

BROOMS & BURGLARS

Clean Sweep Cozy Mystery Series



DIANNE HARMAN

BROOMS & BURGLARS

By

Dianne Harman

(Clean Sweep Cozy Mystery Series – Book 3)

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ABOUT DIANNE

CHAPTER 1

Summer had finally released its hold over Alma, Kansas and everyone Jane knew was happier for it. It had been so intensely hot for so long that brownouts in the electrical system had become a real concern. However a cold front moving through the area had broken the heat and brought cooler temperatures in its place. The drought was still going strong, but to listen to the farmers, the area had been in a drought since the early 90's.

Jane wasn't sure how much she could believe them since they spun tales like old fishermen often do. But the cracks in her yard were proof that the drought had been hanging around for quite a while. Some were deep enough she was beginning to worry that Annie, the family dog, might step in one and hurt herself.

The trees were starting to turn now, too. Some had already begun the transition weeks ago, but now they all were showing a change in color. Jane sat on the steps of her old farmhouse sipping coffee from her mug as she watched the fog slowly rise that morning over the hay field across the road. The cars on the distant highway, and her Anatolian shepherd

snoring at her feet, were the only sounds she heard that morning. It was calm and peaceful, her favorite way to enjoy the morning on her rare day off.

Jane had started to clean houses and businesses in earnest after her husband had left her and the children, and fortunately it had become quite successful. It provided the income her little family needed, but it required a lot of work and planning on her part.

She'd recently shifted her schedule around so she could have a little more time off throughout the week. Previously, she'd scattered her clients out so she could have a steady flow of work, but now that she had a fuller schedule, she wanted to tighten things up a bit. Plus, she was trying to remodel the old farmhouse she and the children had recently moved into, and trying to do it in short bursts when she had an hour here or there had only resulted in getting very little done.

Painting for just twenty minutes and then, because of her schedule, having to abruptly stop to rinse the brushes out and do all the cleanup was starting to frustrate her. She decided she needed to have several hours at a time when she could work on the projects that needed to be done, even if that meant she had to change the way she did things.

Jane knew she'd have to get up early on her day off, but that was okay, because she'd gone to bed earlier than usual the night before. After a full day of work, Jane had come home absolutely exhausted, but the kids were more than happy with the bag of tacos from the drive-thru that she'd brought home.

When she'd finished working the previous day, she had no desire to go home and then have to cook dinner, so fast food it was. As soon as Jane finished eating last night, she'd started yawning. It had taken everything she had to stay awake for a reasonable amount of time until she could tuck her daughter Libby into bed.

However, this morning she felt much better. She'd slept so hard she barely remembered dreaming or even falling asleep. She was sure that if there had been some kind of natural disaster, she would have slept right through it. Even though she'd been incredibly tired, she still thought it was worth it and was optimistic that she'd eventually adjust to her new, busier schedule.

She took another sip of her coffee and allowed herself to just relax and breathe in the fresh air, because she knew this relaxing time would end when the kids woke up.

Jane's eyes skimmed over the yard, and she wondered if she should mow the grass or wait a little longer. It was slightly

shaggy, and it wasn't exactly green because of the scorching temperatures they'd had the last few weeks. She decided she'd get the garden hose out and work on filling in the bigger cracks in the yard, just to be on the safe side.

Jane left her coffee and phone on the porch steps and went in search of the hose. She dragged it around the side of the house and hooked it up to the outside spigot before twisting the handle and listening to the water rush through the hose.

She walked over to the first crack and started shooting water down inside it, watching it disappear. But soon the edges grew soft, and she was able to step on them to push them down into the deeper part of the crack. She worked methodically around the yard, doing what she could to minimize the size of the cracks until she was somewhat satisfied, then she turned off the hose.

The ding of her phone caught her attention, so she headed back to the porch. When she bent over to pick the phone up, she saw it was a text from Henry.

So sorry if this wakes you, but I wanted to make sure I told you as soon as I could. I have permission to search in the basement of the Alma History Museum today and I was wondering if you and the kids would like to join me?

Jane smiled. She was still impressed that Henry was including her and the kids in his hunt for the Howland Treasure. Ever since Libby had helped him find the first clue at the town park, he seemed to think she was a good luck charm or something. Some people might think that was a little creepy, but Henry wasn't like that at all.

Jane could tell that he really liked sharing the treasure adventure with a little girl who seemed just as eager as he was to believe in the Howland Treasure, and she'd watched Libby grow and blossom under his attention. With her father gone, Libby had missed having a male presence in her life, and Jane couldn't fill that need, but Henry was definitely helping her in that regard.

It was obvious in the way Libby asked him questions and looked up to him. She'd found a male role model, and it warmed Jane's heart to watch their relationship. Especially since she could tell that Henry liked sharing his knowledge and never tired of the barrage of questions Libby unleashed at times. He just patiently listened and answered them as honestly as he could.

Jane wasn't afraid to admit that she'd always thought the story of the treasure was just that, a story, or even a fable. But with what they'd discovered so far, she'd begun to change her

mind. It began with the hidden map they'd found that led to their house and then there was the strange necklace and the riddle. If all of this didn't lead to a treasure, it definitely had to lead to something important. Why else would someone have gone to that much trouble?

Her fingers began to type her response.

They're still asleep but you know as well as I do that Libby will tag along to anything connected with the treasure. She added a smiling emoji and then pressed send.

I know but I wasn't sure if you were getting tired of searching with me by now so I wanted to give you the option, Henry replied.

She didn't think about her response as she typed it. *I always enjoy tagging along with you too.* It wasn't until she pressed send that she realized it could have a double meaning.

She bit her lip as she saw the reply bubble pop up. Would he take it the wrong way and think she was flirting with him? He was handsome, but she wasn't going to pursue him, not when she was trying to raise two kids on her own and this was the longest Libby had gone without asking about her dad.

Either she was starting to accept that her dad had left them with no intention of returning or she was just distracted

by Henry and the treasure. Whatever it was, Jane wanted to keep it going.

I really like having you guys along, too, he replied. *It's good to know you aren't getting tired of me yet.*

Jane smiled to herself. She wished she could tell him how nice it was to just have another adult around to laugh with and do things with the kids. He really had a way with both of them, and she appreciated it. It was a load off her shoulders when she didn't have to constantly entertain them both.

I'll be heading to the museum at 10:00. Will they be up by then?

Absolutely, she replied. *We'll meet you there at 10:00.*

She set her phone down and sighed. It wasn't that she was disappointed they were going to go meet Henry, but she'd been planning on committing the whole day to working with the trim in the hall, even though she knew she probably didn't need that long to complete the task. She sat down and decided to sip on the rest of her now cooled coffee and wait to tell Libby the news.

“Yeah! Of course I wanna go!” Libby cried out when Jane told her about Henry's text.

“Then you better get dressed,” Jane said patiently, and her daughter took off running for her room.

Jane’s teenage son, Tyson, groaned. “Do I have to go?” he whined.

“You don’t want to go treasure hunting?” Jane asked, a little surprised. She’d thought Tyson had been enjoying the search too.

“I mean, you’re going into some dusty old basement to look for more old stuff. There’s no way there’s a hidden treasure in the basement of the museum.” Tyson shook his head. “Someone would have found it a long time ago if it had been there, besides, I already made plans to play online with my friends today.” He flipped his long shaggy hair back out of his face.

Jane knew he and his friends had been waiting for everyone to get the latest video game so they could all play together. Jane’s parents lived nearby and Tyson had done a lot of chores at their house to earn the money to pay for it.

“Well, I guess if that’s what you’d rather do,” Jane said.

“I would,” he said as he nodded his head. “Please?” He clasped his hands together.

“Oh, alright,” she said. “But I don’t see why you can’t stand to go with us.”

“It would really mess up the good thing we’ve had going lately,” Tyson said seriously. “Let’s not ruin it.”

Jane laughed. “Alright, let’s not push our luck. You can stay here, but I want you to unload and reload the dishwasher and do your laundry.”

“Deal,” Tyson replied before he ran off.

Jane sighed. “He’s already growing up,” she muttered to herself. “Before long, he’ll never want to do stuff with us.” She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply, knowing that time was rapidly approaching.

CHAPTER 2

While Jane was driving them through town to the Alma History Museum, she tried to remember the last time she'd been in the building. She thought it had been shortly after they'd opened, but they'd had minimal items on display at the time and there wasn't much to see.

She was sure they probably had a lot more on display now for visitors since they'd recently added a whole new building in back of the original one. She figured if they were expanding, they'd acquired quite a bit and needed more space to exhibit their new acquisitions.

The museum was a tall brick building located on the downtown square, one of the first to be remodeled with the revitalization movement the city had recently been undertaking. A grant of some kind had been given to the city that allowed the historic buildings on the square to retain their original old architecture style, rather than be torn down. When they got to the museum building, Jane parked as close to the door as she could get.

“This is the museum?” Libby asked as she unbuckled her seat belt.

“Yes, and I don’t think you’ve ever been here before,” Jane said as she climbed out of the car and opened Libby’s door.

Libby shook her head. “What’s in here? Paintings and stuff?” she asked.

“No, things from our town’s history. Books, clothes, pictures, and other items that belonged to the people who lived here years ago,” Jane explained as they walked up to the front door.

“Wow,” Libby gasped as she looked up at the building with wonder.

When Jane opened the door she saw Henry standing near the front desk, eagerly chatting with an older woman who was seated behind it.

“I’m just delighted you’re in town stirring up interest in the Howland Treasure again,” the older woman said as she beamed at Henry. Her plum-colored blazer was pulled tightly over a black turtleneck, and her close-cropped hair was piled on top of her head in curls. Her red lipstick had faded on the bottom, as if she’d left some on her coffee cup this morning.

“It’s an honor,” Henry was saying as he heard Jane approach. He turned and smiled widely at her. “There they are

now.” He looked down at Libby. “How is my favorite little lady doing this morning?”

“Good!” Libby said, obviously thrilled by his words.

“Marie, this is Jane and Libby. They’ve been helping me on this treasure hunt. Jane and Libby, this is Marie. She’s the museum docent.”

