smelled like home.

I parked in the driveway and bounded up the stairs to the front door. Lou, who'd been napping on the back of the couch, stretched and purred when she saw me. I kicked off my shoes,

dropped my keys in the bowl, put my bag on the old wooden chest that served as my coffee table, and sank down on the couch to cuddle my cat.

After she sniffed me and made known—loudly—her displeasure at the scent of the dog on my clothes, she let me rub her furry belly to make it up to her. I told her about my day, and everything obviously fascinated her. At least until she meowed loudly, informing me it was dinnertime for cats in this household.

I grabbed my phone, and we moved into the kitchen, where I gave her a can of chicken deliciousness and poured myself a glass of iced tea. Then I sat down at the table to wait for Jack and the pizza and decided I ought to check the Dead End town text loop, just in case.

Bad idea.

Bad.

The texts were flying fast and furious, and few people were even attempting to be civil. Some were pro UltraShopMart, but most were against the shopping center. One thing I hadn't known was that they'd already broken ground. Bulldozers had moved in and started excavating already. Somebody'd posted that UltraShopMart had hired a wizard to cast a look-away spell, which was evidently common practice in this kind of thing, to keep protestors away. It had worked, and on sound, too; I'd never heard the heavy machinery. They owned the property, but, wow, they must be pretty confident they'd get permission to build in Dead End, which surprised me.

Unless they knew something I didn't. But I was pretty sure Aunt Ruby would have told me if she and the town council had agreed to allow it. From the sounds of the texts, it was still very much an open question.

And—joy—she'd scheduled a town hall meeting for “all business owners and other interested parties” for Monday. And the UltraShopMart representative would be there.

Also, I still didn't know why they wanted to build a garden center on our property, which was pretty far from the site where they were putting the main store. People would have to get in the car and drive ten minutes to travel between the two.

I closed the text loop and noticed a voicemail message from ... "Speak of the devil." I waffled, but finally listened to it.

Miss Callahan, this is Delvaney Craven of UltraShopMart. Please call me. I have an exciting business opportunity for you. My number is —

I clicked off my phone. I wasn't in the mood to think about it and Jack was on his way with pizza. I poured myself a little more iced tea and made a quick salad in my ongoing quest to get Jack to eat more—or any—vegetables, and then I checked the fridge for beer.

Yep. Two bottles left. Jack wasn't much of a drinker, like me, but he did like a beer with pizza.

I realized how easily I'd become accustomed to thinking about Jack's preferences after the past few years of living alone. Maybe it should have made me worry, but an almost incandescent feeling of joy bubbled up inside me. I touched the tiger's eye pendant he'd given me the month before.

He *loved* me.

He loved *me*.

When I heard his truck pull up outside, I went to meet him, carrying Lou.

"Hey, kitten," he said, giving me a wicked grin as he got out of the truck carrying pizza.

"Nope. Not kitten. No animals. Not bunny, or kitten, or turtle, or hamster."

"Hamster?"

I sighed. "Middle school was tough."

He dropped a kiss on my head. "I was talking to Lou, anyway."

“Sure, you were.”

“So, Mr. Craven from UltraShopMart called,” I said, following him into the kitchen. “He said he has an ‘exciting business opportunity’ for me.”

“I think the old snake oil sellers said the same thing,” he drawled, putting the pizza on the table and pulling me into a hug.

I took a deep breath and relaxed into his arms. It was one of my favorite places to be.

“He wants to buy our property where the shop and my office are,” Jack said. “Dave saw the plans when Craven tried to buy strong-arm him into signing a crappy contract for a lot of money to do some work.”

Heat rushed through me, and I took a step back. “I’m not selling! Never!”

Jack gave me a lazy grin. “Me, neither. Problem solved. I heard there was talk of a shower?”

I could feel my cheeks turn pink. “Um. Don’t you want dinner first?”

“Dinner can wait,” he growled.

“Dinner can wait? Wow! You really *do* love me!”

He chased me down the hall to my room, and we were both laughing all the way.

I don’t think I stopped smiling until I walked into my shop the next morning to discover that the cat-burgling Christmas tree had struck again.

T^{ess}

“Oh, *no*,” I moaned to my empty shop. “Not Mrs. Frost, you stupid tree. Why did you have to steal *her* presents? She has a *crossbow*.”

The pile of gifts was even bigger than it had been the day before, but I needed more coffee before I dug through to find out whose presents the tree had stolen this time. I headed to the small kitchen in the back room and started the coffeemaker. While I waited, I called the vet.

“Dead End Veterinary Clinic,” Phin said.

I laughed. “This is Tess. I see you continued our fine Dead End tradition of naming everything as literally as possible.”

“And boring. Don’t forget boring. Charithra wanted to go with something clever, but I gently told her about Dead End residents and their prejudices against ‘funny-sounding names.’”

“How is the dog doing?”

“She’s a trooper. Slept through the night with minimal discomfort, although of course we had the pain meds and fluids going. It’s really a shame she isn’t chipped. Somebody must miss that dog.”

“No luck on any owners coming forward?”

“No. But Deputy Kelly is interested in adopting her if her owners don’t show up. He says she can ride along with him

and be a kind of friendly police dog. He already named her, even.”

“What did he name her?”

“Galadriel.” Phin chuckled. “Once a nerd, always a nerd. He’s going to call her Ellie, though.”

“Hey. Any *Lord of the Rings* name is good with me. I named my cat after Lieutenant Uhura.”

“Oh, that’s right! You were always a huge Star Trek fan.”

“Commander Data liked one of my tweets once before I abandoned Twitter. It made my whole day,” I admitted.

“Brent Spiner? I saw him at MegaCon. He’s so nice and so funny.”

I heard voices in the background and, sure enough, Phin said he had to go.

“Come by tonight for dinner, if you can.”

He promised he’d try, and we hung up. Then I sighed, poured myself a cup of coffee, and called Mrs. Frost.

“Hello! This better not be any telemarketers. I’ve got a crossbow, and I’m not afraid to use it!”

Exactly what I was afraid of.

“Mrs. Frost? This is Tess Callahan. I’m calling to apologize and explain about those Christmas presents you’ve probably noticed are gone...”

By the time I finished explaining, she was cackling with laughter.

“Oh, Tess, you’re better than a tonic, I swear.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that and wasn’t at all sure it was a compliment.

“You know, we were sure we had a haunted tree once when I was a child.”

“Really?” I took a sip of coffee. “Seems unlikely.”

“You’d think, but this is Dead End.”

She had a point.

“My folks were out to dinner, and we were home alone. Something started making a horrible moaning noise, and we were sure it was our tree! We all ran and hid upstairs. We tried to tell Mama and Daddy when they got home, but they’d had a bit too much to drink and just sent us to bed. I swear, I was up all night, terrified of that stupid tree.”

“Really? What happened?”

“I finally fell asleep with my sisters all in bed with me. When sirens woke me up in the middle of the night, I was sure that the tree had done something terrible! Turns out, though, the horrible sound was just old Mr. Gyorsky next door with a raging case of indigestion. He’d been moaning fit to wake the dead all night, and his wife finally woke up and called the ambulance. Do you remember him?”

“No,” I said faintly. “1956 was a bit before my time.”

“Oh, right. Old Mr. Gyorsky. Haven’t thought about him in years. That man could fart like an exploding steam engine. I remember this one time—”

Ack! No!

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Frost, but I have customers coming in. I’ll get these presents back to you today, I promise.”

“No worries. Best to burn that tree, though. That’s the only way to be sure, with these enchanted objects.”

I assured her we’d take care of it and finally got off the call, shaking my head. Farted like an exploding steam engine. Maybe Shelley and Zane could put *that* in their documentary.

I opened the shop and waited on a few customers and did some paperwork during the lulls. Jack, who’d been up and out of the house before I woke up, showed up around ten with donuts.

I needed to find less-generous friends, or I wouldn’t be able to fit into my jeans.

Jack raised an eyebrow at my sweater, recycled from an Ugly Christmas Sweater party years ago.

“Is that ... Rudolph?”

It was. Sort of.

“A friend of Aunt Ruby’s knitted it, and I think she may have been in the early stages of—”

“Hating life?”

“The flu, I was about to say,” I said primly. The purple, green, and orange reindeer—complete with yarn pom-poms in completely random places—looked more like a swamp monster than a reindeer, but I wasn’t going to admit it. “I have one for you, too.”

I rummaged in the box next to the counter and found the monstrosity: it was so large that two of Jack could have fit in it easily. Pink and purple stripes and tiny metal bells covered the entire thing.

The bells were *everywhere*.

All. Over. It.

I shook it, and tiny metallic chimes rang.

One hideous Christmas sweater: three dollars at the thrift shop.

The look on Jack’s face: Priceless.

“You realize you couldn’t pay me enough to wear that sweater,” he said.

“But Jack—”

“Nope. I think we should burn it with the tree.”

“Speaking of trees.” I grinned at him, tossed the sweater back in the box, and told him about Mrs. Frost and the moaning tree/farting neighbor.

He laughed so hard he almost couldn’t catch his breath. “I love this town.”

After that, we sorted through the gifts. There were presents stolen from three different families, besides Mrs. Frost’s. I bagged them up in some oversized totes I had in the back room, and Jack took them out to his car.

When he got back, he headed straight for the tree and unplugged it from the wall, so the built-in lights quit flashing.

“Okay. We’ve had enough of this. I’ll take this bad boy out back and burn it,” he said.

“I think that’s best—”

But the tree didn’t like that idea at all, evidently. Because its lights started flashing and the tree itself whirled around in increasingly fast circles on its base.

The base and lights that also were not plugged in.

“Great,” I groaned. “It’s not just a kleptomaniac tree. It’s a *haunted* kleptomaniac tree.”

I folded my arms across my chest and looked at it. “Listen, tree. You may think you’re scary, but I had a fortune-telling booth in here that did the same thing. Been there, done that. So cut it out.”

The tree’s lights flashed more erratically, but the spinning slowed down.

“There aren’t going to be batteries in this tree, are there?” Jack’s voice was resigned. “It’s just some wacky magic at work.”

“The tree steals presents, Jack. Do you really think a lack of batteries is going to stop it?”

“Let’s deal with it later,” he said. “I need to get some work done in the office.”

He kissed my forehead and headed through the connecting door to his office, probably to make calls to one of his many contacts around the world who specialized in deviant artificial trees. No sooner than his door had closed than mine opened, and a man in a suit walked into my shop.

Expensive suit and shoes? Check.

Expression like he’d walked into the town dump instead of a sparkingly clean shop? Check.

Pasty white ferret-looking face and a bad comb-over? Check.

“Hello, Mr. Craven,” I said cheerfully, years of training in Southern manners not allowing me to just yell at him to get out of my shop.

He flashed the brightest, most insincere smile I’d ever seen and held out his hand.

“Yes, I’m Delvaney Craven. Pleased to meet you, Miss Callahan. I—”

I shook my head, stopping him. “I don’t shake hands.”

His expression didn’t change. So, he’d already known about me. Interesting. Either he thought I was a fake, or he wanted to know how he was going to die. I’d met many people like that, right after the very unwanted publicity surrounding my discovery of my “gift.”

Weirdos.

“Right,” he said, pursing his lips. “I’d like to talk to you about your property here. It’s a nice-enough place.”

He said “nice-enough place” in the same tone of voice I’d use to say *hemorrhoids* or *toenail fungus*.

It was my turn to narrow my eyes. “Yes. It is. And it’s all mine.”

“The bank—”

“The bank has nothing to do with my shop, Mr. Craven. We paid off the mortgage decades ago. And I’m not interested in selling.”

He gave me an oily smile. “We can make it worth your while, Miss Callahan. You could build another shop. A bigger shop. With better inventory. Or, better yet, live a life of leisure on UltraShopMart’s dime.”

“I don’t want another shop,” I said firmly. “Or a life of leisure. I’m not selling. Please leave.”

His expression turned nasty. “We’ll just see what your town council says. Maybe you could look up *eminent domain* when you’re having a slow hour at your little shop.”

That did it. Now I was angry.

“Eminent domain is the right of a government or its agent to expropriate private property for public use, with payment of compensation,” I said in a bored voice. “Maybe *you* could look up the charter for Black Cypress County when you’re having a slow hour in your little quest for world domination. Dead End doesn’t steal our residents’ property out from beneath them.”

He showed his teeth. It wasn’t a smile. “People like you always say that, and people like me always win, Miss Callahan.”

“I don’t think you’ve met any people like me before, Mr. Craven,” I drawled. Then I walked toward him with *my* hand held out. “Shall we shake hands, after all?”

He backed away so fast his butt bumped into the door. “Stay away from me. I know about you. And we’ll just see what Mr. Shepherd has to say. I bet an ex-soldier could use some money, and—”

“Yes,” I interrupted, smiling when I heard a certain sound from next door. “Let’s see what Mr. Shepherd has to say. How about right now?”

I walked over to the connecting door to Jack’s office and opened it, and a quarter ton of Bengal tiger prowled into my shop.

Jack walked toward Craven, lashing his tail, and the UltraShopMart rep’s face turned so pale I was almost afraid he’d faint.

“Jack isn’t interested in selling, either,” I said.

Craven had more guts than his name would suggest, though, because he tried one last time. He looked at Jack. “Does she speak for you?”

Jack opened his powerful jaws and showed the man his teeth.

Jack had really, *really* scary teeth.

“You should take that as a yes,” I said, but Craven was already shoving his way out the door.

Seconds later, we heard tires squeal as he raced out of the parking lot, and I started laughing. Just after Jack turned back to human, though, the door opened again, and a tense woman in her forties or fifties whom I'd never seen before walked in, carrying a box.

Thankfully, the magic of Jack's shapeshift meant he pulled his clothes into it with him. It would be highly inconvenient for him to wind up naked every time he turned back to human.

I grinned at the thought. Okay, I wouldn't *hate* it, but, yeah, inconvenient.

"I need to sell you this clock," she declared, marching forward, placing the box on the counter, and pulling out a beautifully carved cuckoo clock.

"Oh, it's beautiful! And old. Where did you get it?"

She shrugged. "My family has had it forever. My grandfather was originally from Germany, so probably there."

I ran a finger over the wood case, which was carved with stylized birds, wolves, and foxes. "This is Lindenwood, so it's original to the Black Forest," I mused, then looked up to see both of them staring at me.

"I've worked in a pawnshop since I was a teenager. I know stuff," I said, shrugging. "And this is just gorgeous. Are you sure you want to sell it? If it's a family heirloom—"

"Yes," she snapped. "I want to sell it."

That was rude. But some people were embarrassed to have to sell their possessions, and it could lead to anger. I'd seen it before and had a lot of sympathy and patience with it, learned at Jeremiah's side.

"You could pawn it and come back when—"

"No! Do you want to buy it or not?"

I really, really did. But I needed to check it out first.

"Does it work? The gears—"

"Yes, it works," she interrupted again. "In fact, it's nearly eleven o'clock, so you'll see."

She stood back, looked down at her watch, and sighed. “And here you go. The compliment clock in action. Three, two, one—”

The tiny, perfectly carved cuckoo popped out of its little door, made a bobbing motion, spread its wings, and opened its mouth. But instead of the traditional cuckoo sound, it started talking.

“You are so beautiful today! *Cuckoo!*”

I blinked, and then what the woman had said struck me.

“The compliment clock?”

She threw her hands in the air. “Yes! All it does is compliment the owner. All day long. Every hour. It’s great at first. For the first few months, even. But after five years of it, I’m ready to smash it with a baseball bat.”

Jack wandered over and looked at it. “That doesn’t sound so bad,” he said cautiously.

She turned her glare on him. “Sure. You try it. ‘Your eyes are like pools. Your bottom has the roundness of a fine heifer. Your hips are lovely and broad, sure to bear many fine sons.’”

“Heifer?” I looked at the clock again. “Broad hips?”

She sneered at the clock. “I’ve been on a diet for five years, thanks to this clock. My therapist says I have to get rid of it now, before I go over the edge. Apparently, it gives compliments that were flattering in the 1600s.”

Jack coughed, and I could tell he was seconds away from falling over laughing. I jerked my head at the door to his office, and he mumbled something about phone calls and ran away.

Coward.

“Please. *Please*, will you buy this clock?”

I didn’t want a compliment clock any more than I wanted a haunted Christmas tree, but I couldn’t resist the plaintive appeal in her eyes.

I bought the clock.

She thanked me and ran out of the shop like she was afraid I'd change my mind. I polished the lovely wooden case and determined to research its exact provenance, probably after the holidays. Then I got back to work, stopping by it every hour to hear what it had to say.

At noon, it told me my hair was beautiful.

At one, it told me I would have many fat babies.

At two, it told me my embroidery would be renowned throughout the land.

At three, it told me my husband would never beat me.

At three-ten, I put it in the vault.

When I returned to the shop from the back room, a shiny pink bicycle with a giant red bow on the handlebars sat next to the Christmas tree.

Maybe I should call Mr. Craven back. A life of leisure suddenly sounded fantastic.

Jack

After the clock fiasco, I did paperwork and bills for an hour and then got bored. I rounded up the stolen gifts, waited a few minutes to hear the clock tell Tess her hair was beautiful (it was), and then headed out. I felt a bit like Santa myself when I dropped off everybody else's presents at their respective houses—luckily, Tess had figured out which gifts belonged to which family.

And then I stopped by Mrs. Frost's place.

When I parked in front of her two-story Victorian, which she'd painted in authentic shades of yellow, pink, and green, I stepped out of the car.

Holding my hands in the air.

"Mrs. Frost? It's Jack. I'm here with your presents. Don't shoot!"

She toddled out onto the porch and flashed me a huge smile filled with shockingly white dentures. She definitely must have been at the dentist's since the last time I'd seen her, when her smile had been pretty normal.

"That's a beautiful smile, Mrs. Frost," I said, carrying her packages up to her door.

"I told 'em to make me look just like the weather girl on channel ten," she said proudly. "Just like her. I mean, not with that fluffy hair or brainless prattle, but the smile. I wanted the weather girl smile."

She nodded at the door, so I opened it for her and followed her in. “I’m not sure we’re supposed to say weather girl anymore, are we? Where do you want these?”

“Under the tree, young man, where else? And why shouldn’t I call her a weather girl? She can’t be over twenty. Should I say weather woman? Weather person? Sounds ridiculous.” She snorted.

I didn’t know how to argue with that, so I didn’t even try.

“Okay. Tess sends her apologies—”

“You tell that girl not to worry for one second. She’s a sweetheart. Brought me homemade chicken soup after I had my hip surgery.”

She leaned forward and put a hand to the side of her mouth, like she was trying to keep somebody from hearing what she was saying. Since she and I were the only people in the room, I wasn’t sure why, but I bent down toward her.

“Don’t tell her she puts too much pepper in it. Those Irish people never quite know how to spice things, do they?”

Irish people?

I looked around in a futile attempt to figure out what to say. The only other inhabitant of the room, an ancient beagle, lay on his back next to the fireplace, all four legs up in the air. I watched him for a second, but he didn’t move or even seem to breathe.

He might, in fact, be dead.

Some dogs had weird reactions to me, as if they knew a predator lurked beneath my skin, but I’d never actually *killed* one by just walking into a room.

“Is your dog okay?” I blurted out.

“And anyway, it’s not Tess’s fault stuff keeps happening to her. It’s just been a crazy year. Now, how about some cookies?”

“I . . . sure. But your dog?”

“Oh, Mister Rogers is fine. He likes to sleep like that. Warms his belly. Now come on into the kitchen and have some cookies.”

“Okay, but I can’t stay long.”

But she was already marching off toward the kitchen. I took a quick second to check on the dog. His fur was almost entirely gray, and he may have been the oldest dog I’d ever seen.

He was still alive, though, so I called it a win and strode off to the kitchen.

“This is a beautiful home, ma’am,” I said sincerely. The interior was as lovely as the exterior, filled with antiques and art.

“Thank you, young man. Now eat some cookies. And take some with you. I’m off to my bridge club, but you can take these to go.” She pushed the entire platter of cookies toward me.

“Oh, no, I can’t take all this. You’ll need some for your next visitor,” I protested. But then I took a big bite of a walnut-chocolate-chip cookie, and I may have moaned a little.

“These are *amazing*.”

She beamed. “What a nice boy you are. I’m glad you and Tess found each other. Now you go on. Just bring the plate back to me when you’re done.”

“But I—”

She wagged her finger at me.

I might be a foot and a half taller and fifty years younger, but I knew when I was outmatched. I took the cookies.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Before I knew it, I was back on the street with my cookies, and she was walking down the street to her neighbor’s house, where a half-dozen women on the porch chatted and stared at me. I waved with the hand holding a cookie, balanced the platter in my other hand so I could open the truck door, and

carefully placed the treasure trove of sugar on the passenger seat.

Sometimes a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do.

After that, there was nothing to do but stop over at Lauren's Deli to pick up sandwiches to take with me to see the boys in the swamp.

She packed up my order in three large paper carrying bags—twenty each of sandwiches, bags of chips, and bottles of water—and rang me up.

“Thanks, Lauren. See you tonight for pizza at Tess's?”

She grinned. “I'm looking forward to it. We can discuss the ongoing dueling Santa saga.”

“There's *more*?”

“I'll tell you tonight. It's getting wild in Santa's workshop, though, Jack. Wild.”

Somehow, I wasn't even a little surprised. I said goodbye, got in my truck, and drove myself, my sandwiches, and my cookies out to the swamp.

I had some commandos to see.

Jack

Swamp Commando Airboat Rides was hopping.

There was a line of tourists waiting to climb onto the boat, and two guys wearing S.C.A.R. shirts were busy taking care of them. This probably meant making sure they wouldn't fall out of the boat—because *tourists*—and preparing to tell them about what they'd see on the forty-five-minute tour.

The umbrella of trees over shady spots, the Spanish moss, the birds, the gators—there was no denying the natural beauty of the place. I'd brought Shelley here several times when she was going through the bad times after her mom died. She loved the place and seemed to find a kind of peace here.

It surprised me to see the group of tourists on the deck—it was the week before Christmas, after all. On second thought, though, a lot of people probably had the days around the holidays off. And it was a heck of a lot more fun to go on an airboat ride through the swamp and see wildlife and nature than to spend the day in a mall, shopping.

Malls.

Presents.

Crap.

I really needed to get Tess something small and pretty I could wrap. A garage didn't lend itself to wrapping paper and ribbon. Plus, I was only going to give her the *plans*. Since I'd

sprung the pool on her already installed, I didn't want to presume to know what she might want in a garage.

Or if she still wanted one at all.

I planned to give her the plans in a wrapped box and then explain.

Sure. Because a sketch of a building in a box is so romantic. She'll be bowled over by that, hissed a nasty voice in my mind.

I banged my head back against the headrest and groaned. "What do I know about romance?"

"If you're looking for romance, you might be in the wrong place," an amused Southern voice said.

I turned my head to see Lucky Tremaine, an ex-special forces guy with blond-haired, blue-eyed, surfer-boy looks, standing next to my open window, grinning at me.

"I might be losing my mind," I told him. "I can't believe I didn't hear you sneak up on me."

"Superior tiger hearing, too," he said, straight-faced.

I threw my head back and laughed. "Okay, okay, already. Help me carry this food over to the picnic table. I brought enough for everybody."

He walked around, opened the passenger door of my truck, and then whistled. "Jack. Did you mug a little old lady for these cookies?"

He grabbed one, stuffed it in his mouth, and made moaning noises.

"It's embarrassing to see a grown man act like that over a cookie," I said, ignoring the fact that I'd done just that about a half-hour earlier.

He swallowed and then pointed at the platter. "These are Mrs. Frost's special chocolate-walnut-surprise cookies! She wins with these at the Swamp Cabbage Festival every year! How did you get your hands on these?"

“She gave them to me. Said I was a nice young man,” I said smugly.

He rolled his eyes. “Right. She doesn’t even share the recipe for these with her own family. *Did* you mug a little old lady, Jack?”

“You caught me. I didn’t want to confess, but after I disabled her crossbow ...”

By the time we lugged all the food to the extra-long picnic table on the grass about twenty feet from the water, a half-dozen guys had shown up and were jostling for spots and good-naturedly arguing about who got which sandwich. I knew all of them, but the two guys dealing with the tourists must be new hires. The business was going well, which was great to see.

Twins Dallas and Austin Fox sat on the end, undoubtedly talking about some high-tech computer stuff that nobody else would understand. Their dark skin gleamed in the sun and, if possible, they looked like they’d gained even more muscle since the last time I’d seen them.

Tess said they brought “hot” to the world of computer nerds, not that I’d ever shared that comment with them.

Mickey Young, ruddy-cheeked over his tan, was laughing and stealing an extra bag of chips.

“Ah. That lovely swamp smell of crushed leaves and gator,” I said, looking around and taking a deep breath. “Hey, Mickey! Are you still dating the clown?”

He grinned at me. “Yep. Sometimes we play helpless clown and evil ringmaster, too. We—”

Everybody loudly booed and drowned him out before he could say anything else that made us want to bleach our ears.

Darius Jones, Charles Youngblood, and Mateo Lopez—aka Fireworks, because he was an explosives expert—had their heads together whispering about something, and suddenly all three of them turned toward me, put their hands over their hearts, and batted their eyelashes.

This couldn't be good.

I gave them a flat stare. “Do you have something in your eyes?”

“Ooh!” all three said in unison, grinning like fools. “I’m a scary shapeshifter. Did you know that Tess *lurves* me?”

Everybody cracked up. I nodded and gave them a “bring it,” gesture. “Okay, okay. Get it out of your systems. I’m secure enough in my masculinity to be happy the most beautiful woman in the world loves me.”

“Well,” Lucky said, probably thinking about his girlfriend Molly, Tess’s best friend.

“Shut up,” I growled.

He laughed, and we sat down to eat lunch. Since there were seven of them and only one of me, I had to settle for two roast beef and Provolone sandwiches and half of a turkey with Swiss.

While we ate, I told them about the haunted tree and the compliment clock. When they quit laughing, they filled me in on the success of their new business. Tess had actually named it, in a way. She’d started calling this group of former soldiers who lived on the edge of the swamp the Swamp Commandos after they’d helped us out during several crisis situations over the past year. When they’d opened the business, the name stuck.

Dallas and Austin were part owners with everybody else, but they spent more time on their computer consulting business. Lucky was the CEO and head of the complaints department because customer service was a new concept to some of the guys.

“We had one old guy complaining that his shoes got wet from the spray on the boat ride,” he’d told me once. “Fireworks told him he was lucky to *have* shoes, because once Fireworks had spent a week crawling through the jungle, carrying a fifty-pound pack. After his boots almost disintegrated from being constantly soaked, he would have

loved to complain about getting his ‘wittle toesies’ wet. After that, I took on the official Complaint Handler role.”

When I’d stopped laughing, he’d added: “And after I listened to the old guy rant and rave at me, I had to refund his money, too. This civilian life is not for wimps.”

“Hey,” I said to all of them when we were finishing up. “Have any of you heard or seen anything about a petty crime ring operating in Dead End? The vet clinic got tagged, Dave’s job site got hit by somebody who stole a couple grand worth of tools, and evidently there has been more. Plus, and this is weird and can’t have anything to do with that, somebody keeps dumping pets on the side of the road across from Tess’s shop.”

Faces turned somber, and it surprised me to see everybody nodding.

“In fact, we got hit last night,” Lucky said, his eyes dark. “Somebody smashed a hole in the bottom of one of our boats. It’s going to cost a pretty penny to fix.”

“Let’s all keep an eye out,” I said. “I thought maybe teenagers, but now I doubt it, considering the variety of stuff happening. It’s gone from tagging to theft and vandalism. I don’t like the idea of what might happen next.”

“We will,” Dallas said grimly. “We’re upgrading the camera system here. The boat hit was at the dock just outside of range, which also weighs in on the not-kids’ side. It may have been chance, since it was the boat the farthest away from the check-in shack, but maybe not. If so, they have a sophisticated enough set of skills to be aware of security cameras.”

“I’m not liking the sound of this,” I said. “Oh, and don’t let me forget to talk to you about setting up some cameras along the road just outside Tess’s shop. At least temporarily, so we can try to catch the animal dumpers.”

Austin nodded. “Text me.”

“On another note, have you heard from the UltraShopMart guy?” Lucky asked, frowning. “Kind of weaselly guy in a

fancy suit?”

“Yeah, he just stopped by to get us to sell the shop and property to him. He’s the kind of guy who doesn’t like to take no for an answer. Tess knocked him down a peg, but I’m sure we haven’t heard the last of him. He’s tried to hire Dave already, too.”

“He stopped by here yesterday,” Lucky said. “Doesn’t want our property, since it’s—”

“Swamp?” I grinned at him.

“The headwaters of the Everglades,” he said loftily. “Look in our brochure.”

“You have a brochure?” I whistled. “Fancy.”

“Anyway,” Charles put in, tapping his finger on the table. “He talked to a few of us about hiring on to provide security at the job site. Excavation already started, I guess.”

I glanced around the table. “Are you going to do it?”

Darius shrugged. “Maybe. They’re paying top dollar, and we could do it when we’re not on shift here. He mostly wants us at night. Apparently, they sometimes get sabotage when they’re breaking ground on a new site. Angry townspeople and whatnot.”

Austin wrapped up his sandwich paper and tossed it into one of the tote bags. “I’m doing some research on UltraShopMart. See what they’ve done in other communities. I’ve just started, but so far, it’s looking like they have a ‘burn down the opposition’ strategy when opening new stores.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” I said, frowning. “If they even think of coming after Tess ...”

“Let us know if you need us,” Mateo said, flashing a wicked grin. “It’s getting kind of dull being all upstanding and stuff.”

“Oh, boy,” Lucky groaned. “The old dude is back.”

I glanced over at the parking lot and then realized everybody else was looking at the water, where a gator who

had to be twelve feet long was waddling up onto the shore.

“That thing has got to weigh seven hundred pounds,” I said.

“Closer to eight,” Mickey told me. “We saw one that was nearly fifteen feet once, but I haven’t come across him again.”

I raised an eyebrow, watching the gator. “Is anybody else concerned that he’s walking right toward us?”

“Nah,” Fireworks said. “He likes people food.”

“He likes to eat people?”

They all burst out laughing.

“No, at least not as far as we know,” Lucky said, still chuckling. “He likes to eat whatever we’re having for lunch.”

“He really, really likes ribs,” Charles said, shoving his long black hair away from his face. Charles, who was tall, heavily muscled, and had bronze skin and a strong face, was a member of the Seminole Native American tribe and spent a lot of time posing for pictures with tourists. I’d asked him once if it bothered him, and he’d just laughed.

“I can’t help it if they think I’m pretty,” he’d told me, winking at a college girl in a Notre Dame T-shirt who’d blushed and giggled.

Austin stood and tossed the gator half of a roast beef sandwich, and the giant lizard opened cavernous jaws and snapped it out of the air. I just shook my head.

Waste of a perfectly good sandwich.

“Have you ever wrestled a gator?” Darius asked. “You know, when you’re a tiger.”

“Nope. Although I had to rescue Tess once when somebody put a gator in her house.”

Eyebrows raised around the table.

Fireworks shot me a sly grin. “Do you wanna wrestle one now? I’m sure we could work something out.”

“Ten bucks on the gator,” Mickey said.

Lucky shook his head. “That’s a sucker’s bet. Jack would have that gator running for his mama. Gators have no idea what a tiger even is, other than scary.”

“Maybe another time,” I drawled, standing and gathering the trash to pack out with me. “Later, boys. Let me know what you hear, okay? And keep an eye out. Let me know what you discover if you take that job at the UltraShopMart site, too, would you? I’m very curious about that company, suddenly.”

Dallas nodded. “Got it.”

Fireworks walked over and gave me a friendly punch on the arm. “Thanks for lunch, dude.”

A chorus of thanks from everybody had me nodding. “You’re welcome. Next time I’ll remember the beer.”

That got an even louder hum of approval.

Lucky walked back to my truck with me.

“Molly and I are coming over to Tess’s for pizza tonight,” he said. “Can I bring anything?”

I shook my head. “We’ve got it covered. We might grill, though, since we just had pizza last night.”

“From Judd’s?”

“Yeah. He bought Dead End Pizza, you know.”

Lucky frowned. “Yeah. It’s weird. When I was there a couple of days ago, he and Darryl Peterson were standing out back of the pizza place yelling at each other. I thought it might come to blows and headed over, but Darryl just stormed off.”

“Darryl’s getting into a lot of fights these days.”

“Yeah. The Santa thing. I heard. But this was about UltraShopMart. I didn’t pry, but I heard them shouting about Craven.”

I thought about it. “You know what? All those UltraShopMarts have an in-store pizza restaurant. I wonder if Judd is worried they’ll steal his business out from under him. And after he just bought this restaurant, too.”

“Folks are definitely lining up on opposite sides. I wonder if it’s going to come down to a fight.” He tilted his head. “You’re dating the mayor’s niece. Any hints on which way the town council is leaning?”

“Nope. We haven’t had time to talk to Ruby about it.”

He stood back, and I climbed in the truck.

“Okay. See you tonight.”

Lucky nodded. “We’ll be there. Try to stay out of trouble.”

I drove off and thought about what he’d said. The problem was that I *tried* to stay out of trouble.

But trouble always seemed to find me.

I called Tess for an update on the compliment clock and heard about the “many fat babies” in her future. She was laughing about it, but after we hung up, I stared into space, barely seeing the road in front of me.

Babies?

I hadn’t thought beyond a new garage.

Oh, boy.

T *ess*

When I locked a newly pawned diamond bracelet in the vault at six, the compliment clock told me my goats would all have twins.

“I don’t have a goat,” I told it, but then I remembered the earless goat I’d given Uncle Mike and figured I might just shoot him a warning. I didn’t know if the compliments were also predictions, but just in case...

It had been another long day. Jack had texted me what he’d learned from the guys, but I’d been too busy to think about it much. The pre-holiday rush was in full force, and Eleanor had only come in for a couple of hours. I really needed to hire another part-time person.

Another thing to think about after the holidays.

By the time I got home, Uncle Mike, Aunt Ruby, and Shelley were already there. Lou looked up at me from her place on Uncle Mike’s lap, shamelessly trawling for belly rubs, but didn’t move a muscle to come greet me.

“Traitor,” I told her, leaning down to kiss the top of Uncle Mike’s head. “I think she likes you better.”

“Cats belong in the barn,” he said calmly, pretending he wasn’t cuddling a lapful of house cat.

I just laughed and headed to the kitchen, where Aunt Ruby and Shelley were wrist deep in pie crust dough.

“The trick is to keep the butter cold,” Aunt Ruby said.

“Definitely,” I agreed, walking over to kiss her cheek and give Shelley a hug.

“Why?” my sister asked.

“Pie crust is flakier if the butter is cold. That’s why Tess makes better pies than I do. My hands are too warm, and hers are always cold,” Aunt Ruby said.

A warm glow swept through me. I’d worked hard for years to perfect my pie crust. It was nice when people noticed. “Here’s a secret: On hot days, I put a metal bowl filled with ice on the counter for five minutes before I roll out the dough. It makes the surface nice and cool. But I’ll never make a chocolate cream pie that is even close to Aunt Ruby’s,” I said honestly. “I cannot get the consistency right.”

“Practice makes perfect,” Aunt Ruby said, but I noticed the modestly pleased smile quirked at the edge of her lips. “Get the butter, Shelley?”

Shelley waved a hand at the refrigerator. The fridge door opened by itself, and the box of butter sticks floated across the room to her. Then the fridge door slammed.

“Gently, please,” Aunt Ruby admonished.

I just blinked. I’d seen Shelley use her newly manifested magical powers before, in a big way during a kidnapping crisis, but I wasn’t used to it yet. Somehow, it seemed even more shocking in ordinary circumstances like this than it had when she’d helped move hundreds of pounds of stone to get to Aunt Ruby after the bank blew up the month before.

“Sorry,” Shelley said, ducking her head and grinning up at me. “I forget sometimes.”

“How’s your new magic helping you out with chores?” I pulled out a bag of apples and started peeling. “What do you think, Aunt Ruby? Two apple pies and two pumpkin? I have a pecan and a lemon meringue in the fridge.”

“Depends on how many people are coming over,” she said, always practical.

“The five of us, Molly, Lucky, the Fox twins, Mellie, Lauren, Andy, Phin, Charithra, and maybe Carlos. So, fifteen? Carlos won’t eat much, but he loves pie.”