“Nice to meet you, Marie,” Libby said as she stuck her hand out. Her politeness made Marie chuckle as she shook the little girl’s hand.

“Nice to meet you, too,” Marie said kindly. “Don’t you have wonderful manners?”

Libby beamed with pride at the praise.

“Sorry, we were running behind. Someone couldn’t find their other shoe,” Jane said with a sigh.

Henry laughed. “Well I guess you should have put them where you could find them, Jane,” he teased.

“Excuse me,” a man in a blue work shirt interrupted, “but I finished the upgrade. I should probably show you the way to run the new keypad.”

Jane’s eyes drifted down to the company name stitched on the shirt the man was wearing and saw it said Valued

Security. The name sounded familiar, but she didn't know why.

"I'm sorry," Marie said to Henry. "You go on ahead and let me know what you find. I've got to deal with this mess." She shook her head. "With the recent break-ins, we can't be too careful."

"Break-ins?" Henry repeated, looking confused as he tilted his head. He glanced over at Jane, but she hadn't heard anything. She shook her head in response.

Marie nodded. "Two nearby places have been broken into and vandalized. We decided to up the security here at the museum to make sure it doesn't happen to us." She turned and followed the security company employee toward the back of the building.

Jane was tempted to ask a couple of questions of her own, but Marie moved off and Henry was walking away too, so she decided to keep them to herself. It didn't matter anyway. It wasn't like anyone had asked her to investigate the break-ins.

"Follow me," Henry said over his shoulder. "Marie already showed me how to get into the basement."

He led them over to a door, slipped a key in the lock, and pushed the door open. Once they were inside, he closed the door behind them and locked it.

“What is this?” Libby asked as she looked around the room. It smelled musty and there were lots of boxes stacked against the wall.

“This is their back room where they keep the stuff that’s been donated until it’s been restored, or cleaned, and ready to be put on display,” he explained as he led them over to another door. When he opened it, they could see stairs leading down and a single lightbulb dangling from a cord.

“Ladies first,” Henry said with a smirk.

Libby shook her head and got behind Jane. “Mom’s first,” she said as she hid behind her.

Jane sighed. “I guess that means me,” she said as she approached the narrow stairs.

As she carefully walked down the stairs, the air became cool. The slight smell of damp earth seemed to permeate the room despite it being mostly concrete at the bottom of the stairs. There were rows of metal shelves and tightly closed storage boxes. At the back of them she could see that the rear

of the basement hadn't been finished like the front of the basement had.

"You know, maybe you should look into those burglaries," Henry said as he followed Libby down the stairs.

Jane turned and frowned. "Why me?" she asked.

"You told me about the other investigations you've done, remember? This shouldn't be much different, and it's something that's affecting your hometown, your neighbors."

She had to admit he was right, but did she really want to take that on? Especially if she didn't have to? She'd just rearranged her schedule so she could have more time off. Did she really want to fill that time poking around in break-ins? However, it probably would be much easier than the other ones had been because this was right here in her hometown. Still, she wasn't sure she should get involved.

"I don't know," she said.

"But what if you can stop the bad guys, Mom?" Libby asked as she slipped her hand in her mother's.

"I don't think I'm cut out for that sort of action," Jane confessed.

"You'll never know unless you try," Libby pointed out.

"That's a smart kid you have there," Henry grinned.

“I’ll think about it,” Jane said with a sigh.

Henry looked around and said, “I would think anything that might have been in the front part would have been discovered by now, and in that case, I say we probably should look back there.” He pointed toward the unfinished rear portion of the basement.

Libby seemed hesitant but followed him as she clung to her mother. Henry pulled a couple of flashlights out of his bag that Jane hadn’t realized he had. He handed one over to them and kept one for himself.

“Keep an eye out for anything that’s unusual. My guess is the necklace is a hint, so it would probably be something with the symbol like we found on the necklace.”

“Got it,” Jane replied as she flicked on the flashlight.

“Can I hold it?” Libby asked as she reached for the flashlight.

“Sure,” Jane said as she handed it over.

They went to the far corner of the basement and began to search every square inch. Jane would pull boxes out only to move them back and Libby would hold the flashlight and be on the lookout for spiders. Thankfully, although the basement was dark and a little dusty, at least it was cleaner than most

and the only arachnids they came across were small and in a hurry to get away from them.

As they searched the wall behind a set of shelves, something caught Jane's eye.

"Can I see that flashlight for a second, Libby?" she asked. The shelf was up higher than Libby could reach, but Jane thought she saw an unusual indentation on the wall as the light passed over it.

Libby handed it over and Jane stretched to run her fingers over the strange marking. Like the others they'd found, it was a triangle within a triangle. A strange symbol that she was starting to learn somehow applied to the treasure.

"I think I found something," Jane said as she ran her finger over the engraving in the wall. As she did, dirt and dust began to fall away from it, making it easier to see parts of it. "Henry," she said louder, "I think I found it."

"Way to go, Mom," Libby said proudly as Henry rushed over. Together, they moved the shelves away from the wall, which was a struggle because they were old and well built. They slid across the floor with a loud scraping noise. Once the shelves were out of the way, Henry began to inspect the engraving.

“There’s a lot of dust and dirt packed in it,” he said, turning to pull a stiff brush from his bag. After carefully brushing it for a few minutes, he reached for the necklace and slid the small attached symbol off the chain. “Let’s see what this does,” he said, a thread of excitement in his voice.

He pressed the metal triangular symbol into the wall where the indentation was located and held it there. When he took his hand away, it slid free and almost tumbled to the ground before he caught it.

“Does it not go there?” Jane asked as they watched.

“No, I think it does,” he replied as he carefully grabbed his brush and cleaned a little more. He gave the spot on the wall a good blow before he reached for the symbol again and he pressed it into the engraving. This time, there was a pop somewhere in the wall and cracks formed.

“Does that look like a door shape to you?” Jane asked as she and Libby took a step back.

“Maybe. A small one, but it does look like a door of some kind, doesn’t it?” he said. “But I think someone might have blocked the edges over the years.”

“Maybe it’s just dirty like the symbol was?” Libby asked.

“That could be true,” he said as he began to push on it. “Either way, it seems stuck.” He pushed on it a few more times and although it shifted slightly, it still didn’t move nearly enough. “I think I’m going to have to work with this for a while.”

“Can’t you just get a sledgehammer?” Jane asked and Libby nodded.

“Or an ax,” the little girl suggested.

He shook his head. “The first goal is to always preserve as much as possible. If we can get the door operational and see what kind of technology they used, it would be incredibly helpful.” He eyed it a little longer. “I should probably tell Marie about this.” He sighed. “I’m going to need permission to work down here for a whole lot more than a couple of hours.”

CHAPTER 3

Jane and Libby followed Henry back up the stairs, slightly disappointed, Libby more so than Jane. Libby had expected something else to be there, like the other times when they'd found something. Jane could tell that the stuck door had really bummed Libby out, and Jane had to admit that it was pretty anticlimactic.

“Well, that went faster than I expected,” Marie said when she spotted them coming up from the basement.

“We found something,” Henry explained. “But I think time has gotten the better of it. I think it’s a secret passage or door, but the door mechanism seems to be broken or the door is just stuck after all these years.”

Henry paused as if he wasn't sure how to approach the next part. “I’m actually really good with that sort of thing, and I was hoping I could stick around and try to get it open without breaking the whole thing to gain access.” His eyes were wide and hopeful in a way Jane found incredibly charming.

“I wonder if that’s something we could add to our tour,” Marie said as she rubbed her chin. She seemed to be weighing the pros and cons of agreeing. “I’m sure a lot of people would

like to see a part of real Alma history and a possible piece to the Howland Treasure.

“I don’t mind if you want to tinker with it during museum hours while I’m here. As long as you aren’t hurting the building or the foundation, I don’t see what harm it could cause. It might be exciting to see what’s going on down there.” She smiled at him indulgently.

Henry was overcome. “Oh, thank you so much, Marie. I really appreciate this.” He took her hand and eagerly shook it which made her whole body shake.

“Of course,” she said with a smile. “It’s the least I can do for another history lover like me.” She sighed. “I hope whoever is breaking in and vandalizing some of the local stores will stay away from my museum and leave the vandalism for places that don’t have priceless artifacts of local history.”

Jane didn’t like the idea that Marie was nervous about something like that happening at the museum. If Marie was nervous, other business people probably were too. How had this type of activity already caused so much fear and Jane hadn’t even heard about it yet?

She felt bad for being so out of touch with things that were happening in her own little hometown. Important things, too. This wasn't just some community news she easily could have missed. She wanted to know more.

“Those break-ins that you mentioned earlier,” Jane said when there was a lull in the conversation. “Where were they?”

She was glad Marie had brought them up again because she'd wanted to ask a few questions. The first of which was to find out who had been affected and how. Maybe that would help her understand how she'd missed the news.

“All I know about is the place next door, The Book Bar. My friend's daughter opened it and runs it, so that's how I knew about it. She told her mother, who then passed the news on to me. When I heard about it, I went next door to speak with my friend's daughter, and she mentioned that another place had already been hit.

“But thankfully, Chelsea, the one who owns The Book Bar, said it seemed like whoever it was just went in and made a huge mess. They destroyed a few things, but nothing seemed to have been stolen.”

“Well, I suppose that's the good news,” Jane replied. But even so, it was enough to worry other business owners. How

much money had they lost from the mess? Was that really all that happened or was that just the part everyone knew about?

“Makes you wonder why someone would do something so senseless,” Marie said with a huff. “That’s why we’re getting our security system overhauled. I don’t want to take any risks here at the museum.” She pointed to a newly installed camera perched in the corner near the ceiling.

“I’m surprised you found someone so quickly,” Henry said. “When I needed to redo the keypad at my apartment, it took over a week for me to get someone to even look at it.”

Marie waved her hand. “Vincent, that’s the guy who interrupted us earlier, owns Valued Security, and he lives right here in Alma. I think almost every business in town uses him since he’s local and can help us here faster.” She seemed proud of that fact, as if his living in town was her doing.

“I’m sure that does make a difference,” Jane said finally, unsure what else to say.

“Yes, and considering the police don’t seem to be doing much, it’s up to us to protect our own...” she looked down at Libby as if she caught herself, “...assets.”

Henry frowned. “Why aren’t the police doing anything?” he asked.

“Oh, they poked around and asked a few questions, but the Alma police department isn’t exactly known for its ability to solve crimes. From what I’ve heard, even if you file a report, you might as well assume nothing is going to be done about it.”

Jane shifted from one foot to the other. She didn’t like the idea that whoever had caused the businesses so much trouble might not even see their day in court. Where was the fairness in that? No one should be able to get away with it that easily.

Henry spoke to Marie a little longer about what they’d found, and Jane heard Libby chime in, but Jane was too preoccupied to really listen to what they were saying. Who would break into businesses in a small town only to wreck everything?

Marie was called away by someone who came through the door, leaving Jane, Henry, and Libby alone for a moment. Jane had a feeling Henry would be sticking around the museum for a while, but she had other things to do.

“Libby and I are going to leave now. I’m sure it’s going to take you a while to figure out what to do about that door,” Jane said.

“Yeah, but I’ll let you know when I get ready to open it. That way my little adventure buddy here can be in on the excitement.”

Libby grinned as if she couldn’t wait.

“Come on kiddo, let’s get out of their hair,” Jane said as she and Libby headed for the door.

As they stepped outside, Libby sighed.

“What’s wrong?” Jane asked.

“I just don’t want to go home yet. I thought we were going to be gone longer,” she admitted.

When they got to Jane’s car and climbed in, Jane said, “Well, what else do you want to do?” Jane really wanted to head home and get on with her list of things she wanted to get done on her day off, but she had enough time to still do something for Libby to make the morning a little more interesting. The treasure search had turned out to be something of a dud, at least so far.

“Brynlee wanted me to come over sometime. Can we find out if that’s okay?” she asked, sounding hopeful.

“Sure, I’ll send her mom a message,” Jane said as she pulled out her phone. Brynlee was one of Libby’s good

friends, and she seemed to have an open invitation to their house, which was something Jane really appreciated.

Brynlee's mom quickly responded that they would love to have Libby come over for the day. "Do you need to go by the house or anything first?" Jane asked as they drove towards Brynlee's house.

"Nope, I don't need anything," Libby said, happy again. She bounced in her seat and clapped. "I'm so excited."

"It's been a while since you've been to Brynlee's house, huh?" Jane said, making conversation.

Libby nodded. "And she's got a lot of cool new stuff I want to check out," she said eagerly.

"I hope you're not just friends with her because she has nice things," Jane said warily.

"Of course not," Libby replied, clearly offended. "But that doesn't mean I don't like to play with her stuff when I'm there."

A few minutes later, they pulled up in front of Brynlee's house. Jane walked Libby up the sidewalk, but her mind was still trying to solve the puzzle of why someone would want to break into a business just to trash it. Surely something had been stolen or they'd at least tried to steal something.

“Hi, Libby!” Brynlee’s mom, Amber, said while she was opening the door as they approached.

“Hi!” Libby said cheerfully as she walked into the house and then took off with a squeal.

Amber turned to Jane. “I can bring her home if you like. Do you need her home at a certain time?”

“Nope, I’m just doing a few things around the house, so whenever you get tired of her,” Jane joked.

Amber chuckled. “Okay, I’ll send you a message when we’re thinking about bringing her back. It won’t be until late afternoon, though, unless you absolutely need her earlier. And if you do, just let me know.”

“Sounds good, thanks!” Jane said with a wave as she headed back to her car. She’d already decided she wanted to make a quick stop before heading home. Her curiosity was getting the best of her, and she couldn’t possibly let the burglaries go until she found out more. Just a few questions wouldn’t hurt and then maybe her curiosity would be quenched.

CHAPTER 4

The Book Bar was a fairly new place in Alma. Jane had heard about it, but she'd never been there, although she'd really wanted to stop by and check it out. But the whole idea of a book bar had made her hesitant. To her, it had sounded confusing. A place that serves coffee but also books? How was that even possible? If she was being honest with herself, she had to admit that she was a little intimidated to go in since she didn't quite understand exactly what they did there. But now she had an excuse to check it out.

When she'd first heard about the new business, Jane had gone online to search for what a book bar was. It could be a bar, a library, and coffee shop all rolled into one or just a couple of those things. She assumed when she walked in there would be a bar of some kind and that was probably the place to start. Everything about the concept seemed strange, but she was willing to keep an open mind.

The Book Bar was right next door to the Alma History Museum. Squeezed between the museum and Mickey's Diner, it was a narrow building with a black façade. The large

wooden door with a glass center was stained a lighter color with a long vertical gold bar serving as the handle.

It gave off a very chic vibe that intrigued Jane as she pulled up in front of it. There were a few parking spaces along the front of all three businesses on the block, the museum, The Book Bar, and Mickey's Diner. And there was a large parking lot in the back. For now, they didn't seem very busy, which Jane found promising.

She got out of her car and eyed the front of the building. The black paint was dull and probably wouldn't have been her first choice, but she had to admit it did give the place the feel of an upscale bar. She wondered if that was what they were going for as she pulled the door open and stepped inside.

The interior was decorated similarly to the outside and seemed far too modern for a little town like Alma. It was such a small town that normally businesses wanted to stick to the old tried and true, but it seemed The Book Bar was looking to change that, and she admired the owners for doing it.

Jane saw that there was a bar off to the left with a couple of people behind it, and there were a few patrons seated at nearby booths and tables. Most of them were sipping on a drink and either reading or doing some other solitary activity while soft music was playing in the background.

Jane walked up to the nearest person behind the bar who didn't look busy. The woman had strawberry blonde hair which was in intricate braids. She had a narrow nose and thin lips that curled up in a polite smile when she saw Jane approach her.

Jane went with the first question she had. "Excuse me, can you explain what I'm supposed to do here?" Jane asked. She thought perhaps being a patron would help get her foot in the door to ask a few questions about the burglary. Besides that, she was genuinely curious.

"First time to The Book Bar?" the woman asked. When Jane nodded, she smiled. "Wonderful, and do you live here in Alma? You look familiar," the woman said as she squinted at Jane.

"I do. My name's Jane Barrow," she said as she extended her hand. "I run Clean Sweep Cleaning."

"Nice to meet you, Jane. That's right, I've heard about your business. All good things of course." She paused to give her a reassuring look. "Well, you chose the right person to sit down in front of because my name is Chelsea, and I'm the owner of The Book Bar. I think that probably makes me the best person to introduce you to what we do here." She chuckled.

“Basically, you can borrow any book we have and read it while you’re in the bar. We only serve coffee, tea, and that sort of thing, but some other ones like us serve alcohol as well. We recently added a few little snacks to the menu, such as muffins and cookies.”

“That’s interesting,” Jane replied. She liked the idea of a place where you could devote your time to reading, but have a small snack at the same time “So people come in, borrow a book, grab a cup of coffee, and sit down to relax?”

“Pretty much. This is a place you can come and just do whatever you want to do. You can meet up with friends or work quietly alone in the corner,” she said with a shrug. “Your choice, it’s all acceptable here. We can also help you find your next read if you’re not sure what to dive into.”

Chelsea looked around at the other employees. “I think we have someone for every genre of book, so if one of my people here at the bar can’t help you, they’ll know someone who can.”

“Interesting,” Jane replied as she looked around. “Can I get a cup of tea?”

“Sure thing,” Chelsea replied. “Sweet or unsweetened.”

“Unsweetened, please,” Jane replied as she ran her hand along the polished bar. It had a beautiful high gloss that Jane found she really wanted to clean, just for the satisfaction of it.

“Here you go,” Chelsea said as she brought the tea and set it down on a coaster in front of Jane. It was a disposable cup with the name The Book Bar scrawled on it with books underneath.

“I heard from Marie over at the museum that you recently had a break-in, but it seems everything’s okay now.” Jane thought she was being subtle and hoped that bringing up the woman next door who claimed to know the owner of The Book Bar would help her get some details.

“You know Marie, huh?” Chelsea replied. “Yeah, we had a situation here the other day, but we’ve gotten it straightened out.”

“What happened? Do you know who did it?” Jane asked, feigning ignorance. She may have heard about it from Marie, but she wanted to hear Chelsea’s version.

“We’re not really sure why at this point, although Mickey’s Diner got hit a couple of days before we did, and I heard it was the same thing. Whoever it was broke in and then trashed the place. We’re having a security system put in

tomorrow. I didn't think I'd have to worry about that sort of thing so soon, but I guess I was wrong. The police have no leads, and I'm getting frustrated." Chelsea's mouth was set in a grim line.

"There aren't any leads?" Jane asked, surprised. "But surely someone knows something. After all, this is a small town. Whoever did it had to have had a reason for breaking in and doing what they did. Are you sure that nothing was taken?"

Jane couldn't imagine anyone breaking into a business and not stealing something while they were there. Usually trashing the place was a way to hide what they took. Or at least that's how it always happens in the movies.

"Nothing," Chelsea said with a shake of her head. "Stuff was just messed up. Books were thrown on the floor, coffee grounds were everywhere, along with flour and you name it. If it could make a mess, it was thrown around. We had friends come in and help us clean it up so we could be open that afternoon in spite of it. We can't really afford to close for a day. So if that was their motive, we ruined their fun."

"Good for you," Jane said. She was glad they'd been able to come out on top, but it still made Jane feel confused. Why break into a place just to wreck it? Even if nothing had

been taken, she could imagine the stress the situation must have put on them. “They didn’t take money or anything?”

“We don’t leave money in the building after we close,” Chelsea explained. “So there was no money to get.”

Jane nodded but thought maybe that was why the place had been wrecked. Because if there was no money to be stolen, what else would they steal? Books and coffee?

“Do you have any idea who might have been behind it?” Jane asked.

“Not a clue,” Chelsea said as she shook her head.

“Come on, not even a hunch? This town isn’t that big,” Jane pointed out.

Chelsea looked up and down the bar. “Honestly?” she said finally. “There’s this guy who’s been harassing me about bringing city people in and saying that I’m going to ruin Alma with my ‘big city ways’.” She used finger quotes and rolled her eyes. “Never mind the fact I’ve lived here pretty much my whole life.”