Yes, vampires could eat food, and my neighbor’s favorite was pecan pie. Who would have guessed?

“I *wish* I could figure out how to use magic to do chores,” Shelley said glumly. “Aunt Ruby got me that movie, *Fantasia*, but I couldn’t do any of that stuff.”

“That movie creeped me out when I was a kid,” I said, shuddering.

“I meant it as a cautionary tale,” my aunt said, raising her eyebrows. “About the things that can go wrong if you use magic carelessly. This is my first time raising a child witch, so I thought we could figure things out as we go.”

Shelley grinned. “I’m going to be a *good* witch, like my mom. She would be so proud of me.”

I smiled at her, happy that enough time had gone by that she could talk about her mom with a smile instead of tears.

“I’m sure your mom *is* very proud of you,” I said. “She’s probably watching over you right now and shaking her head at the flour you have all over your nose.”

Shelley crossed her eyes, trying to look at her nose. “No, I don’t!”

“You do now!” I flicked flour at her and then took off running out the back door.

She chased me around the pool twice before I let her catch me, and we both cheerfully accepted the scolding Aunt Ruby gave us when we went back inside.

I was an *exceptional* big sister.

Then we all pitched in and made quick work of the pies.

“We were going to do pizza, but Jack wants to grill steaks, burgers, and whatnot,” I said. “So, we need some sides.”

From the living room, a “Woot!” sounded. Aunt Ruby shook her head, but for a change didn’t say anything about eating healthy.

Shelley bounced up and down. “Can we have french fries? I love french fries!”

“I like them, too. There are a couple of bags in the freezer. Maybe go *walk* over and get them, since the freezer is pretty full, and we don’t need a magic-induced avalanche of frozen foods.”

“Oh! Speaking of freezers...” I walked out to the family room. “Uncle Mike, I’m thinking of giving Jack a chest freezer for Christmas. He buys so much meat I think it would come in handy.”

He grinned up at me, put Lou down on the couch, and stood. “A girl after my own heart. Practical presents all the way.”

“Do you think it’s not romantic enough?” Suddenly I felt panicky. Jack had given me the beautiful pendant that he’d had made especially for me, plus the pool.

Great.

“I’m a horrible girlfriend,” I moaned.

“Give him some aftershave or something, too,” suggested Uncle Mike, the storied romantic.

This was the man who’d once told Aunt Ruby that a new garbage disposal was a more useful anniversary present than flowers or candy, since she’d have the disposal for a lot longer. He’d shifted his thinking after she’d offered a bland smile and wondered aloud how the boy she’d gone to junior prom with was doing and whether he was still single and pining for her.

“*Teddy* always brought me flowers,” she’d confided in me and Molly, just loud enough for Uncle Mike to hear.

The next day, he’d filled the house with yellow roses—her favorite—demonstrating that an old dog *could* learn new tricks.

But he’d installed the new disposal the day after that.

“Anyway, I was wondering if you had thoughts on a good make and model,” I continued. “I’d appreciate any suggestions.”

“Absolutely,” he said, already pulling out his phone. “Now, the way that boy eats, you’ll want at least nineteen cubic feet ...”

I left him there happily comparing freezers and prices, and went back to the kitchen to whip up some pasta salad. Aunt Ruby was already at work on slicing pickles, tomatoes, and onions for the burgers and hot dogs, and Shelley sat on a chair texting.

“How goes the movie business?” I asked her.

“Me and Zane have story boarded the whole thing, almost, but we need to interview Grandpa Jed again to make sure we get the facts straight.”

Jed was still in Orlando being wined and dined, as far as I knew, but he’d been gracious about helping the kids.

“I think he’s coming home soon,” I told her. “Ask Jack when he gets here.”

Before Shelley could answer, we heard cars driving up, and everyone arrived at once.

I welcomed my guests and introduced Charithra around—they all knew Phin, of course. After that, the next two hours were a wonderful blur of conversation and laughter. By the time we’d finished dinner, I felt like I’d known and liked Charithra forever.

After everyone finished eating, Shelley settled in front of the TV to watch a documentary about haunted places, and the rest of us made our way out to the seating area by my new pool. Jack had hooked up a few outdoor heaters, so we were all toasty warm despite the December evening chill.

“Maybe now is a good time to talk about the elephant in the room,” Aunt Ruby said. “Most of you own small businesses in town. What do *you* think about UltraShopMart establishing a store here?”

Austin folded his arms across his chest. “Respectfully, ma’am, I’m not in favor. My brother and I have been doing some research, and it looks like the UltraShopMart people run roughshod over every town they move into.”

Dallas nodded. “Delvaney Craven is not a very nice guy. There are reports—unsubstantiated, to be fair, but where there’s this much smoke, there has to be a fire—that he gets a million-dollar bonus for every new store. He’s been their advance guy for a long time. And he’s not very particular about what he has to do to get that million bucks.”

“With a name like Delvaney Craven, his parents *doomed* him to be a supervillain,” I pointed out.

I got a chuckle, but it wasn’t much of one. Everybody was worried, including me.

“He tried to buy the shop building and property,” I said.

“Evidently, they plan to build a garden center there,” Jack said, filling us in on what Dave had told him.

“Not to change the subject, but what do you know about this crime spree, Mayor Callahan?” Lucky asked.

“It seems to be petty crime, like the graffiti,” she said. “At least so far.”

“Not so petty,” Lucky disagreed. “They did over five thousand dollars’ worth of damage to one of our boats.”

“And stole two grand in tools from Dave,” Jack said.

“I hadn’t heard that yet,” Aunt Ruby said, frowning.

“The graffiti on my clinic seems minor, in comparison,” Charithra said. “And yet I worry it will drive away customers. It’s challenging to open a new practice in a new town.”

“I’m sure it won’t. We’ve needed a vet here for a long while. By the way, how’s the dog?” I asked her.

She smiled. “She’s doing great. She’s going home with Andy tomorrow.”

“Ellie’s going to stay with my mom while she recuperates. While the *dog* recuperates, not my mom,” Andy said hastily.

“And then she’s going to be our first K-9 dog.”

The vet gave him a doubtful look. “That sweet girl doesn’t have a mean bone in her body. She won’t be able to chase down criminals.”

“I was thinking more of taking her to schools when I give talks on safety,” Andy reassured her.

“You don’t—you don’t think that the UltraShopMart folks are behind the crime, do you?” I glanced around at everyone. “I mean, it seems like too much of a coincidence that it all started right about the time that they came to town.”

Jack shook his head. “Good thought—you know what I think of coincidences—but the crimes don’t make sense. If UltraShopMart wanted to cause trouble, they’d make it count. What conceivable use could graffiti on the vet clinic or damage to one of the Swamp Commandos’ boats have?”

Nobody disagreed.

“Yeah, they even asked us to provide security for the excavation site,” Lucky said.

“Excavation site?” Lauren frowned. “I didn’t hear they’re already excavating. Did the town council give them the go-ahead? Because if yes, I should just pack up and move. The UltraShopMarts all have their own delis.”

“They couldn’t make food that tastes even a fraction as good as yours,” I said, and everybody murmured their agreement, but Lauren waved a hand in dismissal.

“That’s lovely to hear, and thanks. But the convenience factor alone will take away a lot of my business. Judd isn’t happy, either. UltraShopMart is famous for its pizza. It’s not *good* pizza, but it’s cheap, fast, and, again, convenient.”

“I don’t like anything about UltraShopMart,” Molly said. “The fast fashion, the environmental damage their stores have caused, or even the way they treat their employees. I’d vote a resounding no if it were up to me.”

Molly Chen, my best friend since elementary school, was the lead singer in an indie rock band that was making big

waves. I didn't get to hang out with her nearly enough these days, and I missed her, but she always kept up on Dead End news.

"The environmental issues worry me a lot," Phin said. "I've been in touch with a Florida statewide organization to organize an inspection of the site to be sure they're not destroying any irreplaceable animal or plant life. It makes me crazy that they started excavating already with no real testing, except from their pet scientist who gets paid to rubber stamp all their plans."

Jack leaned forward. "That's a serious issue. Let us know what you hear, okay?"

"How are the Santa battles going?" I asked Lauren.

She threw her hands in the air. "Who knows? That Darryl causes problems everywhere he goes. I can't believe the Peterson brothers are encouraging him to move down here."

"I'm not so sure they are," Uncle Mike said slowly. He hated anything that even hinted of gossip, but this was more town business than idle chatter. "When I went to the hardware store to buy a new pipe cutter, I walked in on Darryl and Harold shouting at each other. I turned around and walked out, got some coffee, and went back later, but it looked pretty intense."

"Darryl has been telling everybody who will listen about how wonderful UltraShopMart is," Aunt Ruby said thoughtfully. "Not all of them want to hear it. Certainly, the hardware shop would suffer."

"We can't figure it out tonight," I said. I was suddenly exhausted and tired of problems. "How about we change the subject? Charithra, why don't you tell us the most unusual client you've ever encountered?"

The vet shot a sly glance at Jack. "I've treated a tiger cub for an injured paw."

Jack, sitting with his arm casually thrown around my shoulders, saluted her with his beer bottle. "And I thank you on behalf of all of us."

“But most unusual? Hmm. I’d have to say the woman who brought in her potbellied pig and asked me to pierce its ears so she could put diamond studs in them.”

T^{ess}

“Diamond studs?” Uncle Mike shook his head in disgust. “City folks.”

“Yes. She showed me the earrings. They had to be two carats each.”

Molly, sitting in a chair next to me, leaned forward. “Did you do it?”

Charithra laughed and shook her head. “Not a chance. For one thing, it was ridiculous. For another, I don’t poke holes in perfectly healthy animals for *jewelry*.”

Phin shook his head. “I had a man come in once—a regular client—and ask me if I’d officiate at the wedding of his two hamsters.”

“What did you do?” Jack asked.

“I told him, with a straight face, that I wasn’t licensed to perform marriages in Florida,” Phin said. “I skipped the reception, too, even though he sent me a gold-foil-embossed invitation.”

Andy, who I’d noticed hadn’t moved that far from the new vet all evening, grinned. “Cops have stupid criminal stories. Susan and I once arrested a masked man who’d robbed the Dead End bank. He didn’t want to speak and give himself away by letting anybody hear his voice, he told us after we found him, so he just slid a note to the teller.”

“Did you get fingerprints?” I read a lot of mysteries.

He laughed. “We could have, I suppose, but the note was on an old envelope—that had his full name and address on the front!”

Everybody cracked up.

“When we got done laughing, we drove out to his apartment and arrested him. He was sitting in his kitchen counting his money.” Andy shook his head. “If you listen to those podcasts or watch TV shows or movies, you’d believe every criminal is a super genius. Most of them aren’t all that bright, or they wouldn’t have turned to a life of crime in the first place.”

“What about you, Tess?” Charithra took a sip of wine. “What’s the most unusual item you’ve taken in pawn?”

She looked startled when everybody started laughing. The real belly laugh kind.

“We don’t have that kind of time,” I said, sighing.

Everybody started tossing out suggestions.

Uncle Mike: “The Doltar!”

Aunt Ruby: “The dreamcatcher that had a nightmare trapped inside!”

Shelley, who’d wandered outside and curled up next to Jack: “Fluffy!”

Molly: “The music box! And I still have it.”

Lucky: “The clowns’ ukuleles!”

Jack gave them all a pitying look. “Oh, please. You haven’t heard about the haunted kleptomaniac Christmas tree. I’ve been delivering stolen presents back to their owners all over town.”

“Or the compliment cuckoo clock,” I put in. “Got it today. It compliments me every hour.”

Mellie, sitting on Dallas’s lap on the swing, tilted her head. “How is that bad?”

“They’re all compliments from the 1600s,” I said glumly. “It told me my goats will have twins—oh, forgot to mention that, Uncle Mike; watch out—and I will have many fat babies.”

Charithra laughed. “I can’t help you with the second one, but if you get a goat with twins, be sure to call me. That can be a tricky birth.”

“At least it hasn’t told me that my bottom has the roundness of a fine heifer yet. Apparently, it said stuff like that to the woman who sold it to me so often she’s in therapy.”

Even Aunt Ruby laughed at that one. “I don’t think I want to hear what it would say to me, then. I’ve gained a few pounds over the years.”

Uncle Mike kissed her cheek. “You are even more stunningly beautiful today than you were the day I met you.”

Maybe he *had* stepped up his romance game since that garbage disposal.

After that, everybody carried dishes and glasses into the house. Jack and I refused all offers of help with washing up, and we said our goodbyes. When we’d almost gotten the kitchen back in shape, we heard a knock at the door.

“Maybe somebody forgot their phone or jacket,” I said, starting for the door.

“Or it’s an axe murderer, and you should let me answer it,” Jack countered, moving past me. “It’s Dead End, so fifty-fifty odds.”

He strode down the hall and opened the door. “I was half right about the axe murderer. It’s Carlos.”

“Funny, funny, little kitty cat,” Carlos said, amusement in his midnight-dark voice.

“Hey, Carlos!” I beckoned him to come in. “Glad you could make it.”

“I’m sorry to be so late. If you’re not in the mood for more company, we can visit another time,” he said.

Carlos was *beautiful*. Tall, dark, and deadly. I'd seen him around town a few times before he left town after high school, and he'd always been hot. But something about becoming a vampire had really upped his gorgeousness game. Maybe, like the movies say, it helps vampires entice their prey.

Or maybe he was just lucky.

Tonight, he wore casual jeans and a forest-green sweater, but still looked like he should be on the cover of a magazine. *Vampire Quarterly*, maybe.

He and Dave were in the beginning of a relationship, but I hadn't seen much of them lately. Everybody was so busy. And Carlos had mysterious vampire council business, so he was often out of town.

I stayed a few feet back from him, but not because I was afraid of him—I wasn't, he was my friend and Susan's brother—but because I hadn't touched him and didn't want to see how he'd died when he became a vampire. Or how he might die in the future. Didn't want to know, didn't want to take the chance.

“No, come on in! I saved you a big slice of pecan pie, just in case you were late. I mean, later than usual.” He wouldn't come by until after sunset, of course.

Jack shut the door, and the three of us headed back to the kitchen. I gave my vampire guest a slice of pie and a bottle of water. Carlos wasn't much for beer or wine. He'd once given me a sly grin, glanced at my neck, and said he preferred more exotic beverages.

I'd blushed scarlet and burst out laughing. We'd been good friends ever since. I sometimes thought he wasn't used to knowing people who weren't afraid of him or trying to use him for the power he wielded on the council.

Certainly not many people who gave him friendship and homemade pie.

“What's up in the world of bloodsuckers?” Jack leaned against the doorway and grinned at us.

Carlos shook his head, grimacing. “Politics. Always politics. Some of the older vampires have been around so long they have nothing else to live for but Machiavellian conspiracies and plots. When Daniel was our leader, he worked so hard to make things better. Since he stepped down, they’ve only gotten worse.”

“That’s too bad,” Jack said somberly. “Daniel is a good guy. You really get to know someone when your lives are in danger. I once had to pretend to submit to his girlfriend—who was a saber-toothed tiger at the time—because she thought I was threatening him. Fun times.”

I blinked. “What? A *saber-toothed tiger*? When was this? When you time-traveled back to the dawn of civilization?”

He grinned at me and walked over to join us at the table, pulling out a chair next to mine and across from Carlos. “You’re not that far off. His girlfriend—mate, really—is an eleven-thousand-year old Atlantean princess. That’s a long story.”

I put my head in my hands and groaned. “Eleven thousand years. Long story. Yes, I get it.”

Carlos ate his last bite of pie, closed his eyes, and sighed. “Tess, as always, that was delicious. I really must get you a gift that expresses the level of my appreciation for your baking expertise.”

“I don’t need any gifts,” I said, laughing. “But if you see any interesting kitchen tools or implements on your travels, maybe pick one up. Jeremiah gave me a spoon made of jacaranda wood that a friend of his brought home from Brazil. I’d love to begin a small collection like that.”

Carlos studied me with serious dark eyes and then shrugged. “If you like. I was thinking about a diamond bracelet. Or a Mercedes.”

Jack’s eyes narrowed at the same time I started laughing. “Right. People always give me diamonds for pie. Maybe stick with the wooden spoons.”

“You’ve come into money,” Jack drawled. “Small-town boy from Dead End makes good? Or are you into something dangerous?”

The vampire in my kitchen grinned at us. “Nefarious, perhaps, but not dangerous. I’ve been consulting in Hollywood. Everybody wants ‘authenticity’ on their films, now that supernaturals are mainstream. That werewolf picture with real shifters broke all box office records.”

“I saw that with Molly,” I said. “It was pretty scary and couldn’t have been real. Jack doesn’t go through all those painful contortions when he shifts.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “They want big, bold, and scary and aren’t interested in reality if it won’t bring in the audiences.”

“I’m not here to talk about movies,” Carlos said. “I’ve heard some of what is going on, and I have no particular view on the UltraShopMart situation. However, the crime ring concerns me. I returned home last night to find that someone had broken into my home. I knew Jack was here, and it was the middle of the night, so I didn’t call and warn you right then, Tess, but I have people coming to install security cameras.”

“We’ve already got those here and at my shop.” I shook my head. “That settles it. The thieves must be from out of town. Nobody in Dead End would break into *your* house.”

“The twins told me earlier that they’d be sure to put cameras by the road next to your shop, too,” Jack told me. Then he turned to Carlos. “Are you sure it’s related? You have more than a few enemies because of your job, I’m guessing.”

Carlos shrugged. “This is also true. But I have scented the three who were in my home and didn’t recognize any of them. I will identify them if you find them.”

The look on his face almost made me feel sorry for the culprits.

“If *I* find them?” Jack shook his head. “Not my circus, not my monkeys. I’m not law enforcement anymore and won’t be again. Andy—”

“With all due respect to my sister’s colleague,” Carlos cut in smoothly, “I don’t have as much faith in him as she does. He’s very young.”

“When is Susan coming home? Is she okay?” I didn’t want to pry, but I was worried about her.

“She’s ... fine,” he said, his frown not matching his words. “She insists on handling the situation on her own. If things intensify, I will help whether or not she wants me to.”

“Of course,” I said. “She’s family. Let me know if there’s anything I can do. I didn’t want to bother her, but I can at least text and say hello.”

“Perhaps wait a week. She doesn’t need to be distracted right now.”

That was mysterious. And not at all enlightening.

I sighed. Stupid resolution not to pry. *This* New Year’s resolution was going to be easier to keep. Like, I’d resolve to take two naps a day. Maybe not easier to keep, but definitely better for my health and morale.

“I should go,” Carlos said, rising. “Shall I wash this plate?”

“Sure. But wait—let me take a picture. *The Supernatural Enquirer* would probably pay me big bucks to see Mr. Super-Important Vampire Council guy washing dishes.” I pretended to check my pockets for my phone, and Carlos started laughing.

“Oh, Tess. I sometimes wish I could hug you. You lighten my heart,” he said, smiling down at me. “Take good care of her, tiger.”

Jack stood, too, and put a hand on my shoulder. “We take care of each other.”

“A rare thing, indeed,” Carlos said, and I caught a trace of wistfulness on his face.

I squashed the urge to ask how things were with him and Dave—not prying again—and just followed the guys to the

front door. We said our goodbyes, but then Carlos paused on my front porch and turned back to us, grinning widely.

“I almost forgot to tell you this. One of my ... associates stopped by your pawnshop a few months ago. He was curious about you after I’d spoken of you. He wound up buying a ‘surprise potion’ from you and now he keeps bursting into song, belting out random show tunes at all hours of the day,” he said, laughing. “This is a very dangerous man, you understand. To see him stand up in the middle of a meeting and start singing *Defying Gravity* from *Wicked* is hilarious.”

I laughed at the thought, but Jack didn’t look amused.

“Why did you allow a ‘very dangerous man’ near Tess?”

“I didn’t know he’d gone there until afterward. Be sure that I’ve now warned all dangerous people to stay away. He said you were friendly, and the ‘we don’t buy vampire fangs, ever’ sign made him like you even more.”

I put my hands on my hips and aimed a serious stare at both of them. “I can take care of myself. And to be honest, if he got one of the Surprise Potions, he’s lucky he just got show tunes. It could have turned him into a ferret.”

“Why in the world would anybody take an unlabeled magic potion?” Jack asked, giving me an incredulous look. “I mean, that’s just asking for trouble. And then going one step further and actually *paying* for it.”

“People like to take risks. Maybe they could have woken up with superpowers. You don’t know,” I said, my cheeks warming. I’d once tried a drop or two of a sparkly pink potion in my coffee. Then I’d spent the day wearing tiaras made of flowers that kept reappearing every time I removed them. So embarrassing.

But not dangerous, thankfully.

And not ferret-like.

“If I’d gotten that one, I wonder if my singing would have improved, or if I’d just be belting out songs in my current ‘can’t carry a tune in a bucket’ voice?” I wondered out loud.

And then I caught both men trying to hide their flinches.

“Very nice, you two. *Very* nice. And after I saved you a slice of pecan pie, Carlos.”

He grinned. “Tess, I said I’d give you diamonds. I made no promises about listening to you *sing*.”

He was lucky I couldn’t swat him.

His laughter followed him off the porch. When he started singing *There’s No Business Like Show Business*, I shut the door. Firmly.

Jack was laughing, too, and I could feel my lips quirking. It was true my singing was so bad it usually made my cat go hide under the bed, but a girl could still dream.

Speaking of Lou ... I went to retrieve her from the closet in the spare room, where she usually went when too much company overwhelmed her. And then I snuggled with both of the cats in my life until we fell asleep, feeling content and happy with the entire world, despite evil corporations and petty criminals and insults about my singing.

When my phone kept buzzing and buzzing at eight the next morning, I reached for it to toss it across the room. Sunday was my only day to sleep in, and I planned to take full advantage of it.

But I caught the word “Santa” out of the corner of my eye and reluctantly pulled the phone closer to read the text that was so important somebody had to keep bothering me.

“Oh, no!” I felt tears rolling down my face before I even realized I’d started crying. “Not Rooster!”

Jack was wide awake in an instant. “What? What about Rooster?”

“He’s dead!” I held out my phone in a shaking hand so Jack could read the text.

Somebody killed Santa!

T*ess*

We threw on clothes, and then I quickly fed Lou and grabbed a bunch of tissues, scanning my phone for any other news, but there wasn't any yet. Lauren had sent the murder text, but she didn't answer me when I called. We hopped in Jack's truck to go downtown, and I put Aunt Ruby on speakerphone.

"Tess?"

"What is going on?" My breath hitched. "Who would do that to poor Rooster? He was one of the nicest—"

"Not Rooster, honey."

Jack and I exchanged glances. "What? Lauren texted me that somebody killed him. How could she make that mistake? I mean—"

"Not that Santa, Tess. Somebody killed Darryl Peterson, and he was wearing his Santa suit. When Harold and Emeril got to the store this morning, they found him. His ... body."

Aunt Ruby took a shaky breath. "I have to go. Mike and I are on the way downtown to drop Shelley off and then we'll be there. Andy's already at the site, but he may call Jack to help. I guess the temporary deputy quit yesterday after somebody stole her car right out of the jail's parking lot. What is this town coming to?"

I heard Uncle Mike say something in the background that I couldn't make out, and then Aunt Ruby said a quick goodbye

and hung up before I could tell her we were on our way.

“Jack, what did Uncle Mike say?”

A muscle clenched in his jaw, but he answered me. “He said the same thing Ruby just said. ‘What is this town coming to?’ And I’ve got to say, I’m feeling that way, too. If this is an escalation from the crimes that have been happening, that’s a big jump. From graffiti to thefts to murder? Doesn’t track.”

“On the other hand,” I said slowly, “Darryl has been making a lot of people mad this week. Not that I think Rooster or Judd—”

“Or even Harold,” Jack reminded me.

“Or even Harold—especially Harold; they’re family—would kill him over a few arguments.”

“And shouting matches. And fistfights.”

I blew out a breath. “Right now, I just feel like a horrible person, because my first reaction was to be relieved it’s not Rooster.”

“You’re not horrible, you’re just human. Rooster has been your friend for a long time.”

I looked down and realized I’d dressed in such a hurry I had on jeans, a sweater with a hole in one sleeve, and two different-colored socks with my sneakers. I’d forgotten my jacket, too, and it was probably only fifty degrees outside. Parka weather, for native Floridians.

At least I’d remembered my little backpack I used as a purse. I dug around and found a hair tie and pulled mine back and out of my face. My hair was nearly down to my waist now, and I really needed to get several inches chopped off.

Two things that had been stopping me, though:

1. Jack really loved my hair, and
2. An evil witch had killed my stylist.

Jack, of course, was gorgeous in a rust-colored long-sleeved Henley I’d gotten him, jeans, and boots. He never

wore a jacket. Tiger shifters have naturally high body temperatures.

It came in handy, too. I never had cold feet when I slept anymore.

I groaned.

“What?” Jack took the turn to town.

“I’m thinking stupid thoughts about my socks and cold feet when somebody just killed Santa. One of the Santas. Whatever.”

“I’m thinking stupid thoughts about how it will probably be a long time until we get breakfast,” he said ruefully. “Bad news doesn’t stop the world from turning, fortunately or unfortunately, depending on your perspective.”

“Maybe Mellie’s bakery will open early, because you know everybody who heard is on their way downtown right now.”

I was right, of course. Half of Dead End’s five-thousand-person population seemed to be converging on the town square.

I turned to Jack. “Andy’s alone. We’re going to have to help.”

He sighed. “I know. I’m going to park the truck sideways across the street here, since he’s got the squad car across the street down there. We can at least block off the area in front of the store until the coroner gets here.”

“We don’t have a coroner anymore, remember? Doc Ike retired. Somebody will have to come from Orlando.”

Jack muttered something beneath his breath and pulled his truck in at an angle facing toward the hardware shop. I could see Harold and Emeril in there with Andy, and I felt a sudden pain for them.

Darryl was—had been—their cousin, after all. Even if he annoyed a lot of people, they probably had memories of him as a kid. They had to be hurting.

I shoved my relief about Rooster out of the way, but just then, as if my brain had conjured him up, the man himself strode down the street wearing his Santa suit.

Jack jumped out of the truck and headed him off before he got to the shop. I climbed out and joined them on the sidewalk, trying not to look in the window.

“Rooster, will you help me disperse this crowd so Andy can do what he needs to do?”

“Sure, Jack,” Rooster agreed, but his face was blank with shock. “Is it true? Is it Darryl?”

“Yes. Aunt Ruby says the brothers found him this morning. It’s just awful.”

He nodded and then strode toward the growing crowd and started bellowing orders. “Hey, everybody! Get back! Move away! This is a dang crime scene!”

Questions came from all sides.

“Who is it?”

“Is it Darryl Peterson?”

“Who killed him?”

“Did you do it, Rooster?”

I gasped and whirled around, trying to see who’d yelled that, but there were too many people. “Of course, he didn’t do it! Don’t you have anything better to do?”

People looked at each other, then back at me, and shrugged.

“Not really.”

“No, it’s Sunday.”

“Church isn’t till ten.”

Jack moved them all back by the simple means of scanning the crowd with eyes that had iced over. It still stunned me a little to see how tiny changes in his posture and expression changed him in an instant from the fun, easy-going guy who

liked to do dishes and tease me about my singing to this person.

Commander Shepherd.

Soldier. Leader.

Butt-kicker.

Andy walked out just then, as people were moving back, and gave his own version of a move-or-die stare. Despite his slender stature, flaming red hair, and freckles, Deputy Andrew Kelly wasn't somebody to mess with, as he'd proven over and over during the year.

"Move away, folks. This is a crime scene. I don't want anybody trampling on potential evidence."

I bit my lip and stepped back, hoping I didn't have any evidence on my shoes.

"Thanks for coming out, Jack. I was just trying to call you. I know you said you want nothing to do with law enforcement ever again, but—"

"Just tell me what you need," Jack said quietly.

Andy visibly relaxed at Jack's response. "Thank you. Our temporary deputy quit, and the new one isn't due till noon ... Never mind all that. The coroner is on her way, but it will be some time. Darryl—the body—is behind the counter, out of sight of curious eyes. The Peterson brothers are in shock. I need to get them to the station to sit down and maybe have some hot tea with sugar. Separately. I need to question them separately."

He ran a hand through his short, spiky hair. "I really wish Susan would show up and take over. I've never run lead on a murder investigation before."

"Are you sure it's murder? He might have just had a stroke, or a heart attack," I whispered hopefully.

Andy tightened his lips. "Not unless he smashed the back of his head in with a hammer on his way down. Tess, if you could escort the Petersons to the station, I'll—"

“Rooster *did* do it!”

The voice had come out of nowhere, but seconds later, a skinny teenager raced toward us, waving something in the air.

“Rooster killed Santa! I found the murder weapon in the back of his truck!”

T^{ess}

Andy let out a growl through gritted teeth that nearly rivaled one of Jack's when he was in tiger form and pointed at the kid. "And you *picked up what might be a murder weapon and maybe destroyed evidence?*"

The kid—maybe one of Bubba's cousins? He had the look of a McKee—skidded to a stop and dropped a large hammer on the street.

Andy clutched his hair, briefly closed his eyes, and then pinned the kid with a stare. "You. Stand there and don't move."

"Yessir," the kid said, face paling beneath his freckles. "Sorry, sir."

"Name?" Andy strode over to him and, whipping a large plastic bag out of one pocket, crouched down. He turned the bag inside out and put his hand in, so there was a plastic layer between him and the hammer, picked it up, and sealed the bag. He immediately whirled around so he was facing me and Jack and not the crowd, and his face was grimmer than I'd ever seen it.

Staring at the bag, I knew exactly why.

Bright red coated the hammer's head, and whatever the red substance was—*not blood, please don't let it be blood*—it was smearing the inside of the bag.

“That’s blood,” Jack murmured, dashing any tiny glimmer of hope I might have had. “We’ve got trouble now.”

“I’m F-F-Frog,” the kid stammered out. “I mean, Frank. Francis, I mean. Francis McKee. But everybody calls me Frog.”

“Okay, Frog,” Andy said. “Hang on a minute.”

The deputy then gave Jack a look and held the bag out toward him. Jack apparently understood the unspoken cop language and took the bag. Then he took my arm and pulled me to stand partly in front of him. Before I could ask what was happening, Jack whipped his shirt off, used it to wrap the plastic bag in—hiding the contents from the crowd—and walked over to the squad car and put it inside.

I noticed that a lot of people—especially the women in the crowd—fell silent when Jack took his shirt off and just stared, open-mouthed, at him while he strode to the car.

I couldn’t exactly blame them, even though I wanted to yell “Mine!” at the top of my lungs. Jack, with his shirt off, was a genuine work of art. All rippling muscles and broad shoulders narrowing to those incredible abs.

After he put the evidence in the squad car, Jack pulled his shirt back on, and I swear I could hear sighs of dismay. I shook my head, annoyed with myself for thinking stupid thoughts about muscles and abs in such a serious situation. My mind was trying to distract me from yet another dead body in Dead End, but the tightness in my chest and the sick acid roiling in my belly told me my mind was failing miserably.

This dead body was someone I’d known, at least a little. Even though I hadn’t much liked him, he was the Peterson brothers’ relation, and that mattered. I closed my eyes and offered a quick prayer for Darryl, which gave me a tiny measure of peace. Then I started thinking about lining up the casserole brigade, which helped too.

Dead End folks always turned up to help when there was a need. It was one of many things I loved about our little town.

I took a deep breath and turned back toward Andy, who stood in front of Frog McKee, staring up at him in grim silence.

Frog, who was so skinny he looked like a fierce wind would blow him over, had to be at least six four, so of course Andy had to look up at him. One glance at the two, though, clearly showed who was in charge.

“All right. You. Over there, against the building.”

“But—”

“No. No talking. You’ve done enough damage. I may haul your butt in for obstruction as it is. Do you want to add more trouble to that?”

“No! No, sir! I just—”

Andy snarled. “I said move. Now.”

Frog moved.

Rooster, who’d been frozen in shock since Frog had run up with the hammer, finally snapped out of it and took a step toward me and Jack, his face almost gray against the brilliant scarlet of his Santa suit.

“Tess. Jack. You know I’d never do anything like this. You have to believe—”

Andy stepped over to block Rooster from reaching us. “Rooster. I’m sorry, but I’m going to need you to come down to the station to answer a few questions.”

The big man kept shaking his head. “Andy. You know dang good and well I’d never hurt anybody, let alone kill ‘em, even somebody as goldarned annoying as Darryl. And if I did, I’d never be fool enough to put the murder weapon in the back of my open truck bed. You know that. Call Susan. She knows me too.”

“Susan’s out of town right now, but I’m going to need you to answer some questions. Tess, change of plans. Will you walk with Rooster down to the station?”

It probably wasn't very official to ask the local pawnshop owner to escort the suspected murderer to the jail, especially when the suspect was bigger than me by a foot in height and almost three hundred pounds in weight, but this was Dead End. And Andy knew Rooster almost as well as I did.

No way was he a murderer.

Somebody was trying to set him up.

Rooster's eyes were wild, though. "Jack. I'm no killer. Tess, you know I never would have shot that goat."

The goat he'd pretended he was planning to shoot in order to get me to take it in pawn was alive and happy and possibly had twins in her future, if we believed the clock. "I know, Rooster. Everybody in town knows that. Let's just walk over to the station. We need to let Andy do his job so he can find out who really did this."

He blew out a huge breath and nodded, seeming to calm down. "Right. Right. That's what we'll—Jack." He grabbed Jack's arm. "You know I never woulda done this. I need your help. Official and all."

Jack glanced down at Rooster's ham-sized hand but didn't shake him off. Instead, he studied my face for a moment, nodded, and then gave Rooster a measured stare. "Are you hiring me?"

"Yes! Yes. I'm hiring you. You can investigate or detect or whatever."

"Is that a conflict of interest?" Maybe I watched too much TV, but it seemed like a valid question. I looked at Jack and bit my lip. "I mean, if you're going to help Andy?"

"Nope. Everything I do is going to be about finding out the truth. That will benefit everybody on all sides."

Rooster blew out a breath. "Thanks, man."

Jack nodded. "Got any money in that Santa suit? A quarter, maybe?"

Rooster's bushy brows drew together in puzzlement, but he pulled a handful of change out of a pocket and shoved it at

Jack.

Jack reached over and selected a quarter, flipped it in the air, and then put it in his pocket. “Now, it’s official. I’m on the case.”

Just then, a rattling car engine sounded from around the block, and an old Chrysler sedan pulled into view, braking immediately when the driver saw the crowd. Right behind the Chrysler, I saw my Aunt Ruby and Uncle Mike pull up in Mike’s truck, having dropped Shelley at Zane’s. My sister didn’t need to see anymore dead bodies.

Sadly, not everybody felt that way about keeping their kids away from a crime scene. There were plenty of children there, and when I scanned the crowd, I noticed a few of the younger ones were crying.

“You can’t put Santa in jail!” A tiny girl, maybe six years old, yanked her hand out of her dad’s and raced over to Rooster before anybody could stop her. She flung her arms around one of his legs, pushed her face into the velvet fabric of his pants, and burst into tears.

Rooster patted her head with far more gentleness than you’d expect from someone with his giant, rough hands.

“Now, now, sweetheart. You just run off back to your daddy, you hear? Nobody is arresting Santa. I’m going to walk on down to the mayor’s office and straighten all this out.”

She turned her adorable, tear-stained face up to him. “You promise?”

“I promise. Now—” He looked around helplessly, but by this time the girl’s dad, who I thought was one of Granny Josephine’s distant relations, had run over to retrieve his daughter.

“Okay, sweetheart,” her dad said, shooting a death glare at poor Rooster over the top of his girl’s head. “It’s all going to be fine. Santa will be fine, and he’s still bringing presents for Christmas.”

She snuggled into her father’s arms but sent one last look at Rooster over her dad’s shoulder. “I love you, Santa,” she

called out in her fairy princess voice.

Rooster patted his heart and smiled at her, but I was close enough to see the strain in his eyes.

Uncle Mike and Aunt Ruby broke through the crowd, and Aunt Ruby rushed over to me. “Tess! Jack! What’s happening?”

Jack nodded toward Andy, who’d ducked into the store for a few moments and was just now coming back out.

“Deputy!” My Aunt Ruby, the mayor, threw her shoulders back and lifted her chin, visibly putting on her most official persona. “Please fill me in.”

Uncle Mike put an arm around me and pulled me aside while Andy reported to the mayor, who was his boss.