“That’s odd. Who said that to you?” Jane couldn’t imagine that anyone would be so opposed to change that they would begrudge a business pulling in customers from Kansas City. Especially in a small dot on the map town like Alma.

People only stopped there when they were going somewhere else.

“His name is Jerry Sigler. He used to run the gas station that still pumped your gas for you until he had hip surgery and had to retire. I think he’s just bored and looking for some excitement.” She rolled her eyes.

“Maybe,” Jane replied, and she was pretty sure she knew who Jerry Sigler was. Her parents had been friends with him, and she thought they probably still were. Jane took a sip of her tea and sighed. “This is really good.”

“Thanks,” Chelsea replied. “And if you know anyone that you think would like our place, would you tell them about us?”

“Absolutely,” Jane replied, still thinking. When Chelsea began wiping the moisture from the bar she said, “Would Jerry Sigler have the ability to break in and trash things?”

“He’s doing really well after that hip replacement, so I don’t see why he couldn’t. I heard he used to be a locksmith before he bought the gas station.”

“So he’d be able to pick a door lock,” Jane assumed.

“You would think,” Chelsea replied.

“But does he have a problem with Mickey’s Diner, too? You said they also got hit.”

“I know business really picked up for them after they were featured on some website. I wouldn’t put it past him to have been mad about all the ‘city people,’ as he calls them, coming to our town to eat.” She used finger quotes again as she spoke bitterly.

“Anyone else you think could have done it?” Jane asked as she sipped her tea.

“If I had to put my money on anyone else, it would be Evelyn White, the woman who runs White’s Bakery. She was over here having a fit when we started selling muffins and cookies. She said we were stealing her business. I informed her that customers could visit wherever they wanted, and I wouldn’t stop them. She didn’t seem to like that too much.”

“She thinks you’re stealing her customers?” Jane asked as she looked over at the cookies and muffins on display. “I’ve never seen anything over there that looked like what you have.”

“I know! Maybe if she’d change it up once in a while, her customers would come back a little more often,” Chelsea shook her head.

“Thank you,” Jane said as she held up her tea. “This is so much better than the stuff I get from the store.”

“Enjoy,” Chelsea said as she turned to someone who called her name. “Looks like I have another customer to tend to. You have a good day.”

Jane took her tea and headed for the door. She’d thought she would stop in and find out that everything had been taken care of, but now she wasn’t so sure. Who would break into two small businesses in Alma and trash them without taking a single thing?

The question still burned in her mind as she headed back to her car.

CHAPTER 5

While Jane headed home she wondered how Tyson had fared on his own. Even though he was getting older, he didn't spend a lot of time at home alone. Usually, Libby would be with him, and even though she was younger, she was still another person. Jane knew that sometimes being out in the country, where their farmhouse was located, and with no one else around, could be a little intimidating if you weren't prepared for it.

She was happy to see that the house was still standing when she pulled into the driveway. The new windows upstairs shone in the sunlight, and she briefly considered what color she would eventually paint the house. Pushing that thought away, she focused on what mattered at the moment.

“At least Tyson didn't burn the house down while we were gone,” she muttered. While she'd trusted him to watch Libby, she also knew that Libby would tell her if he was up to something. Tyson knew it too. Jane had been just a little concerned about leaving him home alone, unsure if he might get into trouble on his own.

“Tyson?” she called out as she set her keys and purse down on the hall table after entering the house. Her eyes scanned the living room, but everything seemed to be just as she’d left it.

“Be down in a second,” he called from upstairs.

“Must still be playing,” Jane muttered to herself. She headed into the kitchen and threw away her now empty teacup. After a few minutes, Tyson appeared in the doorway.

“Yeah?” he asked as he leaned against the door frame.

“How was your morning alone?” she asked him.

“It was fine. Annie and I just hung out in my room, and I played with my friends online,” he said with a shrug.

“What are you doing now?” Jane asked, sensing he wanted to hurry up and leave.

“I’m still playing with one of my friends. Everyone else got off but we’re still going strong. He’s waiting for me.” He leaned in the direction of the stairs as if he really wanted to go.

“Alright, sorry to bug you. I just wanted to check in and see how things were going.” Jane waved him off and he took off running without saying another word.

She was actually pretty grateful that it would be a while before Libby would be home. Obviously, she loved her

daughter more than anything but her son, however, Libby was really good about interrupting Jane on a regular basis. So much so that sometimes Jane felt like it was impossible to get anything done when she was around.

Jane decided to get some cleaning done on her own home, then, if she felt like it, she might repaint the kitchen trim, but she wasn't going to hold her breath for that to happen. She'd planned on doing it for over a week and still hadn't managed to get it done.

As she began to collect the dirty laundry and dishes from throughout the house, she settled in and hoped to get a few things done on her to-do list.

Later that afternoon, the sun started its slow descent that brought on the evening. Jane had finished a number of things and decided to enjoy a little quiet time by reading a book for a little while.

Eventually, her phone dinged with a message from Amber, Brynlee's mom.

We're going to stop for an Icee before we bring Libby home. Do you need anything?

Jane quickly typed out a reply.

Nope, but thanks for asking. I'll be here.

Once she pressed send, she picked up her book and started reading rapidly, hoping to get to the end of the chapter before Libby got home.

It all worked out, because by the time Amber was to drop Libby off, Jane had put her book away and called Tyson down to help with dinner.

“Keep an eye on the noodles,” she said to him when she saw Amber’s van pull in the driveway. “I’ve got to go out and say hi to Amber’s mom.”

Tyson nodded as he stood over the stove and put a big wooden spoon in the pasta pot to stir the noodles.

Jane stepped out on the porch and waved to Amber, who then let Libby climb out of the van. After the little girl was clear of the van and the door was shut, Amber honked as she backed out of the driveway and headed up the road.

“Did you have fun?” Jane asked. Libby was still munching on her blue Icee, her entire mouth a matching color.

“Yes!” Libby cried out and then began to list all the things they’d done. As she spoke Jane noticed a black vehicle driving down their road. As it drew closer to their driveway, it began to slow down.

The black Ford SUV pulled into the driveway and then pulled off to the side, along the grass. Jane stared at it, trying to figure out who it could be. She was fairly sure she didn't know anyone who drove a vehicle like this one.

"Go inside. I'll be there in a minute," Jane told Libby as she took a few steps towards the vehicle.

Libby nodded and headed inside as she finished her Icee.

"Good evening!" a woman called out as she opened her door and climbed out. "I thought I would stop by and introduce myself. I live in the house on the next mile section," she said as she pointed up the road.

"Oh!" Jane replied. "Hello!" The woman shut her door and came around the front of her vehicle. "I'm Jane," Jane said as she held out her hand. "Jane Barrow."

"Abigail Hernandez," the woman replied. She had long wavy dark hair with flawless looking tanned skin. A small diamond twinkled on one side of her nose. "But you can call me Abby."

"So you live in the yellow house?" Jane asked. She had to shield her eyes from the setting sun. She'd admired the house when they'd driven by it. The paint looked new, and

there was a nicely manicured lawn with flowerbeds that looked wild and haphazard, but were beautiful, nonetheless.

“That’s right,” Abby said with a smile. “Just me trying to stay sane.” She shoved her hands into the pockets of her jeans. “I hope you don’t mind my saying anything, but I noticed you that you didn’t seem to have a man around. Are you divorced or widowed?”

“Divorced,” Jane replied.

Abby hooked her thumb at herself. “Motorcycle accident,” she replied.

“I’m so sorry,” Jane replied.

Abby shrugged. “It is what it is. I kept meaning to stop and then I saw you outside. I didn’t want to bother you when you were moving, and then I noticed that you were remodeling. I wanted to stop and introduce myself so you’d know I was a friendly face, but I couldn’t ever seem to find the right time, so I decided to make the right time. We single ladies need to stick together.” She gave Jane a small smile.

“Why don’t you come in?” Jane asked. “We’re about to make homemade milkshakes and you’re welcome to one.”

“I wouldn’t want to impose,” Abby said as she shook her head.

“We have plenty! Come on!” Libby cried out from the porch, startling them both.

Abby chuckled. “Are you sure?”

Jane nodded. “Absolutely. Come on in and we can get to know each other. You never know when I might need to borrow a cup of sugar,” she said as she led Abby to the house.

“Hey, Mom,” Libby yawned as she slid under her blankets.

“Yeah?” Jane answered.

“Do you think Abby’s going to be your friend?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Jane said as she pulled the blankets up on Libby. “She didn’t say, did she?” Libby shook her head. “Well, I guess we’ll just have to find out sometime.”

“I hope she does,” Libby sighed. “She seems like she’d be a good friend.”

“We’ll see,” Jane replied.

“I guess so,” Libby said, yawning for the second time.

Jane kissed her on the forehead and wished her a good night before heading out into the hall and pulling the door almost closed.

She stopped by Tyson's room where he was drawing, this time with Annie lying across his feet.

"Hey, kiddo. You might want to think about bed soon," she said as she leaned on the door frame.

"Okay," he sighed as he closed his drawing book and sighed.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Sometimes I just get bored living out here," he admitted. "When we were in town, my friends could ride their bikes to our house but now we're too far away."

"Sorry," she winced. "But we knew that was a possibility."

"Just sucks," he said, sighing. "Now the only way to hang out with my friends is online."

"Imagine what it was like before there was the internet," Jane said in a mock scary voice.

Tyson laughed. "Yeah, I guess so. Good night," he said as he stood up and started to get ready for bed.

"Night, buddy," she said before pushing herself away from the door frame and heading to her own room.

CHAPTER 6

The next morning as Jane opened her eyes, the first thing she thought about was the burglaries. She glanced over at her alarm clock and saw that it was fifteen minutes before it was due to go off. Sighing, she reached over and flipped off the alarm before flopping on her back and staring at the ceiling.

The fact that both of the businesses that had been hit seemed to have recently brought attention to Alma, which really stuck out in her mind. Could it be a coincidence? Of course, but she didn't really believe in coincidences anymore. She had a feeling there was a link between the two businesses in some way other than they'd both been burglarized.

"Maybe I'll go have breakfast at Mickey's Diner and see what I can learn there," she said aloud as she tossed her blankets back. "If it was like The Book Bar, the employees would have come to work in the morning and found out that they'd been broken into overnight. Maybe someone will be there who was working that morning and can fill in a few blanks for me."

Jane left the kids a note that they could order a pizza and have it delivered for lunch before heading out the door. She'd

felt guilty about the fact she was going out for breakfast without them. She wrote down the login information for the pizza place so they could order it online. She only had one card on file, so Tyson should be able to figure it out. Just in case, she wrote a P.S. that if he had trouble to message her.

Heading to the door, Jane scratched Annie's head. "Keep an eye on the kids for me," she told the old girl before stepping outside.

The drive to town was quiet, and Jane didn't bother to turn on the radio since her mind was busy enough with her thoughts.

Mickey's Diner was on a corner lot with large windows and a neon sign above the door. It always had a number of cars in the parking lot, and the one time she and the kids had gone there for dinner, the place had been busy. The decor leaned on a 1950s theme and the whole idea of being an old school diner.

It wasn't exactly Jane's cup of tea, but she had to admit that the chicken fried steak she'd had that one time had been amazing. The kids had been pleased with their food, too. Tyson had a burger and Libby had enjoyed her chicken strips.

Jane found a parking spot and headed inside, thinking about what she was going to order. She was sure they probably served all the classics, biscuits and gravy, omelets, pancakes, and things like that, but the busy parking lot made her think that probably anything the diner served was good. They also had a sign in the window that claimed they served the best pies in the area. Jane wondered if that was actually true or just a slogan.

The hostess at the door smiled as Jane walked inside.

“Just you this morning or are you meeting someone?” she asked.

“Just me,” Jane replied.

“Follow me,” she said as she began to walk toward the seating area. She took Jane to a booth in the corner and tapped the tabletop. “Is this okay?”

“Perfect,” Jane replied before sliding into the booth. She put her purse next to her, and a moment later a waitress came to her table.

“What can I get you to drink, hon?” the waitress asked as she slid a menu in front of Jane. Her name tag read “Roberta.”

“I’ll start with a glass of orange juice,” Jane replied.

Roberta nodded and headed for the kitchen. As she waited, Jane looked around the restaurant. Why would someone want to break into a diner of all places? Was it for the money they thought these places might be bringing in?

Jane had looked up an article that featured Mickey's Diner and noticed that it seemed to have gotten a lot of interest. The free advertising had probably helped their bottom line dollar income considering the article had said it was the best place in the area to get a burger. She figured that the success of both places had to be a clue, and at least for now, she'd be treating it as one.

Jane looked over the menu and after a bit of deliberation, decided to have biscuits and gravy. It had been a while since someone had made breakfast for her and she was hungry. Every time she wanted biscuits and gravy, she'd always been the one to cook it. In her opinion, everything tasted better when someone else made it.

In a few moments the waitress returned with her glass of orange juice. "Have you decided what you'd like to order?" she asked as she set the drink down and pulled a straw from her apron.

Jane told her she wanted the biscuits and gravy as she handed the menu to Roberta. As Roberta started to leave, Jane

asked, “Hey, is it true someone broke in here a little while back?”

Roberta paused for a moment, as if she was considering how she should answer. “Yeah, it was about a week ago, although I can’t be sure. I’ve been working so much lately the days are running together.” Her eyes went wide as she shook her head. “But it was somewhere around there.”

“What happened?” Jane asked, her disbelief showing in her voice. “Did they take anything?” She still couldn’t believe what was happening in their small town. Mentally she was hoping Roberta would have more to tell her than everyone else had so far.

“No, they just trashed the kitchen and the back office. Don’t really see the point of what they did, but now I’m sure the owners are wishing they would have put in a security system like the others around here have started doing.”

Roberta shook her head. “Who would have thought we’d have a need for such a thing in Alma, of all places? It’s a diner, not a bank.”

“I was just thinking the same thing,” Jane said. What would make the diner and the book bar targets of a break-in? Was it the fact that neither one of them had security in place?

It probably wouldn't take much for someone to learn that piece of information and decide to capitalize off of it.

Roberta leaned in closer, lowering her voice. "I think it was someone looking for a quick buck. You know, trying to find some money or something they could sell fast. The thing is, we do deposits every night, like most businesses, so there wasn't any money to take."

"That's just like over at The Book Bar," Jane told her. "Has it happened anywhere else?"

Roberta shook her head. "Not that I've heard, and I pretty much hear about everything in here. But lots of people are wondering if this is just the beginning and they're getting worried. Some people think it's crime from the city starting to spill over into our little town."

"Can't say that I blame them," Jane admitted. "I'm starting to wonder if maybe I should look into some sort of security system for my house." She'd been thinking about it ever since the first night they'd stayed in the farmhouse. It got very dark at night. Sometimes a little too dark.

"You wouldn't be the only one," Roberta replied. "I better go put your order in," she said as she held up her ticket book.

Jane nodded and she walked away.

Waiting for her food, Jane sipped on the orange juice as she thought about her day. She had several cleaning jobs, but none of them involved deep cleaning, mostly surface level cleaning that could be done fairly easily. But then her thoughts drifted back to the burglaries and wondering who could possibly be behind it all. She also wondered if the waitress was right and this was just the start?

In a few moments her food arrived, and Jane used the opportunity to ask one more question.

“If you were to guess, who do you think did it?” she asked Roberta.

The woman pursed her lips as if debating whether or not she should answer. Finally, she said, “My money would be on Tom Stevens. He worked here for just a short time before he got fired. Honestly, they only hired him as a dishwasher because he walked in the door looking for a job the very day the dishwasher had quit, so they gave him the job on the spot.” She snorted. “Bet they don’t do that again.”

“He’s a local?” Jane asked.

“Yeah, I always see him fishing down at the river. I’m not sure if he’s ever caught anything, but he’s always out there.

He drives a red Ford Ranger and has an old and faded American Flag fishing chair. You really can't miss him."

"So you think he might have been upset with the owners here and decided to break in and cause trouble?" Jane asked.

"That's my theory, but there are plenty of others out there just as valid," she admitted.

"Thank you," Jane said, and Roberta walked away. If it was this guy Tom Stevens, why would he break into The Book Bar, too? Jane wasn't sure, but she couldn't help but wonder as she began to eat her breakfast.

CHAPTER 7

Jane's day proved to be a long one. It seemed every client that day had a special need that had to be taken care of. The first client had shown her a spill on their carpet that looked like an entire two-liter bottle of orange soda had been dumped on it.

Thankfully, the stain had come out without much fuss. But one client had a situation with their robot vacuum and a potty-training puppy. They'd already been working on cleaning it up before she got there, but there was no way she could make them work at it alone. After all, they did pay her to clean, and they'd pressed a decent sized tip into her hand when she'd left their home and headed to her car.

After such a long day at work, Jane was glad when she finally pulled into her own long driveway. She'd never been so happy to see the gravel driveway and then her house looming up behind it. Normally, when she bumped over the potholes at the end of the driveway, she'd grumble about their presence, but this time she simply smiled.

The kids were in a good mood when she walked in the door, which helped tremendously. She'd been bracing for some sort of argument or disagreement that she'd have to

break up and had been pleasantly surprised that there wasn't one. When she walked into the living room, Libby and Tyson were watching a movie.

Jane sat down and started watching it with them, not sure what was going on, which was okay, because Libby was intent on explaining everything to her anyway. It was a show about a family who moved to a new house and the children kept finding keys that were for secret doors and places. Of course, Libby thought this was amazing and told Jane that about a dozen times while they watched it.

"Someone's here," Tyson said as he craned his neck to look out the window. "I think it's Grandma and Grandpa."

Jane stood up and went to the door, peeking out of the window. Sure enough, her parents were getting out of their car and coming to the door.

"We just thought we'd stop by. You're not busy, are you?" her dad asked.

"No, not at all. Come on in," Jane said happily. It felt like it had been too long since they'd last visited, and she was glad to see them. "Let me show you what I've done so far."

Jane led them into the house and through to the kitchen because that was where she'd recently done the most. "I had

my new handyman friend come over and hang some sheetrock for me. I finally got the walls completely painted the other day.”

It had been time-consuming, but she and Brett Wildwood had managed to work together and get it all done. She was still incredibly happy she’d befriended him.

“You’ve done an amazing job,” her mom said as she looked around. “I would never have imagined it could look so great in here.”

“Wait till you see my room, Grandma,” Libby beamed.

“I can’t wait,” her grandmother replied.

Libby led her grandparents upstairs and showed them almost everything she owned. They smiled and humored her, even when she was showing them things they’d seen before.

“What about your room, Tyson?” her mother asked.

Tyson led them to his room with much less enthusiasm, until they started pointing out things they felt were nice or interesting and then he opened up a little more.

Eventually, they headed downstairs to the living room and sat down to chat. After a while, Jane decided to ask them a question.

“Do you guys still talk to Jerry Sigler?” Jane asked.

“It’s been a little while,” her mother said as she looked at her father. “When did we last see him? June? May?”

“I don’t know,” her dad said as he shook his head. “Why, punkin?”

She considered saying that she thought he might be behind a few local burglaries, but she knew how her parents were. They would stoutly defend him and refuse to give her information. It was something they did from time to time, and it really got under her skin. Instead, she’d come up with a better way to find out what she needed to know.

“I heard someone talking about him the other day and I was just curious how he’s doing after his hip replacement. I know he had to give up the gas station because he couldn’t be on his feet all day.”

Her dad brightened. “Oh, he’s doing just fine. I think he’s lost ten pounds because he’s been staying active even though he’s retired.”

Her mom nodded and added, “That’s right, although a lot of people thought he might do a bit of locksmithing again. That’s a word right?”

“Locksmithing?” Jane questioned.

“Yes. He was really quite good back in his day,” her mother went on. “He had those little picks and could pick any lock when he was younger. I don’t remember why he quit that and opened the gas station.” She shook her head.

Dad joined her. “I don’t either.”

“Didn’t he used to live in a big blue two-story house on the east side of town?” Jane asked.