“What happened?” he asked me in a quiet voice. “Is Darryl really dead?”

“Seems like it. I haven’t actually seen him, and I don’t want to. There was something about a hammer...” I swallowed.

Hard.

I nodded at Frog. “That boy found a bloody hammer in the back of Rooster’s truck. And everybody knows they’ve had physical altercations—”

Uncle Mike raised an eyebrow. “Physical altercations? You mean the fist fights?”

I nodded, frowning. “Anyway, everybody knows, and the crowd here is waiting for some spectacular and awful event, I think.”

“Bunch of vultures.” He stepped away from me and exchanged a few words with Andy and Aunt Ruby, and then he turned to the crowd.

“Listen up,” he shouted. “The mayor would like to make an announcement.”

There were a few catcalls, but mostly everybody quieted down, and my Aunt Ruby stepped over next to Uncle Mike

and faced the crowd.

“We understand this is very disturbing, especially the week before Christmas and the ... the disposition of the victim. Toward that end, will everyone with children please remove them from the scene? In fact, all of you just go home, please. Andy and his team need to get to work.”

“And here’s my ‘team’ now,” Andy muttered. I’d barely heard him over the crowd, but I followed his gaze to see a woman in a sharply pressed deputy’s uniform climb out of the Chrysler. She marched over to us, stopped before Jack, and saluted.

“Reporting as ordered, Deputy Kelly.”

Jack pointed a thumb at Andy, and the new deputy’s warm brown skin flushed a little. She made a sharp left turn and saluted at Andy. “Deputy Lizzie Underhill, on loan from Orange County, sir.”

Andy put out a hand. “Very good timing, deputy. We’ve got a bit of a situation on hand.”

Deputy Underhill, who was probably in her early twenties, nearly six feet tall, and sturdy in her uniform and gear, squared her shoulders and stared at Andy with serious dark brown eyes. “Yes, sir. Where do you need me?”

“One moment, deputy.” Andy turned to us, put Jack and Uncle Mike on crowd control, asked Aunt Ruby to meet him in her office, and then blew out a sigh and studied me and Rooster.

“Tess, I’d really like to have Deputy Underhill here with me, at least until the coroner gets here. I’m going to send Harold and Emeril with your Aunt Ruby. Rooster, can I have your word you’ll go to the station with Tess and stay there?”

Rooster reached for my sleeve and closed his fingers around my arm—he knew better than to touch my bare skin. “I swear on my honor, Andy.”

Andy stared at Rooster in silence, then nodded. “Okay. Tess, thank you. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

I could almost see question marks surround the new deputy's head, like in a comic book, but I had a job, and I was going to do it.

"Let's go, Rooster," I said, gently pulling away, so he didn't accidentally touch my arm. The last thing we needed right now was for me to pass out with a vision of his death. "We'll get this all straightened out really soon, you'll see."

"Thanks, Tess," he said, but his voice was shaky. "Jack?"

Jack turned to face him, one eyebrow raised.

"I can't sit around the cop shop like this," Rooster said, plucking at the fabric of his Santa suit. "Just feels wrong. Can you—when you get a minute, can you get my regular clothes out of my truck? It's not locked."

Because nobody locked their vehicles in Dead End, a fact I suspected the actual murderer knew and had taken advantage of.

"Sure," Jack answered and then he went back to herding the remaining Dead Enders, who were still trying to get a glimpse of what was going on.

"It's going to be just fine," I told Rooster, and then I walked with him down to the sheriff's office. "Everything's going to be just fine."

I should have known better.

Because when Deputy Underhill walked into the station thirty minutes later and slapped Rooster's clothes down on Andy's desk, they were splattered with blood.

T*ess* I felt like all the air in my body escaped in a monster-sized gasp.

Those clothes had been *inside* Rooster's truck—not in the open back.

This was bad.

This was *really* bad.

Andy strode into the office before anybody could speak and walked right up to Rooster.

“I’m going to have to ask you to explain this.”

But the big man’s eyes were wide with confusion and sorrow, which looked so wrong beneath the Santa hat he still wore. “I don’t—I got no idea what that’s about. I put those clothes in the back of my truck to change into after my Santa shift at town hall.”

Deputy Underhill pinned him with a narrow-eyed stare. “Are you sure you didn’t wear them downtown, kill the victim, and then change into your Santa suit?”

“The *victim* has a name,” I said hotly. “Darryl Peterson. And Rooster is no killer.”

Jack reached for my hand, but I shook him off. “It’s true. And I doubt Rooster has ever locked his truck in his life.”

Rooster shrugged. “Nobody locks their trucks in Dead End. Ain’t no call for it. People here are honest.”

Nobody said anything for a long beat, as it sank in with all of us that this wasn’t exactly true anymore. At least not today.

“So, you’re saying that somebody killed the vic—Mr. Peterson, and then took time to splatter blood on the suspect’s clothes and put the alleged murder weapon in his truck?” Deputy Underhill sneered at all of us and shook her head. “Wishful thinking, much?”

“He’s not *the suspect*, he’s Rooster Jenkins,” I snapped. “And I’ve known him all my life, so back off.”

Andy shook his head at me, but then gave the temp deputy a hard look. “Deputy, I’d advise you to watch your tone until you know what’s going on. Also, think about what you’re saying for a minute. Because the flip side is that Rooster killed Darryl for whatever reason I can’t imagine, then took time to dump the bloody murder weapon in the back of his own truck where anybody could see it, and then changed out of his bloody clothes and stashed them in the back seat in plain view to anyone who glanced in the window. That would make Rooster the dumbest criminal we’ve ever seen in Dead End, and that’s counting the bank robber who handed the teller his name and address during the robbery.”

Rooster wrapped his arms around himself and hunched over, a mountain of misery. “I’m so sorry, Andy, but I don’t have any idea how that stuff ended up in my truck. I drove downtown wearing my Santa suit and then wandered over to see what the ruckus was when the crowd started up. That’s when I saw Tess and found out about Darryl.”

“It’s true! He was coming from the opposite direction of the store when I saw him! In his Santa suit,” I confirmed.

“I didn’t like Darryl much, but I didn’t kill him,” Rooster told Andy.

Andy, who was still in his Sunday clothes—he took his mama to church every week—ran his hands through his

bright-red hair, which was already standing up in spikes. When he said nothing for a beat, though, Jack spoke up.

“The problem is that Rooster could have been coming back from changing into his Santa suit, like Deputy Underhill said. Andy has to look at the facts on hand, Tess.”

Underhill—Lizzie—shot a smug look my way.

I was beginning to dislike that woman.

“Jack’s right,” Andy finally said, sighing. “We need to figure this out. For now, Rooster, I’m going to hold you for a while, just based on the evidence. I don’t want to charge you formally, if you’ll agree to stay here until we find the actual killer.”

Deputy Underhill looked outraged, no doubt at the breach in what she considered proper procedure, but Rooster and I both blew out sighs of relief.

“Sure. You know I’ll hang out here until you find the real murderer, Andy. Want me to go back into a cell? I can get a nap, I guess. I was up all night. And will you give Emeril and Harold my condolences?” Rooster’s shoulders drooped. “I won’t be able to take food over until I get out of here, but Tess, maybe you could take something from me?”

“I will, I promise,” I told him. “Later today or tomorrow, after the flood of church ladies have been through.”

Andy nodded at Deputy Underhill, and she escorted Rooster back to the cell.

“You don’t have to lock it,” Andy called out, and her snort was loud enough that it echoed off the walls.

Andy shrugged. “I will not lock him up on this obviously planted evidence. What if he needs the bathroom?”

“That’s a good call,” Jack said quietly. “You’re doing a good job, Andy. Don’t second-guess yourself.”

Andy glanced up at Jack, and I could read the surprise and gratitude in his eyes. “Yeah, I was doing just that. I wish Susan hadn’t gone out of town.”

“You can do this,” I said. “You already know that Rooster didn’t kill Darryl, and that’s a big step.”

“You’re the man,” Jack said. “And I’ll help in any way you need.”

“And you’re exactly right about planted evidence,” I said. “If Rooster did this, why would he leave the hammer and clothes in his truck? He could have driven out and tossed it all in the swamp, and nobody ever would have found it.”

“I’m both impressed and appalled that your mind goes straight to getting rid of evidence,” Jack said.

“It has been a very long year.”

Deputy Underhill walked back out from the hall, and Andy squared his shoulders. “We should get back to the crime scene. The coroner and CSI from Orlando are there, and I need to talk to them. Jack, do you have some time to come with me? Maybe see what you can smell?”

Underhill shot Jack a suspicious look. “Smell?”

Jack rolled his eyes and answered Andy. “I’m not a wolf, as I keep telling you people.”

“Still,” Andy said. “A tiger has a better sense of smell than I do.”

At the word *tiger*, Deputy Underhill took a large step back. This time, *I* rolled my eyes.

“All right. Whatever you need.” The resignation was clear in Jack’s tone and expression. I felt bad that he kept telling people he didn’t want to be in law enforcement ever again, and yet he kept getting dragged into it.

“Anytime you want a job, Shepherd, just let me know.”

“People keep *saying* that,” Jack said. “Still no.”

As if in response, my phone loudly rang with the theme music from *Cops*, making me jump.

“Dang it, Shelley,” I muttered. “Also, it’s uncanny how he does that.”

“The theme from *Cops*?” Andy asked, brows raised.

“He, who?” Jack asked.

“It’s the feds. And Shelley messes with my ringtones,” I said, answering both at once, and then I answered my phone.

“Alejandro! How are you? Also, are you psychic? We just had a murder here!”

Silence.

“Again?” he finally said in his lovely, lyrically accented, melted-chocolate voice.

“I know. It’s been a long year,” I said again. “I’m putting you on speaker. Jack and Andy are here. I’m actually at the sheriff’s office.”

“Hello to all. I wish I could help, but of course, P-Ops can’t interfere in a local murder investigation.”

Special Agent Alejandro Vasquez worked for the Paranormal Operations division of the FBI. He had a magical gift of his own, and his wife was a powerful witch. He’d been part of several events in Dead End in the past year, even if only skating around the edges, and I’d come to think of him as a friend.

Except for the part where he kept trying to recruit Jack to be his partner, which would take Jack out of town all the time and put him in almost constant danger.

I didn’t like that one bit.

“Anyway, I’m calling with good news and a request from my lovely wife. I’ve talked about you all enough that she’s dying to meet you.”

Andy pointed at the door and gestured to Deputy Underhill to follow him, then raised an eyebrow at Jack.

Jack nodded.

Alejandro paused. “Okay, maybe *dying* was a bad word choice under the circumstances.”

He wasn’t wrong, but it wasn’t his fault.

“Can you visit? I’d love that!” I caught myself smiling and then felt guilty. Under the circumstances, indeed.

“We’d love to make the trip, but it’s going to have to be soon. We just found out that Rose is pregnant!”

He sounded ecstatic.

“That’s wonderful! I’m so happy for you! Two kids, Alejandro. How wonderful!”

“Not exactly,” he said, dragging out the words.

“No?”

“We’re going to have *three* kids. It’s twins!” This time, he sounded dazed.

“Oh, wow! Congrats times two!”

“Congrats, my man,” Jack said, grinning. “That’s wonderful news. Can’t wait to meet Rose and tell her she’s too good for you.”

Alejandro laughed. “Sadly, I agree with you, but it’s too late now. She’s mine.”

“We’ll talk soon, okay? And give Rose our love. But right now, we need to get going,” I said reluctantly.

“I understand. We’ll be in touch and, of course, let me know if anything comes up I *can* help with.”

Jack gave me a hug after we said our goodbyes. “We’ll figure this out, Tess. Don’t worry. We’re going to get Rooster out of that cell.”

“I know,” I said, trying to sound confident. “You go ahead. I’ll talk to Rooster for a few and then meet you at the truck.”

I watched him go and then walked back to the cells to find Rooster. He was sitting slumped on the bed, his head in his hands.

“Hey, Rooster. We’re going to sort this out. Don’t you worry. We know you didn’t do it.”

“I know I didn’t do it, too, and that’s the problem, Tess.” He looked up at me with eyes filled with sorrow. “Because

that means the actual killer is still out there.”

“Not only that,” I said slowly, realization slamming into me. “But the killer is somebody who knows us all well enough to decide exactly who to frame.”

Rooster nodded glumly but said nothing, so I said it for him.

“It’s one of us. The killer is a Dead Ender.”

Jack

The coroner told us her initial conclusion was that Darryl died from a blow to the back of the head, but she still had to run a tox screen and do all the other official stuff.

Since we could see the amount of blood on the floor, it was pretty clear the murderer had caught Darryl in the shop and killed him there, but maybe the tox screen and the rest of it would tell us something new. Even in today's world, where so much magic was part of normal life, I never questioned the value of science.

The crime scene people scurried around doing their thing, but one of them looked at me and Andy and gave us a helpless shrug.

"This is a store, guys. It's clean enough, but it's a store. There are maybe a million fingerprints and hairs and bits of fabric all over the murder scene."

"What about the hammer?" I saw Andy had transferred the probable murder weapon from his car to the CSI folks now that the nosy crowd had dispersed.

"We processed it and took Francis McKee's prints for comparison. The kid's prints are the only ones on it. It's pretty clear someone had wiped it before the boy picked it up."

"Another point in Rooster's favor," I pointed out to Andy. "No way he's smart enough to wipe his prints off the bloody

murder weapon, but then dumb enough to throw it in the back of his truck for anybody walking by to find.”

I walked around the outside of the clearly marked crime scene area and gave it a try, but—as I’d said again and again—I wasn’t a wolf. A werewolf could probably tell you exactly who’d been in the shop for the past month and what they’d had for dinner before they came, but I just caught scents from the Peterson brothers, Darryl, and a bunch of random people.

“Hey, Andy, I’m going to head out and leave you to this,” I said after a second pass with the same results. “I got nothing.”

He nodded. “Thanks anyway, Jack. I’ll talk to you later.”

The new deputy gave me a hard stare as I walked out, but then I could almost see the realization dawn. “Shepherd? And you’re a tiger?”

“Jack Shepherd.”

If the situation hadn’t been so serious, I might have grinned at the frozen expression on her face.

Yeah. She’d heard of me.

I headed down to my truck, answering the few who called out to me with a quick nod. I knew, Dead End being Dead End, that everybody was desperate for news or even gossip, but I had nothing to say.

Tess was sitting in the truck texting furiously. She looked up when I opened the door, and I could read the question on her face.

I shook my head. “Nothing. But I didn’t expect anything.”

“What did the coroner say? Or the crime scene people?”

I started the truck. “The coroner said the blow to the back of the head probably killed him. No big surprise there. And the crime scene people said they didn’t have any hope of getting any evidence, since it was a public building and filled with fingerprints and random hairs of all the people who come into the store.”

Tess put her phone in her bag. “So, what are we going to do now to help Rooster?”

I pulled out of the parking space and turned left at the stop sign. “We are going to head out to his house and see what we can see. I didn’t want to ask him questions in front of Andy and especially not in front of that new deputy, but maybe we can find something at his house that proves he wasn’t there when the murder happened.”

“What could that possibly be?”

I shook my head because I didn’t have a clue. I just felt like I needed to be moving and doing something. Not just to help Rooster, but also to help Andy.

Rooster’s farmhouse was a tidy little place just outside of town. It was an older house but had a nice feel to it. He’d clearly repainted the outside not all that long ago, and the lawn was neatly cut. Not that somebody who kept up with his landscaping wouldn’t commit murder, but it just made it seem less likely, somehow.

Or maybe life in a small town was messing with my head.

I smacked my hand on the steering wheel and wanted to smack myself on the forehead. “I should have asked Rooster for his keys. We’re going to have to turn around and —”

“Why would you do that?” Tess gave me a funny look. “I doubt Rooster has ever locked the door to his house in his life. This is Dead End.”

“Everybody keeps saying that, but maybe things need to change.”

Tess sighed.

We parked in the driveway and walked past a neatly edged flower bed to climb up the front porch to the door. Not only was it not locked, but it was wide open behind the unlatched screen door.

The scent of fried bacon and eggs hung in the air, making me realize I hadn’t had any breakfast and it was going on

lunch time. Horrible situation or not, my stomach was growling.

A tiger needs to eat. A lot.

Really, all shapeshifters have such fast metabolisms that if we don't eat a lot—and frequently—things can get bad.

Really bad.

You never, ever want to hear the word *hangry* in connection with a shapeshifter.

Tess walked into the kitchen. “The pans are still on the stove, and there are dishes and silverware in the sink. How would he have had time to cook any breakfast and still come downtown and hit Darryl in the head with a hammer?”

I just shook my head. She knew as well as I did he could've made food, eaten it, and still had plenty of time to get to the hardware store and attack Darryl.

I glanced through some papers sitting on the coffee table in the front room, trying not to feel guilty or like a snoop. But he had hired me, after all. And I needed to find something—anything—to help him out.

“This is interesting,” I said slowly, scanning a few handwritten pages.

Tess walked back into the room from the kitchen, a red-and-white checked dish towel in hand. “What is it?”

“It's some research that Rooster did on UltraShopMart and what looks like notes on a speech he was planning to give at the town hall meeting tomorrow. It's organized and persuasive, Tess. I bet if he gives these remarks, it's going to convince some people that we don't want that store in Dead End.”

“That's a problem. Rooster and Darryl were already fighting about who was the ‘real’ Santa Claus. If it comes out that they were on opposite sides of the UltraShopMart issue too, then that adds motivation for Rooster to be the killer.” Tess closed her eyes for a moment, and she looked so sad. I just wanted to take her away from every bit of this. Then she

turned back to the kitchen. “One tangible way I can help is to do the dishes for him while you look around.”

I looked through the rest of the papers, but there was nothing else that seemed pertinent. I didn’t know what I was looking for anyway, because I still thought like a soldier and commander and not yet like a private investigator, no matter what the name of my business was. But sometimes just moving forward and digging could eventually lead to answers, as we’d found out all year long.

When I accidentally knocked a pen off the table, I bent to pick it up and found a wadded-up piece of paper on the floor, partially hidden behind the table leg. I started to toss it in the small wastebasket next to the desk, but on second thought, smoothed it out to read it.

And then instantly regretted it.

I walked into the kitchen, where Tess was just finishing up. She saw the look on my face and her whole body slumped. “Please don’t tell me it’s something bad.”

“I’m sorry. It’s something bad.” I held out the paper, but it took her a reluctant moment to reach for it.

I AM THE REAL SANTA, AND YOU’RE JUST A PATHETIC WANNABE. I’M GOING TO LAUGH SO HARD WHEN ULTRASHOPMART RUNS YOU OFF YOUR FARM AND TURNS IT INTO A PARKING LOT.

The blood drained out of Tess’s face until it looked like the few freckles on her nose and cheeks were floating on a sea of pure white.

“This is horrible. It’s not signed, but it may as well have been. Nobody else would claim to be the real Santa but Darryl. And this looks like another reason for Rooster to want to hurt him.”

She convulsively tightened her hand around the paper and raised her chin. “It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter how awful, aggressive, or confrontational Darryl was being, Rooster would never, ever have killed him. We’re just going to destroy this note, so Andy doesn’t get the wrong idea.”

I put my hand on hers, and then gently took the paper out of her hand. “Tess. You know we can’t do that. It’s evidence, and we can’t destroy it.”

She whirled around, put her hands on the edge of the sink, and stared out the window. “I don’t care about evidence. I know Rooster and he never would’ve done this. It’s not fair.”

She huffed out a strangled sort of laugh. “And now I sound like Shelley. Saying ‘it’s not fair,’ like I’m a child. I know you’re right, but I hate it. I hate all of this.”

Before I could say anything else, we heard a car pulling up outside. We went back to the front room just in time to see a woman walk up to the door and nudge it open with her hip, a pie in her hands.

She was maybe in her mid-forties, with chestnut-brown hair pulled back away from her darkly tanned face into a bun. She wore jeans and a red flannel shirt, and I was almost certain I was looking at a farmer.

“Mrs. Engelhaupt. How are you?” Tess walked over to the newcomer. “I’m sorry, but Rooster isn’t here right now.”

The woman smiled. “Oh, I know, honey. He had to go down and do his Santa thing. I just wanted to bring him this pie to say thank you for all his help last night.”

Tess introduced us, and then she took the pie from Mrs. Engelhaupt and carried it into the kitchen.

“You said he helped you last night?”

She nodded at me. “Yes, he’s a wonder. We had a tough foaling with our favorite mare, Blossom, and we were all up all night with her. Poor Rooster didn’t get a lick of sleep.”

Tess walked back into the room in time to hear that, and her face lit up.

“Did you say that Rooster was with you? All night?”

“Oh, yes. Until almost seven. It was a very long night. All three of our boys were there too, even though they napped a little on and off in the stall next to Blossom.”

Tess rushed over and beamed at Mrs. Engelhaupt. “That’s just amazing! And how is Blossom? What did she have?”

The farmer beamed. “A beautiful little filly. We are so pleased. You tell Rooster I said thanks again. I’ll be on my way.”

Tess and I looked at each other, almost afraid to say anything, until the woman was in her car and backing out of the driveway. Then Tess let out a whoop and jumped into my arms.

“That’s it! That’s proof! There is no way Rooster could be downtown killing Darryl when he was at the barn with the Engelhauts and their horse all night.”

I hugged her, because one of my favorite things in the world was having her in my arms. But then I took my phone out of my pocket and called Andy, putting him on speaker. “It’s Jack. Did the coroner give you time of death?”

“Yep. She said somewhere between two and four this morning, roughly. She’ll give me an exact time when she gets back to the morgue and pulls one of her assistants. The guy has a magical talent that can pinpoint the time of death to the minute, she says.”

“This is Tess, Andy. We have excellent news.” She told him about the farmers and the horse.

Andy’s sigh of relief was audible. “Thank goodness. There is no way the Engelhauts would lie about that. I know them from church. I’m going to release Rooster right now and start trying to find the actual killer.”

“This is definitely not my area of expertise, but I said I would help you however I can, and I meant it,” I told him.

When we ended the call, Tess and I felt a lot better about everything for about a minute. But then a random thought hit me. “Isn’t it odd that Mrs. Engelhaupt never asked us what we were doing in Rooster’s house?”

She shrugged. “It’s going to sound weird, but I’ve found that the farmers seem to be a lot less nosy than the townspeople in Dead End.”

Huh.

I took a deep breath and smelled apple-cinnamon goodness. “Now that we’ve rescued Rooster, don’t you think we deserve a piece of that pie?”

“Definitely not. I need to go home now and make a casserole for the Petersons.”

“Why?”

“Not necessarily a casserole. Maybe a pie. But I think a lot of people are going to take pies, and it’s good to have something hearty to eat.”

I still must have looked confused because she smiled and patted my arm. “It’s the thing you do for families when there’s a death. It’s a way to help them, so they don’t have to worry about preparing food when they’re grieving, and it also helps us express how much we care about them and our sympathy in a practical way. Flowers are great, but feeding people is important too.”

With that, she headed out the door. I glanced around to make sure that nothing was out of place, dropped the ugly note from Darryl on the coffee table, and started after Tess.

Then she screamed.

I started running.

T*ess*

I was so happy when I rushed out of the house that I didn't even notice my evil nemesis lying in wait: an almost fatal error.

Because there were geese.

Geese in the *yard*. Geese on the *porch*.

Before I could move, the biggest, scariest-looking goose I'd ever seen spread his wings and came after me, honking and screeching what were probably very bad words in goose language.

And after the big guy headed for me, the rest of the flock joined in on the attack.

I ran for the nearest thing—a small tractor in front of the barn—and climbed up on it and into the seat, breathing hard but determined to keep my cool.

They were only *birds*. Dangerous, smelly, scary birds, just FYI for city folk, but still. Birds. I'd tangled with an eagle shifter the month before and come out on top.

“So, take that,” I shouted at the geese. “You have no chance against me!”

I was wrong, though. So, so wrong. Because here's a thing about geese:

Geese can fly.

The mutant bird—surely a goose crossed with a pterodactyl—bellowed out a horrible noise, raised his wings, and flew *right at my face*.

I leaned back so far I rolled off the tractor backwards and barely managed to land on my feet. When I instinctively crouched and looked up, the goose stood perched on the tractor seat, looming over me.

Smirking.

Then he *hissed* at me and opened his wings again.

I couldn't help it. I yelled for Jack.

He slammed the screen door open and ran out like the house was on fire, and I belatedly realized that, under the circumstances, it made sense that he might have overreacted a little when he heard me scream. I wasn't in danger of being murdered, after all.

Probably.

But still. *Geese*.

“Help!”

I ducked, covered my head with my arms, and circled the tractor, avoiding the rest of the flock, and hightailed it back to the porch. The monsters stormed after me, hot on my heels all the way. The head bird flew low and fast in attack mode until it hit the ground running right behind me.

“Help! Keep these nasty beasts away from me!”

Jack was laughing so hard I was afraid he was going to pee himself. He swung me up into his arms, sat me on the porch rail, and turned to face the marauding horde.

“All right, geese. You're in for it now,” he told them, but they looked decidedly unimpressed.

Until he shifted.

The lead goose, suddenly confronted with an enormous tiger, skidded to a halt. Behind him, his gang members—er, flock—ran into each other, trying to stop and stay away from the scary predator.

But I had to give it to him. The lead goose was no chicken. I could tell by the look in his beady eyes that he was still considering whether to go after Jack or go through him to get to me.

And then Jack roared.

The geese all immediately decided they had other places to be and wheeled around in a bunch, then raced off the porch and down into the yard, feathers flying and a cacophony of honking filling the air.

Before I could breathe a sigh of relief, Jack growled, soared off the porch in one giant leap, and then chased the geese around the yard. Not seriously, of course. One tiger-sized hop and he could have been on top of the entire flock. I doubted he wanted to hurt the silly birds, after all.

But I didn't mind him scaring them a little.

The enormous tiger herded them back into their goose pen, gently nudged in a few goslings that had gotten confused, and pushed the door shut with one giant paw. I wasn't sure how they'd gotten out in the first place, but the alpha goose looked like he might've been smart enough to figure out a simple door latch.

Then Jack sauntered back over to me, flashing a big, toothy grin.

I hopped down off the rail and met him in the yard. Then I put my arms around his furry neck and kissed the top of his head. "Thanks for protecting me from the scary geese."

I took a step back so he could shift back into his human form.

"I'd do anything to put a smile on your face, Sweet Pea. Even brave a flock of killer geese." His human grin was every bit as toothy as his tiger grin had been.

"My big, strong hero." I kissed his cheek. "But a hard no to Sweet Pea."

We decided on the way back to town that there was nothing we could do about Darryl or to help Andy right then.

But I didn't know what else I wanted to do. I'd already called off the shopping trip I'd had planned for today by texting everybody while I waited for Jack earlier. I wasn't in the mood for shopping now, anyway.

I sighed. Again. And then just stared morosely out the window. Even the temporary lift I had gotten from Jack's adventure with the geese had worn off. Why did stuff like this keep happening?

"I've got an idea," Jack announced.

I glanced over at him. "What?"

"Let's get out of town. We can pick up Shelley and Zane and take them to the beach. The weather is great, and it's not even too cold, especially considering that it's December. They're out of school, the shop is closed, and we need to do something fun for a change."

"Cocoa Beach?" I would never have thought of it, considering the circumstances, but I liked the idea. A lot. "We could take a picnic."

"Nope. Let's have a giant seafood lunch at one of those little restaurants on the beach. I bet I can eat my weight in fried fish."

I started laughing. "That's a fool's bet. Those poor people have never seen anything like you. You would drive a restaurant into bankruptcy if you ever went to one of those all-you-can-eat deals."

Jack shook his head. "Wouldn't be fair. The couple of times I ate at a place like that, I paid them for four dinners and only ate that much or less."

Because of course he did. He was Jack. And there was no doubt in my mind that he also tipped the servers four times as much.

"You're kind of wonderful. Do you know that?" I put my hand over his on the steering wheel.

He flushed, which always amused me coming from a big tough soldier like him. "You're the one who's wonderful, and

I'm just lucky to know you."

"Okay. Let's just agree that we're both awesome and take our amazing selves to the beach."

I called Dave and got enthusiastic and somewhat frazzled permission to take Zane, and then I called Aunt Ruby. She and Uncle Mike were only too happy to have Shelley off their hands. They had wrapping and other things to do, and she was so hyped up on excitement over her birthday and Christmas, she was bouncing around the house like she'd eaten a pound of candy. So, we picked up the kids and headed out.

It was the best idea ever.

Even if Jack and I couldn't get a word in edge-wise, the sheer joy coming from the back seat, bouncing between the two kids, was such a gift. I'd felt as if I'd had a rock sitting on my chest ever since I'd woken up that morning to the thought that somebody had killed Rooster.

Now, I was finally breathing again, and I realized I was starving.

"How is it you survived this long without breakfast or lunch?"

Jack grinned at me and then growled over his shoulder at the kids, who immediately went silent. "When I'm this hungry, you know what looks super tasty to me? Children! Because they're crunchy with ketchup!!"

The peal of giggles let us know they hadn't taken him at all seriously, of course. We were all smiling when we pulled into the restaurant parking lot.

The server never even batted an eye when Jack asked her for four of the fishermen's delight platters, but she asked us if we needed a bigger table for the rest of our party. Since the kids and I had already ordered, it made sense that she thought we must have more friends joining us.

I smiled at her and shook my head. "Nobody else is coming, thanks. That's just for him. Shockingly enough, he'll probably order dessert too."

Her eyes got big, but she didn't say anything else. Just headed back to the kitchen shaking her head.

After the four of us ate enough fish and chips, shrimp, Mahi, and burgers—Zane—for eight people, we went down to the beach to walk it off. Jack held my hand while we walked, which gave me a quiet feeling of contentment, despite everything going on at home. The late December sun warmed our faces enough to counter the ocean breeze sweeping over the sparkling white sand. The familiar scents of surf and suntan oil recalled laughter-filled memories of days at the beach with Molly when we were growing up. We'd solved the world's problems and endlessly discussed the mysteries of boys while sitting on frayed beach towels and walking in the dancing surf.

The sound of Shelley and Zane laughing while they played barefoot at the edges of the advancing waves made me smile. It was a beautiful day, and this was what people should do on a beautiful day.

Not find dead bodies.

Guilt slammed into me as I thought about Darryl, who would never walk on a beach again. I stumbled to a halt.

Jack pulled me close, his emerald eyes filled with concern as he looked down at me. "I know. I know what you're thinking and feeling, and I understand why. But all those years at war taught me to appreciate the good moments when they come. I'm sorry that Darryl died, and I'm very sorry for the Petersons, especially with this happening just before Christmas. I don't know why, but that feels like it makes it worse. When we get back to town, we'll see about taking some food over there, okay?"

I nodded and just held him for a moment. Then I took a deep breath and smiled up at him. "You're right. I know you're right. I just want this to stop happening."

"I know. Me too." He bent to kiss me, lightly, but I put my arms around his neck and the kiss turned into something deeper. Reassuring and seeking reassurance. Giving comfort and taking some for myself.

The sound of high-pitched voices shrieking “Euwww” broke us apart.

“Jack was kissing Tess!” Zane shouted. “Out in public! In the middle of the beach!”

Shelley put her hands on her hips and rolled her eyes at us. “I know,” she said with mock exasperation. “They do it all the time. It’s so yucky.”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “That’s too bad. Tess, I guess it’s only us going for ice cream, since these two goofballs think we’re so yucky.”

Happy shrieks of protest drowned out anything I might’ve said, so I just laughed and held out my hand to take Shelley’s. Zane and Jack walked ahead of us, Zane chattering a mile a minute, and we made our way back up to the street and down a block to an ice cream shop. It was December, but it was Cocoa Beach, so the little place was still crowded. When we got to the front of the line, Jack, Shelley, and Zane got triple cones.

I settled for a single and regretted the lost metabolism of my youth.

To be honest, though, I was still full from lunch. By the time I was halfway through my cone and too full to eat anymore, Jack was done with his triple and perfectly happy to finish mine.

Between Jack and Lou, I never had to worry about leftovers anymore.

We browsed in a few of the little touristy shops and picked up matching sea-glass bead bracelets for the kids. Jack asked me if I wanted one too, but I shook my head and touched the pendant that he’d given me—the pendant I never took off.

“No. I’m good with only this.”

He reached out and lifted the pendant away from my skin, and his eyes flared with heat. “I love it so much that you wear this, Tess. It means a lot to me.”

I reached up and touched his cheek. “It means a lot to me, too.”

Shelley, who was studying a display of saltwater taffy like it held the secrets of the universe, shot us a glance filled with warning. “If you two start kissing again, we’re leaving you here.”

Jack threw back his head and laughed. “Okay, kiddo. Tess, how about we take these kids back home so they can shower off the ten pounds of sand they managed to cover themselves with?”

“Probably a good idea,” I agreed.

The kids were happy, full, and a little tired, so they weren’t as bouncy on the ride home. We dropped Zane off first and then headed to Aunt Ruby and Uncle Mike’s.

When we got there, Shelley danced inside, showed them her new bracelet and told them about our day, talking so fast her words tripped over each other. Then she hugged all of us and ran upstairs to have a shower.

“That was a really delightful idea to go to the beach,” Uncle Mike said. “They’re smart kids, and they heard about the murder from their friends who live downtown. It was good to get them away for a while, so they could do something fun and exciting and just be kids for the day.”

“Jack needed to just be a kid for the day too,” I confided.

Uncle Mike and Jack both started laughing, but Aunt Ruby didn’t manage more than a weak smile.

“I’m so glad you two discovered Rooster’s alibi so quickly. But now the question is: who would want to kill Darryl? We still have a murderer running around town,” she said, her eyes filled with worry.

I thought about that for a second and then something occurred to me. “What if it’s not anybody in town at all? Darryl lives in Nashville, and he’s only been here a few days. What if he made someone in Nashville so angry that they followed him down here and killed him? They could be back home by now and nobody the wiser.”

Jack nodded. “I thought about that too, and I texted Andy earlier. Being the experienced law enforcement officer that he

is, he'd already thought of it and reached out to his counterparts in Nashville."

"Oh," I said, feeling a little deflated.

"I may take a trip to Nashville to nose around if Andy hasn't solved this by Christmas." Jack said. "But I'm really hoping that he does, or that Susan gets back in town soon. Between the two of them, they'll be able to figure this out in no time, I'm sure. I don't love the idea of a killer still at large in Dead End."

"The problem with this theory is that whoever tried to frame Rooster knew exactly who to go after. Would some random person from Nashville know that? It couldn't be just a coincidence," I said, thinking back to my conversation with Rooster in the jail.

Aunt Ruby offered us iced tea and cookies, but I shook my head. "We need to get going. I've got a lot to do around the house, because I'm going to be too tired after work the next couple of days to do anything. The shop is always crazy busy on the last days I'm open before Christmas."

"Are you still wanting Shelley to come help at the shop?"

"Absolutely. She enjoys doing it, and I enjoy having her there. Plus, I know you're going to be awfully busy with your mayor stuff, between the Darryl situation and the town hall meeting."

Uncle Mike hissed out a breath. "I don't like that Craven fellow one bit. Ran into him when he came to the town hall to see Ruby. I don't figure that guy's got a single honest bone in his body."

Jack nodded. "I have to say you're an excellent judge of character. I feel the same way. Did Tess tell you he's trying to buy our building and the land it sits on right out from under us?"

"Threatened me with eminent domain," I said hotly. "And then hit me with some condescending baloney about how I probably didn't know what that was."

“I wish I’d been there to see you set him straight. Bet you knocked him back a step or two,” Uncle Mike said.

“I did. Then it was even more fun when Jack—in tiger form—came out of his office and added his two growling cents to the conversation.”

Jack shrugged. “I also said no. It was just a little louder.”

“Back to the elephant in the room ... the thing about Darryl is he truly was an annoying guy. But annoying isn’t worth killing over,” Uncle Mike said.

“I’ve seen people kill for a lot less,” Jack said, almost beneath his breath.

I’m sure that was true, but I didn’t like to think about it. I didn’t like to think about any of the horrible things he’d been through before he moved back to Dead End.

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow,” I told my aunt and uncle, giving them both hugs. “And if I don’t see you before that, I’ll see you at the town hall meeting. This is about UltraShopMart, I’m guessing?”