“That’s right,” her mom replied. “But after his wife died last year he moved into those assisted living duplexes.”

Jane made a mental note of that.

“Have either one of you been to Mickey’s Diner yet?” she asked.

“Oh, yes,” her mother said as she slapped her hand gently on her husband’s thigh. “Your father wanted to go there. He said they have the best chicken fried steak.”

“That’s what I had when we went,” Jane said. “I thought it was good too.”

“Almost better than your mother’s,” her dad said to Jane. As her mother beamed, he leaned back and nodded while mouthing ‘It’s better’.

Jane snickered. “What about The Book Bar?” she asked.

Her mother frowned. “We’re not really bar people. You know that.”

Jane shook her head. “It’s not like that. It’s more like a coffee shop with books,” she said. “They do have a bar, but you buy nonalcoholic drinks at this one. However, when I spoke to the owner, she said that some other book bars do serve alcohol.”

“That’s interesting,” her dad replied. “We may have to check that out.”

They continued with their conversation and Jane smiled to herself. It was nice to sit down and chat with her parents. It had been too long, and she told herself that she shouldn’t go this long again without visiting them.

That night Jane was drying her hair with a blow dryer before bed when she found herself looking at her nails. Before she had the cleaning business, she used to paint them all the time. After that, she stopped because the paint would peel and chip so quickly. It didn’t seem to matter what kind of polish she used, none of them lasted. She missed the pop of color and how such a small thing could help raise her confidence.

Hair dry, she wrapped the cord up and put it away. As she leaned over, she had a look at her toes and got an idea.

“The polish might not last on my fingers, but it will on my toes,” Jane said with a smile.

She went to her room, opened the top drawer of her dresser, and began to look through her old fingernail polish bottles. She’d tucked them away long ago for safekeeping. She chose a soft pastel pink, padded over to her bed, and pulled her feet up.

“I don’t remember it being this hard to get to my toes before,” she said to herself.

As she twisted so that she could paint each nail, she thought about her day. Her mom and dad had taken them out to dinner and the kids had talked their ears off. Whatever hesitation Tyson had felt when everyone was in his room had completely disappeared.

Libby had told her grandparents about how they’d been helping Henry look for the treasure. Jane hadn’t been overly happy about it, but didn’t say anything, expecting them to scoff at the idea because they might think it was risky to let Libby participate in it. Instead, they’d both been on board and had been excited about the prospect.

When she'd finished painting the toenails on one foot, Jane lifted the other one with a grunt and a twist. She'd thought about telling her parents about the burglaries, but she'd changed her mind. It was bad enough that it had caused her to worry, but until there was a reason to, they didn't need to worry, too.

Her mother would insist that they buy themselves and Jane some fancy security system. She already felt she owed them for letting her move out to the old farmhouse that had belonged to the family, and putting the house in her name. And all without her paying a dime, so she didn't want to feel further indebted to them.

After she finished with her toes, Jane started to yawn. She was exhausted and ready for bed. She turned on the fan and put her toes in front of it so that they would dry faster. That way she could slip them under the covers and go to bed, hoping she wouldn't fall asleep first.

CHAPTER 8

The next morning Jane decided that she was going to swing by the bakery so she could talk to the owner. Although Evelyn White's name hadn't been mentioned at the diner, the owner of The Book Bar seemed to think that her coming in and yelling at them about their baked goods had meant something. Mickey's was known for their pies too, so it was possible a baker would have been mad about the pies if she was mad about muffins and cookies. Jane wouldn't know for sure unless she talked to her and found out.

White's Bakery was just off the square, but it was close enough that everyone pretty much acted as though it was on the square. There was an entire block just off the square that held other businesses and they were often lumped in with those officially in the historic town square district.

When Jane walked into the bakery, the smell of sweet bread and icing raced up her nose. She inhaled deeply, welcoming the smell. Her mouth was watering, and she hadn't even laid her eyes on a doughnut or cookie yet.

A small line had formed, so Jane went to the end behind a guy with a backpack. He wore earbuds and as he cleaned his

glasses Jane wondered if he was actually listening to something or if he just kept them in so he could avoid having conversations.

The woman behind the counter served each customer with a welcoming smile and the patience of a saint. When it was his turn, she handed Earbuds his bag of doughnut holes and wished him a good day.

“I’ll take two twists, please,” Jane said as she stepped up to the counter. She was glad no one had come in after her so she could ask her questions without holding a line up. She looked over her shoulder one more time to make sure that no one else had snuck in without her noticing.

“Sure thing,” the woman behind the counter replied as she moved to fulfill the order.

“I’m sorry, but you’re Evelyn White, the owner, right?” Jane asked as she watched the woman use her metal tongs to select two twists from the tray.

“That’s right,” Evelyn nodded. “Can I get you anything else?” she asked as she straightened up.

“No, that will be it,” Jane replied. She followed Evelyn to the register as Evelyn folded the white bag and stapled it. Jane knew she was running out of time, and she needed to ask

her questions, but how was she supposed to ask someone about their personal interactions with other businesses when she really didn't even know the woman?

Without thinking, Jane blurted out, "Someone said you went to The Book Bar not long ago and yelled at them. Is that true?"

Evelyn raised her head in surprise and then looked at Jane with a cool and calm expression on her face. "I wasn't having a great day," she said simply. "And I was upset, so yes, I went in there and spoke my mind."

Evelyn looked defensive and slightly ashamed as she lowered her eyes to the counter and began to fidget with anything she could, such as adjusting papers and shifting the bell to another place.

"But why? What could make you do something like that?" Jane asked as she handed over her money. "I understand having a bad day, but going into a business and yelling at them has to be another level of anger."

When she noticed that Evelyn's lips were pursed, as if she might not answer, Jane added, "I'm not judging you. I'm honestly just curious."

For a moment Jane didn't think she would answer. Evelyn handed her the change and her receipt before she finally said, "I had a deal with Chelsea. She was considering selling my muffins and cookies in her place. We talked, she picked my brain, and then the next thing I knew, she was selling her own instead."

She crossed her arms over her chest, her lips curling in on themselves as if she were holding back something else she wanted to say. She paused for a moment and said, "So I went down there to let all her patrons know that she's not someone who can be trusted."

That surprised Jane. She hadn't gotten that kind of an impression from Chelsea, but then again, they'd only spoken for a few moments. "So now you have something against The Book Bar?"

"Yeah, I do. And that diner, too. It wasn't so bad when they first opened, but now I think their desserts are cutting into my business. I barely make enough as it is to make ends meet most months. I can't be losing out to the new guys just because they have fancier places."

A line had formed between her eyebrows now, making her look incredibly unhappy.

“I wonder if that’s why both businesses were broken into recently,” Jane said.

Evelyn scoffed. “I think it’s because they’re the new big guys in town and a certain business owner doesn’t like the attention being taken from her.” She leaned one hip against the counter as if willing to talk about the subject all day.

Jane frowned. “Who do you mean?”

“Margaret Green. She owns the jewelry store in town.”

Margaret Green. The name sounded familiar to Jane, but she couldn’t put a face with it. She was fairly sure she knew of the jewelry store, though.

“The one on the other side of the square?” Jane asked, wanting to make sure she was right.

“The one and only,” Evelyn replied. “All of our businesses are struggling, but not Margaret’s. Well, besides those two new places, but that doesn’t really count. Once they both opened, they became the big guys in town and her fancy little jewelry store wasn’t the talk of the town anymore.” She shook her shoulders as she said the last sentence and scrunched her nose.

Jane shook her head. “I don’t see how it all connects. What did that have to do with the burglaries?”

“I heard that nothing was stolen from either place. That they were just trashed. What if she broke in to try to destroy their products so they would get a bad name and she’d be back on top again?”

Jane thought she’d heard worse reasons. Besides, wasn’t that basically what she’d thought Evelyn White had done? “I can see where you’re going with that.”

“I’m just saying that I don’t trust Margaret any farther than I can throw her. She’s up to something over there. I get that a ring is a lot more expensive than a dozen doughnuts or cookies, but I don’t see how she’s doing it. I’ve needed to remodel for a while now, but I can’t begin to afford to do it. But Margaret recently did a renovation, and I know how much she paid for those new lights. I priced them myself.” Her eyebrows shot up almost to her hairline.

“I haven’t been there,” Jane said, so she had no idea what renovations had been done to the store.

Evelyn stepped back from the counter and grabbed a towel. “You should see it. Then come tell me how someone who hardly ever has more than five or six customers a day can afford to do something like that.”

Jane thanked her and turned to leave the store. She pulled a twist out of the bag and took a big bite before pushing the door open and stepping outside. Just as she stepped through the door, she almost ran into a man and a woman walking down the sidewalk near the building in the shade.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Jane said instantly. In her surprise at almost bumping into the couple, she’d almost dropped the bag that held her other twisty, so she scrambled to keep it from hitting the ground.

The man reached out by instinct and tried to grab it too. Instead, he ended up gripping her hands tightly.

Jane looked up into the most brilliant green eyes she’d ever seen. The man’s dark complexion seemed to make them stand out more, and was helped by his shirt which was almost the same color. His chocolate brown hair had caramel highlights that seemed to be in just the right place.

The man looked at her with concern until he realized he was standing there, gripping her hands. “I’m so sorry,” he said as he released her and straightened up.

“Jane, omigosh, you came out of nowhere.” Jane turned to see that the woman she’d almost run into was Abby.

“Abby,” Jane said as she glanced back at the man. If that was the man her neighbor was seeing, she was a very lucky woman. “I’m so sorry. I wasn’t paying attention to what I was doing.”

She didn’t want to admit that she’d been enjoying her twist just a little too much as she left the bakery.

She glanced back at the man to find that he was intently staring at her. It made something in her belly flop, so she nervously focused on Abby instead.

“It’s no big deal, you just scared the heck out of me,” Abby replied. “Grabbing breakfast before work?”

Jane nodded. “Yeah, I have a long day ahead of me.”

“Jane owns her own cleaning business,” Abby said to the man. She slapped her forehead with her palm. “I’m such an idiot. You two don’t know each other. Jane, this is my brother, Marcus. Marcus, this is the neighbor I told you about, Jane.”

“Nice to meet you, Jane,” he said as he extended his hand, his dazzling smile still on his lips.

Jane took it and her hand felt small inside of his. “Nice to meet you,” she replied.

“So a cleaning business, huh? I’m sure that can be interesting. Why did you choose that?” he asked.

Jane couldn't help but crack a joke in her nervousness. "Well, I really like cleaning mirrors," she replied.

"Oh yeah?" he asked as he cocked his head.

"Yeah, it's really something I can see myself doing," she said, struggling to keep a straight face.

Marcus burst out in laughter. "You're quick," he said with a broad smile. His eyes remained on her and for a moment she felt as though he was trying to say something with them.

"I- I don't know about that," Jane replied, barely able to get her words out without stumbling over them. Something about the way he looked at her made her shift uncomfortably. She looked away, unable to hold his intense gaze for long. "So what are you two up to?"

"Marcus is moving to town, so I was showing him around," she explained. "He's going to be staying with me until he finds his own place."

"She said the doughnuts here are to die for," Marcus explained. "She tends to be a bit dramatic, but I take it that's what you came here for?" he asked as he eyed her bag.

"I did," Jane said, holding it up. "I was just polishing off my first twist when I walked out the door."

As soon as she said it, she regretted it. Marcus looked trim as though he watched what he ate and took care of himself. The last thing she wanted to do was admit she was going to inhale two of the big doughnut twists.

He didn't seem to mind though and smiled. "I guess I know what I'm getting then." He looked at Jane and winked. A movement so fast she wasn't sure if she'd really seen it or had made it up. It made her stomach flutter and her cheeks flush. Was he flirting with her or just being nice?

"Well, I better get going," Jane sighed. "I have work to do. It was really nice to meet you, Marcus."

"I've had a rough week, do you think you can give me another joke before you take off?" he asked, his eyes hopeful.

Jane wasn't exactly the joke telling type, but she'd heard a lot since she started her cleaning business. Most of them were from her corny dad.

"How do you contact a professional cleaner after they've died?" she asked, suddenly remembering one.

Marcus shook his head, unable to answer.

"With a Squeegee board," she said in a deadpan voice.

Marcus roared with laughter. "Why do I love jokes like that so much?" he asked his sister.

“Because you’re as corny as they are,” Abby grumbled.
“Come on, I need sugar. Have a good day!” Abby said as
Marcus waved before they headed into the bakery.

“You, too,” Jane replied as she reached for her other
twist.

CHAPTER 9

“Here, let me take that out for you,” Jane said as she changed the trash. She was at Mrs. Hunt’s house, doing her weekly cleaning. Betty Hunt wasn’t quite as spry as she used to be and had started having Jane come in and do the cleaning that she couldn’t do anymore.

Jane hated charging her, but knew she also needed to at least be somewhat compensated for her time. So she charged Betty a secret “reduced rate” that she wasn’t aware of. While it might not have been the best for Jane’s bottom line, she didn’t care. It made her feel better as a person.

“You don’t need to carry out my trash,” Betty chided. She’d come to check on Jane, something she usually did. Not that it offended Jane. She understood wanting things done in a particular way and she was doing her best to learn Betty’s way of wanting them done.

“It’s a little heavy,” Jane lied. “I don’t know if you should lift it.” Betty had fallen recently and had hurt herself enough that it had taken some time for her to heal. She was almost back to normal now, but she still occasionally winced in pain when she thought Jane wasn’t looking.

“Oh, okay,” Betty said as she continued on her way. She usually sat in her chair and crocheted while watching her “stories” on the television set, but this morning she was moving around more than usual. Jane could tell by her restless pacing and the way she kept wringing her hands that something was wrong. A feeling of concern flooded her.

“Everything okay?” Jane asked.

“Yes, I just haven’t heard from my kids for a while. I hope they’re doing okay,” she said with a sigh. Her lined face was filled with worry.

Jane hated to see her sad. “I’m sure they’re just busy. You know how it is when you have kids, a job, and all the things that go with it,” she said sympathetically. She’d met Mrs. Hunt’s son, and he seemed like a nice guy. She doubted her kids were ignoring her on purpose. “You know, you could always call them.”

“I don’t want to bother them,” Betty replied. She leaned against the kitchen counter and stared down at her weathered hands.

Jane walked over and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. “I bet they’d love to hear from you.” She knew sometimes Betty got a little down on herself and needed a

friendly pep talk to boost her spirits. It seemed it was time for one.

“I don’t know about that,” Betty mumbled.

“Why would you say that?” Jane asked patiently.

“The last time I called my son, he acted as though he didn’t have the time for me. I needed someone to talk to and he couldn’t take five minutes for me. He had to rush off for some reason or another.” She looked away but not before Jane saw tears in the woman’s eyes.

“I’m sure there was a reasonable explanation. Don’t forget that they have kids and things going on in their lives. Maybe it really was just a bad time for him to talk. I’m sure you’ve had friends or family call at a time that wasn’t exactly convenient for you.”

Betty looked up at her, her eyes wet and glossy. “You think?” she asked, her voice shaking.

“I’m sure,” Jane said. “Now I’ll take this trash out and get out of your hair. Make sure you call one of them tonight. I bet those grandkids of yours have a lot going on.”

“Have a good day, Jane,” Betty said with a wave as Jane slipped out the side door.

She tossed the bag of trash in the trash can and after checking what day it was on her phone, also dragged the can out to the curb. She loved Mrs. Hunt, but she was starting to worry about the woman and her ability to be on her own. Which was why she tried to do as much as she could for her. The less heavy lifting she had to do, the safer Jane felt she was.

Jane had debated with herself all day if she was going to talk to Jerry Sigler. She didn't want to get involved, not really. Memories of how stressful it had been with her last investigation was a big reason why she didn't want to get involved with an investigation of the burglary situation. It wasn't her place to get involved, and she hadn't exactly been asked to get involved, either.

Not a lot of people know you can investigate either a small voice in the back of her head said. And it was true. She'd only done two investigations and those were in the city for other people. Not someone here in Alma.

"Maybe I will go see what Jerry has to say," Jane decided after she got in her car. She could do a slight bit of poking around to see what she found, and if it seemed like something she couldn't handle, no one would be any the wiser.

As she started her car and backed out of Mrs. Hunt's driveway, she thought it would be a good idea if she kept her investigation quiet. That way, if she couldn't do it, there was no one to disappoint but herself. No one had to know that she was looking into it a little bit, right? It would be her own little secret.

As she stood in front of Jerry Sigler's door, Jane found herself nervously shifting back and forth. She'd gone to the main building of the assisted living facility to find out where Jerry lived. When she stepped inside the building, she saw the bank of mailboxes, each with a last name on it and quickly scanned through them to find Sigler and his apartment number. But now that she was standing in front of his door, she was having second thoughts about talking to him.

The duplexes were in neat rows, each with its own garage and a small yard. Jerry's looked well maintained while the one next to it looked as though it might be vacant. She lifted her hand to knock, but the door opened before she could.

"Geeze!" Jerry said in surprise.

"I'm sorry, I was just about to knock," Jane said, feeling embarrassed to be found lingering on his doorstep.

“Jane, is that you?” he asked, his brow furrowing. Jerry’s thin dark hair was slicked back and the bags under his eyes were bigger than she remembered.

“It is,” she nodded. “Sorry if I’m interrupting anything,” she said. She and Jerry had never really interacted all that much. He’d become friends with her parents long after she’d moved out, but she’d spoken with him from time to time if he happened to be visiting her parents when she stopped by. She’d always thought he seemed like a good guy, but then again, she never thought her husband would leave her high and dry, either.

“No, no. Is there something you need? Everything okay with your folks?” he asked.

“Yeah, they’re fine,” she replied. “But I heard you were causing trouble with a local business, and I thought I would come over and see if you’re okay.” She’d come up with the excuse on the drive over. “I know your kids aren’t around anymore, so I thought maybe I could help you.”

“Ah!” Jerry said, flinging his hand in the air. “Of course that woman would tell on me. I miss the good old days when you could confront someone, have it out, and be done with it. Nowadays everyone’s calling the cops if someone so much as raises their voice.”

He shook his head. "I'm telling you; the world is going to the birds." He moved over to the white rocker on the porch and Jane leaned against the railing. "You came over for a reason, what is it?" he asked, his face scrunching against the sunlight.

"I heard through the grapevine that you used to be a locksmith, is that true?"

He beamed. "Yes, it is. I could pick any lock back in my day. Nothing could keep me out. I even won a couple of speed lockpicking competitions in my prime."

"Why did you stop?" Jane asked. "Surely it was a good profession to have."

"It was and I was darn good at it, but it also required me to drive a lot and work crazy hours. People lock themselves out at all hours of the day, not just from 9 to 5."

"I'd never thought about it, but I imagine that's true," she said. "So you opened the gas station to have more stable hours?"

"More or less," Jerry admitted.

Interesting, she thought. "Do you think you could still do it?"

He shook his head. "It's not really a habit I kept up with over the years. I doubt if these old fingers would be steady enough anymore." He looked down at his hands and they trembled a bit.

"I'm sure you could still pull it off," she pushed. "Surely you've tried once or twice since then."

"No," he said, shaking his head vehemently. He stood up from his chair. "And that looks like my ride coming down the street."

Jane turned to see the transportation bus for the elderly.

"I guess I better let you go then," Jane said as she straightened up. "Have a good day."

"Hey, why did you want to know about the lockpicking? You get locked out or something?" he asked carefully.

"No, it's nothing. Have a good day," she waved as she headed to her car.

CHAPTER 10

After leaving Jerry's place, Jane felt like she still had too many questions to head home just yet. They were circling around and around in her mind, and while she wanted to get home, she knew this wouldn't take too long. Plus, it was on her way. The kids wouldn't know if she made a pit stop, but her curiosity sure would. If she didn't at least try to find the next person she wanted to talk to, she'd spend the evening wishing she had.