Aunt Ruby nodded. “Yes. I tried to put it off until after Christmas, but Mr. Craven and some of the council members insisted. And with all the hot tempers on either side, we should just get it over with. It’s going to be a brief presentation by him and then a question-and-answer period. I hope it doesn’t turn into a giant shouting match.”

“I hope so too, but I wouldn’t bet on it. If—”

Jack’s phone rang, interrupting me. “Hey, Jed, what’s up?”

He listened for a moment, and his eyes went flat and hard. “All right. I’m on my way.”

He ended the call, looking grim. Before I could ask, he started for the door. “That was Jed, as I guess you heard. He just got back into town and found out somebody broke into our house.”

Jack

Tess followed me out. “Do you want me to come with you?”

I stopped long enough to pull her in for a hug. “No, but thanks. I don’t know what I’m walking into. Jed said nobody was there, and from what he’d seen it was only vandalism, but he doesn’t know Jeremiah’s—my—*our*—place enough to know if anything is missing. Can you get a ride home?”

“Of course. Call me as soon as you know. Do you want me to reach out to Andy for you?”

“No. He has enough on his plate without dealing with simple vandalism.”

I kissed her, jumped in the truck, and sped home. By the time I reached my place, I’d calmed down from fiery rage to mere fury. Whoever was behind this crime ring, they’d dared to come into *my* town. They’d hurt *my* friends.

And now they’d invaded my territory.

I didn’t have time for this, with a murderer on the loose. These jerks were going *down*.

When I reached the house, I realized I’d clamped my fingers so tightly on the steering wheel that they’d left dents.

Okay. Maybe I wasn’t all that calm, after all.

Jed walked out onto the porch, and I recognized the angry amber sparks floating in his green eyes, since I’d seen the

same in my own.

“Nobody came into the house,” he called out. “The cowards just threw a brick through the window.”

I studied the front of the house. They’d shattered the large parlor window, which was an odd size and would be a pain to replace. Even as I thought it, part of my mind wondered at how easily I’d settled into thinking like a homeowner, after fourteen years of living out of a duffel bag wherever life threw me.

Jed walked out to meet me, wearing jeans and one of the flannel shirts we’d bought him since he couldn’t go around dressed in the outfit he’d been wearing in the 1700s. He looked like me—or like I’d look in forty years. Same reddish-brown hair, though his was streaked with white. Three hundred years trapped in a statue would probably do that to a guy. A few inches shorter than me, but same build, same shapeshifter lean muscle and fast metabolism.

Now there were two tigers in Dead End—and somebody had been stupid enough to invade our den.

That somebody was going to be very, very sorry.

“Any tracks out here?”

Jed nodded at the ground beneath the window. “I found shoe prints there. Maybe they looked in the window to see if anybody was home before they threw the brick through it?”

“A brick? What kind of brick?”

He raised an eyebrow. “How do I know? A brick. Not much different from the ones we used in my day, after half the town burned down a couple of times, and we got smart enough to realize that wooden buildings weren’t the best way to go when we had fireplaces and woodstoves.”

I examined the prints, which were large and deep in the soil around the plants. “Big man. Heavy, too, to leave prints this deep.”

“That’s what I thought. Or else a really short guy with enormous feet who held another guy up on his shoulders.”

Jed was grinning when I turned to glance at him. “Hey. I thought I’d add a little humor to the situation. You look like you could chew nails right now.”

He wasn’t wrong.

“How’d you get here, anyway? I thought you weren’t coming back until tomorrow.”

“I got homesick,” he said, shrugging. “Those folks at the university are nice enough, but they mostly treated me like a fascinating insect they were studying instead of like a person. Got old. They sent me home in a car—called it a Yoober—and I had a better conversation with the driver than I’d had in all the days at UCF.”

The thought of an Uber driver chatting with my great-great-however-many-greats grandfather lightened my mood. “Yeah, we need to teach you how to drive and figure out how to get you a driver’s license. The DMV is difficult enough to deal with under normal circumstances. Trying to explain how a guy presumed dead for three hundred years needs a license is going to be tough.”

“Maybe Tess could take me. That girl could charm the fur off a bear,” Jed said admiringly. “Or what about Ruby? She’s the mayor. Doesn’t that mean she could fix it?”

“With anything else, maybe. But the Florida DMV doesn’t recognize Black Cypress County when it comes to rules of the road. We all have to qualify just like anybody else.” I said, crossing to the porch. “But we can figure that out after the holidays. Right now, we need to discover who is behind these random crimes. I just can’t wrap my mind around the logic behind any of it.”

Jed followed me into the house. “What random crimes? There have been more?”

“Right. You don’t know.” I studied the glass shards strewn all over the floor and the brick sitting in the middle of the room while filling him in.

He whistled when I finished. “That’s an awful lot of random events. What do all these things—painting the vet

clinic, stray animals being dumped, stolen tools, damaged boats, and a brick through our window—have to do with each other? Plus, who’s stupid enough to break into a vamp’s house and then do the same to two tigers’ place? It makes no sense at all.”

“And a murder,” I reminded him.

He threw his hands in the air. “Clearly, that has no relationship with the rest. Murder would be a huge jump from painting about drool on the animal doctor’s place of business.”

I couldn’t disagree. “We have two separate criminal elements, then. Or maybe even more? After all, what does the graffiti have in common with stealing tools? Or damaging boats? None of it makes sense. But I’m going to make it my personal mission to track down the people behind all of it.”

“Should we clean it up? The television play that Tess showed me said that we should not disturb evidence.”

Jed and Tess had discovered a joint love of true-crime documentaries. I usually spent the time when they watched them going for a run or napping on the porch.

I’d seen enough true crime in my life. I didn’t need to watch more of it on TV.

“It’s not much in the way of evidence. I’m pretty sure even a stupid criminal would have worn gloves, but if not, I doubt they can get a fingerprint off the rough edges of that brick. Let’s just clean it up and conduct our own investigation. Andy is too busy with the murder to bother with this.”

“All right. But I’m getting out the whiskey. It feels like a night that calls for a drink or five.”

Tigers have very strong metabolisms. It would take a couple of *bottles* of whiskey to get either of us drunk, so a drink or five was no problem.

I texted Tess that Jed was fine, and the break-in was no big deal, which wasn’t *entirely* false. She said Uncle Mike had driven her home, and that she was worn out and going to bed and would see me tomorrow. I caught myself grinning like a lovesick teenager when she texted me heart emojis.

Jed and I cleaned up the glass, taped a tarp up over the window, and polished off a few bottles of whiskey that he found in the back of the cupboard. Maybe my late uncle had stocked up for a party.

I held up my cup. “To Jeremiah, one of the best men I’ve ever known. He raised me and loved me, even though it must not have been easy dealing with an adolescent shapeshifter going through the pains of the change for the first time.”

Jed held up his own cup. “To Jeremiah. May he rest in peace and glory in the ever after. I wish I’d been able to meet him.”

I’d told him about my uncle, of course. How he’d raised me. Left me this house and half the pawnshop. He’d left the other half to Tess, a decision that had changed the course of my life.

One look at her and something inside me had felt a shimmering sense of recognition, as if my soul had taken a deep breath and slowly let it out in relief.

In gratitude.

Knowing that I was finally and forever home.

“Must be the whiskey,” I muttered. “My brain is going all mushy.”

Jed roared with laughter. “You get that pole-axed look on your face every time you think about Tess, grandson.”

He probably wasn’t wrong. I felt my face get hot and downed another shot of Jeremiah’s finest whiskey to cool off.

Bad choice. It burned all the way down.

And then I burped, which struck both of us as hilariously funny, which probably meant that the two ... no, *three* empty bottles on the kitchen table had gone down way too fast.

We’d devoured the two leftover pizzas I’d found in the fridge, and I was rummaging around for more food, because ... tigers. I looked up and caught Jed with a pole-axed look on *his* face, and I grinned.

“Who is she?”

“What?” He tried to give me an innocent face but failed miserably.

“The one who put that gleam in your eyes.” I pulled out ham, cheese, and mustard and put it on the table with a loaf of bread. Five or six sandwiches each would go down well.

Jed cleared his throat. “Well. Gia ... er ... Dr. Hernandez is, ah, well. The women of this time are very *forward*, aren’t they?”

I caught the flush on his cheeks before he ducked his head. “Are you fraternizing with the professor, Granddad?”

“Fraternizing?”

“Kissing. Making out. Playing the—”

“Stop! I get it. We, ah, we may have shared a respectful kiss. Or two.”

I handed him a sandwich. “How old is she?”

“Forty-three,” he mumbled before stuffing the sandwich in his mouth.

I laughed. “Hanging out with younger women now, are you?”

He swallowed the mouthful of sandwich. “When you’re three hundred and sixty years old, give or take, every woman is a younger woman.”

I couldn’t argue with that, so I opened another bottle of whiskey and we toasted younger women.

And redheads.

And brunettes.

And that tigers are freaking *awesome*.

And then we went for a run.



had to give Tess all the credit in the world. When two tigers showed up on her porch at three in the morning, she barely batted an eye.

At least until we shifted to human and started singing sea shanties.

On the third “Way, hey, blow the man down,” Tess pointed to the door.

“You can stop singing now, or you can go sleep on the porch.”

Jed protested. “Now, Tess—”

She narrowed those beautiful blue eyes. “Don’t you ‘now, Tess,’ me, Grandpa Jed. Shut it or get out. It’s the middle of the night and *some* of us need to get to work in the morning.”

I started down the hall after her, but she turned and wagged a finger at me. Or maybe two fingers. Things were a little fuzzy by that point.

“Not a chance, buster. You can go sleep with the other drunkard in the living room or out in the backyard for all I care. And if anybody sings again, I’m going to toss your furry butts in the pool.” Then she looked over my shoulder at Jed, who’d shifted back to tiger and was staring fixedly at Lou, who was crouched on the back of the couch.

“And don’t eat my cat!”

Lou took that opportunity to leap off the couch, use Jed’s back as a springboard, and race down the hall into Tess’s room.

I tried to say something, but what came out instead was a tremendous belch.

Tess did a very respectable imitation of a tiger’s growl. “That’s it. Good night. You’re lucky I love you.”

When I shifted back to tiger and claimed the couch, leaving Jed the floor, I was still grinning, because she was right.

I *was* lucky she loved me.

It was my last thought until morning, when I woke up to somebody pounding on my head with a giant boulder.

T^{ess}

When my Donald Duck alarm clock rang, I smacked it into submission and then stared up at the ceiling, wondering why I was so tired. Then Lou meowed, staring at my closed door, and I remembered.

Drunk tigers.

Sea shanties.

Maybe it had been a horrible nightmare?

I got out of bed and wandered down to the living room. Nope. Not a nightmare. There were two Bengal tigers sleeping in my house.

My lips quirked when I realized that, to some people, waking up to two apex predators in their house *would* be a nightmare.

To me, it was just a Monday.

I glanced at the clock and groaned. Speaking of Mondays...

I started the coffee and then headed back to my room to get ready for work. By the time I was mostly awake and dressed in jeans and a Dead End Pawn sweatshirt, my hair braided away from my face, I could smell breakfast.

Tigers or no, the second I opened the door Lou abandoned me to follow the scent of bacon to the kitchen. I wandered after her, wondering if I could invent a coffee IV.

Jack stood at the stove, turning bacon in a pan. He turned his head when I walked in and gave me a very sheepish smile. Jed, who sat at the table with his head in his hands, grunted in my general direction.

I poured coffee into my travel mug and studied the two of them. After my first sip, I finally spoke. “Sea shanties?”

Jack’s groan was so soft I might not have heard it if I hadn’t noticed him clutching his head.

“Exactly how much beer does it take to get two tiger shifters drunk?” I felt like I was reciting the opening to a very tired joke.

“Whiskey,” Jed muttered. “Lost count after the fourth.”

“Fourth? Shot? Glass?”

Jed muttered something inaudible.

“What was that?”

“Fourth bottle,” Jack said, studiously looking at the bacon, the pan, and basically everywhere but at me. “We, ah, got a little carried away.”

I gave them my sweetest smile, and Jack winced.

“So, what you’re saying is ... the men got blown down?”

Jack put the bacon-filled plate on the table. “Tess, I’m so sorry. I don’t even remember deciding to come here. We should have gone back home after our run.”

“So sorry,” Jed mumbled, pulling the carton of orange juice over and putting its cool surface against his forehead. “So very sorry.”

“Maybe I’ll wake you two up in the middle of the night sometime singing sea shanties.”

This time, they both winced, and I narrowed my eyes. My singing wasn’t *that* bad. Also, speaking of sea shanties...

Don’t ask, don’t ask, don’t ask.

I had to ask.

“Why sea shanties?”

Jed opened one bleary eye. “Did I tell you about the time pirates captured me?”

“*Argh*. No. Just no. I already listen to one Shepherd’s ridiculous stories. Don’t you start too. Anyway, I need to get to work. See you two later, if you survive what must be truly monstrous hangovers.”

I ducked away from Jack’s kiss, because he still smelled faintly of whiskey, and fed Lou. Then I grabbed a biscuit, stuffed some bacon in it, and headed to work, leaving two slightly bedraggled shifters behind.

I caught myself singing “Blow the Man Down” all the way to work.



When I arrived at the shop, I saw Eleanor’s car, even though it was almost an hour before opening. She was wonderful, and I hated the idea that I might lose her after she got married. I hadn’t directly asked if she planned to keep working at the shop, not really wanting to hear the answer yet.

I’d worry about that after the holidays too.

It was going to be a busy January.

Popping the last bite of biscuit in my mouth, I took my bag and coffee and walked to my shop, making a mental note to wash the windows again before I reopened after Christmas. They were still clean, but sparkling windows made the contents of the store shine. Pawnshops started with a disadvantage because we were basically selling used stuff, but presenting that stuff to its best advantage went a long way.

Anyway, nobody said “used” anymore. Just ask the car dealers. It was all “pre-owned.”

“We need a locked case for our pre-owned magical objects,” I called out when I pushed through the door. “Also, good morning! Hey! Who bought the klepto tree?”

Eleanor came rushing out from the back room. “Tess! I was just about to call you—somebody broke into the shop! The door was hanging wide open when I got here. I ran into the back to see if they got into the vault.”

I was running before she finished speaking. “Did they? Get into the vault, I mean?”

“No!”

The “no” slowed me down, but I still felt compelled to look. That vault held all my most expensive pawned goods—the things that still legally belonged to other people. I was insured, of course, but insurance didn’t get Aunt Sally’s heirloom diamond ring back to the family who’d needed to pawn it for some extra money to pay bills.

But Eleanor had been right. The vault not only wasn’t open, but there weren’t even scratches to show that somebody had tried to get into it. I opened it anyway, of course, but nothing was gone. Nothing was in disarray.

“They really only opened the front door and left?” That didn’t make any sense to me. “I mean, nothing else is missing? The jewelry? Any of the magical objects?”

She shook her head, but her expression told me she was still in shock. “I might have just thought we forgot to lock the door, but with all the crime going on around town recently... I really shouldn’t have even come inside. I should have just called Andy.”

I whirled to face her, suddenly aware that somebody could have harmed her ... or worse. “Oh, Eleanor!” I hugged her, hard. “Please don’t ever put yourself in danger over the shop. It’s just stuff, and stuff will never, ever be as important as you are to me.”

She hugged me back. “Honestly, I didn’t even think about it. I just raced in when I saw the door open.”

I turned and slowly scanned the shop. I didn’t have an eidetic—often called photographic—memory, but I spent six days a week here. I had an excellent sense of what was where,

and I couldn't see a single thing out of place. Only the enchanted tree was missing.

"Eleanor, please tell me you *sold* the magical kleptomaniacal Christmas tree?"

"No. They must have taken it. But at least it's off our hands, right?" Her expression was somewhere between relieved and worried.

"Yeah." I blew out a breath. "I'm glad it's gone, but now I'm worried about where it went and who has it. Are thieves going to get the stolen Christmas gifts? Will they return them? Or are there Dead End children who won't get their presents because of this?"

I was so mad at myself. Jack and I should have destroyed the tree when we first thought of it. Now there were kids who might go without their presents, and it was my fault.

After debating with myself for a while, I texted Andy.

Hey, it's not a huge deal, but the thieves hit my place. They only stole an enchanted Christmas tree, but I thought I'd tell you. I don't need to file an official report or anything, but the problem is that it's the presents-stealing tree. Text me when you get a chance.

He didn't immediately respond, so after waiting a few moments, I shot off a quick text telling Jack what had happened and then put my phone aside and got on with my day.

Customers bombarded us, as always happened during the last days before I closed for the holidays. We weren't UltraShopMart; I didn't stay open all day, every day, including holidays. The folks in Dead End knew that the shop closed after business on December twenty-second, because that's how Jeremiah had done it for decades, and I'd carried on that tradition.

"Christmas is for families," he'd always said, and I completely agreed.

Eleanor filled a bowl with candy canes and set it out on the counter, and we spent the morning smiling, chatting, and

wishing everyone happy holidays as we rang up sale after sale. I was so busy for an hour that—for a while—I forgot one important fact:

I had security cameras.

All I needed to do was find a minute to review the footage, and I'd see who'd broken into my shop and stolen the tree.

Shelley arrived around eleven, and I put her to work inventorying the Dead End Pawn merchandise. She finished that quickly, so I made her Chief Candy Cane Hander Outer, which she loved, and the morning flew by. Before I knew it, it was time for lunch, but we were too busy to stop.

When I walked into the back room to grab a bottle of water, Shelley followed me, her little face serious.

“Tess, can we talk?”

I handed her a bottle of water and uncapped one for myself, expecting a question about boys or school or Christmas presents. “Absolutely, sweetheart. What's up?”

She fidgeted with her water while I took a long drink, and then she squared her shoulders and looked up at me. “I don't know how to feel about what happened to Mr. Peterson.”

Oh. This was not a talk about boys.

This was a serious, “almost-ten is not a child” talk.

“Oh, honey.” I put my water down and hugged her. “I know. Death is hard. And especially a death like this. But any way you feel isn't right or wrong. It's just how you feel, and that's okay.”

Her eyes glimmered with the tears she was fighting hard to keep from falling. “It's just that I know Mr. Rooster, and I was glad it was the wrong Santa. Is that wrong? Am I a horrible person because I thought that?”

“Of course, you're not a horrible person. I'll let you in on a little secret. When I found out it wasn't Rooster, my first reaction was relief, too. It's only human and normal to have feelings like that about someone you know and care about. Being glad they're alive, I mean. It doesn't mean that we're

not sad about Darryl—Mr. Peterson.” I kissed the top of her head. “I think sadness about things like this may be proportionate to how well we knew and loved somebody. Like I said, it’s not that it’s right or wrong, it’s just that we’re human. And nothing you ever feel will be wrong. Please always talk to me about stuff like this. Don’t ever be ashamed of your feelings.”

“I will,” Shelley said, wiping her eyes. “It’s just that it’s hard to talk about stuff like this to old people.”

“Well, Uncle Mike and Aunt Ruby aren’t really that old—”

She gave me a quizzical look. “No. I meant you and Jack. Anyway, thanks Tess. I better get out there in case anybody needs a candy cane.”

I stared thoughtfully after her and drank my water, wondering if I should stock up on adult diapers and a walker now or later. Then I had to laugh, remembering how Molly and I had thought people in their late twenties were *ancient* when we were Shelley’s age.

“What goes around comes around, or something like that,” I murmured to the empty room.

And then I cheered my elderly self up by taking the compliment clock out to the front room and letting it share its bounty with all the customers. Surely there was somebody out there who wanted their goats to have twins and would snap it up.

For once, luck was smiling at me. Because not thirty minutes later, two sisters in probably their mid-forties walked in, and one of them caught sight of the clock and headed straight for it.

They weren’t just sisters; they were twins. Both had curly brown hair, sparkling brown eyes, and huge grins. Within a minute or two, they were best friends with Eleanor and talking about her upcoming wedding.

“We’re just over from Tampa,” the sister in the orange shirt—Mindy, I think—burbled. “I’m looking for something for my horrible mother-in-law.”

The sister in the green shirt made a tsking sound and touched Mindy's arm. "Now, you know you don't mean that. Or at least you shouldn't say it out loud."

They burst into laughter.

"Anyway. It can't be something awful. I'm going to be the better person if it kills me. Do you have anything that seems nice on the outside but isn't, really?"

Just then, the clock struck noon, and went into its routine.

"You are a fit subject for the pleasant songs of youthful poets."

I narrowed my eyes. "Really? I get twin goats, but they get songs for poets?"

Shelley giggled, Eleanor grinned, and Mindy looked at me, her mouth open. "Did that clock really just say what I thought it said?"

I nodded. "Oh, it gets better. It will also tell you your hips are wide for child birthing or that your farm animals will have twins. It likes to give compliments, but they're compliments from a time long gone."

"Not all that long gone," Mindy's sister said darkly. "You should meet her in-laws."

With that, the haggling was on. Mindy was my favorite kind of customer—she loved to bargain. We jockeyed back and forth for a while, both of us enjoying the give-and-take. I needed to get at least fifty dollars more than I'd paid for it, because of overhead, salaries, etc. When Mindy got me down to about seventy-five dollars in profit, I put an expression of sadness on my face and slowly shook my head.

"Mindy, in the spirit of Christmas, I'm willing to go down to this price, but you're hurting me. A girl needs to make at least a *little* profit to keep the lights on. I really can't go any further."

Mindy grinned at me. "Oh honey, this has been the most fun I've had all week. I *love* bargaining. But I can't give my

mother-in-law a present that only costs that much, so let's add two hundred to the price, and I'll take it."

I blinked. I had never had a customer bargain me *up* on price before.

"I can't do that. It's not fair to you, after you had me down to—"

But Mindy was already rummaging in her giant purse for her wallet. She shook her head and gave me a stern look. "Oh, no you don't. Every year, there's an unspoken competition between all the daughters-in-law to see who spent the most on Alva. My sister-in-law, the surgeon—and I think she has that tattooed on her butt, that she's a surgeon—has won for the past three years. But there is no way she would spend this much money on a present for our mother-in-law. I'm totally going to win this year. Then I get bragging rights for twelve entire months until next year, when it all starts up again."

She held out her credit card with a triumphant look on her face, and I didn't see how I could refuse. After all, I was helping her win a competition and get bragging rights.

I rang up the sale, patted the clock on the top of its case and told it goodbye, wrapped it carefully in a Dead End Pawn T-shirt I threw in as a bonus, and handed it over.

"Please come back anytime," I told them, smiling. "Especially when you don't feel you have to pay extra, and we can get down to some *real* bargaining."

The twins grinned at me. Shelley handed them each a candy cane, and they were on their way.

I looked at Eleanor and shrugged. "I'm not really sure how to act. We only have ordinary merchandise right now. No compliment clock and no kleptomaniac Christmas tree. It's like ... it's like we're a normal store or something."

Eleanor stared at me for a moment, and then she got the giggles. "Ordinary? Here?"

That made Shelley crack up. I tried to resist but couldn't help myself—everybody knows giggles are contagious. We

were bent over laughing like loons when the next customer came up to the counter.

The elderly gentleman gave all three of us disapproving glares and waited until we stuffed our hilarity under control. “I know it’s the holidays, young lady, but I think it was a little early to get into the Christmas rum.”

I opened my mouth to apologize, but all that came out was a howl of laughter. Eleanor started laughing again too, and Shelley bit her lip to keep from joining in this time. She glanced at us—the two adults who were acting so silly—and must have decided she had to save the day.

She grabbed the mug and held it out to the man. “Candy cane?”

By the time he’d unwrapped his candy, Eleanor and I had the giggles under control again.

I arranged my face in my most professional expression. “I’m sorry about that, sir. It’s just been a crazy week. How can I help you?”

“I wanted to talk to you about that stuffed rabbit,” he began, pointing at my wall of taxidermy. “I know this is going to sound ridiculous. I must be hallucinating, but I’m almost certain I saw the rabbit bite the foot of the stuffed raccoon on the shelf next to it.”

Okay. Not an *entirely* normal store.

By the time I’d explained to the man about the enchanted rabbit—shockingly, he purchased it anyway—we were all starving. But the customers kept streaming into the store. Great for the bottom line, but not so great for my empty stomach.

“Hey, Shelley. Will you run in the back and call Jack? See if he can bring some sandwiches or pizza for the three of us? Maybe some sodas?”

“And dessert!” Shelley said, grinning from ear to ear. “Lots and lots of dessert”

She skipped off into the back.

“That girl is just a delight,” Eleanor said. “She’s healing more and more from the loss of her mom every day. You did a wonderful thing taking her in, you and Ruby and Mike.”

“I can say honestly that she’s been a blessing to us. We all love her.”

After that, Eleanor helped a customer with jewelry while I rang up sales. When we had a temporary lull, she leaned back against the counter and gave me a hesitant look. “I don’t mean to be nosy—”

“Unlike every single other person in Dead End?”

She laughed. “True enough. But it’s just with that woman talking about her mother-in-law. I realized I’ve never heard the story of what happened to Jack’s parents. Do you know?”

I blinked, feeling like I’d suddenly swallowed a rock. I *didn’t* know. And, even stranger, I realized I’d never once thought about it in the year since Jack had been back.

Great. So now I had to talk to Jack about Quinn, *and* I had to ask about his parents.

January was going to suck.

Jack

After we cleaned up the kitchen from breakfast—well, mostly I cleaned up the kitchen while Jed sat there in silence, head on the table, occasionally moaning—we shifted back to our tiger forms and ran to my place. It was a little harder to avoid being seen in the daylight than it had been in whatever embarrassing time of night it had been when Jed and I landed on Tess’s porch, but the few people we saw mostly just waved and went on their way. A couple did a double take at seeing two tigers, because folks weren’t quite used to the idea of both of us yet. Nobody scowled or waved guns at us or told us to get off their lawns, though, all of which had happened to me in the past.

When I’d been *lucky*.

When I hadn’t been as lucky, they’d been firing those guns at me. Or casting heavy-duty spells. Or attacking with fangs and claws.

Life as a rebel leader had certainly had its moments.

We ran up to the porch, transforming mid-leap, and I shook my head and grinned at my granddad. “The funny thing is, I thought it would be boring, moving home to a small town after my adventures in the rebellion.”

He threw back his head and laughed, long and loud. “Jack, from what you’ve told me about your year here, bored is the last thing you’ll ever be.”

I had a feeling he wasn't wrong.

I took a long, hot shower and then remembered to check my phone and said some very bad words when I saw the text from Tess.

Jed looked up from where he was reading the Dead End Gazette at the kitchen table. "What is it?"

I told him about the break-in at Tess's shop.

"I need to go out there." Before I realized I was going for them, I had my keys in my hand. "She said it wasn't a big deal and nothing was gone except for that crazy enchanted tree. But I need to—"

Jed made pushing motions with his hands. "Of course you need to go. Tell Tess hello from me."

"You don't want to come with me?"

Jed suddenly looked a little sheepish. "Well, I would, but it's just that... my professor lady friend is stopping by. She said she had a few clarifying questions to ask me."

I grinned at him. "I bet she does."

Jed sternly pointed at the door. "Out."

When I opened the door to my truck, though, my phone rang. I glanced down at it and answered the call. "Hey Shelley. Is everything okay? I'm on my way to the shop right now."

"Happy almost Christmas, Jack! I'm at the shop with Tess. We need food! Tess said to ask if you can bring sandwiches or pizza. And sodas. And lots and lots of dessert."

"I kinda have the feeling that she did not say lots and lots of dessert." I swung up into the truck and started it. "But I'll see what I can do."

"Okay, thanks! And don't forget the dessert! See you soon!"

Between her upcoming birthday, which was on the 23rd—the same day as mine—and Christmas, Shelley was so excited it surprised me she wasn't levitating. Although, considering

her newly manifesting magical powers, she very well might start at any moment.

I decided pizza was the way to go and headed for Judd's shop, formerly known as Dead End Pizza. I tried to call Tess on the way, but she wasn't answering. I knew she'd be really busy at the shop, and I figured there was nothing to worry about if she had Shelley calling to ask me about lunch.

I also figured if I kept telling myself that long enough, the hollow feeling in my stomach at the thought of somebody breaking into her shop would go away. I still wasn't quite used to worrying about somebody the way I did about her. I blew out a deep breath, determined to put negative thoughts out of my mind. I'd bring pizza, and I'd be cheerful, and I wouldn't give her anything else to be concerned about.

It was bad enough Jed and I had bumbled in on her singing sea shanties.

The pizza shop had been a relatively nondescript building before Judd bought it. He'd repainted the outside in the colors of the Italian flag, and it looked cheerful and inviting. Inside, he'd added a nice seating area for people who wanted to eat out instead of at home. I ordered five large pizzas, plus an assortment of cannoli. The teenager at the counter kept giving me surreptitious glances in between ringing up my order and finally he stopped and looked at me, took a deep breath, and blurted out: "Are you really a tiger shifter?"

I considered flashing fangs at him, but restrained myself and grinned. "Yep. That's me."

"So, tigers like pizza?"

I would've thought he was poking fun at me if the awed expression on his face wasn't so plain.

"Only when there are no teenagers available," I said cheerfully.

He grinned at me. "Good one, Mr. Shepherd."

"Just Jack, please." I paid him and put twenty bucks for a tip in the jar. He thanked me and told me it would be about fifteen minutes, so I wandered back outside and leaned against

the front of the building, enjoying the late December sunshine. It was chilly but not cold, especially for somebody with the metabolism of a tiger shifter. I pulled my phone out of my pocket, considering trying Tess again, but then I heard raised voices coming from behind the shop.

“You need to tell me where you were, and you’d better do it *right now*.”

I didn’t recognize the female voice, but I recognized the man who answered her.

Judd.

“I told you. I got up and went to run the mower at church before the six a.m. service, since I was having a hard time sleeping. And then I heard all the ruckus downtown and wandered over and found out about Darryl.”

“Don’t you lie to me! You left at four in the morning! And I know you weren’t in church because I talked to the pastor, and he said he hadn’t seen you. Want to try again? Are you having an affair? I knew it! My mother warned me about you!” The woman burst into tears, and I froze.

It wasn’t the first time my superior tiger hearing had gotten me into an uncomfortable situation, but I’d never found a good way to handle it. I didn’t know if Judd was married, but it sounded like this was his wife or girlfriend, and I did not want to know about their relationship problems.

I made a quick right turn and headed back into the shop. Even the horrible music they were playing—a cross between 80’s soft rock and elevator Muzak—was better than the chance that Judd would catch me eavesdropping on his private conversation, no matter how inadvertently.

When I went back inside, the boy at the counter grinned at me. “It’s ready. Having a lunch party?”

“Something like that.”

He’d just started to respond when a woman slammed out of the doors from the kitchen, with Judd hot on her heels.

“Honey, please,” he called after her before he caught sight of me.

The woman pushed past me, tears running down her cheeks, and mumbled an apology.

“Um, Mrs. Judd,” the kid at the counter said. “Um, you left your purse...”

But she was already out the door.

Judd’s wife, then. I wished, not for the first time, that I had the magical power to transport myself somewhere else. Since I didn’t, I gave Judd a brief nod and focused hard on the counter.

The boy handed me my pizzas, and I turned to go.

Judd’s voice stopped me. “Women,” he said weakly, with a forced chuckle. “What are you going to do, right?”

I shrugged noncommittally and started for the door.

“Here. Let me get that for you.” He strode past me and pushed the door open, which only prolonged the awkwardness. After a quick glance at his strained face, I pretended it was crucial I watch the pizza boxes I was carrying, so I couldn’t meet his gaze.

On the way out, though, I glimpsed the battered sneakers he wore with his jeans and Judd’s Pizza shirt.

“Hazard of the job, right?” I grinned at him. “Splattering pizza sauce on your shoes.”

The boy at the counter laughed. “Oh no. Mr. Judd never makes pizzas anymore. It’s good to be the owner, right?”

Judd glanced down at his shoes and then up at me, something almost frightened in his eyes. “Yes, pizza sauce. I was in here last night, in fact. Got to make the pizzas.”

“But—”

“I’m sure Jack needs to be on his way,” Judd said, cutting off whatever the boy had been about to say.

“Sure do. I have three hungry ladies waiting for me. Thanks,” I said cheerfully as I walked out the door, not letting on for a second that I was pretty sure the tiny red splotches on his shoes were not pizza sauce at all.

To me, they looked a lot like blood.

His wife had also accused him of having an affair, because he’d lied about where he was on *Sunday morning*.

Sunday morning—exactly when somebody’d murdered Darryl.

Lucky had told me about how he’d overheard Judd and Darryl arguing, and now Judd had no alibi for the time of the murder.

Tess and I needed to tell Andy. Well, after I told her.

I put the pizza boxes on my passenger seat and frowned at them. I hated the idea that Judd might be the killer. And not only because the pizza had gotten so much better since he’d bought the place. I genuinely liked the guy. But, as people had brutally shown me so many times during the past decade, even the nicest people could snap and do violent things.

Starting the car, I decided to talk it over with Tess before I called Andy. A snippet of overheard conversation and what might—*might*—be blood on shoes did not equal proof beyond a reasonable doubt.

Tess and I would discuss it like real private detectives, even though neither of us were, and then I’d decide what to do. That resolved, I drove myself and my pizzas over to the pawnshop, pulled into the parking lot, and turned off the truck.

Then I just sat there for a moment, staring, before I picked up my phone and called Tess.

She answered on the second ring. “Jack! Where are you? We’re starving over here!”

“Tess,” I said slowly. “Why is there a reindeer on the roof of your shop?”

T*ess*

I dropped my phone on the counter and raced to the door. A normal person would think “he’s messing with me.”

But normal people didn’t live in Dead End.

I opened the door, glanced up, and then carefully walked out onto the porch. Jack ambled toward me, staring up at my roof the whole time. I leaned back over the railing and looked up, but still couldn’t see anything.

“You’re going to need to come down here.” The expression on Jack’s face told me he didn’t know whether to laugh or clutch his head and groan.

I slowly edged down the stairs, backward, until I could get a good view of my roof.

My roof ... and the reindeer standing on top of it.

“Well, that’s unexpected.”

Jack stopped just behind me and put his arms around my waist. “Definitely a new one on me, too.”

“Are you sure that’s a reindeer? I mean, just because he’s brownish white, has antlers, and looks like he ought to be pulling Santa’s sleigh doesn’t prove anything.”

“It’s a reindeer, Tess. Remember, I told you about the time ___”

“Stop. Stop right now. I just can’t.”

The door to the shop opened, and Eleanor, Shelley, and a half-dozen customers all rushed out to see what was going on. Probably because of the weird squeaky noise I'd made before rushing out the door.

"Why are you standing in the parking lot staring at the roof?" Shelley asked. Then she skipped across the porch and down the stairs, turning as she went, until she was standing next to me and Jack, her eyes huge, staring up at Rudolph.

I took a deep breath. "I'm looking at the reindeer on my roof. Before you ask, no, I don't know how it got there or why it's standing there now. It seems a little like the abandoned dogs and cats, but not really, because—reindeer."

All the customers and Eleanor were chattering and taking selfies with Rudolph in the background, and I had a sinking feeling the pictures were going to show up in the Dead End Gazette.

Shelley's little hand slipped into mine. "Um, Tess?"

"It's okay. We're going to figure out what to do and how safely to get the reindeer off the roof. Don't you worry."

Behind me, Jack chuckled. "I could jump on the roof and shift. That would get it moving really fast."

"Absolutely not!"

"Don't you dare!" Shelley said.

"I'll give you fifty bucks to do it," one customer said, pointing her phone at Jack.

"I need to go back in the shop and get my phone," I said, sighing. "Maybe we can—"

"Tess? There's something I need to tell you."

I looked down at my little sister. "What is it, honey? Jack was just kidding. He wouldn't scare the reindeer. And—"

"I know *that*," she said impatiently. "It's the reindeer. I think ... I think it's my fault it's here."

Jack crouched down and looked at her. "Why do you say that, sweetheart?"

Shelley looked miserable. “I didn’t mean to do it,” she wailed.

Oh, no. This was not good. When a baby witch with brand-new powers says, “I didn’t mean to do it,” things might be going south.

“Didn’t mean to do what?”

“It’s just that I was thinking about Santa Claus. Also, the reindeer. And Rudolph. And...” She looked away from us and bit her lip.

“And what, Shelley?” Jack asked in a gentle voice.

“I was just wishing that Rudolph really existed, and that he’d come visit us at the pawnshop, and maybe I could go for a ride on him,” she blurted out, all in one breath.

Jack and I both looked at her.

And then up at the reindeer.

And then back at Shelley.

I had absolutely no idea how to handle this one.

Just then, the reindeer glanced down and caught sight of Shelley. He made a strange noise, a cross between a grunt and a cough, and then he jumped off the roof and flew.

Straight at us.

I ran forward, with some crazed idea of catching him before he fell and broke his legs, and then ran backwards, when my brain kicked in and told me he would crush me. Jack grabbed the back of my shirt and yanked me out of the way.

The reindeer, meanwhile, floated slowly down through the air and landed almost delicately on the ground, directly in front of Shelley. He bent his head and gently nudged her shoulder.

My sister’s squeal of delighted laughter rang through the air, and she reached out to pet his nose.

“He might bite,” I said, but the rush of excitement as everyone came up to pet the reindeer drowned me out.

“They’re not aggressive unless there are females around to impress,” Jack said in my ear. “She’s fine.”

Rudolph, I had to admit, didn’t look at all threatening. Instead, he almost seemed to smile, and he was certainly enjoying all the attention. I looked into his beautiful brown eyes and saw what I thought was calm patience, not that I could read reindeer expressions.

I nudged Jack with my elbow. “What do you see when you look at him?”

“Lunch,” he murmured next to my ear, and I had to bite my lip against the laugh.

“I mean, do you see a child’s sweet holiday wish come to life or something dangerous?”

“I suspect he’s only dangerous to *roofs* after he eats too many carrots on Christmas Eve. Nobody wants to clean reindeer poop off their house on Christmas.”

I rolled my eyes. “Jack. Focus. What are we going to do?”

Jack grinned and shook his head. “I’m pretty sure you’re going to say barbecue is out of the question, so I think we should call the vet and see what she thinks.”

I took a few steps away from the chatter surrounding the reindeer and dialed the vet clinic. Phin answered. “Dead End Veterinary Clinic, can I help you?”

“Boy, I sure hope so.” I told him about the reindeer situation, but he was laughing so hard by the end of it I had to wait a few moments for him to calm down enough to hear me.

“Yes, we’ll certainly take him and figure out where he came from. The flying is probably temporary. At least I hope so. I’ll talk to Charithra, but in the meantime, do you have a way to get him here?”

“He can go in the back of Jack’s truck,” I said. “Let me go get some rope and we’ll figure it out. I’ll see you as soon as we can get there.”

By the time we fastened a piece of rope into a modified collar and leash and got all the customers out of the way, the

reindeer was clearly ready to get away from the crowd.

Jack lifted Rudolph into the back of the truck as easily as he'd lifted the injured dog. I had no idea how much a reindeer weighed, but I'd grown up around horses and cows. Just eyeballing it, I figured he was easily three hundred and fifty pounds.

Shapeshifter strength to the rescue.

"I'll ride in the back with him," Shelley said, all but vibrating with excitement.

"Oh, no, you won't," I told her. "If Rudolph decides he wants to take off, you wouldn't be able to stop him. And the idea of you floating through the air hanging onto the end of his rope is enough to give me gray hair."

"I'll go with them. No problem, Miss Tess." It was one of my customers. A strong, sturdy guy who probably could've lifted the reindeer all by himself. I didn't remember his name, but I knew he worked with Dave.

He and Jack shook hands.

"Julio Martinez, right?" Jack said. "Nice to see you again."

Julio grinned. "You, too. And let me tell you, we had fun for weeks making jokes about Dave's ... incident."

That's right. He'd been in the hospital when Dave had gotten shot in the, ah, posterior region.

"Shifter strength. Wow! Not many people could lift that deer up and put it in the back of the truck. Well, let's get 'er done."

I agreed Shelley could ride along, but only in the front with Jack.

And then I stood and watched as Jack slowly and carefully drove away, with Julio sitting in the back on the wheel well, holding the rope. Before they even made it out of the parking lot, the reindeer launched himself into the air like some kind of twisted Macy's Thanksgiving parade balloon, with poor Julio hanging on for dear life.

“I gotta get a video of this for my grandkids,” one of my customers said, and she scurried off to her car, yelling at Mabel to hurry.

A tiny white-haired woman—Mabel, evidently—clutched her Dead End Pawn tote filled with purchases to her chest and toddled off after the first woman.

I trudged back into the shop, which was now empty of customers. Eleanor walked in right after me, still laughing.

“Do you know what the worst part of all of this is?”

She shook her head. “Not sure. That there might be reindeer poop on the roof?”

“Knowing my luck, there is *certainly* reindeer poop on the roof,” I said glumly. “But the worst part is, Jack and Shelley just drove off with our lunch. We’ll be lucky if there’s a crumb left by the time they get back here.”

T*ess*

Another surge of customers kept me and Eleanor busy for a while, and then she took pity on me and ran out to get us some sandwiches. I hadn't heard from Jack or Shelley since they took off with Rudolph, which I had to think was a good thing. No doubt Jack would have called me if something had gone horribly wrong.

It was almost Christmas. We deserved one afternoon without a crisis.

When Eleanor got back, she told me she'd eaten her sandwich in the car on the way over, so she took over while I spent ten minutes inhaling a sandwich, some chips, and more caffeine. Then it was back to work and back to ringing up those all-important holiday sales. Christmas was terrific for profits in the pawnshop business.

Half an hour later, Shelley called to tell me they'd transported the reindeer safely to the vet clinic and to ask if she could go Christmas shopping with Jack.

I told her that would be great and to have fun. I wanted to ask her to hand the phone to Jack so I could talk to him for a minute, but just then, another group of customers came up to the cash register carrying their treasures.

"Tell Jack I have to make a casserole for the Petersons, so if he wants to come over for dinner, I'll make two of them. I probably still should bring something from Rooster, too."

I heard her talking to Jack, and then she came back on the line. “Jack says that sounds great, and he appreciates it. There’s also leftover pizza. Jack and I only ate two of them.” She giggled. “But we ate all the cannoli.”

Six o’clock came faster than it ever had before. There was nothing that made time go by as quickly in retail as being shockingly busy. I could also tell that we’d had a terrific day of sales. I needed to make a few repairs to the shop, and the extra money was going to come in handy. Not to mention, I always gave Eleanor a Christmas bonus. I had enough money on hand for that already, but a little more definitely didn’t hurt.

“I’m out, Tess.” Eleanor gave me a hug and retrieved her purse from the drawer under the counter. “Bill and I want to have some dinner before we go to the town hall meeting tonight.”

I groaned and smacked my forehead. “I knew I was forgetting something. Think they’d notice if I didn’t go?”

She laughed. “No, not at all. It’s not like your aunt is the mayor or anything. See you there.”

I was almost out the door before I remembered to check the security cam footage for the intruder who’d broken in and stolen the klepto Christmas tree, so I trudged into the back to check my computer. I pulled up the cheat sheet of directions I’d copied to a file (and also printed, laminated, and stuck under my desktop calendar) and scrolled through the footage.

Several long, frustrating minutes later, I was forced to accept the truth: whoever had broken in had used some kind of electronic blocker on my cameras. The footage was nothing but a blur of static for the hour before Eleanor had arrived at the shop. I texted the news to Jack and Andy, reset the camera, and headed out.

By the time I got home, I was dragging. I fed Lou and then we cuddled on the couch for a while, but only a short while, because I had casseroles to make.

The chicken, broccoli, and cheese were ready to go when I pulled them out of the refrigerator. I could cook the rice, whip

up two quick casseroles, and bake them in less than an hour, which would give me enough time to run them over to the Petersons' house before the meeting.

Since Jack was still out shopping with Shelley, I turned on some Christmas music and sang along while I cooked. My cat never complained about my singing, so I gave her a few celebratory pieces of cooked chicken. Then I put lids on the casserole dishes, slipped one inside my casserole carry bag—yes, this is a thing in the South—and headed back out the door.

I stumbled on the step but caught myself with the handrail. I hadn't realized until that moment how exhausted I was. Funny how it had already been a long week, even though it was only Monday.

There was still no word from Jack, so I left the porch light on for him and headed out. The Petersons lived less than fifteen minutes away from me, and I expected there to be a line of people dropping off food. But when I arrived, there were only two trucks in their driveway, and I recognized them as belonging to Emeril and Harold. Everybody else must've been by earlier, before dinnertime, but this was the earliest I could make it and I didn't want to put it off. I'd be just as tired tomorrow, and it would be one day later. Etiquette and good neighborliness demanded that I take something over as soon as possible.

Also, I really cared about both Misters Peterson. And I knew this must be hard on them, no matter that they may have been at odds with their cousin. Loss makes us forget petty slights and disagreements, even as it destroys the chance to move beyond them and reconcile.

Or forgive.

As I parked near the door, I heard yelling inside the house. I'd never heard either of the brothers so much as raise his voice before, so I was a little shocked.

I froze, trying to decide if I should wait, honk the horn so they noticed me, or head home and bring the casserole over tomorrow.

Before I could decide, I heard Harold, whose voice was gravelly and deeper than Emeril's, shout. "Where were you? You've been avoiding me for two days now. I want to know where you were yesterday morning, and I want to know right now."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Emeril hurled back at him. "I was here until it was time to go to work."

"No, you weren't! You must have left hours before you got to the shop. I got up to get a drink of water and you weren't here."

"I had to walk in and find Darryl—find him lying there like that—and you didn't show until ten minutes later," Emeril hurled back at him. "Where were *you*?"

Their voices faded, and I realized they must be heading toward the back of the house. It was no wonder they hadn't heard my car drive up with all that shouting. The stress of the murder must have caused this strife between them. I'd never heard either of them say a harsh word to the other. Although I'd probably stress out, too, if I'd walked in and found my cousin lying dead on the floor.

Deciding, I gently closed my door and slowly backed down the driveway. I didn't want to interrupt them. More than anything, I didn't want them to know I'd heard part of their argument. They'd probably be so embarrassed and...

My tired brain finally clicked on.

It wasn't *embarrassment* they would be worried about. It was the fact that Harold didn't know where his brother had been at the time of the murder.

Oh, no. Emeril didn't have an alibi.

I had to tell Jack.

I had to tell *Andy*.

How could I, though? What had I really heard, after all? Two brothers shouting at each other, already in the middle of an argument when I arrived? And maybe I hadn't heard it exactly right.

I knew that they'd been unhappy with how Darryl had been behaving, but being annoyed with your cousin didn't exactly inspire murder. If it did, half of Molly's relatives would be dead and buried.

I didn't have any cousins, but many people had annoyed me over the years, and it had never occurred to me to hit one of them in the head with a hammer. I just couldn't see either Mr. Peterson doing something so awful.

Unfortunately, though, the past year had taught me a lot about making assumptions. I had no idea what could've happened in that hardware shop that morning. Neither did anybody else.

Nobody but the person who'd picked up the hammer.

I really, really needed to talk to Jack.

A wave of pure happiness spread through me when I pulled into my driveway and saw Jack's truck. I'd always loved my little house, but sometimes arriving home to find it empty except for my cat had been lonely. It felt like a gift to know that someone I loved was there waiting for me.

Someone who loved me back.

I blinked away the tears and swallowed the lump in my throat. I was just tired. That's all. Just overtired and upset at what I'd overheard ... what I *thought* I'd overheard. All of it was making me emotional.

Jack stepped out onto my porch holding my cat, and I smiled at him. I was home, and Jack was here. We'd figure everything out together.



*T*urns out, tigers love chicken casserole.

I had two big helpings and Jack ate the other three quarters of the dish, while telling me about his and Shelley's adventures with Rudolph.

“I can’t believe the new vet handled a flying reindeer with such calm competence,” I said after I stopped laughing.

“It was great. She and Phin were champs. They’re going to find out where Rudolph belongs and get him back there.”

“Does she have any idea where he might have come from?”

“She has some suspicions. Turns out you can rent a live reindeer for your holiday event. Have you ever heard of such a thing?”

I rolled my eyes in disgust. “No, but I’m not surprised. It’s a horrible practice to rent out a living animal. I hope that’s not where he came from.”

“If he did, we’ll make sure he doesn’t go back there. Maybe your uncle needs a reindeer to keep Bonnie Jo company.”

I grinned at the thought of Uncle Mike’s face if we asked him. “Do you think whatever Shelley did to make him fly will wear off?”

Jack stood and collected the dishes. “I think it already was. By the time we got to the vet, he had floated down into the back of the truck, and he showed no signs of flying when it was time to get out. I had to lift him down. Hopefully, Rudolph’s aeronautical adventures are over.”

My grin faded. “On a serious note, we’re going to have to get Shelley some lessons or training or whatever apprentice witches get. She’s clearly too powerful to just figure things out on her own. I mean, who knows what will happen next time? What if she decides she wants to see a flying elephant? Dealing with Dumbo would be a little harder.”

I raised a hand before he could ask. “Disney flying elephant. Made me and Molly cry buckets.”

Jack ran hot water in the sink, poured in some dish soap, and scrubbed the casserole dish while I put the jug of iced tea back in the refrigerator. Tigers, as I’d found out early on, like to wash dishes. Or at least my tiger did. It was truly a wonderful thing.

“I know Alejandro said Rose can help, but I can also ask Erin. She’s a powerful witch, and if she can’t come personally, she’ll have some ideas for who might or what we can do.”

I nodded, sighing in relief. I’d met the prince of Atlantis’s magical wife, and she was wonderful and very kind. “That’s a great idea.”

Working together, it only took a few minutes to clean up, and then I walked out to the living room and collapsed on the couch.

“Well, at least we have one clue about the person or persons behind the crime wave,” I said.

“I thought you said the video was blank?”

“That’s just it. Whoever it is has some pretty good tech skills. That automatically rules out a lot of people. For example, nobody in my family would know how to do that.”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “Were we suspecting Ruby or Mike of breaking into your shop?”

“Of course not. I’m just saying it’s a clue.”

He grinned at me. “You just love saying ‘clue.’”

I wanted to argue, but I really did.

“Anyway, speaking of your family, Shelley could have done it without even realizing it. Magic plays havoc with tech.”

“Oh. That’s right. So, either a tech person or a magic user.” I sighed. “That narrows it down a little.”

“Sure. Not a lot, but every little bit helps.” Jack leaned his head back on the couch and closed his eyes. “I need to tell you something while we’re talking about clues.”

“Yeah. Me too. I didn’t want to bring it up during dinner, because I was tired and hungry and didn’t want to—well, I just didn’t want to. But I should tell you now.” I filled him in about the Petersons’ argument I’d overheard.

By the end of my recitation, he was frowning. “How sure are you? I’m not doubting you, but you said you were outside

the house ...”

“To be honest, I doubted myself at first. I’m so tired, and it just seems ridiculous, but on reflection, I’m more certain about what I heard. And now I feel horrible, because what it tells me is that Emeril has no alibi for the time of the murder.” I closed my eyes and leaned my head back on the couch. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but we’re going to have to tell Andy that we may have found the murderer.”

“Not so fast,” Jack said slowly. “I overheard something myself.”

I stared at him in growing disbelief as he filled me in on the conversation he’d heard between Judd and his wife. And the thing about maybe pizza sauce, maybe blood on his shoes.

“So, we’ve gone from having no suspects to having two likely suspects, both of whom were missing at the time of the murder and neither of whom have alibis?”

Jack’s phone buzzed, and he pulled it out of his pocket and frowned at it. “It gets worse.”

“How can it possibly get worse?”

“It’s eight o’clock. We have to leave for the town hall meeting.”

T*ess*

It was a packed house.

It surprised me, since it was only four days till Christmas. But then again, the UltraShopMart was a critical issue for everybody in Dead End.

Small clusters of people deep in conversation filled the room. As Jack and I made our way through, I overheard almost as many in favor as opposed. I really had no idea how this was going to go. I'd been so busy that Aunt Ruby and I hadn't talked about it since the gathering at my place, so I didn't know which way she was leaning. Since she was the mayor, her vote would hold considerable sway on the town council.

My head started aching from a combination of stress, tiredness, and the noise level in the room, and I winced, pressing my fingers against my temples.

"Oh, no," I groaned. "I can't take another headache like last month."

Jack grinned at me. "At least you have approximately seven thousand different headache remedies to try."

I caught the look of concern on his face, though, when he put an arm around me and headed for the seats. "It's okay, Jack. Just a headache. I'm sure I'll feel better as soon as this is over."

“You and me both,” he muttered. “Tigers hate crowds, and the human side of me is in total agreement. The tension level in here is sky high.”

We nodded hellos to everyone but didn’t stop to chat, and I was careful not to touch anyone. A slight but noticeable path opened for us as we moved—people knew about my gift and Jack was Jack. We saw Lucky raise a hand and made our way to the seats he’d saved for us on the center-aisle side of the second row.

“Hey, Tess. Jack.” Lucky’s face was grim. “We should talk after this. We caught vandals heading for our boats again, but this time they had guns and took shots at us. Unfortunately, they got away.”

“That was a mistake,” I said. The swamp commandos were all *actually* commandos—ex-special forces guys from various branches of the military. “They’d have to be fools to come after you guys.”

“Either that, or they’re not from around here and don’t know Lucky and the other men’s backgrounds,” Jack said quietly, glancing around to be sure nobody was eavesdropping.

“Which is the opposite of what we think about Darryl’s killer.” I threw my hands in the air. “Too many criminals and too many crimes. How are we ever going to solve all this?”

Lucky raised an eyebrow. “The opposite of what you think about the killer? What does that mean?”

Jack filled him in on our theory that the person who’d framed Rooster must be familiar with Dead End, but Lucky just shrugged.

“I mean, okay, but I don’t see what one has to do with the other. Killers don’t usually hang around to commit vandalism just for the fun of it, right? At least, none that I’ve known about.”

Jack leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest, his face going hard and expressionless. I was familiar with the look: it was the one he wore when he was having deep thoughts, and somebody was about to be in deep trouble.

“I don’t like coincidences, but this has every appearance of being just that,” I said. “Maybe—”

But I didn’t get to finish that sentence, because Aunt Ruby stepped out onto the stage and headed for the podium.

“Take your seats, everyone, please. And happy holidays to all in whatever tradition you celebrate. Merry Christmas, blessings on the winter solstice, Happy Diwali, Happy Hanukkah, Happy Kwanzaa, and peace be on us throughout the holidays and into the new year.”

Many people responded:

“Happy holidays.”

“Merry Christmas.”

“Blessings.”

“Is there any alcohol at this thing?”

I turned to see who’d said that last and wasn’t surprised one bit to see that it was Bubba McKee. His cousin Frog stood next to him, cheeks blazing with mortification at Bubba’s comment, or maybe from suddenly being the center of attention again. When Frog caught me glaring at him, he hunched over and stared at the floor.

“Tess. It’s not his fault.” Jack took my hand. “If he hadn’t found the hammer, somebody else would have. The killer made sure that his frame job had its greatest chance to succeed.”

Aunt Ruby chuckled, and only those who knew her well would see the annoyance in her eyes. “Bubba, you can drink all the eggnog you want when we’re done here. For now, let’s get down to business.”

She made a few announcements about holiday hours for county government offices, recited the annual warning about not setting off homemade fireworks or fire-breathing salamanders in town for New Year’s Eve, and reminded everyone that if we saw the Fae Queen wandering around, she was to be treated like an official and much-loved guest at all times.

“That way, she can’t kill anybody because of Fae guest-right law,” she concluded. “But the Fae aren’t likely to come visit at this time of year, so we should be good. Plus, I gave her the official key to the city.”

“Key to the shed,” I muttered, grinning. Aunt Ruby was not somebody to be messed with, even by Fae royalty.

She answered a few questions and then took a deep breath and moved on to the principal business of the evening. “As I’m sure all of you know, the UltraShopMart corporation bought a fairly large piece of land on the outskirts of town. They’re wanting to put one of their megastores there and also have their eyes on some ancillary properties. What you may not know is that they’ve already begun excavating, despite the fact that the town council has not approved the land to be zoned commercial.”

“Look-away spell,” the woman in front of me said, the bright orange feather on her hat bouncing as she nodded. “I hired a wizard to put one on my veggie patch after the deer and rabbits kept getting at it. Turns out, animals are immune. I was out five hundred dollars *and* my entire tomato patch.”

“No!” her neighbor gasped.

“If that wizard dares show his face in town again, we’ll just see how magical he is when I get my hands on him.”

I realized the conversation had distracted me from Aunt Ruby for a minute and focused my attention back on the stage.

“—and so, without further ado, we’ll have remarks from Mr. Delvaney Craven on UltraShopMart’s proposal to put a store in Dead End, and then any comments from residents will follow.”

A few people applauded, but even that quickly died out as Craven strode out on stage, his slick, butter-wouldn’t-melt smile flashing whitely at us.

“Thank you, Mayor Callahan. And thank you to all the fine people of Dead End who gave up time from their holiday preparations to hear about the marvelous opportunities UltraShopMart has in store for your wonderful town.”

Aunt Ruby gathered her papers and walked over to an empty chair on the stage. As she seated herself, her gaze caught mine, and she gave a tiny shake of her head, frowning slightly.

“She’s against it,” I whispered to Jack. “She just gave me a signal.”

“Then it’s over?”

“Sadly, no. She’s just one vote. We’ll have to see how the rest of the council votes. This meeting is so they can see which way people in town are leaning.”

Jack nodded. “Then I guess we’ll see. And if the council votes them in, but we find out UltraShopMart isn’t on the up-and-up, we’ll have to do something about it.”

Orange-feather lady turned and scowled. “Shh!” Then she blinked. “Why, Tess Callahan, boys, I haven’t seen you in a while. How have you been?”

“Oh, Mrs. Hamilton! I didn’t realize it was you. How are you?” Mrs. Hamilton had been the secretary at the high school forever, and she was a sweetheart. She and her wife had the best garden in town, so it was no wonder the animals were snacking there.

“I’d be better if our science teachers quit blowing up banks and causing gargoyle stampedes,” she said, with a firm nod that sent her orange feather quivering.

“Shh!” said someone further down our row, and I gave Mrs. H an apologetic smile and sat back.

On the stage, Craven was droning on. “—benefits of having such an outstanding company as UltraShopMart in your community. For three of the top reasons,” he held up a hand and ticked off fingers. “First, jobs. Second, jobs. And third, of course, jobs.”

He paused, as if waiting for applause, but the auditorium was eerily silent. To be honest, I’d expected more of an uproar—either of applause or catcalls. I glanced around and saw only grim determination or supportive nodding.

“I don’t like this,” I whispered to Jack. “Dead Enders only get this quiet when something is about to explode in a big way.”

“Don’t say explode after the bank last month,” he murmured, a grin quirking the edges of his lips. “But, yeah, I get what you mean.”

Craven cleared his throat, and a whine of microphone feedback underscored his next words. “—*screech*—but let’s talk about the other benefits of having UltraShopMart as your newest and friendliest neighbor.”

I heard scoffing noises behind me, but didn’t turn around.

“We pay taxes. Lots and lots of our tax dollars going into your community.” He threw his arms out, palms up, and flashed an enormous smile. “We’ve paid enough in taxes to other small towns like yours that they could build and staff a medical clinic.”

This time, I heard more positive-sounding murmuring around me. The lack of a clinic in Dead End had long been a serious problem for Dead End’s chronically ill and elderly.

“You can upgrade and maintain roads,” Craven continued, warming up to his theme as he realized he was pulling people over to his side. “You can improve schools and hire more teachers.”

“Yeah, but do we need to name the high school football stadium after UltraShopMart?”

Laughter swept through the room, and I turned my head to grin at Lorraine, the former mayor and current troublemaker. She was standing in the middle of the first row across the aisle, splendid in a neon-yellow cardigan.

“We know all about UltraShopMart and their corporate taxes, Mr. Craven,” she called out. “We’ve done our research. Funny how often the big money trickles away into nothing after you build the store, and then you hire your fancy lawyers to find loopholes, isn’t it?”

A hint of red touched Craven’s cheeks, but his smile remained steady. “Mrs. Packard, I understand your concern,

and I promise you we at UltraShopMart have investigated every single incident of overreaching local lawyers taking it upon themselves to—”

“Oh, so it’s the local people to blame, is it?” This time it was Judd. “You’ll run small business in town into the ground, quit paying taxes, and then blame the folks in Dead End for your corporate greed?”

A few people in the audience stood.

“Yeah!”

“You tell ‘em, Judd!”

Craven said nothing until the shouts of support died down, and then he leaned toward the microphone, an expression of calm benevolence on his face.

“He must take acting lessons,” I muttered to Jack.

“Yeah. He’s good. To look at him, you’d almost believe he means what he’s saying.” Jack shook his head. “No wonder they pay him a million dollars for every store that opens.”

“We will promise *in writing* that the tax dollars will continue to flow into Dead End,” Craven said. “And you can even specify what you want to spend them on or just accept the monies into your general fund.”

“We could use some money to beef up the police force,” some guy I didn’t recognize yelled from the other side of the aisle. “All these crimes going on around town, and our sheriff isn’t even here to deal with it.”

I winced. Poor Andy. But being able to afford another deputy or two *would* take some of the pressure off him and Susan.

“Our latest store, opened in Patienceburg, Arkansas, two months ago, allowed the town to fund three additional full-time deputies and purchase three new police cars,” Craven said smoothly.

“He didn’t even have to check his notes to pull those figures out. Either he’s got a great memory or he’s making stuff up as he goes along,” Lucky muttered.

“We can ask Dallas and Austin to confirm,” I said, pulling out my phone to text them to do just that.

Craven wrapped it up with more rose-colored blather about the Great Opportunities of “inviting UltraShopMart into our community” and sat down amid a scattering of applause. More than I’d expected, though. A lot of what he’d said must have resonated with people. The part about the clinic and schools, certainly.

Aunt Ruby returned to the microphone. “Many of you have submitted written comments that the council is reviewing to prepare for making our decision. But we’d like to invite those of you who’ve requested to speak to the stage to offer your comments.”

Judd was the first to rush up the stairs. He told us how UltraShopMart would crush our small businesses and turn entrepreneurs into low-paid employees, and he was very convincing. I was absolutely against giving up the pawnshop and my independence to stock shelves at a massive megastore.

Then Lauren and Mellie walked onstage together and talked about the effect the proposed store would have on their businesses. Their points were both thoughtful and well-coordinated and made a real impression on everyone, as I could tell from the murmurs I overheard.

“In conclusion, my deli and Mellie’s bakery will no doubt both go the way of the Floridian dodo if we allow UltraShopMart to build its store here,” Lauren said defiantly.

Mellie leaned forward and spoke into the mike. “And free donuts at my place in the morning for anybody who wants to talk strategy to stop them.”

The biggest cheer of the night went up from almost everybody, with the pointed exception of Delvaney Craven, who looked like he’d just swallowed a hedgehog.

Jack leaned over and murmured in my ear. “Floridian dodo?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

A couple of other people walked up to give brief comments, both in favor of the UltraShopMart. It surprised me to see that one of them was Julio Martinez.

“But he works for Dave,” I whispered.

He stood at the podium, twisting his hat in his hands, and cleared his throat a couple of times before he spoke. “Well, I guess I just wanted to say that the jobs would be good for Dead End. I work for Wolf Construction, and Dave is a great boss. But construction is a seasonal gig, even in Florida, and my family has to eat all year long. Plus, I’ve got some cousins who need work. When you’re voting, just remember that not everybody is a small business owner in Dead End. A lot of us just want to work and feed our kids.”

He got a cheer, too, and his words made me rethink my knee-jerk hatred of the idea of a megastore.

Because he was right.

Not everyone was lucky enough to have a business drop in her lap like I’d been. Not that the circumstances had been lucky; I’d give up my shop in a heartbeat to have Jeremiah back. But the fact was, he’d died and left me half of Dead End Pawn, and Jack had shown up in town soon after and forced me to take his half in exchange for the right to build an attached office for his new private investigations business.

Saying yes had been one of the best decisions of my life.

But if it hadn’t been for that, or if Jeremiah had sold the shop or left it to someone else, I’d be looking for work too. Would a job stocking shelves or as a cashier at UltraShopMart look good then?

Definitely something to ponder.

Aunt Ruby went to the podium after that and wrapped things up. “If there’s nobody else who wants to speak, we’ll —”

“Reckon I want to speak, Miss Ruby.”

Everybody turned to stare at the owner of that rumbling voice, and Rooster made his way down the aisle toward the

stage.

“Oh, boy,” I muttered, my hands involuntarily clenching.

“His notes were excellent, remember?” Jack took my hand and gently stroked the back of it until I relaxed my fist.

“Yeah, but not everybody is going to know that he has an alibi, and—”

A woman I didn't know, but who looked familiar—maybe one of Susan's distant cousins?—stood, punched a fist in the air, and started shouting.

“Murderer! We don't want to hear from a murderer!”

Pandemonium ensued.

T^{ess}

Things went to heck in a handbasket after that. Aunt Ruby called for order, but everybody ignored her.

Andy, who'd been standing against the wall beside the stage during the meeting, tried to calm things down. He yelled to be heard over the uproar. "Mr. Jenkins is *not* a suspect."

"Why not?" Somebody yelled back. "Because he's your buddy? Maybe we need better police in town!"

"Yeah," shouted the woman who'd started the fracas. "You and the *conveniently* absent sheriff clearly can't handle it."

So much for her being one of Susan's cousins. Loyalty was important in the Gonzalez family. Not to mention, nobody in their family would be stupid enough to criticize Susan in a public forum when her brother *Carlos, the scary vampire*, would be sure to hear about it.

Susan was a public servant, and she was calm under pressure, so she'd undoubtedly handle any criticism with aplomb. But people who knew Carlos did *not* talk crap about his family.

"Oh, boy," I muttered.

After that, it was a free-for-all. Everybody was shouting at everybody else. After a few more futile attempts to call for order, Aunt Ruby threw her hands in the air and marched off to meet Uncle Mike, who strode out from backstage.

Andy blew a whistle, long and loud, and then he and the temporary deputy, Underhill, each took a side of the room and started trying to herd people out. When Andy caught sight of Jack, Lucky, and me, he gestured to us in a pretty clear call for help.

Jack sighed, but stood. “Since they outnumber the deputies four hundred to two, I guess we should pitch in. I’ll take the far side, and you take this side, Lucky.”

“I’ll take the middle,” I decided.

Jack’s eyes widened in alarm, but then he grinned. “Tess, you’re brilliant. Nobody can get people out of here faster than you can.”

And that’s what we did.

I leaned forward and asked Mrs. Hamilton and her friend to wait a moment, because I didn’t want them to get trampled in the crush of people, and then I followed Jack out to the center aisle. While he moved across the rows of seats to the far side of the room, I put a big smile on my face, held out my hands, and raised my voice.

“Hey, everybody! Happy holidays! The mayor and deputies want us to move along, so how about we head for the doors? Time to go home and wrap presents, right?”

The people nearest me turned to glance my way, a few of them scowling, but mouths dropped open and feet started moving when they saw me walk toward them with my hands outstretched.

I was counting on my assumption that nobody in the history of Christmas had *ever* asked Santa to tell them how they were going to die.

Word spread, and I’m proud to say that my technique worked even better to break up the crowd than the sight of armed deputies, an ex-special forces soldier, or a tiger shifter. People grumbled and complained when they saw Jack, Lucky, Andy, or Deputy Underhill coming.

But people *moved* when they saw me approach—even people who liked me but were probably afraid that I’d

accidentally jostle them in the crowd.

Within minutes, the auditorium was empty, and we were standing outside in the cold, clear December night. It had to be down in the mid-thirties, and the light jacket I'd worn was not keeping me warm in the slightest. I shivered but waited, because Andy was making his way over to us while the temporary deputy kept the crowd moving away from the building and out toward, hopefully, their cars and homes.

"Thanks, guys. I appreciate it," Andy said.

"No problem, but it would be a good idea if you spread the word that Rooster has an alibi," Jack said. "That turned ugly pretty fast."

Andy threw his hands in the air. "I did! Put it on the town text alert just before the meeting. I guess nobody had time to read it."

"Or they read it and just wanted to cause trouble," I said. "I know personally, or at least can recognize the faces of almost everybody in town, and it seemed to me like there were more strangers than I'd expect to see at a town hall meeting."

"Yeah, Tess, but it's Christmas," Lucky said, shoving his hands in his pockets and hunching his shoulders against the cold. "Lots of people have extended family in town for the holidays."

"Of course," I said, feeling foolish. "I hadn't thought of that."

Jack caught me shivering and put an arm around me to pull me close, and I snuggled into him. When shifters were in human form, their body temperatures ran a few degrees higher than the normal 98.6. Jack radiated heat like a furnace, which was wonderful.

"I have news," Andy said, looking too steamed over the meeting chaos to be affected by the cold. "You can hear this too, Lucky, but it's part of the official police investigation, so keep it to yourself, okay?"

Lucky nodded somberly. "Absolutely."

“The Nashville cops say that they don’t have any suspects or any reason to think that anybody up there would have wanted to kill Darryl. They did some investigating and found out basically that he was as annoying at home as he was here, but they didn’t find any evidence or even any rumors that anybody cared about him enough to kill him. I get the feeling they weren’t going to put any real effort into it, what with bare-bones holiday staffing hours.” Andy rocked back on his heels, frowning. “Darryl’s parents have arranged for the body to be transported to Nashville for the funeral. Emeril and Harold are going up too, I’m sure.”

I shot a look up at Jack. If Emeril had actually had anything to do with Darryl’s death ... Should I tell Andy my suspicions now?

Jack moved one shoulder in a barely there shrug, leaving it up to me. I fidgeted for a moment or two while Andy and Lucky talked about the meeting, but ultimately, I just couldn’t do it. What had I really heard, after all? I needed to at least talk to the Petersons before I snitched on them to the police, even Andy.

Deputy Underhill walked over to us when the crowd had dwindled to only a few people chatting—the temperature had probably had as much to do with it as anything—and Andy introduced her to Lucky.

“And you remember Tess and Jack, of course.”

“Yes. Hello. Thanks for the help in there,” she said, giving me a look filled with open curiosity but no judgment or disgust. “Miss Callahan, I know it’s not my business, but I just wanted to say I researched you.”

I sighed. Of course she had. I steeled myself for what might be coming. Hopefully she wasn’t one of the zealots who thought I was a devil spawn because of my gift.

“Anyway, I just wanted to say how much I admire you. It must be a tough road to travel, with an ability like that. I, ah, I know a bit about that. So, anyway, thanks again for your help.”

“I—thank you. I appreciate it. A lot. It’s definitely been not the most fun thing in the world,” I said, surprised and touched. “If you’re still assigned here after the holidays, maybe we could have lunch? And call me Tess.”

It was her turn to look surprised, and her wide smile—the first I’d seen from her—lit up her entire face.

“I’d love that. And I’m Lizzie.” She turned to face Andy. “I’m off duty now if you don’t need me for anything else. I’ve got a long drive ahead of me.”

“About that,” Andy said. “My mom has a newly renovated guest room she’s been dying to try out on someone. She asked me to tell you she’d be pleased to host you while you’re on duty here.”

“Oh, but ... I couldn’t impose ...” Lizzie looked flustered. “I mean—”

“Trust me,” Andy said, grinning. “The imposition would be if you say no. She’s already bought all the ingredients for a huge breakfast. Do you have the stuff you’d need to stay?”

“Yes, I always keep a bag, but ... are you sure? It would really be great not to have to drive the hour back and forth every day while I’m here.”

“You should stay,” I told her. “Mrs. Kelly makes the most amazing biscuits.”

“She really does,” Andy confirmed. “And she has homemade apple butter.”

Lizzie smiled again and gave in. “You had me at biscuits. I will, then. Thank you. I’ll just get my stuff from the station and clock out. I’ll see you later, everyone.”

We said our goodbyes, and she headed off with a spring in her step. I should know better than to let first impressions turn me against someone. I had a feeling I was going to enjoy getting to know Deputy Underhill.

Lucky said his goodbyes, too, after promising to come into town the next day to make a full report on the intruders who’d

attacked his business. When it was just the three of us, I asked Andy what was next.

“I honestly don’t know. I’m going to keep digging into Darryl’s interactions with people around town and investigating. Somebody has heard *something* that might give me a lead, even if they don’t realize it.” Andy shook his head, looking defeated. “Maybe those people in the meeting were right. Maybe this job is too much for me, especially when Susan is gone.”

“That’s not true,” I said hotly, guilt churning in my belly. Jack and I had both overheard things that might give Andy not just one suspect, but two. But I just wasn’t ready to throw friends under the bus on such slim evidence. “You’re doing a great job. You’ll figure this out, and we’ll help.”

Jack nodded. “We definitely will. Call me tomorrow and let me know what you need. Just until Susan gets back, and you’re fully staffed, okay? But until then, I’ll help if you want me.”

Andy squared his shoulders. “Thanks, Tess, Jack. You’re right. I won’t give up so easily. Okay, I’ll call you, Jack. Tess, good luck at the shop tomorrow. Final shopping day blowout, right?”

“Yep. Stop by and pick up a present or two, if you need any. Sale prices all day. Oh! And we need to talk about that enchanted tree. I’m worried that it still may be stealing presents from kids in town, but now the bad guys are getting them.”

More guilt. I should have burned the tree the second I figured out what it was doing. My stomach twisted into a pretzel. A big, acidic, pretzel.

“Did you get anything on your security footage?”

“What?” It took me a moment to shake off thoughts of pretzels. “Oh. No.”

Jack told him about the interference.

“Great. Well, I’d hate for something to be easy,” Andy said, rolling his eyes. “Good night, guys.”

We said good night, and he strode off to the station. I tugged on Jack's arm when he showed no sign of moving. "Hey! We need to go. I'm exhausted and freezing, and I have to work—"

"Shh," he murmured, patting my hand. He had a far-off look in his eyes, and I realized he was listening to someone or something in the distance. I stopped talking and listened as hard as I could, but heard nothing except for the sound of a car driving by, probably carrying some of the last of the town hall attendees.

I followed his line of sight and realized he was staring at the corner of the building.

"Stay here," he said urgently. "Or, better yet, go start the truck and get warm. I'll be right back."

With that, he dropped the keys in my hand and then raced off, running on the grass instead of the sidewalk.

Probably so whoever he was listening to didn't hear him coming.

I shoved his keys in my pocket, jumped onto the grass so I could run silently too, and started after him, shaking my head at his foolishness.

"Go start the truck."

Please.

Jack

I took off running, hoping to get to the back of the building before Craven and whoever he'd been arguing with took off. I gave it a ninety-five percent chance Tess would ignore my request to go warm up the truck—and stay safe—and instead follow me.

Then I heard her footsteps. Make that one hundred percent.

I gritted my teeth and took half a second to consider turning around to escort her to the truck and lock her in it. Then I took another half-second to enjoy imagining the look of outrage on her face if I tried.

Tess's beautiful eyes darkened when she was annoyed and sparkled with icy blue fire when she'd gone past irritation to anger, and I was ridiculously helpless when she turned that outrage on me. It didn't help calm a situation when all I wanted to do was lift her into my arms and kiss the breath out of her.

I didn't think we were heading into danger. I'd heard Delvaney Craven reading the riot act to a person or persons who must work for him and UltraShopMart. Nothing about Craven worried me. He was a pompous suit.

Even when he'd been yelling at his minions, the dressing down had been so vague, dull, and filled with cliches that I hadn't paid much attention to it. Mainly, his whiny attempts to sound important had been pathetic:

“So hard to get good help these days.”

“Do you like your job? I can fire you right now!”

“How can you screw up such a simple job so spectacularly?”

And so on and so forth.

But when I’d heard him mention something about the excavation site, I’d tuned into the argument more closely. Specifically, something about keeping trespassers out because of what they’d found in the pit when they’d prematurely pulled the trigger and begun to dig.

That had made me curious, and maybe even a tad concerned.

After all, this was Dead End.

That excavation could have turned up pirate treasure or dead bodies.

Silver or skulls.

Gold or ghouls.

Suddenly, I had a driving desire to discover exactly what they’d found in that pit. I raced to the corner and then slowed to a saunter as I rounded it in time to hear Craven shouting.

“I gave each of you discretion to choose how to protect the site. You all chose your own paths, stupid though some of them may have been. What I want to know is *how* could you get one thing—*one thing*—so wrong?”

Interesting. I suddenly desperately wanted to know what the discretionary paths were about and what the one thing was that they’d gotten so wrong. They still hadn’t heard or seen me, so I smiled and waved. “Hello, boys.”

All three of them wheeled around to stare at me. Craven, in his expensive suit, and two men who must be his employees or thugs, both dressed in jeans, flannel, and leather jackets, stood next to a black SUV.

Craven visibly flinched, and a brief look of panic crossed his face before he schooled his expression back to its usual

fake cheer.

The shorter, slender thug put a hand up like he was hiding his face and turned away.

The taller, broad, bald pile of muscle nearest to me twined his fingers together and cracked his knuckles, aiming what he must have believed was a terrifying smile my way.

I burst out laughing.

“Listen,” I said, shoving my hands in my pockets and ambling toward them. “Thanks. It has been a long day, and I needed a chuckle. So, Chuckles, how about you say something like ‘this town isn’t big enough for both of us’ to cap it all off?”

Chuckles, aka the mountain of meanness who must serve as Craven’s muscle, snarled, clenched his fists, and took a step toward me. Delvaney reached out and grabbed him by the arm, muttering something so quietly through his clenched teeth that even I couldn’t hear it. For a few seconds, I thought Chuckles would pull away and come after me, anyway. He finally relaxed, but not before I caught the look of utter disgust he aimed at Craven, who didn’t seem to take it as seriously as I would have if I’d been him.

Men like Chuckles didn’t put up with being leashed for long. I’d have to watch out for him.

The footsteps I’d been listening to came around the corner behind me, and Tess, breathing hard, jogged up to join me. Chuckles caught sight of her, and his demeanor changed instantly—from snarling to smiling in a split second.

Oh, boy.

“Maybe a bit more warning next time you decide to do your Flash impersonation,” Tess muttered. “Also, I really need to work out more.”

“What’s a Flash impersonation?”

Tess sighed. “Later.”

“Well, hello there,” Chuckles said, in what I’m sure he considered a seductive voice. “Aren’t you a pretty little

thing?”

Tess blinked. “Not a *thing*, but hello.”

The thug’s smile turned to a sneer, but before he could say anything I’d have to punch him in the throat for, Craven spoke up.

“Delightful to see you two, as always. Am I to presume from your hasty approach that you’ve decided to sell UltraShopMart your property?” He beamed that huge, fake smile at us, and suddenly I wanted to punch him instead of his goon.

I tried to remind myself that I wasn’t a rebel soldier anymore and couldn’t go around punching people just because they annoyed me.

Shouldn’t go around punching people.

“Nope,” Tess said brightly. “But thanks for asking. We just came by to ask—” she turned to me with a big smile and nudged me with her elbow. “Well, Jack will tell you why we came back here.”

“Just wondered what the hullabaloo was about,” I said, purposely putting a little Southern drawl in my voice. Northerners often assumed anybody with a drawl wasn’t very bright. I was happy to take advantage of that.

“No hullabaloo,” Craven said smoothly. He jerked his head toward the alley, and the smaller guy, still ducking his head so we couldn’t see his face, took off at a trot.

Chuckles stayed where he was, teeth bared in what I’m sure he thought of as a challenge. Craven really should have told him about me.

“Sorry,” I said, making sure the insincerity rang in my voice. “Thought I heard shouting.”

I could almost see the realization slide behind Craven’s eyes. He might have been a slimy creep, but he did his research. He’d undoubtedly read about tigers and their superior hearing, and now he was obviously trying hard to remember exactly what I might have heard.

The entire process only took seconds, though—he was quick. I'd give him that.

“Just a friendly conversation among coworkers that maybe got a little heated,” he said, trying on a jovial chuckle.

Craven clearly wasn't a guy who could pull off jovial in a situation like this. The noise he made sounded less like humor and more like Tess's cat trying to cough up a hairball.

“Oh, I know all about that. Sometimes Eleanor makes mistakes in inventory, and I have to have a serious talk with her. Just part of being the boss,” Tess said cheerfully, lying her cute little butt off.

I kept a straight face and nodded.

Craven couldn't help himself; relief mixed with a trace of condescension crossed his face. Must be tough to know you're so much smarter than everyone else in the world, like he did.

Maybe we'd have to help him out with a few facts before this was all over.

Craven jumped on the opening Tess had handed him, pointing at her and smiling. “Exactly right, young lady. It's hard to get good help, et cetera, et cetera, and so on.”

Chuckles turned his head and pinned his boss with a stare that would have left more perceptive men shaking with fear. There was a lot of *you're going to regret that* in that stare, combined with a pinch of *I could snap your neck like a twig*.

The UltraShopMart advance man, though, let it slide off him like water off a particularly stupid duck's back.

I caught Tess shivering in her light jacket and suddenly just wanted to get her home and warm, but I really wanted to know what they'd been fighting about. “What was it?”

“What was what?” Craven's smile didn't falter.

“What did they get so wrong?”

Chuckles clenched his fists again and rolled his neck from side to side, like he was preparing to jump me.

I couldn't help it—I grinned at him.

“Nothing important,” Craven said quickly, putting a hand on his thug’s arm and shaking his head. “A trivial problem with the excavation equipment.”

Chuckles again restrained himself, but just barely. “Not so trivial,” he growled. “Some guy snooping around the dig site, and we caught him with spray paint. Probably getting ready to vandalize the place.”

Tess inhaled sharply. “What guy? Did you get his name? What happened?”

Craven’s smile reached his eyes this time. He was obviously happy that the topic had sidetracked Tess from whatever he was trying to hide.

“Yes, we got his name. We were completely within our rights to press charges for trespassing and intent to cause damage, but we were magnanimous and let him off with a stern warning.”

Tess grabbed my arm, her fingers biting into my skin through my sleeve. “Sure, okay, but *who was it?*”

Craven glanced at Chuckles. “What was his name, Merks?”

Chuckles—Merks—shrugged. “Some guy named Finn. Hunter Finn, I think? We got a copy of his driver’s license.”

Beside me, Tess gasped. “Phineas Hunter?”

“That’s it.” Chuckles eyed Tess. “You know him? If he’s your friend, warn him to stay away.”

Tess pulled on my arm. “Jack, we need to go. I have to open the shop early in the morning. Mr. Craven, Mr. Merks, happy holidays.”

With that, she turned and started back toward the town square where we’d left the truck. I caught Merks leering after her and gave both of them a long, steady look. “I’ll be very unhappy if anything or anyone disturbs Tess. Is that clear?”

Craven drew himself up, the picture of offended dignity.

I didn't give a crap if I'd offended him. I just wanted to get the message across.

"We certainly will not disturb Miss Callahan."

I ignored him and kept my gaze pinned to the muscle. "See that you don't."

Merks growled. "When this is over, I'm coming for you, Shepherd."

A slow smile spread across my face—friends in the past had described it as more of a baring of the teeth—and I leaned forward, rising to the balls of my feet in readiness.

"Name the time and place, Chuckles."

For a moment, I thought he'd attack me on the spot, but Craven sharply called his name and Merks froze, muscles straining toward me. Finally, he forced himself to relax.

"When this is over," he repeated, and then he turned and climbed into the SUV's driver's seat.

"See you at the Winter Festival, Shepherd," Craven said brightly, as if the incident with Merks had never happened. "We have a booth."

With that, he got into his SUV and Merks drove them to wherever they were staying, which was something else I should find out.

"Jack!" It sounded like Tess was back at the truck, so I turned and ran to meet her, pondering the crucial facts I still didn't know: What was the *one thing* that was so important to Craven? The one thing that his thugs had gotten so wrong? And what were the discretionary paths?

I had a feeling the answer would tell me a great deal about what was going on in Dead End, and I was determined to find it out.

T*ess*

It had been too late to call Phin the night before, but I'd worried about the situation—and him—for hours, even after Jack fell asleep. I hadn't wanted to say anything to Jack until I'd talked to Phin, but memories from high school had come flooding back when Craven and that over-muscled minion of his had told us about the trespassing.

Phin had gotten into trouble more than a few times for tagging—spray-painting graffiti—on public buildings like the water tower. And he'd always been passionate about his support for wildlife, even telling us he was investigating the site with a statewide environmental organization. Was it possible that he had proof that the UltraShopMart excavation was threatening some indigenous animal or bird population?

But if that was the case, why hadn't he been trumpeting that fact loud and clear? Why hadn't he been at the town hall meeting to tell everybody about it?

I had too many questions squirreling around in my mind, but no answers.

Jack had left early to check in on the meeting at Mellie's bakery and pick up some donuts, and I was on my way to work. The last shopping day at Dead End Pawn was always a madhouse, and I was so tired I didn't know how I'd find the energy for it.

There were already cars parked in front of the shop when I rolled up at quarter to eight, even though we didn't open till

nine. Car doors opened when I climbed out of the Mustang.

“Tess!”

“Merry Christmas!”

“Busy day ahead; any chance you can open early so we can pick up just a few things?”

My grumpy side wanted to tell them to go away and come back at nine. My business-owner side smiled and waved them in.

“You’ll just have to browse and give me a minute to get some coffee going. Late night last night.”

One of my regulars, Mr. Ingleson, toddled in behind me, his eyes wide behind his oversized glasses. He was maybe eighty years old and tidy in his daily uniform of black trousers, white shirt, and suspenders. He’d retired a few years back after fifty years as a snake milker who’d supplied samples of venom to scientists all over the world. To this day, he kept a menagerie of snakes in his greenhouse that rivaled the collections of the top zoos, or so people said.

I had to settle for hearing about it, because one of the very last things in the world I wanted to do was go look at a snake collection. He’d offered tours to the Dead End High science classes every year for decades, but I’d managed to be out sick from school the day my class visited.

I wasn’t afraid of snakes, exactly, but I had a healthy respect for them, especially the poisonous ones, and I didn’t exactly want to be neighbors with them.

They shopped, and I made and drank coffee. A few of my regulars haggled with me over prices, comfortable knowing that I was willing to bargain.

“Never list your rock-bottom price on the tag,” Jeremiah had always said. “A price tag is more of an invitation to begin negotiations.”

I’d been sixteen and responded with something like, “what are we, used car dealers?” but the lesson had stuck. Everybody won if the shopper could bargain me down a bit, even if

sometimes I had to go close to the bone. Better to have a happy customer who'd come back again and again than a hefty profit on one particular item.

Besides, these were my friends, neighbors, and fellow Dead Enders. I wasn't going to be a Scrooge to them, especially this time of year.

"I heard you had an interesting Thanksgiving," Mr. Ingleson said, placing several items on the counter.

I groaned. "Is there anybody in town who *hasn't* heard that story?"

He grinned, flashing white dentures. "Maybe one or two people at the Dead End Nursing Home who haven't had their hearing aids adjusted for a while. How did you get a turkey that size stuck in the washing machine?"

"Talent, Mr. Ingleson," I said glumly, ringing up his sale. "It took genuine talent."

His delighted peal of laughter made up for my temporary embarrassment, and the two hundred dollars he paid me helped too. By the time Eleanor arrived at nine, I'd already had a busy and profitable morning.

But the clock striking nine—and I briefly wondered what the compliment clock was telling people right then—was like the ringing of a starting bell at the racetrack. The customers came in fast and furious in wave after wave, until suddenly it was noon, and I realized I hadn't had time to call Phin or even to go to the bathroom all morning.

I caught Eleanor's attention. "Should we close for a half hour to eat some lunch?"

She looked around at the crowded store and laughed. "No, I think we'd cause a riot."

"Or a stampede," I muttered, watching two people reaching for the same thing—the last taxidermied animal on the shelf. I'd even had multiple offers for Fluffy, but she was staying right where he was. The ratty-looking old girl had become the shop mascot and a good-luck charm.

“We can take turns chowing down on protein bars in the back,” I said without enthusiasm. “I wonder what happened to Jack. He was going to bring donuts.”

“You go first, dear. I’ll stay here. I had a big breakfast. And Jack may have gotten caught up in that meeting at Mellie’s.”

While she turned to ring up more customers, I scanned the shop to see if anything needed my attention and then made a break for the back. I took five minutes to scarf down another cup of coffee and a thoroughly unappetizing protein bar, and then brushed my teeth and headed back out to the shop.

When I came through the door from the back, I heard the door chimes and looked up with an automatic welcoming grin, only to see Mrs. Engelhaupt step through.

“Mrs. Engelhaupt!” I waved. “I’m so happy to see you. How is that filly doing?”

She beamed and made her way through the people crowding the magical objects aisle to get to me. “Wonderful! She’s a beauty, she is. How are you?”

I waved a hand at the crowd. “Happy and busy, as you can see. It’s our final business day before Christmas, so people like to get their last bit of shopping done.”

I leaned toward her and spoke in a quieter voice. “I’m just so happy you told us about Rooster helping you that night. He might have been in a tough spot if you weren’t able to verify that he was with you.”

“Oh, yes. He’s such a dear man.” She smiled at the memory. “He even went home in the middle of the night and fixed us all breakfast. Never ate eggs and bacon at four a.m. before, but he was so proud to have cooked it for us. Who was I to refuse? Took him so long to do it, too.”

Her words hit me like a punch in the face, and I suddenly could almost physically feel my heart sinking in my chest.

“He ... you ... what?”

“Breakfast. The full deal, in fact. Eggs and bacon and biscuits. Fried potatoes. It was delicious!”

I felt dizzy. “You said it ... it took him a long time?”

She pursed her lips. “Well, you know. He’s a lifelong bachelor. The food was delicious, though! Don’t get me wrong. But he left around two and wasn’t back until four. I mean, it really doesn’t take two hours to make breakfast, does it?”

With that, she laughed and wandered off to do her shopping, leaving me with my mouth hanging open and my brain exploding.

No, it didn’t take two hours to make breakfast.

Not unless you were trying to fit “fry eggs” into your schedule around “beat Darryl to death with a hammer.”

Oh, no.

Oh, no.

It was time to call Jack.

Jack

After ten or fifteen minutes squeezed into the bakery, listening in on dozens of conversations about how to stop UltraShopMart, I still hadn't made it even halfway through the line and decided I didn't need donuts after all.

What I did need, though, was a look at the UltraShopMart site for myself. Tess had been adamant that her friend Phin wouldn't have been doing anything illegal out there, but she'd admitted he'd had scrapes with the law in the past.

The endangered animal theory was interesting, especially since he'd told us he was meeting with some organization about it. But why wouldn't he have told Andy? Or at least told Tess, since they'd been friends since high school.

No, something weird was going on, and we needed to find out what. Tess was going to call him as soon as she got a minute, and I was heading out to the excavation site. I'd heard about the wizard, but shifters have some natural immunity to glamours and other magic. Not all, and we were as susceptible to blood magic as ordinary humans, but we could usually see right through illusion magic.

Oddly, when I pulled up and parked outside the tall wire fence that encircled the site, nobody came out to challenge me or even ask who I was or why I was there. I climbed out of the truck and walked through the visual distortion that signaled the edges of the look-away spell. I could feel how potent it was, so it was probably very effective against ordinary humans. When

I reached the fence, I scanned the area for guards or other personnel—still nobody—and hopped easily over the six-foot-tall wire boundary.

The site looked like every other construction site I'd ever seen, with several trailers, probably used as offices and break rooms for the workers, off to one side. A couple of trucks and a few Toyota sedans were neatly parked next to the furthest trailer from me and, oddly, their license plates were all smeared with mud even though the cars themselves were clean.

The enormous mound of dirt told me that UltraShopMart had been digging like crazy, which was surprising, since they still hadn't gotten town permission via the revised zoning. Maybe they knew something the rest of us didn't?

Maybe they'd bribed one or more town council members? Ruby would have a fit if that were the case. She was every bit as honest and ethical as her niece.

I casually strolled over to the mound of dirt that marked the edge of the excavation, hands in my pockets, trying to project "I belong here" vibes. When I reached the line of enormous machines, I studied them for a minute. These differed from excavators I'd seen before that ran on wheels. These had tank tracks that propelled them. I'd have to ask Dave about why they were being used here as opposed to the wheeled kind. Not that it probably mattered to anything, but I'd had a love of this kind of equipment ever since Jeremiah had given me my first toy truck when I was three or four.

"Hey! You! Stop right there!"

I turned to see two heavily armed guards—and assault rifles were way more than what they needed to protect a construction site—rushing down the steps from a trailer and headed my way.

I decided I didn't feel like explaining myself to more of UltraShopMart's thugs, so I just waved at them.

"Sorry! Wrong turn!" With that, I loped back to the fence and hopped over it, expecting to hear shots any second.

Luckily for me, they probably didn't have authority to shoot townspeople in the back. Might make UltraShopMart look bad.

I raced back through the look-away spell, wondering if the effect applied on this side, too, and the guards would have trouble seeing me now. It cost quite a lot more to hire a wizard who was both talented and precise enough to cast one that only worked one way, but UltraShopMart certainly had the money.

Nobody shot me, so there was at least that. I took the win, climbed into my truck, and sped out of there. I'd see if Jed wanted to come back to the site with me tonight.

Because an interesting thing about tigers?

We can see in the dark.

T *ess*

It was a banner day for sales, and we were happy—at least about that—and exhausted when six o'clock rolled around. I actually couldn't get the door locked and the CLOSED sign up until almost six-thirty, but I hadn't wanted to hurry my last two customers.

They'd been buying a lot.

I'd taken in a few items in pawn, but the day was mostly straight sales, and we'd rung up over a thousand dollars. I offered a quick prayer of thanks and sighed with relief that I was good to keep the lights on for several more months. My earnings this year had been a little precarious—I think I'd been spending more time investigating crimes than working at my business.

Next year would have to be different.

But I had the holidays to enjoy before I started making plans and resolutions.

“Eleanor!” I hugged my tired employee. “You are wonderful. Thank you so much for everything today.”

She hugged me and then stepped back, smiling wearily. “That was certainly a day to remember! Well, I'm off. I'll see you at the festival?”

I held up a hand to stop her. “Yes! But hang on a moment, please.”

I retrieved the bright red envelope from my bag and handed it to her. “Your Christmas card from me, with a little something to say thank you for your hard work this year.”

She shook her head. “Tess, you know you don’t have to do that! But I’ll happily take it, because I have wedding expenses. Maybe I can put it toward the flowers. The nursery is giving me a deal, but they’ll still be nearly three hundred dollars! Can you imagine?”

I just smiled, hugged her again, and sent her on her way. She’d be happily surprised when she opened that envelope and saw her bonus check. The store may have had less profit than usual this year, but what profit we had was due in large part to Eleanor stepping in when I’d been off investigating crimes with Jack.

I really, *really* hoped she still wanted to work at least a few hours a week after the wedding.

“But that, like so many other things, is a problem for next year,” I told my empty shop. “And I’ll be back to clean up after Christmas.”

I turned off most of the lights and double-checked the security cameras, not that they’d been much help so far, and unlocked the front door. I stopped in the doorway, struck by an impulse I didn’t quite understand, and turned to face my shop. “Thank you. For giving me a job and a life and a livelihood. For giving me Jeremiah and leading me to Jack. Thank you.”

Although it didn’t make the slightest bit of sense, I was almost certain that my little shop gave me back a feeling of happiness and peace.

No, it didn’t make sense, but it made me feel warm inside.

I locked up, carried my stuff out to the car, and planned out my evening.

Step one: Get that casserole out to the Petersons and maybe find a subtle way to ask them about Emeril’s whereabouts on Sunday ... at the time of the murder.

Step two: Talk to Jack about Rooster and the two-hour breakfast ... at the time of the murder.

I knew with all my heart that Rooster wasn't a murderer—could not be guilty. But I also felt guilt over not telling Andy what I knew. I really needed to talk it out with Jack.

Step three: Try yet again to reach Phin by phone to find out what in the world was up with him trespassing on the UltraShopMart site and where he'd been ... at the time of the murder.

Step four: Face plant in bed and sleep till noon.



When I arrived at the Petersons, casserole ready to hand over, there was an unfamiliar car parked next to the brothers' two trucks—a small, butter-yellow Volkswagen Beetle with a HONK IF YOU LOVE LIBRARIANS bumper sticker on the back.

Maybe one of the family down from Nashville?

I stepped out of the car just in time to hear a door slam inside the house, and I froze, looking at the screen door in dismay. Honestly, people should close their actual doors, not just their screen doors, when it was forty degrees outside. It would solve a lot of accidental eavesdropping problems.

Taking a deep breath, I raised my chin and headed up to the house. This casserole was going into that house if I had to close my eyes and sing show tunes to avoid seeing or hearing any drama.

I knocked on the screen door and called out a hello. “Mr. Peterson and Mr. Peterson? It's me, Tess. I have a casserole for you. If this isn't a good time, I can just leave it here—”

A lovely woman, maybe in her sixties, walked into the hall from a back room and peered out at me. She had blonde hair burnished with silver, bright blue eyes, and pale skin with pink cheeks. She looked like a Dresden doll, if they'd ever made any who wore tweed skirts and fluffy cardigans with pearls.

The librarian, I was betting.

“Hello! Emeril and his brother just stepped out to, ah, well, I’m not sure what they’re doing, exactly.” She smiled at me and shook her head. “Boys will be boys, right?”

Since the brothers were in their early seventies, I thought calling them boys was a stretch, but she was so friendly and cheerful I automatically returned her smile.

“If I could leave this with you, then?”

“Oh, of course! Where are my manners?” She rushed down the hallway to open the door and beckon me inside. “Thank you so much. I’m sure they’ll appreciate it. It smells delicious!”

It *did* smell pretty good, not to brag.

“I warmed it up in case they want to have it for dinner this evening. If not, it’ll keep just fine in the fridge for a few days or they can freeze it. I’m so sorry about Darryl.”

She turned and gestured for me to follow her, leading the way into the kitchen, chatting all the way. “That’s lovely of you. I hadn’t met him yet, but it was very sad. Especially at Christmas. Would you like a cup of tea? Such a chilly night.”

If she hadn’t met him yet, she probably wasn’t one of the Nashville side of the family, which brought me back to wondering who she was and why she was there.

“No, I’m fine,” I said, taking in the lovely cherry-wood-paneled walls of the hallway and what must be a formal parlor as we walked. The house was definitely old, but well-maintained and scrupulously clean. Someone had polished the wood until it shone, and the home felt comfortable and inviting. The kitchen was the same, with herbs in pots on the windowsills and copper pans hanging from a rack over the island.

“Oh, you must have a cup, and we’ll get to know each other while the boys work out their differences,” she said, not taking no for an answer. I placed the casserole dish on a hot pad on the counter and sank down on a barstool, happy to get off my feet.

“Well, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“None at all. Oh! I’m sorry. I’m Angela. Angela Lovesberry, Emeril’s friend. I didn’t ask your name. I think my head is still in the book I’m reading.” She nodded toward the breakfast nook, where a copy of *Jane Eyre* lay next to a pair of glasses. “I always enjoy revisiting old friends.”

“I love to read too,” I confided. “I’m currently in the middle of a biography of an art forger, a reread of *The Lord of the Rings*, and a book about the history of antique furniture. Oh, and I’m Tess Callahan. Nice to meet you, Mrs. Lovesberry.”

She stilled, cups in hand, and sent me a delighted smile. “What an eclectic list! I love to read multiple books at once too. And it’s Miss Lovesberry. I never married. But please call me Angela.”

“So, you’re a librarian?”

She returned to filling the cups with steaming, fragrant tea. “Yes, up in Jacksonville for forty years. I’m retired now, but I think I’m going to volunteer with the Friends of the Dead End Library. I like to keep my hand in, you know.”

She placed the cup in front of me and nudged a tray with milk and sugar in silver bowls toward me.

I added a little sugar and milk to my tea, stirred, and took a sip. “Mmm. That’s delicious. Just the thing on a cold night. What kind of tea is it? I know a pixie who would adore this.”

Her eyes widened. “An actual pixie? One of the faeries?”

“Yes. Her name is Frazzle, and she got swept up in an interdimensional portal and landed in a flowerpot on my front porch. Long story.” I sipped more tea. “But she drops by sometimes to visit my cat, and she’d love this.”

“It’s jasmine tea infused with marigold honey from my own hives. And how wonderful that you know a pixie well enough that she comes to visit.” She sighed happily. “I love Dead End. I wish I’d moved here long ago.”

The back door slammed open, and I heard one set of heavy boots clomping up the stairs and another heading for the

kitchen. I froze, tea in hand, not knowing what to do, but then Emeril walked into the kitchen with a frown on his face.

“He’s being a dang fool,” he began, but then he caught sight of me and sent me a strained smile. “Why, Tess Callahan. What brings you out here?”

“I brought you a casserole. Oh, and it’s from Rooster too. I’m so sorry for your loss, Mr. Peterson. Please give my condolences to your brother, too. If you need anything ...” I trailed off, thinking about the conversation I’d heard the night before. Was it even possible that Emeril Peterson was a murderer?

A cousin murderer?

No. I couldn’t believe it.

“Thank you, Tess. Rooster sent a ham, too.”

“What did Harold say?” Miss Lovesberry—Angela—put a hand on Emeril’s arm. “Is he okay with us?”

Emeril’s cheeks flushed, and I hopped up. “Um, I should go. Please take care, and I hope, ah—”

Angela waved her hands. “No, no, finish your tea. It’s not a secret. Emeril and I have been seeing each other, and he finally stayed overnight Saturday night and got to work late Sunday. But the silly lug hadn’t told his brother about it out of some notion of protecting my honor, and they were fighting about it.”

Emeril’s face was now fiery red, and from the heat in my cheeks, mine were probably the same. I really, *really* didn’t need to know anything about Mr. Peterson’s love life.

He cleared his throat a couple of times. “Um. Yes. Well, Tess, thank you for the casserole. We’ll enjoy that tonight, because tomorrow we’re heading up to Nashville for the funeral.”

“Yes! I—yes!” I was babbling, but I couldn’t seem to stop myself. “Please drive safely. It was lovely to meet you, Miss Lovesberry. Good night.”

They called out good nights and goodbyes, but I was already halfway down the hall and then out the door, racing away before the feisty librarian could share any other details about their love life.

Argh.

How was I going to look her in the face at the Friends of the Library meetings?

It took me so long to get over my embarrassment that I was halfway home before I realized the second and far more important implication of Emeril's night of romance with his new lady love:

He had an alibi for the time of the murder.

A knot of worry immediately followed my sigh of relief. One suspect cleared, but that only put more suspicion on Rooster and his two-hour breakfast cooking, and I still didn't know what to do about that.

When I stopped at a stop sign, I glanced down at my phone. No messages or missed calls, so Phin hadn't called me back yet, and I didn't know what to do about that, either.

When I arrived at home, there were three cats in my living room, but only one was currently furry. Jack sat on the couch, petting Lou, and Jed sat on the armchair, gleefully flipping through channels on my TV before yelling "aha!" and settling on one. He liked to say that he had a lot of history to catch up on, after three centuries stuck in a statue, but I wasn't sure how a rerun of *The Amazing Race* was going to do it.

It was a great show, though, so I didn't mind.

Jack eased Lou aside and stood to give me a hug, which I was happy to return with interest. Jack's embrace felt like home, and I closed my eyes and breathed in his uniquely Jack scent of forest and sunshine and *Jack*.

"Why are you here? I'm happy to see you—both of you—but I thought you and Grandpa Jed had an errand to run."

Jed looked up. "Yeah, but then people started shooting at us."

T^{ess}

I hadn't gotten much sleep after learning that heavily armed guards had been shooting at my boyfriend and his grandpa, but I hadn't gotten much since Sunday morning either, so it was nothing new.

I'd told them about Emeril being in the clear and about Mrs. Lovesberry. Jack had told me about his two separate adventures at the site. We couldn't figure out why they'd protect a construction site like it was Fort Knox, but Jack planned to talk to Andy about it.

Jack was also going to confront Rooster about the missing two hours since Rooster had hired him. Also, because I just didn't want to watch Rooster's face if it turned out he was guilty.

I knew he wasn't guilty, though.

I *knew* it.

But ... that two hours had given me the slightest itch of doubt, and I *hated* itches. Doubt or otherwise. And I loved Rooster, so I'd take the easy way out and let Jack do it.

Anyway, I had important plans for the morning.

But first ...

"Happy birthday!" I flipped the last batch of pancakes onto the platter and then set them on the table next to the bacon and fried potatoes. "Oh! I should put a candle in your pancake!"

Jack laughed. “No, you definitely should not. Poor Jed will be sad that he went home early and missed this.”

“Also, I’m going shopping!”

“You’re what?”

“Going shopping with Molly! I love shopping with my best friend, because she talks me into poor decisions, instead of practical ones.”

“What does that mean?” He looked up from where he was feeding Lou her breakfast, a look of mild concern on his gorgeous face. “What kind of poor decisions?”

“Remember that red dress I wore on our first attempt at a date?” It was the sexiest and most expensive thing I’d ever worn, and Molly had forced me to buy it. On my own, I would have found something cheaper and less—everything. And the look on Jack’s face told me how much I would have regretted that.

His eyes went glazed, and a slow, wicked smile spread across his face.

“Tess, I can honestly say I’ll *never* forget that dress. Where is it? Can you wear it today? Or, you know, every day?”

It was my turn to laugh. “Yes, because wearing that tiny dress to Aunt Ruby and Uncle Mike’s for Shelley’s birthday party is exactly what I’m going to do.”

He walked over to me and pulled me into his arms. “Then how about you wear it after the party? When we’re here, all alone?”

His kiss left me a little breathless and wondering what we’d been talking about. “Um, huh?”

“Red dress. You and me. Tonight. I’ll buy the champagne. You deserve champagne in that dress.”

I pulled away from him and raised an eyebrow. “Only in that dress?”

He gave me his best innocent face. “Of course not! You deserve champagne *out* of that dress, too.”

“Eat, foolish man. This is your first breakfast as a thirty-three-year-old.”

He pulled out my chair and then sat in his. “Thank you so much for this. You didn’t have to go to so much work on your first day off, though.”

“I was happy to do it. Happy birthday.” I reached over and touched his cheek. “I love you.”

Amber glints appeared in his piercing green eyes, a sign of deep emotion. “I love you too, Tess. In fancy dresses or blue jeans, in your Donald Duck pajamas or in your Dead End Pawn sweatshirt. I love you, and I still can’t believe I was lucky enough to find you.”

I had to swallow, hard, against the lump in my throat. “I feel ridiculously lucky, too.”

We smiled mushy smiles at each other for a while and then began to eat. I downed my first cup of coffee pretty quickly and then got up for a refill, mentally planning my day. There was a lot of work to be done. I’d already bought most of my presents for Shelley’s birthday, but I still needed a few Christmas gifts for my family. Maybe another thing or two for Jack.

Jack jerked his head to the side and stared down the hall. “Molly’s coming. She should get that muffler checked.”

I cocked my head and listened. Nothing.

“Superior tiger hearing strikes again. Want more coffee?”

“No, but thanks. I need to get moving. I’ll wash up here. You go get ready for your horrific trip to the chaos of shopping two days before Christmas.” He shuddered and made a face. “I’d rather face angry, drunk werewolves than crazed holiday shoppers.”

“I’ll keep that in mind the next time I run into any angry drunk werewolves.” I kissed him and then headed down the hall to unlock my door.

Locking doors was a new thing for me and most of Dead End, I imagined. But better safe than invaded by stalkers. Or

alligators. Or vengeful vampires. Or ...

Never mind. I'd just lock the door. Especially when Jack wasn't here.

Molly, never the most patient person, started pounding on the door just before I opened it, and then threw herself into my arms for a hug.

"Why are you locking your door now? No, wait, I know the answer to that. Why isn't Jack figuring out who killed Santa? This is no time to sit around eating breakfast!"

"Actually, it's exactly the time to eat breakfast, since it's not even nine o'clock," Jack drawled from the kitchen. "Coffee? Did you eat yet?"

"Happy birthday, Jack! I had a huge breakfast at eight, but I guess I could nibble on something." She skipped down the hall to the kitchen, too full of energy at all times to do anything as mundane as merely walk.

Molly was tiny, tattooed, and terrific. She wore her silky black hair down to her shoulders these days, a change from her long-time pixie cut, but her cutting-edge fashion sense hadn't changed. For our trip to the mall, she was rocking a red wool sweater, black jeans, and stylish leather boots with three-inch heels.

I washed my face, slapped on some moisturizer and a little makeup, and pulled on a forest-green sweater, jeans, and my leather boots, which were a little less stylish than Molly's and only had a half-inch heel. Still, they were gorgeous, and I loved them. They'd been a splurge buy a few years back, and I kept them in good shape and polished the way Uncle Mike had taught me.

He and I had spent many long hours bonding over boot polishing. Especially during the not-infrequent times Aunt Ruby and I had butted heads over something. I'd polished his boots to a mirror sheen the day Aunt Ruby had heard thirteen-year-old me say my first bad word and grounded me for a week.

It hadn't even been that bad a word, as I'd learned the next month when I tried out one that was much, much worse. That time she grounded me for a month.

To this day, I didn't swear.

I walked back into the kitchen just in time to see Molly polish off a plate that looked like it had been filled with breakfast.

"Glad you could nibble," I said dryly, pouring coffee into my to-go mug. "Want some coffee to bring with?"

She bounced up off her chair. "Nope. Need to get moving. Already had a quad latte this morning."

One of her first purchases with her new music money had been an enormous cappuccino/espresso maker. Since Molly on caffeine was a truly awe-inspiring experience, my expectations for the day rapidly revised themselves from "this may be tough" to "oh, holy cow, let's keep Molly off the ceiling."

"Oh, boy," I muttered.

Jack laughed, washed Molly's plate and fork, put them in the rack, and dried his hands.

"Good luck with everything," he told me, before pulling me close and kissing me again.

I pulled away quickly, still shy about public—or even private in my kitchen, but in front of my best friend—displays of affection. Jack's eyes laughed down at me, but he didn't say anything.

"Okay, well." I patted his chest twice like I might pat Lou's head, feeling silly even as my cheeks heated. "You ... do the thing. And then call me. Okay?"

"Yes, Jack," Molly said, her dark eyes filled with curiosity. "Do the thing. What is the thing?"

"Secret birthday stuff for Shelley," he said smoothly.

I blinked at him, wishing I could lie that easily. I was a horrible liar and had almost lost my shirt—literally—at strip poker as a teenager, until Molly'd saved me and yelled at the

boys to quit taking advantage of my easy-to-read tells or she'd kick their butts for them.

Nobody had doubted her, even though she'd been talking to four of the biggest football players in our school. Such was the power of Molly Chen.

Shortly after that, my gift had kicked in, and nobody had invited me to parties anymore, so it hadn't really mattered. Still, it would have been fun to have a poker face now and then.

Molly gave Jack a suspicious look, but he only returned a bland smile, so she shrugged, grabbed my arm, and pulled me down the hall. "You're driving. My car needs a new muffler, I think."

"It does," Jack called out. "Want me to take care of that while you're shopping?"

"No, but thanks. I have an appointment after Christmas to get everything fixed. Lucky thinks I should get a new car, but I'm going to drive this one until it dies under me. Why should I give my hard-earned cash to the capitalist auto industry?"

I rolled my eyes. "No dissing the capitalist industries when you're talking to your best friend, the business owner, while we drive out to that palace of commercialism—one of the biggest malls in Orlando."

She grinned. "Fine. But I get to pick where we have lunch."

"You just ate your second breakfast! You're like a hobbit, except without the hairy feet!"

We bickered and joked and laughed and told secrets all the way to the mall, as we'd done together for all our lives. I loved catching up with Molly.

"I miss our bad-movie Fridays, now that you're always off on tour," I admitted. "I make Jack watch bad movies with me, but it's not the same."

I deepened my voice and put on a serious face. "How can 'the safety was on' be a plot point that saves the day? That gun

doesn't even have a safety!"

She laughed, but I held up a finger. "Oh, no. That's nothing. Don't even get me started on any movie with shapeshifters in it. Also: He criticized the weapons in *Fifth Element*, the battle strategy in *Dracula Reborn*, and the command structure in *Starship Troopers*! Who pays attention to the *command structure*? Giant bugs attacking the universe, Molly! *Giant bugs!*"

She was now laughing so hard she got the hiccups.

I sighed. "Watching movies with an ex-rebel commander isn't a job for the faint of heart."

She held up a hand and held her breath for a count of ten, which mysteriously made her hiccups go away like it always did for her and had never once for me.

"Listen," she finally said, gasping a little. "Lucky has gone whole-hog into the business-owner thing. He's suddenly gone from somebody who used to have to pawn a guitar or two once or twice a year to get by to somebody who wanted to talk about my *general liability insurance* on our last date."

"Yes!"

"What?"

I pointed. "I mean, yes, I finally found a parking space. But no, that's crazy! Liability insurance?"

I swung into the parking space so far from the mall entrance we should have brought skateboards to cross the lot, and the guy in the ugly truck behind me smashed his horn at me.

Like I cared. "Get here earlier next time, buddy!"

"Your window is closed," Molly pointed out. "He couldn't hear you."

"Like I'd say anything with my window open?" I snorted. "This is Florida. He'd probably shoot me. What did you say?"

"To the ugly truck guy?"

"No, to Lucky."

She unfastened her seat belt, sighed, and leaned her head back against the headrest. “I changed the subject, but the awful thing is he’s not wrong. Dice broke another guitar over another guy’s head at our set in Little Rock last week, and this guy was shouting about suing.”

I shrugged. “Dice—or should I say Veronica Dunstan-Blueblood—”

“Dunstan-Smythe,” Molly said, weary patience in her tone. She knew I wasn’t crazy about her sometimes-drummer, sometimes-bass guitarist, who caused a lot of trouble for Molly with her roller-coaster love life and propensity toward violence.

“Whatever. The anger management didn’t take?”

“Apparently not, and it’s the fourth time the court ordered her to take them. They’re going to just lock her up. Not to mention—”

“Not to mention, you’re getting to be a big deal, and they’re going to sue *you*,” I said, realization dawning.

“Exactly. I had to tell her that this was it. The last time. We’re all over her tantrums and craziness.” Molly frowned. “I had to sit her down and tell her she’s out of the band if it happens again. Any fighting at all, not just her favorite guitar-over-the-head trick.”

“That couldn’t have been fun.” I reached out and touched her arm. “I know, believe me. Dealing with employees feels too adult, somehow. How are we other people’s bosses? It feels like yesterday you were beating up Nancy Hoffman for stealing my crayons.”

“I know. But speaking of being an adult, what in the world is happening in Dead End? And how could anybody believe Rooster was a killer?”

I glanced at her, surprised, but then I remembered she’d been on the road a lot. “There’s a lot going on. A *lot*. And Susan is out of town.”

“Tell me.”

So, I did. I filled her in on everything Jack and I had learned, everything we suspected, and where we were now.

“The thing he was going off to do was confront Rooster about those missing hours? What if he just took a long time because he burned the first batch of eggs? I do that all the time.”

“Then it will be a simple conversation.” I tried to smile and not think about how betrayed Rooster would feel by our suspicions.

Molly grabbed her bag. “I know! Let’s put any thoughts of bad bad-movie nights and insurance and killers out of our minds and go shopping! I have so much still to get. Plus, I think I hear the Cinnabon place calling my name.”

We chatted about men, gifts, and her unfairly high metabolism on the hike to the mall. Then, despite an underlying sadness for the Petersons and worry about Rooster, the next two hours went by in a haze of shopping, laughter, and a much-needed break from the challenges of life in Dead End.

Until the security guy lost control of his Segway and plowed right into us.

Jack

It was time. I wanted to procrastinate by fixing Molly's car, or cleaning Tess's pool, or even starting a fight with that bunch of angry, drunk werewolves I'd mentioned to Tess.

Instead, I went to confront Rooster. Those two hours of "breakfast cooking" at the exact time of murder were a problem. A big problem. And if he couldn't explain them to my satisfaction, I was going to have to tell Andy about it.

The day had dawned sunny and gorgeous, and it was already in the sixties at ten in the morning. We'd likely get thunderstorms or a thirty-degree temp drop by midnight.

Florida: If you don't like the weather, hang on an hour or two.

When I pulled up to Rooster's place, he was out in the yard in a T-shirt and overalls, hauling a roll of fence wire over one massive shoulder. His whole face broke into a smile when he saw me, sending stabs of guilt shooting into my gut.

"Hey, Jack! Did you come by to help me rebuild the goose enclosure? Pesky birds keep getting out. I swear that big guy learned how to work the latch."

I grinned. "Let me tell you a story about that goose..."

By the time I'd filled him in on Tess and the goose attack, we'd nearly finished repairing the goose fence. Rooster

laughed long and hard, then mopped his face with a red bandanna he pulled out of a pocket.

“That Tess. She’s a wonder, isn’t she? Took right over at the pawnshop after your uncle passed, God rest his soul, and is really making something there. Plus, she’s got a heart bigger than the moon.”

“She is definitely a wonder.” I studied the new enclosure and then turned to Rooster. “Why do you have a goose pen, anyway?”

“Well, it’s more a chicken pen.” He pointed one meaty finger at the chicken coop I’d barely noticed and then walked over and opened the latch on the wooden door at the top of a narrow ramp. A storm of chickens, loudly clucking out their indignation at being penned up, rushed out of the coop and down the ramp, where they calmed down and started pecking at the seeds he scattered for them.

“But the geese?”

“Well, a goose is better’n a guard dog for protecting a flock. Loud and aggressive.” He flashed that grin. “Like Tess discovered, if she didn’t already know, growing up with Mike and Ruby.”

He pointed at the enormous goose who’d led the attack on Tess. “I got that fellow to protect my hens, and somehow the other geese just kept showing up to hang out with him. I guess it’s his feathered harem or something. As you can see, they’re all free to leave if they want, all day long. They can just fly away. But I reckon the big guy there enjoys being the king of the hill, so to speak.”

I had to laugh, watching the goose strut around and periodically aim beady-eyed warning glares in my direction. “I think he’s plotting revenge.”

Rooster finished the job and brushed his hands off on his overalls. “Well, I sure appreciate the help, but I figure you didn’t drive out here to jaw about geese and help me fix the fence. What’s up?”

Now that it was time, I wasn't sure how to begin. I rubbed the back of my neck and sighed. "Got any coffee? I could sure use a cup."

"Always." He waved at me to follow him and trudged over to the house.

I followed him inside and downed half a mug of coffee in one gulp. Rooster raised an eyebrow, but only held up a knife and pointed to the pie.

"Want a piece?"

"Always."

He laughed and cut us both big slabs of pie. "Okay, spit it out, young man. What's wrong?"

I took a quick bite of pie, still stalling. "This is great!"

Not Tess great, but that seemed impolite to say. Still, pretty much all pie was good pie.

He nodded. "My neighbor brought it over to say thanks for a bit of help I gave them with a foal. Unnecessary, but definitely appreciated."

"About that." I took a deep breath. "Rooster, we have a problem. You and your neighbor told us you were helping with the horse at her place Saturday night all the way through till Sunday morning."

"Yep. Fine little filly." He beamed, shoveled more pie into his mouth. "I bet she—"

"It's just that she—ah, Mrs. Engelhaupt, not the filly—told Tess that you actually came home in the very early morning to cook them breakfast."

Rooster's face contorted into a weird expression that I eventually interpreted as shy embarrassment.

"Well. So, I did. Not a big deal, except I—ah—well." His broad cheeks flushed. "I'm not as young as I used to be, you know?"

"Ah—"

“I fell asleep. Just sat down to rest my eyes, understand? But then I woke up an hour and a half later. Had to rush to make that breakfast and take it back over.”

I stared, hard, into his eyes, but saw nothing but slightly pained embarrassment and total sincerity. If I knew anything about lies and liars—and after ten years of the rebellion, I certainly did—Rooster was telling me the complete truth.

And I’d never even had to bring up our suspicions about him and Darryl.

I blew out a sigh of relief, finished the last bite of my pie, and stood. “Thanks for the pie. I need to be getting along—”

“Jack.” He pushed back and up out of his chair and held up a hand. “I know I’m just an old farmer, and not a big shot like you were. We heard about your exploits even here in Dead End.”

“I’m not—”

He shook his head and gave me a steady look. “No. Stop. I know you and Tess must have been wondering about that missing two hours. Especially since it was right around the time of the murder. But I’ve told you before and I’ll tell you now. I did not kill Darryl. I’d never kill anybody, no matter how mad they made me. So, you and Tess can stop worrying about me, okay?”

I held out my hand and shook his. “Rooster, I can tell you straight out. I believe you. Tess never stopped believing you, but I’ve been places and done things that make me more cynical than she is. But you’ve answered my question without me even having to ask it, so I’ll apologize for that slight instance of doubt. You’re a good man, and I’m glad to know you.”

Rooster patted me on the back, and if I hadn’t seen it coming and braced, I might have gone flying across the kitchen. The man didn’t know his own strength.

“No worries, young man. I respect you for it. Now, you be good to our Tess, or you’ll have to answer to me, you hear?”

He motioned toward his door, and we headed back out into the bright sunshine.

“You’ll have to get in line behind Mike.”

He threw back his head and laughed. “No doubt. No doubt.”

When I started to leave, his smile faded. “I’d appreciate it if you’d go out and find the actual killer now, Jack. I don’t like the idea of a murderer running around our town.”

“Andy and I are working on it, believe me.”

He nodded and headed back to his birds. “I’ll hold you to it. Before Christmas would be good. Thanks again for the help.”

“Anytime.”

As I drove away, I shook my head. “Before Christmas.” No problem.

No pressure.

Then I turned the truck toward town. It was time to talk to Judd.

Before I reached the pizza place, though, which probably wasn’t even open yet, my phone rang.

Andy.

I didn’t bother with hello. “It’s not Rooster.”

“Yeah. I agree. But we have a different problem today.”

A dull headache pounded behind my eyes, but I was definitely not going to try any of Tess’s new collection of homespun remedies. The smell of vinegar still haunted my nightmares.

“What is it now?”

“I’m out here at Charithra’s clinic. We were working on the new kennels and run for dog boarding, and we found a surprise. A canvas duffel filled with tools, all labeled Wolf Construction.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. What would Dave’s stolen tools be doing there?”

There was a silence, and then I heard the vet say something in the background like “not possible.”

“Well. I’m sad to say this, but only she and Phin have access to this run. It’s locked securely and only accessible from the clinic.”

“Are you saying you think Phin stole Dave’s tools?” I thought back to the man I’d met. Tess’s friend.

Another of Tess’s friends accused of a crime. She was going to be devastated.

Andy sighed. “There’s more. UltraShopMart actually reported Phin for trespassing last week, but then they ‘benevolently’—Craven’s word—declined to press charges. And the crime spree in town started not long after Phin came back to town...”

I was shaking my head before he’d finished. “No. I can’t see it. What does checking out the UltraShopMart site have to do with stealing tools? Phin *knows* Dave. Anyway, if you want to get technical, I trespassed on the excavation site too. Am I a suspect? Something very wrong is going on here.”

“All of it is very wrong! I don’t understand why any of this is happening. The murder, the rash of crimes—why would Phin steal tools and then deface the clinic where he works? Why, for Pete’s sake? And what does a murder have to do with any of it?”

“Have you asked Phin about it?”

“No. I can’t reach him. His mom says he’s in Orlando doing some last-minute shopping.”

Dead End. One of the few places in the world where you ask a suspected criminal’s mother about him.

“Tess is going to hate this.”

“Yeah. Not that it’s a real factor in the investigation, because I can’t let it be, but Charithra is devastated too, when

she's not denying it's even possible. Anyway, I've got to reach Phin. And I need to talk to Judd about Darryl."

"I was just headed to his pizza shop to do the same thing."

"Really? Well, I've heard from more than one person that Judd got into a couple of bitter arguments with Darryl and Craven, both about the UltraShopMart. That he has quite a temper. And that he's in a bit of financial trouble after sinking all his available cash into buying Dead End Pizza. I'm going to have a nice long chat with him and see what's what."

I considered for a moment and then decided I had to let Andy know what I'd seen and heard. I described the argument between Judd and his wife and mentioned the spots on his shoes that possibly had been blood.

"And you're just telling me this now?" Andy's voice dropped into a growl. "Shepherd, you're not exactly helping if you're keeping things to yourself."

"I know. But an overhead husband-wife argument and some maybe blood, maybe pizza sauce drops on shoes didn't seem like actual evidence."

"Fine. But I'll go talk to him. You don't need to. Maybe I've caught a killer for Christmas." He sighed. "I hate it if it's true, though. I've always thought Judd was a good guy."

"That's the problem, Andy. Everybody has a snapping point. Even good guys can be killers."

And on that cheery note, we hung up. I stopped at a stop sign and sent Tess a quick text.

Got some bad news.

Deck the freaking halls.

T*ess*

In the security guy's defense, he'd been chasing a couple of shoplifters.

And he'd only just learned to drive the Segway.

And his wife was nine months pregnant, so he'd been distracted.

And he was very, very, very sorry.

As he kept telling me and Molly, over and over and over again.

Luckily, Ezra had been driving pretty slowly when he'd taken a shaky left turn and plowed into us right in front of the Build-a-Bear workshop. I hit the floor, Ezra tumbled into the wall, and Molly went flying into a display of Christmas-themed stuffed animals.

None of us were hurt, really. I hit my cheek on Ezra's boot and could tell a bruise was already starting—the delicate Irish-redhead skin in action—and he sprained his ankle. Molly was completely fine and laughing like a loon, which made me laugh, and even Ezra stopped apologizing and managed a chuckle.

Until his boss ran up and started barking questions and orders. Somehow, he'd gotten the impression that Molly and I were the shoplifters, and he threatened us with the police before even asking if we were all right.

Molly's smile disappeared, and she stood, her eyes narrowed, and pointed at the boss guy. "You should listen to me right now. In pursuit of suspects, your official mall employee just *ran into us*, causing us physical injury and emotional distress."

When the man backtracked fast, she pointed at the guard. "*Ezra* was apologizing to us like a decent person. *You*, however, started out with threats. In the lawsuit, you'd better believe we will name you personally."

By this time, the manager's face was purple, and Ezra looked scared to death, so I stepped in—sort of; I was still sitting on the floor, feeling dizzy—so I could calm things down.

"Hey, now. We aren't going to sue, and it wasn't Ezra's fault. Minor accident, could happen to anybody. It's Christmas, after all."

Molly sneered at the manager. "Fine. But if we hear you took any disciplinary action against Ezra, who has a baby on the way, we'll reconsider that lawsuit."

I held in my grin, scooped up my purse and packages, and prepared to haul myself up off the ground. Before I could manage it, though, the poor, unsuspecting guard, still apologizing beneath his breath, reached down and grabbed my hand to help me up off the floor.

Molly yelled "No!" and threw herself at him, but it was too late.

Ezra's death exploded in my mind, knocking the breath out of me. I slumped back down onto the floor, pulling my hand away when it was too late—the damage was done.

By some Christmas miracle, the vision wasn't as physically painful or emotionally upsetting as some had been in the past. I even smiled a little, looking up at the guard, who would die on his hundredth birthday, skydiving with his son and daughter. His last view would be of their smiling faces and a wonderful view of green hills, and then he'd slip away with a slight pain in his chest.

It couldn't get much better than that.

Molly crouched down next to me. "Are you okay? What can I do?"

I smiled at her, catching my breath. "I'm good. It wasn't awful."

When she kept fussing, I patted her hand, regathered my packages, and stood. "No, really, I'm fine."

Poor Ezra, who had no idea what had just happened, stood there wringing his hands. "I'm so sorry, I—"

His phone rang loudly in his pocket, and he jumped.

"You should look at that," Molly advised him. "Might be the baby."

"The baby?" His eyes widened. "The baby!"

He yanked his phone out, looked down at it, and then whooped. Then he grabbed Molly in a hug and swung her around. "I'm going to be a daddy today!"

Before he hobbled off on his sprained ankle, leaving us calling out congratulations and the Segway still on the floor, surrounded by stuffed bears, he turned to his boss.

"And I quit! I told you I didn't want to ride that thing. We're moving to Arkansas to live with Janey's family."

Molly gave the manager a long, steady stare when he blustered.

We left the mall with free Cinnabon, free stuffed bears for Shelley, and gift certificates for \$100 each. Sometimes I think Molly missed her calling and should have been a lawyer like her parents.

By the time we got back to my place, still laughing, my face was throbbing.

"You'd better get ice on that before Jack sees it and goes all scary tiger on the mall," Molly said, grinning, as she helped me haul packages into the house.

“He’s getting better,” I protested. “Darryl tried to shove me, and Jack only warned him.”

“It’s a wonder he’s not a suspect,” Molly said.

I blushed. “Well. He was here all night, so I guess I’m his alibi.”

Molly ran out to her car and returned with a large box wrapped in pink, sparkly paper and ribbons and a small box wrapped just like it.

“Okay, this big one is for Shelley’s birthday. It’s a guitar and a promise of lessons from me. Never too early to learn.”

“That’s so sweet!” I hugged my wonderful best friend. “And the small one?”

A wicked smile spread across her face. “That’s for Jack. It’s a bag of catnip.”

I was still laughing, watching her drive away, when Jack texted me.

Got some bad news.

I called, and he told me about Rooster.

“That’s not bad news. That’s great! If—”

“Wait.”

Then he told me about Phin and Judd.

It felt like the Segway smashing into me all over again.



Jack and I arrived at Uncle Mike and Aunt Ruby’s house at the same time, which was fun, because the place was all decorated for the double-duty birthday party he knew nothing about.

I climbed out of my car and threw my hands into the air. “Surprise!”

He stepped out of his truck, staring at the balloons taped to the **HAPPY BIRTHDAY JACK AND SHELLEY** sign on the front

door.

“I—what?”

“It’s a birthday party for you and Shelley! Well, Shelley isn’t surprised, since she helped plan it, but we kept it a secret from you, didn’t we?”

From the gobsmacked look on his face, we totally had.

“I don’t understand. It’s Shelley’s birthday. She’s a kid. I’m not—”

“Kids aren’t the only ones who get birthday parties, Jack.” I hugged him. “Happy birthday!”

“But—”

“There’s cake!”

“Happy birthday to me.” He pulled me close, lifted me off my feet, and kissed me soundly, but when he set me back down, his eyes narrowed. “What is that?”

“Segway collision.”

“What?”

I grabbed his hand. “I’ll tell you inside, so I only have to tell it once.”

By the time I’d told the story to much laughter (everybody) and a little worry (again, everybody), it was time to sing happy birthday and eat cake. After that, we watched Shelley tear into her presents. This party was just family, but she was going to have what Aunt Ruby called a “proper party” with her friends after the holiday.

She loved the guitar and was delighted with the idea of lessons with a “real rock star,” which I guess Molly actually was now. She squealed at the Princess Peach pillow and comforter set for her room that I’d found for her and nearly exploded with joy when she opened the package from my cat, Lou, and found the fluffy pink dog bed.

“I get Pickles on Christmas day!”

I raised an eyebrow. “Pickles?”

Aunt Ruby sighed. “Her puppy. She gets to pick out the name.”

Jack pulled a small box out of his jacket pocket and presented her with a beautiful gold necklace with a tiny pug pendant on it, and I thought Shelley’s tiny body would vibrate clear off the floor with excitement.

“Look in the box again,” Jack said. “I think you missed something.”

Shelley’s eyes widened, and she dug into the box and pulled a piece of paper out from beneath the tissue paper.

“This certificate entitles the bearer to ten puppy training sessions,” she read. “Oh, Jack! Really? I got a book, but if you can help, that would be awesome!”

“I can help. I’m kind of good with animals.” He grinned at her and then gave her a big hug when she hurled her small body at him. “Love you, kiddo.”

“I love you too!” She ran to the couch. “I got you something too! With my own money!”

Jack stared down at the slender wrapped package she thrust into his hands and swallowed hard. I could see the emotion in his eyes and could tell he didn’t know exactly how to handle it, so I put an arm around his waist.

“It’s okay, Commander Softy,” I whispered. “You can have feelings now that you’re a civilian.”

It surprised a laugh out of him, and he ripped open the paper. It was a magazine.

“Life magazine’s *Tigers: The World’s Most Extraordinary Animal*,” Jack read out loud, his smile growing with each word. “Well, of course we are.”

Shelley jumped up and down. “I know! I read the whole thing! Tigers can climb trees! Didja know? Didja know? And tigers love water and are excellent swimmers! Is that why you gave Tess a pool? And there’s lots and lots of pictures, but none of those tigers are as pretty as you.”

Jack looked a bit dazed by the flood of questions, but he winked at her. “Well, I am awfully pretty,” he confided.

Shelley giggled and danced off to talk to Uncle Mike and Aunt Ruby about the gifts they’d gotten her, and Jack looked longingly at the cake.

“You know, just one more piece...”

“You had three,” I reminded him. “And I have a present for you.”

I pulled the glitter-dusted envelope out of my bag and handed it to him. “Just a little thing, but I thought you might appreciate it.”

He leaned over and kissed me. “You didn’t have to get me anything,” he began, even as he ripped it open. Then he threw back his head and laughed.

“Steak-of-the-month club. One-year subscription. Feeds six.” He looked at me. “Six?”

I shrugged. “That way, maybe there’s a steak or two left for me once in a while.”

He kissed me again. “Thank you. It’s the tastiest present I’ve ever gotten.”

Leaning closer, he whispered in my ear. “At least until we get home tonight, and I get you into that red dress.”

My face turned as red as the dress, but luckily, my phone buzzed. Saved by the smartphone. I glanced down at it and then up at Jack, my amusement fading. “It’s Dallas.”

We walked out onto the porch and answered via video chat.

“Hey, Dallas. What’s up? We’re just celebrating Jack and Shelley’s birthdays.”

Dallas gave us a thumbs up. “Happy birthday, dude. Listen, I checked the footage of the road by your shop from yesterday morning, Tess. Not much of anything until a gray Toyota sedan drove really slowly up and down the road next to your parking lot a few times. At zero-seven-thirty.”

“Just before I got to work,” I said. “But there are lots of cars on that road in the morning.”

Dallas shrugged. “Yeah, but not Toyotas. Dead End is more of an American-made-car town. And why were they driving so slowly? Guy wore a hat pulled low; didn’t get a shot of his face. But when they saw Tess’s car coming, they pulled a three-point turn and sped off in the opposite direction.”

“That is suspicious,” Jack said, face grim. “License plate?”

“Nope. Conveniently covered with mud. No face, no plate, but you know what we did see? A dog in the backseat looking out the window. You think that could be your pet dumper?”

I inhaled sharply. “What is happening? You think they were going to dump another dog?”

Dallas nodded. “I kind of do, but then you scared them off. Anyway, we’ll keep watching, but cameras can’t do anything about obscured license plates. Talk soon.”

“Thanks, Dallas.”

“Sure, Tess. Happy birthday to the little one. Tell her we’ll give her coding lessons next time she comes by.”

After we hung up, Jack turned to me, his face hardening. “You know where I saw several Toyotas all in a line? At the UltraShopMart site.”

I rolled my eyes. “Jack. Toyotas are wonderful cars, and tons of people own them. Don’t make too much of that.”

“I wouldn’t, except the cars I saw at the site had license plates smeared with mud. Now we’re back to coincidences I don’t like. Not even a little.”

“I don’t like it, either, but where do we go from here? We can’t call Andy and say, ‘hey, we think reps of an international corporate conglomerate are dumping pets outside my shop.’ He’d think we were nuts.” I shrugged. “And we probably are. What possible reason could Craven or UltraShopMart have to do that?”

“I don’t have a clue. Maybe it’s not enough for Andy, but it’s enough for me to take another look at that site,” he said grimly. “Tell your family thanks again for me? I need to head out.”

I grabbed his arm. “I don’t think it’s a good idea. What if that Merks guy—Chuckles—is there? He looked like he wanted a fight.”

Jack bared his teeth. “I’m okay with that.”

“Jack!”

“I’ll call you later. Don’t worry.” He kissed me, leapt over the porch railing, ran to his truck, and drove off before I could formulate a good argument for why he should stay.

I’d just about decided I was going to follow him out to the site when my phone rang again.

Lorraine.

“Hello, Lorraine. How are—”

“You, me, and Eleanor are going to stake out the vet clinic tonight!”

I blinked. “I’m sorry? I thought you said—”

“We heard they suspect that nice Phin of being behind these crimes in town, and we know that’s not possible. We’re going to stake out the clinic and catch the people who keep painting stuff on it.” Her voice held a world of indignation. “We need to catch these scumbags. And we need to keep that new vet in town. She might leave if this keeps up.”

“Lorraine! Why don’t you just tell Andy, and—”

“You think he’s going to believe me when I say I have one of my feelings about this?”

Probably not. Lorraine’s ‘feelings’ were well known, but most people dismissed them. She was convinced they were premonitions, though.

Me? I wasn’t sure she was wrong. I had personal experience with something everybody else had thought was nonsense until they realized it wasn’t.

I sighed, resigned. “Can I at least tell Jack?”

“Nope. He’ll go all rebel commander and try to take over. And if you go behind our backs, Tess Callahan, we’ll never forgive you,” she threatened.

This was serious. Lorraine didn’t play the “never forgive” card lightly.

“Fine,” I said, groaning. “But I’m going to have to come up with a good excuse to be out of the house on Christmas Eve Eve.”

There was no way Jack was going to believe the goat yoga thing again.

T^{ess}

By the time sunset rolled around at six, I'd talked myself into and out of this whole expedition a dozen times. The current thinking was definitely not.

Lou agreed.

No way should I go anywhere after dark with Eleanor and Lorraine, the trouble twins. Look what had happened the last time, when an innocent garden hose was mistaken for a boa constrictor.

No, no, no.

By six-ten, I found myself in the backseat of Lorraine's car, dressed in black jeans, sweater, shoes, and coat, arguing with two stubborn senior citizens.

"It's a terrible idea," I hissed.

"Why are you whispering?" Eleanor, a vision in a dark-purple velour jogging suit, complete with purple sneakers, turned her head to look at me over the back of her seat. "We're still in the car!"

"I'm just getting ready," I snapped at a more normal volume. "To be stealthy, so at least we have a chance of not being caught and hauled into Andy's office for trespassing."

Lorraine pulled the car over to the side of the street a block away from the clinic and turned off the ignition. She was also in stealth mode—if you considered an eye-searingly orange

sweatshirt and mustard-yellow polyester pants over a pair of neon-orange orthopedic shoes to be stealthy.

Maybe it was.

On *Mars*.

“Tess, we have to do what we can to keep that veterinarian in town,” Lorraine said, tapping her fingers on the steering wheel for emphasis. “I like that girl and—more important—Andy likes her. I’ve been worried we’d lose him to the big city if he couldn’t find a sweetheart.”

I moaned and slumped back in my seat. “So, we’re risking life and limb and—more important—*arrest* to prop up Andy’s love life?”

“Oh, sure, now that you have a boyfriend, what do you care?”

“That’s not fair,” I said hotly. “You know I’m the first to want Andy to be happy. But is this really the way to do it? Why don’t we just give them a couple’s gift certificate to a nice dinner?”

“And Phin,” Eleanor reminded me. “There’s no way he’s a criminal. Don’t you want to clear your friend’s name?”

I shot her a narrow-eyed glare, wondering if it would help if I fired her on the spot.

Decided it wouldn’t.

Groaned again.

“Fine! We’ll give it twenty minutes—”

“Half an hour,” Eleanor interjected. “I need to be home for *Jeopardy* with Bill by seven.”

Lorraine growled at both of us. “At least you have *priorities*.”

I poked her shoulder. “Half an hour. Then we’re going home.”

She sighed. “Fine. Whatever.”

“Promise, or I’m done, and I’ll call Andy right now.”

She grumbled out a promise. The three of us climbed out of the car and, staying in the darker shadows, raced down the sidewalk to the clinic.

Okay, we toddled down the sidewalk to the clinic. Orthopedic shoes or not, Lorraine was past her racing days.

Eleanor touched my arm. “Where is Jack, anyway?”

He’d tried to get onto the UltraShopMart site that afternoon, but the armed guards deterred him. I wasn’t going to tell her *that*.

“At his place, meeting Jed’s professor lady friend. He thinks I’m home wrapping secret presents. Which I *should* be doing.”

Lorraine snorted. “Shoulda, coulda, woulda. We need to save the day, Tess. What could be more important than that?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Staying out of jail? Not getting beaten up or shot by the real criminals?”

“Shh! We’re almost there.”

“Thirty minutes,” I reminded her.

It only took ten.

T^{ess}

Since we hid in the bushes next to the small parking lot, Phin never even looked our way when he drove up, jumped out of his car, and raced into the clinic. My heart sank.

“If he’s back here to retrieve his stolen goods, he’s going to be in for a surprise,” Eleanor whispered, looking disappointed.

“He’s not! He can’t be,” I said staunchly. “He might trespass on the UltraShopMart site for environmental protection reasons, but he’s not a criminal.”

“Maybe there’s a sick animal,” Lorraine pointed out. “He is a vet tech, after all. Maybe—”

“Shh!” I pointed and then ducked behind the bushes, pulling them down with me. “There’s another car pulling in. What is going on?”

“I don’t recognize that car,” Lorraine said, sounding puzzled. “I know everybody’s car, and I’ve never seen that ugly gray Toyota before.”

“Toyota?” I raised my head just enough to see it.

It *was* a Toyota. An ugly, matte-gray one. And whoever was driving it had parked at an angle that allowed me to see the license plate ... which was covered in mud.

So much for coincidence.

I hated to even think it, but what if Phin was in league with some of the UltraShopMart people? Or—worse—they were here to hurt him?

Time to pull in the big guns.

I quickly texted Jack and Andy, shoved my phone in my pocket, and grabbed Eleanor and Lorraine by the arms.

“We’re leaving. Now. These may be terrible guys, and we don’t want to be here when they get out of that car,” I whispered, tugging on them.

Just then, naturally, they got out of the car.

A man and a woman, and they were arguing about something. She’d been driving. Both of them opened the rear car doors and rummaged around for a minute and then hauled out what we could clearly see were paint cans.

“It’s them!” Lorraine pushed my hand away. “We’ve got ‘em, Tess. Come on, Eleanor. Let’s show these thugs not to mess with Dead Enders!”

Before I could stop her, Lorraine shoved her way out of the bushes, with Eleanor right behind her. I wasn’t about to let them take on two younger, stronger, dangerous criminals by themselves, so I ran out right on their heels and then pushed in front of them.

“Stop!” Lorraine yelled. “Don’t you dare paint those windows again, you hooligans!”

Hooligans?

The strangers wheeled around to stare at us, dropped their paint guns, and pulled big guns.

Which they pointed at us.

The man laughed. “Hooligans? What is this? The old lady crime-fighting league?”

Just behind and next to me, I heard two oversized purses drop to the ground and saw two even bigger guns swing up to point right back at the bad guys.

“Who are you calling an old lady?” Lorraine yelled.

That's when things might have gotten really, really bad, except for two things.

First, I heard a siren screaming down the street toward us.

Second, an enormous tiger ran out from behind the side of the building, leapt through the air, landed on top of the bad guys' car, and roared.

The man dropped his gun and fell to the pavement, holding his arms defensively over his head. The woman, though, was made of sterner stuff. She swung her gun to point it at Jack.

I had just enough time for my heart to leap into my throat before Jack reached out one giant paw and smacked the gun out of her hand. When she screamed in frustration and dove for the gun, he gracefully hopped down from the car and put her head in his mouth.

She lost all desire to fight back after that.

By that time, Lorraine had the guy pinned down with her gun pointed at him. She kept saying, "Make my day, punk!"

He just curled up in a ball on the pavement and started crying.

"Not much of a criminal," Eleanor said, stuffing her gun back in her purse.

"Does Bill know his future bride plays Annie Oakley in her spare time?"

She grinned at me. "I prefer Batwoman, but no. A woman has to have some secrets."

Andy took the turn into the parking lot on two wheels, lights flashing and siren screaming, and then slammed the car to a stop. When he jumped out of the car, he pointed at the three of us and started to say something, but the words seemed to stick in his throat.

Instead, he let out a frustrated snarling sound and stalked over to the criminals. After he secured the gun, he snapped handcuffs on the man, who acted like he was happy to be arrested, muttering something about being saved from the

crazy women, Andy turned to Jack, who'd let the woman remove her head, still attached, from his mouth.

She all but threw herself at Andy, holding her arms out in front of her. "Please arrest me. For the love of all things holy, arrest me and get me out of this nightmare of a town."

Andy took her gun and put cuffs on her, too, and escorted them both to the back of his police car. Then he turned and marched over to us.

"What did you think you were doing? If you—"

But the front door of the clinic slammed opened, interrupting the deputy mid-rant, and Phin stepped out, carrying a very fat cat.

"What is going on out here?"



Turned out Phin had been checking on a sick cat, since their night vet tech was going to be late. And he'd gotten Andy's message when he was in Orlando and had already texted him back.

Andy checked his phone and grimaced. "I just got it, even though it says you sent it at three. Okay. We need to talk about the stolen tools found in the dog kennel."

Phin's mouth fell open. "What are you talking about? What stolen tools?"

"The tools somebody stole from Dave Wolf's job site," Jack, now human again, put in, his gaze fixed on Phin.

Phin glanced back and forth from Jack to Andy and then to me. "You can't possibly think Charithra had anything to do with stealing tools! She's the nicest, most honest—"

"No," Andy said flatly. "We thought you did. For what it's worth, she said there was no way you'd stolen them, either."

"I don't know anything about tools," Phin said hotly, clutching the poor cat too tightly, if the indignant meow was

any sign. “I’m no criminal. Tess, tell them!”

“I’ve been telling them,” I said. “But why were you trespassing at the UltraShopMart site?”

“I was only taking pics for the environmental group. We want to have proof in case Craven and his crew are destroying any irreplaceable plants or animals.”

Now I felt even worse.

Lorraine patted Phin’s arm. “We knew you were a good boy. We were here to prove it. Me, Eleanor, and Tess.”

“Well, thanks, I guess.” Poor Phin looked completely confused. “I have to get the cat back inside, and then I’ll be glad to answer questions.”

After Phin walked back inside, Eleanor raised her hand. “Deputy Andy. I really need to get home to watch *Jeopardy*. Is there any way Lorraine and I can be excused?”

Andy’s mouth dropped open. “You ... you need to go home to watch *Jeopardy*? You come out here with a firearm, probably impeding a police investigation, and you want to be excused to watch *Jeopardy*?”

She beamed. “Exactly. That nice girl from *Big Bang Theory* is hosting this week. I just love her.”

Andy clutched his head and groaned. I felt a little sorry for him.

“Fine,” he finally said. “Go. But we’re going to talk about this.”

“After Christmas,” Lorraine told him. “Now go fight crime.”

“Lorraine,” Andy began in a threatening tone.

She wagged her finger at him. “Don’t you lecture me, young man. I changed your diapers at church daycare.”

I’d never seen anybody’s eyes almost bug out of his face before, except in cartoons, but Andy was doing a fair impersonation of it.

“Go!” he roared, and then he swung around to me when Eleanor and Lorraine toddled off. “I expect you want to be excused, too?”

“No. What I want is to tell you that the two in your car? I recognize them. Both of them were at the town hall meeting. She was the one who called Rooster a murderer, and he yelled something about how UltraShopMart money could pay for more police.”

Andy’s expression went from outraged to thoughtful. “Are you sure?”

Jack, who’d been fairly quiet, but in an “I’m about to explode” way instead of an “I’m indifferent to this chaos” way, wrapped a hand around my arm. “Definitely?”

“Yes. I’m good with faces. It helps my business when I can recognize repeat customers. Those two are absolutely the ones who tried to stir up trouble at the meeting.”

“That’s very interesting,” Jack said slowly. “Because when they first got out of the car, they were arguing. The woman said, ‘he’s gonna kill us. That’s just another thing we messed up.’ And the man said it was all on her, since she wanted to be the second-in-command.”

I started at Jack. “But—”

“Superior tiger hearing,” he reminded us. “I was coming up along the side of the building.”

“But who is ‘he’?” Andy said. “Who would actually pay people to do stupid things like spray paint the vet clinic?”

“What if they were the ones who put the stolen tools in the kennel?” I folded my arms. “We all know it wasn’t Phin.”

Andy sighed and scrubbed at his face with his hands. “You’re probably right. I wish Susan would get back. Look. I’m going to take these two to the station to process them. Tell Phin I’ll talk to him tomorrow.”

I nodded, and Andy started toward his car, stopped, and turned to look at me over his shoulder. “And quit playing

Batgirl! Or Sherlock Holmes. Or whatever this was. They could have hurt you.”

I wanted to argue with him, but he had a point. “Okay,” I sighed. “I know. I have to quit letting Lorraine and Eleanor pull me into this stuff.”

Jack muttered something beneath his breath, but I decided I really didn’t want to know what he’d said.

Andy just nodded, climbed back into his car, and drove off.

Jack put his hands on my shoulders and kissed me. Then he pulled me into a tight hug. “You are going to give me gray hair, do you know that? I’ll be the only tiger my age with gray hair, and all the other tigers will make fun of me.”

I hugged him back, feeling bad about the gray hair for a second or two, and then I pulled back and stared up at him.

“Jack? What if one thing they ‘messed up’ is that they killed the wrong Santa Claus?”

T*ess*

We gave Phin Andy's message and then went back to my place and debated our theory.

“Craven's whole reason for being here is to pave the way for Dead End to allow the UltraShopMart store, right? No matter how, by fair means or foul, since he gets a million bucks for it.” I paced up and down in my family room. “So, what if they decided Rooster was convincing too many people to vote against them? What if they sent someone to kill him for it?”

Jack, sprawled out on the couch with Lou in his lap, shook his head. “Kill somebody for that? Seems extreme. A lot extreme, in fact. A murder investigation is not making things go smoothly for the UltraShopMart team.”

I stopped, thought about it. Nodded. “Yeah, but what if that's one of the things they messed up? They were maybe supposed to beat him up or something. Put him in the hospital until after the thing was a done deal? But first, they messed up by targeting the wrong Santa, and then they went too far and killed him.”

Jack suddenly sat up straight. Lou meowed in protest until he started petting her again. “That could work, actually. And if those two at the clinic work for UltraShopMart, that plays in, too, and goes even farther. If they planned it so that one of them brought up the tax money for more police, not Craven, then nobody would have even a hint of a reason to suspect that

not only is UltraShopMart behind Darryl's murder, but they're also behind the crime wave."

I stared at him. "I hadn't gotten that far. I keep thinking of the murder and the crime spree as the work of two different groups, but that was always a tough coincidence to swallow. If, in fact, Craven and his merry band of thugs are actually behind *all* of it ... wow. Wow!"

"Remember what he said? To Chuckles after the town hall?" Jack concentrated for a moment and then recited:

"I gave each of you discretion to choose how to protect the site. You all chose your own paths, stupid though some of them may have been. What I want to know is how could you get one thing—one thing—so wrong?"

"What if the discretion—the own paths—was about what they'd do to make Dead Enders believe we had so much crime we needed their money to bulk up our police force? Somebody breaks into houses—"

He interrupted me. "That would explain why they'd be stupid enough to break into my house and Carlos's house. They didn't know any better."

I nodded, getting more and more excited. We were really on to something. "Someone else steals tools and smashes boats, and etcetera and etcetera."

Jack set Lou next to him on the couch and jumped up. "We need food. I can tell you skipped dinner. You always get really pale when you don't eat, and your freckles stand out."

I didn't know what to do with that. What to do with a man who loved me enough to notice what I looked like when I needed to eat and then wanted to feed me. A rush of love nearly bowled me over, and I crossed the room and hugged him as tight as I could.

"Happy birthday," I mumbled into his shirt, trying to blink back tears. "I really love you."

"I love you, too, my precious pookie," he said, grinning, but I could see another wave of emotion sparkling like amber lights in his green eyes.

“No. Never pookie,” I said firmly. “Sandwiches, then sleep. Tomorrow’s going to be a big day.”

We ate sandwiches, and Jack texted the twins to ask them to research Merks. I texted Andy to ask about the thugs from the clinic, and he responded almost right away:

They’ve invoked their right to counsel, so I can’t talk to them until their lawyer gets here tomorrow, but they definitely work for USM I’ll let you know. See you at the Holiday Lights Festival?

I had to smile. Murderers and crime waves wouldn’t stop Dead Enders when there was a festival to attend.

We’ll be there.

After we cleaned up the kitchen, I stretched and yawned. “Some birthday, huh?”

“I’ve had worse. And this was my first-ever surprise party, so I’m counting it as a big win.”

After that, I brushed my teeth, curled up next to Jack, and was out like a light.

I might have tried to stay up later if I’d known how deadly the Holiday Lights Festival would be.

T*ess*

The Dead End Christmas Eve Holiday Lights Festival never disappointed. Somehow, every year, the weather was always clear and beautiful; the food was amazing, and everybody was in a wonderful mood.

Except for this year.

Darryl's unsolved murder and the rash of crimes hung heavily over the town and everyone in it, except for the kids too young to understand. I didn't expect there to be that much holiday feeling at the holiday festival today.

We went, anyway. I dressed in a black sweater and blue jeans, with boots and a red jacket, and left my hair loose for a change. Since I wasn't going to work at the shop today, I wore the pendant Jack gave me on the outside of my sweater. Jack wore a heather-gray sweater, jeans, and boots.

I smiled at Jack and took his hand. "We look pretty great."

"You always look great." He kissed me, and I almost suggested we just hide out in the house and watch movies and eat popcorn all day. But we needed to help Andy, and we needed to find justice for Darryl.

Most of all, we needed to stop the criminals who'd invaded our town.

After a breakfast that neither one of us really wanted, we headed for town. People were subdued, which I'd expected,

but there were still crowds of them in attendance, which I hadn't.

We wandered among the booths and the food trucks. We oohed and aahed over the art the second graders displayed in the lobby of city hall. The air smelled like pine trees, cinnamon, and hot chocolate, three of my favorite things, and I kept taking deep breaths to pull the yummy smells inside. I saw Deputy Underhill, probably on patrol or crowd control, and waved. She waved back and smiled, but we didn't stop to talk.

Instead, wandering, we waited to hear. From Andy, from the twins, from Aunt Ruby and Uncle Mike; from anybody who might have information for us. We needed to lay out our theory for Andy, and that was better done in person.

When I sighed for maybe the seven thousandth time, Jack put an arm around my shoulders and dragged me to a funnel cake cart.

"Listen. If we can't solve everything right now, we can at least make up for that breakfast we didn't eat."

"I wasn't in the mood for eggs."

"Speaking of eggs, did you know geese are as good as guard dogs for protecting chickens?"

I stared at him. "No, they're not! Nobody wants to cuddle with a goose and watch TV. Or play fetch with a goose. Or take one to the beach." I shuddered at the idea of a goose chasing me across the sand. "What a truly horrible thing to say."

Jack raised his eyebrows. "Rooster is the one who told me that, so blame him."

I rolled my eyes. "Rooster has had a lifelong love of all things poultry. Did he tell you why they call him Rooster?"

"No, but now I've gotta know."

We reached the front of the funnel cake line and Jack held up two fingers.

“Because he kept chickens starting way back when he was a tiny little boy,” I told him. “When he started school, his flock would follow him down the road like hens following a rooster. So, the other kids called him that, and it stuck.”

We took our funnel cakes, paid, and wandered off toward the Snowflake Selfie Stand to eat them.

“Huh,” Jack finally said. “I admit the hardest part for me to believe is that Rooster was ever tiny.”

“Shortest kid in his class, Lorraine says. Didn’t get a growth spurt until seventh grade, and then he never stopped. Just kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger.”

Jack downed the last bite of his funnel cake, which he’d devoured in seconds, wiped his hands, and then whipped his head to the side. “Do you hear that?”

“Let’s just always assume this from now on: if you have to ask me, I didn’t actually hear it.”

“It’s Judd.”

We were pretty clear on UltraShopMart as the culprits, but we still had the shoes with what might have been blood on them and the missing alibi to think about.

Judd was with his wife, both of them in festive holiday colors. When they saw us, he waved and strolled toward us.

“Tess, Jack, nice to see you. We’ll be open for pizza in Booth Nine in an hour, if you get hungry,” Judd said.

Mrs. Judd elbowed him. “Honey! Don’t push your pizza on everyone we see. If it’s good enough, they’ll come.”

Judd’s face flushed, and he cleared his throat a couple of times. Then he looked at Jack. “This is kind of embarrassing, but I figured you heard us arguing when you were at the shop. I know about shifter hearing and all that.”

Mrs. Judd’s eyes widened. “Oh. Oh, dear. I’m so sorry. I never would have inflicted our private conversation on you if I’d known.”

Jack's face was nearly as red as Judd's now. "No, I ... I really didn't hear much. Went back into the store right away to give you your privacy."

"Well, anyway." Judd cleared his throat again. "I, ah, I'd slipped out to go to Orlando at four in the morning on Sunday. A friend of mine ... Well, he had to file for bankruptcy. Close his restaurant down. I, ah, I bought one of his ovens at the auction. Felt guilty and ashamed, like I was taking from his mouth and the mouths of his kids, but I saw him there and he said he was glad it was me. He's going to open a frozen yogurt place next."

"Maybe get to the point, honey," his wife said, patting his arm.

"Yeah. Right. I had to pick the thing up Sunday morning at five. Didn't tell anybody, because I felt guilty. Then I was in a foul mood and cut my dang arm, lifting it into the truck. Got blood all over my shoes. Wiped it off the best I could and took my friend out to a big breakfast at the Waffle Manor."

"At five in the morning Sunday? In Orlando?" I'd heard but wanted to be absolutely sure.

"Yep. Finally had to break down and tell my wife." Judd put an arm around her. "All she said was that next time, she wanted to come get breakfast with us. I'm a lucky man, I tell you. A lucky man."

Jack and I both smiled and, after a bit of small talk, they wandered off to find some hot chocolate.

"A lucky man," Jack said. "And now not a murder suspect, because that alibi would be the easiest thing in the world to check."

I grinned at him, feeling a weight lift. "Rooster didn't do it; he was napping and cooking breakfast. Emeril didn't do it; he was having a new romance. And now Judd didn't do it; he was picking up a new oven and having breakfast with a friend."

"Pretty glad none of our friends are murderers, I've gotta say. Also, it's weird how often that issue comes up since I

moved here.” Jack shook his head. “Very weird.”

“Weird, maybe, but there’s Andy, and I think it’s time we tell him our theory.”

Andy saw us heading toward him and jerked his chin toward the jail. We followed him in, and when he turned to face us, all three of said the same thing at once:

“It’s UltraShopMart.”

I held up a hand. “Jinx?”

T_{ess}

We laid out our theory and reasoning for Andy and told him about Judd's alibi, and he nodded along with all of it, only asking a few questions along the way. Then he clapped his hands together once and told us what he'd learned.

"This Merks is a really bad guy. He's wanted on assault warrants in three different states, and for a federal weapons charge. I called your buddy Alejandro, who put me in touch with the right people, and then I made cops in Arkansas, Alabama, and Georgia very happy. Now it's just a fight over who gets him first—and that's all *if* he didn't kill Darryl or commit any of the crimes here, in which case we'll keep him in Florida."

My phone buzzed, and I glanced down at it. "You'll like this, then. Dallas just texted me the information you already knew about Merks, but he went in a different direction. He and Austin looked into crime sprees in places UltraShopMart was trying to establish new stores. Surprise, surprise: the last five places they've built stores experienced exactly what we're going through. Thefts, vandalism, and minor assaults. In every case, the town used some of the UltraShopMart tax dollars to beef up the police department."

Andy whistled. "Wow. I almost don't know whether to be furious or impressed. That's a pretty devious scheme. I'm not surprised that nobody has linked the crime waves with UltraShopMart before—I sure didn't."

“Neither did I,” Jack admitted. “Seemed both too far-fetched—a huge corporation stealing two thousand dollars’ worth of tools? Putting graffiti on the vet clinic? And, at the same time, too ridiculously obvious. UltraShopMart comes to town and a crime wave starts? Nobody would be simple enough to link the timing of their new site and the crimes like that.”

“And they killed the wrong Santa,” Andy said grimly.

“I doubt they were even supposed to kill him,” Jack said, filling Andy in on the conversation we’d overheard between Craven and Merks. “Just get him out of the way, probably, until it was a done deal.”

“It’s a classic reverse-red-herring double-fake-out,” I put in, my years of mystery reading coming in handy. “Nobody suspects the obvious.”

“And they almost got away with it,” Andy said grimly.

“Not in our town,” Jack said.

“So, let’s go arrest their butts!”

They both looked at me, and I got the sinking feeling that I would not be involved in the actual arrest.

“Fine.” I threw my hands in the air. “I’m not a cop, anyway. I’ll just hang out here and worry about you while you go fight for truth, justice, and the Dead End way of life.”

Andy opened his mouth to say something, but just then the door slammed open, and Otis ran in, flustered and wild-eyed.

“Deputy Andy, I need your help to rescue some dogs.”

After he inhaled half a bottle of water and sucked in a lot of oxygen, Otis could finally tell us his story.

“You know those gold coins, Tess?”

I nodded. “Yes, I haven’t had a chance to get that one appraised yet, but—”

He drank the rest of his water and waved a hand. “Nah, that’s not what’s important now. I guess I should have said, but I just happened to be wandering around by the new

UltraShopMart place one evening, and I just happened to look down in that giant hole they dug, and I saw something sparkling.”

“Just happened,” Andy said dryly, handing Otis another bottle of water.

Otis’s face was the picture of innocence. “Yep. Didn’t even realize it was their site.”

“You thought a giant hole opened up in the ground for no reason?”

Otis shrugged. “It’s Dead End.”

Andy sighed. “Go on.”

“Anyway, that’s when I found those coins.”

“Spanish gold, I’m pretty sure,” I told Jack and Andy.

“I, ah, just wandered by there again today, thinking everybody would be down here at the festival, and maybe I’d have another look-see.” Otis hunched his shoulders, looking miserable. “Should have known better. This time, they had guards there who ran me off with guns. Big guns.”

“We’re about to go down there and talk to them right now,” Andy said grimly. “But you stay away from there, coins or no coins.”

Otis shook his head impatiently. “This ain’t about the coins, Andy. It’s about the dogs.”

“What dogs? Otis, you can tell me,” I said gently. “How can we help the dogs? Is Beauty hurt? Did she fall in the hole?”

“Oh, no, Tess. I left her at home. Wouldn’t take her anyplace dangerous. No, it’s the *other* dogs. The ones locked up in one of the trailers, crying and whimpering. Must be at least four or five in there, from the sound of it. We gotta help them!”

I put my hands on my hips. “That’s it. I’m coming. I need to see about the dogs while you arrest everybody. I can call Charithra and Phin to help, too.”

Andy frowned. “We are not bringing you or any other civilians into this until the danger is past, Tess. Promise to stay here, or I’ll lock you in a cell until we get back.”

Jack just shrugged when I turned my outraged stare on him.

Traitor.

“Fine. But you better call me and let me know you’re safe the second you can, Jack Shepherd,” I said, having not the slightest intention of being left behind.

Jack looked suspicious of my sudden capitulation, but I had things to do.

“I’m going to go find Aunt Ruby and tell her what’s going on, so we can be ready when you call,” I told them. “Come on, Otis, let’s get you a funnel cake.”

I grabbed his arm and hustled him out of there before Jack or Andy could protest, and we made a beeline for the funnel cake cart in case they looked for us. After I bought a pile of sugary fried goodness for Otis, I led him to the tables set up in the square, gave him a napkin, and patted his shoulder.

“Stay here, okay? You’ll be safe here. I’ll make sure we rescue those dogs.”

Then I took out my phone and pulled up the town text chat loop. UltraShopMart had *never* gone up against a town like mine.

They were in for a big surprise.

Huge.

Jack

Andy insisted we take the cop car, which was fine with me, because he could run it hot with lights and siren. I debated getting out of the car before we got to the site, to give me the element of surprise, but I didn't put it past Craven or Merks to just shoot Andy on the spot.

So, we raced over to the site, and Andy blew right through the magic barrier in the car and then drove through the wire fence, knocking it down.

"Susan had the cars warded and reinforced after the incident with the blood witches," he explained when I gave him a questioning look. "None of this crap can stop us."

The UltraShopMart folks were sure surprised when we roared into their lot and screamed to a stop directly in front of where they stood by a large semi-truck. Three men and two women whirled around to stare at us when we arrived.

And all of them were armed.

I didn't see Craven or Merks.

"This may have been a terrible idea," Andy said. "I didn't want to bring the new deputy with us, because she's so green she would just get herself killed."

"Which we may also do in the next few minutes," I said, stating the obvious.

“They won’t attack us. They have to know they’ll go to prison forever if they kill a deputy.” Andy reached for his radio, flipped a switch to turn it into a loudspeaker. “Listen up. You are all under arrest. You can come peacefully, or—”

Five people pointed guns at us.

“I’m guessing they’re not coming peacefully.”

Andy rolled his eyes. “Maybe this wasn’t the best idea.”

The trailer door swung open, and Craven walked out onto the porch, the picture of smug satisfaction, with Merks following him. “I really wish you hadn’t done that, gentlemen.”

Then he shook his head, his expression turning sour. “Small towns and rednecks. I hate you all. You only had to go along. See that you needed more police protection. Take UltraShopMart’s money to pay for it. We’d be happy. You’d be happy. Everybody would be happy.”

He walked down the steps, making a production out of it, and I opened the car door and climbed out, Andy mirroring me on the other side.

“But no,” he said bitterly. “Instead, you had to fight me at every turn. Isn’t it bad enough I had to deal with idiots who couldn’t get anything right? I had to put up with your meddling, too. I’m ready to be done with all of this. Done with putting up with people like you.”

Merks scowled at Craven, and I tensed, ready to attack if the underling gave me the opening by going after his mouthy boss. But Craven’s attention shifted to me.

“Point the guns at the tiger shifter, please,” Craven said smoothly. “Merks, I fully intend to share my ... windfall with you. Mr. Shepherd, we are familiar with your background and talents. Please step into the back of the truck with the deputy. We’ll lock you up until we’re out of here, and then you’re free to do what you want.”

“You’re going to jail for a very long time, Craven,” Andy said. “You should surrender now. Maybe the prosecutor will cut you a deal for cooperation. Every law enforcement agency

in three states knows we're here arresting you. You'll never get away with this."

Craven sneered out a laugh. "Please. You have nothing on me. No proof, no evidence. Nothing. And I have sixty-two million dollars in a bank in a lovely little non-extradition country. I don't want to hurt you. I just want time to get away. For all of us to get away. I think that's very generous of me, don't you, Merks?"

"I know it was you, Chuckles," I taunted. "Are you really going to let this suit get away with telling you who you can and can't hurt? Or are you going to take me on like a man?"

"You're not a man, though, Shepherd. You're a filthy animal," Merks snarled. "I wouldn't dirty my hands with you."

"Sure. Chicken." I made clucking noises not quite beneath my breath.

Merks lunged at me, but Craven pointed at the woman. "If he tries to fight Shepherd, shoot all three of them."

"So much for honor among thieves," Andy scoffed. "How much of that sixty-two million did you see, Merks? We know you're the one who killed Darryl. Got the wrong Santa, didn't you, you moron?"

Merks looked like his head might explode any second. His face turned almost purple, and he clenched his hands into fists at his sides. "I'll get mine!"

Craven's gaze fixed on Merks, and, for the first time, he looked slightly concerned. "Enough! Shepherd, Kelly, get into the back of the truck. Merks, step back. Smith, shoot them all if they don't follow my orders."

The woman grinned, displaying truly horrible dental hygiene. "My pleasure."

I rose onto the balls of my feet, prepared to spring at him, shifting on the way.

"And start with the deputy."

Okay. I was going in the back of the truck. There was no way I'd do anything to get Andy killed. Tess would never

forgive me.

I wouldn't forgive myself.

"You win, Craven," I said, sauntering toward the truck, careful to keep my body between Smith's gun and Andy. A tiger could take a bullet better than a human, especially a little human, like our lion-hearted deputy.

Andy knew what I was doing, though. "Get out of my way, Shepherd. I'm the law enforcement here. I need to protect you." He tried to shove past me, but I nudged him forward.

"Tiger," I said beneath my breath. "I'll heal. We go in the truck now, and we find a way out the second they close the doors."

I hopped up into the back of the truck, leaned down, and swung Andy up with me.

"Good choice," Craven said, smirking.

"Yeah. Good choice, losers," Merks said, laughing, just before he stepped forward and slammed the doors shut in our faces, leaving us in the dark.

"I can't believe they didn't even take our phones," Andy said. "Idiots."

"Yeah. I noticed," I said, my heart sinking into my gut. Not taking our phones meant there was no way they were leaving us alive.

Forget that. I was finding my way back to Tess.

"I'm going to shift, because I can probably claw my way out of—"

"Reinforced steel," Andy said, from where he was poking at the side of the truck. "We're screwed."

Before I could answer, somebody started the truck and jerked it into gear. Seconds later, we were rolling forward, and I remembered which way they'd parked the truck.

"Brace yourself," I shouted, but there was nothing to brace ourselves on.

There was a tremendous jolt as the front wheels of the truck flew off the ground at the side of the hole, and the undercarriage hit the dirt. Then the momentum carried us forward and the truck shot through the air and crashed nose-first into the bottom of the hole.

I shifted in mid-fall and still took a hard fall, even in tiger shape, but I was more concerned about the loud *crack* Andy's body made when it hit the wall. Broken bones, for sure.

"Not his neck or back, not his neck or back, not his neck or back," I muttered, after shifting back so I had hands to check him over with.

In the dark, though, it was impossible to be sure how bad his injuries were. He was out cold, and I was afraid to move him.

The next thing I heard was even worse than the sound of Andy's bones snapping.

It was the sound of the excavator dumping a solid ton of dirt on top of the truck.

They were going to bury us alive.

T*ess*

I'd never been in a cavalcade before, but I was leading one now.

Hooray for town text chains!

I drove my car, with Uncle Mike riding shotgun—carrying an actual shotgun.

Charithra and Phin were behind us with Deputy Underhill.

And behind them? Easily a hundred Dead Enders, and most of them were probably armed. Mrs. Frost had even loaned me her crossbow.

I patted it and glanced at Uncle Mike. “It’s going to be unpleasant crossing the magical barrier, Alejandro said.”

His face was grim. “Jack isn’t answering his phone, which means he’s in trouble. I’m not letting anything happen to him until after we build that dang garage.”

“Garage?”

He frowned. “Forget I said that.”

The UltraShopMart site came into view, so I shoved the garage comment away to think about later. Aunt Ruby was back in town calling in the National Guard, the Army, the Navy, and probably the Forest Service.

Mr. Craven and his thugs were going to regret ever stepping foot in Dead End.

“Here we go,” I yelled out the window, and then I floored it.

There was a brief feeling of vertigo, a bout of what felt like severe motion sickness, and then we were through. I raced up to the edge of the pit where Craven, Chuckles, and a few others stood, guns on their shoulders, watching while somebody dumped dirt down into the hole.

Then I slammed the car into park and leapt out, pulling the bow up in one smooth motion and pointing the bolt at Craven’s center mass.

“Stop that machine *right now!*”

Chuckles raised his gun, but my uncle called out to him. “Better not.”

I glanced over to see that Uncle Mike’s gun was aimed at the thug’s heart.

Craven started to say something, a sneer on his ugly face. But then my cavalcade poured through the barrier and surrounded us. Everybody jumped out of their cars and pointed dozens of lethal weapons at the UltraShopMart people, who stared around in shock and then put their guns on the ground and raised their hands.

The guy driving the excavator shut it off, hopped out, and started running. Deputy Underhill chased after him and tackled him, which raised a cheer on our side.

I could tell the bad guys knew we’d beaten them.

All except Chuckles.

He roared something, jerked to the side, and shoved Craven, knocking him into the pit. Then he started running toward the truck parked on the other side of a trailer, aiming his gun back at us over his shoulder.

Craven screamed, and then the scream ended with an ugly thump. I ran forward, my heart in my throat. I didn’t want to see his broken body, but I needed to know if Jack and Andy were down there. Before I reached the edge of the pit, though,

Jack leapt out of the hole with Craven's unconscious body under his arm.

“Is he—?”

“He fainted,” Jack said in disgust. “We need medics for Andy. I think he's going to be okay, but he has a few broken bones. I clawed my way out of the roof—they didn't reinforce the steel there.”

I grabbed him and kissed him, hard, and then pointed to where Merks was climbing in the getaway truck. “Jack!”

“Got him.” Jack shifted and flew across the ground toward the truck.

People think cheetahs are fast, and they probably are, but records say that an adult tiger can run up to forty miles per hour.

Jack destroyed that record.

Before Merks could back up, the tiger was on the top of the truck. With one mighty paw, Jack peeled the roof of the truck cab clear off. Merks tried to shoot him, but Jack smacked the gun out of his hand and then shifted back.

Human now, Jack grabbed the killer by the shoulder and yanked him up and out of the truck. Then he threw him a dozen feet through the air.

Merks hit the ground hard enough that he wasn't going to be fighting back for a while.

The sound of dozens of sirens flooded the air, and the reinforcements Aunt Ruby had called in swarmed the scene. Several of them took custody of Merks, Craven, and the rest of the thugs.

EMTs had extricated Andy from the truck, and they were carrying him toward the ambulance. I saw Charithra was right next to him, holding his hand.

Phin, though, was running up the stairs of the second trailer, and I remembered Otis.

“The dogs!”

Jack and I followed Phin to the trailer and found him on the floor, being mobbed by a half-dozen excited dogs who were all doing their best to lick him to death. One puppy caught Jack's scent and stared up at him with enormous eyes, his ears trembling, and then belly-crawled over to say hello.

I sat down, right there on the floor, because my legs suddenly wouldn't hold me anymore, and I pulled the puppy into my arms.

"Next time, bring me along," I told Jack, and then I started laughing.

That's how Uncle Mike found us. Sitting on the floor, surrounded by dogs, holding onto each other, and laughing.

"Merry Christmas," he said, grinning at both of us.

Merry Christmas indeed.

T *ess*

It was still Christmas Eve, even after all that, so we went home and ate a fine dinner Shelley and Aunt Ruby cooked. And we learned more details then and over the next weeks as texts and calls came in from all the various law enforcement agencies and personnel.

Andy: He was going to be okay. He had a broken arm, three broken ribs, and a concussion. Charithra stayed in the hospital with him all day and overnight, which was better than pain pills, I guessed.

The dogs: one thug had decided that a way to convince us we needed more police presence—or animal control—was to kidnap animals from a shelter in Alabama and dump them on the road outside my shop. Charithra and Phin took them all into the clinic and were caring for them, and each one already had an adoptive family waiting.

The klepto tree: Chuckles and his gang couldn't figure out what the heck was happening, so they'd piled up the stolen presents in a corner of a trailer and burned the tree. Probably for the best, but I had a twinge of sadness for the poor tree. It had only wanted some Christmas spirit, after all. Several Dead Enders took the presents back to the families where they belonged.

The coins: Turned out it was an actual treasure site in that pit. Historians would fight over the proper way to excavate for a while. We forced UltraShopMart to return the property to

Dead End, though, so the coins belonged to the town. Aunt Ruby was thrilled about that.

Craven: Mr. sixty-two-million dollars was going to jail forever and ever, and I couldn't be happier about that. The feds froze all his accounts, too.

Merks: Jack, despite his fury, had been careful not to hurt him too badly. Justice demanded that Chuckles spend the rest of his life in prison for killing Darryl Peterson.

And Dead End was safe again, saved by our citizens. Or, as Mrs. Frost said when I returned her crossbow: "Dang right we kicked their butts! We Dead Enders don't put up with any crap! Especially not on Christmas."

EPILOGUE

T*ess*

My first Christmas with Jack was even more wonderful than I'd dreamed it could be. He loved the freezer and immediately made plans to put it in my new garage, since we always had cookouts at my house.

New garage! I loved the plans.

But I didn't fail in the romance department, either. I'd framed a selfie I'd taken of me and Jack watching TV one evening when he was in tiger form, and I was leaning back against him with Lou in my lap.

"Because I love you in all of your shapes," I murmured when I gave it to him.

His eyes sparkled amber when he kissed me, and then he gave me a beautiful, very old, non-magical cuckoo clock.

Shelley ran around, delirious with joy, with her new pug puppy, until both of them collapsed onto the floor into a heap and fell asleep. All of us had pitched in to give her everything a new puppy owner could need.

Uncle Mike gave me a beautiful case he'd built to hold magical objects for the shop—it locked. Aunt Ruby gave me baking pans, and we laughed when we realized I'd gotten her the same set. I gave Uncle Mike a new shoe-shine kit, so he could share the joy of conversation and confidences with Shelley, like he had with me.

Jack and I gave Grandpa Jed a gift certificate for driving lessons, and he gave us roast venison.

And then Jack gathered us all at my place by the pool for one last surprise that evening.

He stood and cleared his throat, his cheeks turning red. “Well, I asked my friends in Atlantis to help me give you a little magic, since you’ve all made my life magical since I came home to Dead End.”

With that, he turned to the pool and clapped his hands. A shimmer of silver danced up from the pool and surrounded us in a glittering, glowing dome of light, and we all turned our faces up to the stars, entranced.

Then the dome exploded into a kaleidoscope of dancing flickers of color and ... something else.

Something ... cold and wet, like Pickles the pug’s little nose.

I turned my face to the sky and stuck out my tongue. Was it?

It was.

“Jack,” Shelley shouted, jumping up and down. “You made it snow! How did you *do* that?”

Jack laughed and pulled me into his arms. “It’s magic,” he said, staring into my eyes.

“You’re magic,” I said, just before I kissed him.

“About that pet name.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Yes?”

“We don’t need one. You’re Tess. Just Tess. My darling Tess.”

I framed his face with my hands and kissed him again. “That’s absolutely perfect.”

And then we sat and watched snow fall in Florida, and peace and good will were had by all.

At least until the new year, when Sheriff Susan came back to town with a haunted crystal ball.

Respectfully submitted,

Tiger's Eye Investigations



Are you dying to know what happens when Sheriff Susan brings a haunted crystal ball to town? Preorder [EYE FOR AN EYE](#) now!!

Want to read about the Thanksgiving disaster? Sign up for my newsletter at www.alyssaday.com for details on how to get it!



Note from Alyssa Day:

I have loved Jack's character since he first showed up in my brain in 2006, surly and snarling, in the first book of my Warriors of Poseidon paranormal romances. When he was left alone and lonely at the end of that series, he kept asking me when I was going to give him a story.

I did one better: I gave him his own series! And Jack needed to find a new job, and a new life, and when he went home to the craziest town in Florida, he found both... and he found Tess.

I'm thrilled to announce that the Tiger's Eye Mysteries will continue for at least twenty books, and you'll be able to read the continuing adventures of Jack, Tess, and the gang for years to come!

If you want the scoop on all the new releases, behind-the-scenes details, and the chance to win prizes, please sign up for my newsletter at www.alyssaday.com. I promise never to sell, fold, spindle, or mutilate your information so you will get no spam—ever—from me.

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Thanks again for reading—you rock!

Hugs, Alyssa

THANK YOU!

Thanks so much for reading my book! I hope you had as much fun reading it as I did writing it!

Review it. My family hides the chocolate if I don't mention that reviews help other readers find new books, so if you have the time, please consider leaving one. I appreciate all reviews and thank you for your time.

Try my other books! You can find links to all my books at <http://alyssaday.com>.

Thanks again for reading—you rock!

Alyssa

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THE TIGER'S EYE MYSTERY SERIES:

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Private Eye

Travelling Eye (a short story)

Evil Eye

Eye of Danger

Eye of the Storm

Apple of My Eye

Blink of An Eye

Eagle Eye

A Dead End Christmas

Eye for an Eye

Eye on the Ball

More Than Meets the Eye

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THE WARRIORS OF POSEIDON SERIES:

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Atlantis Unleashed

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POSEIDON'S WARRIORS SERIES—A sequel series to Warriors of Poseidon

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NONFICTION

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alyssa Day is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of more than fifty novels filled with kissing, laughter, mystery, and magic. Alyssa's paranormal series include the Poseidon's Warriors and Cardinal Witches paranormal romances and the Tiger's Eye Mysteries paranormal mysteries. In an Alyssa Day book, the good guys (and gals!) always win and happily ever after always prevails!

Alyssa's many awards include the RT Reviewer's Choice Award for Best Paranormal Romance novel of 2012. She's a recovering trial lawyer who loves life outside of a courtroom. Her books have been translated into a zillion languages, but she's still holding out for Klingon.

Check out www.alyssaday.com to sign up for my newsletter and get release day news, behind-the-scenes scoop, notice of contests, and news about where Alyssa will make personal appearances, and more!

Q: "What is the reading order of your books?"

A: [Here!](#)

You can hang out with her on Facebook (www.facebook.com/AuthorAlyssaDay) and Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/authoralyssaday/>), where she talks about her rescue dogs and her future pug ranch, and her blog, where she talks books, movies, and mental health (www.alyssaday.com/blog). Love talking about books? Be a DayDreamer! Join Alyssa's VERY SPECIAL group for superfans for fun chatting, sneak peeks, prizes, and more: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/DayDreamersAlyssaDay>.

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