Jane had been told by Roberta, the waitress at the diner, that Tom Stevens was always fishing down at the river. Of course, that described a lot of the locals. The river was a big place for people to fish that was close to Alma, rather than drive to a lake. With that knowledge and the fact that he drove a red Ford Ranger, and had a fishing chair with the American flag, she figured he shouldn't be too hard to find.

If she could manage to ask him a few questions, maybe she'd be able to get somewhere with this investigation. And if she didn't see anyone who matched that description, she'd just head home. Right now she felt as though all she was doing was collecting suspects but not getting many answers.

Jane knew from the other two investigations she'd conducted that sometimes the answer was just out of reach and all you needed was for someone to help you take that one final step which would lead to the answer. Maybe Tom Stevens could provide her with that final step.

The main place where people visited the river was a flat graveled area where they could pull off the highway not far from town. There was a small dirt road next to the highway bridge that crossed the river, and it led to the water's edge.

A natural gravel bar was at the water's edge, and people often waded out in the water to keep cool, or they'd trek along the banks to find a good spot to fish. It was a pretty popular spot among the locals, and there were always at least a couple of people there on any given day. Rain or shine.

As Jane drove over the slightly rutted, hard-packed dirt, she looked at the vehicles and spotted a red Ford Ranger. In front of it, a man was sitting with his feet in the water in a fishing chair that was a print of an American flag.

"I guess that's him," she muttered before she pulled up and parked behind him. She knew she wouldn't need anything, so she left her phone and purse in the car before pulling her keys out and locking the door.

Jane walked up behind him and veered off to the side a little. She made it appear like she'd just come to look at the river, as if she stopped down there all the time to take in the view and watch the river roll by.

Plenty of people enjoyed having a picnic there if they didn't fish. Some people liked to watch the water go by and relax before heading home. Others like to just see where the water level was. So it wasn't unusual for someone to just be there to enjoy the river.

"Afternoon," the man she knew was Tom Stevens said. He kept his eyes on the water, as if he might get a bite at any time.

Jane pretended as though she was surprised to see him there. "Afternoon," she said with a bob of her head. "Catching anything?" she asked, trying to start a friendly banter. At one time her father had really been into fishing with his friends, so she knew most guys like to strike up a conversation while they waited for a fish to bite. They didn't care who sat down next to them, they'd engage them in some sort of idle conversation to help pass the time.

"I've had a few nibbles," he said. "Thinking of wetting a line?" He eyed her rolled-up capris and loafers.

“Nah,” Jane said, shaking her head. “I just came down here so I could clear my head. I can’t believe what’s been going on lately, you know? It’s just so crazy.”

She was trying to use vague words to see if he would bite. She compared it to doing her own fishing. Casting out a few words as bait to see if the man might be interested.

He frowned at her. “What do you mean?” he asked as he turned slightly in his chair.

“The burglaries that have happened in town. First The Book Bar and then Mickey’s Diner. A lot of other businesses are worried now and taking precautions. It seems like people think it might keep happening.”

She’d cast the line, and the bait was set. He was nibbling, but he hadn’t taken it just yet.

Her statement seemed to surprise him. “You’re pullin’ my leg,” Tom said finally in a voice of disbelief.

Jane shook her head. “No, I’m serious. Someone broke into both of them and made a real mess.” He swallowed the hook, now she needed to reel him in.

“That’s just mind-blowing,” he said, shaking his head. “Who would do such a thing? I mean, I’m no fan of either place, but still.” Tom’s eyes drifted back out on the water.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Well, I was working at both of those places not long ago. ‘Fraid I didn’t last too long at either one, but that’s probably mostly my fault. I’m not really good at working fast under pressure.” He shrugged as if it was no big deal.

“You worked at both places?” Jane asked, as if this was news to her.

“Yeah, maybe that’s what the phone call was from the police department. I thought it was just because I’m supposed to pay my parking ticket this week.” He frowned. “I hope they don’t think I did it.” The idea seemed to hit him, and he said, “I mean, why else would they be calling me and saying they want to talk?”

Jane had the urge to smile. The conversation was going far better than she’d even hoped for. Now she knew he was getting called in, so she had to be on the right track. “Do you have an alibi?” she asked. When his eyebrows knit together in confusion she said, “Is there someone who can say you were with them at those times?”

“I’m down here most all the time,” Tom said, still frowning. “But there’s usually at least one or two other people off and on.” He gestured to the other people scattered around.

Then he stopped and turned back to her. “I wonder if that’s why the lady from the paper was asking all of those questions?”

“A lady from the paper was asking you questions?” Jane asked. That sounded interesting.

“Yeah, she said she was a reporter for the Alma Times. She was young, though, so she couldn’t have been doing it for long.”

“Do you remember her name?” Jane asked.

If he’d talked to this woman, she might know even more that could help answer Jane’s questions so she could stop poking around and move on with her life. She’d been wrestling with the fact that she was using some valuable time she could be spending with her kids, and instead was using it to track people down and ask questions that had nothing to do with her. She felt nosey, but she also couldn’t bring herself to stop.

“Lucy Park,” he said finally. “Really nice girl. Petite and Asian.” He paused. “Hey, if you find her, will you see if she has a boyfriend?”

Jane frowned. “I don’t think I’m going to ask her about that if I run into her,” she admitted.

“That’s fair,” he sighed as he turned back to the water.

“So she was asking you questions? About what?”

“She was asking me about both places, but only things like, what did I do there? Who had access to the buildings, if I saw anything strange, and what I was doing last Monday and Thursday night? Stuff like that.”

Jane nodded. It sounded to her like Lucy Park was conducting her own investigation and she’d gotten along farther in hers than Jane had.

“When was this?” she asked.

“I think it was yesterday,” he said. “But it could have been the day before. I can’t remember for sure.” Tom shook his head.

“So what did you tell her you were doing on those nights?” she asked.

“Same as I do every evening. Here until I get tired of the mosquitoes and head home. I don’t know what time it was those specific nights, though. I don’t always look at the clock.”

Jane nodded and thanked him for his time. As she walked back to her car she wasn’t convinced that Tom hadn’t done it. Although he didn’t seem to have an alibi, Lucy Park didn’t seem to have any further interest in him and she wasn’t

hovering around him. Jane wondered if that was because she was still collecting evidence on Tom or because she didn't think he did it?

That was yet to be determined. But for now, it was time to head home.

CHAPTER 11

Just as Jane was cleaning up from dinner, she saw a familiar black SUV pull into her driveway. She kind of liked it that Abby stopped by on her way home, because it gave her something to look forward to. As she shut the dishwasher, she pressed the start button before she headed to the door.

“Hey, neighbor,” Jane called out as she opened the door and stepped outside.

“How are you doing?” Abby asked as she reached into her passenger seat for something before climbing out.

“A lot better now that I’m home,” Jane said with a sigh. It had been chaos when she walked in on the middle of an argument between Tyson and Libby, but fortunately it hadn’t taken much to get them to calm down.

“I heard that,” Abby replied. “Here, I brought you something.”

“What is it?” Jane asked, looking at the round aluminum pan with something white inside.

“They’re cinnamon rolls,” Abby said as she handed them over. “Made from scratch, by the way. None of that junk from a tube around here.” She wrinkled her nose in disgust.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Jane said as she looked at the pan. “But they look delicious.” She gave a little wave to invite her inside.

“Yes, I did. You have no idea how much of a difference you made in my brother,” Abby said. “He’s been smiling ever since he saw you.”

She followed Jane through the house to the kitchen where she set down the pan on the counter. She decided she’d share them with the kids, but only after she’d had a chance to try one. Otherwise, they’d all be gone, and she wouldn’t get any.

Jane suddenly realized what Abby had said. “What?”

“He’s been having a tough time with some things,” Abby explained. “I don’t want to get into the details because they aren’t mine to share. He’s trying to start his life over and it’s been rough on him. But he’s changed since we saw you this morning.

“I even got him to sign up for a dating app to put himself out there, although he told me that he only swiped on a couple of people. As to the rest, he said there was absolutely no way,” Abby said as she rolled her eyes.

“But I’m hopeful that maybe now he’s thinking about what could be instead of what isn’t. You know what I mean?” Abby leaned against the kitchen counter as she began to pick at her fingernails.

“Unfortunately I do,” Jane replied. She had a feeling that not many women in Alma would be beautiful enough to catch his eye. He and his sister seemed to have been blessed in the genes department. Still, it was good to hear that her lame jokes had a positive effect on his day. What woman didn’t want to be the reason a handsome man smiled?

“I had a friend talk me into signing up for one of those dating apps,” Jane sighed. “I still haven’t done anything with it.”

“I don’t blame you,” Abby admitted. “I’ve been alone for so long I’m not sure I could handle living with a man again. I can’t wait until Marcus gets his own place. He’s about to drive me up the wall.”

A smile forced its way onto Jane’s lips. “It can’t be that bad.”

“The shaving, the products, the extra laundry,” she leaned her head back and sighed. “I’ve been on my own for too long.” She paced around the kitchen dramatically.

Jane chuckled. “Maybe just a bit. I don’t know, I kind of miss having that. Walking in the bathroom after he’s taken a shower and having it smell like a man had been there. There’s no other way to describe it.”

“I see what you’re saying, but keep in mind, this is my brother. I don’t want to even come close to thinking he smells attractive,” Abby said with a shudder.

Jane laughed. “I guess I see your point.”

Abby stood. “You know, if you happen to think my brother’s cute, I think you two might make a good match.” She smiled slyly.

“I think there is no way, on this planet that your brother would ever be interested in me,” Jane said firmly.

“I don’t know,” Abby said carefully. “I’m telling you; I haven’t seen him laugh like that in a while. Apparently, you two share a love of corny dad jokes.” She rolled her eyes before she laughed.

“That’s because I’m a funny chubby girl. That’s the way things work for me. I make the cute ones laugh, not date me.” Jane knew how the world worked and she had no misconceptions about where she stood in it.

Abby grinned. “So you think he’s cute?”

Jane groaned.

“Okay, okay,” Abby said, holding her hands up. “I’ll get out of your hair. I just wanted to bring you a thank you gift for making my day more bearable. But you really should get on that dating app you have and see what you might find. You’re far too young and beautiful to wither out here alone.”

“The pot says to the kettle,” Jane said as she raised an eyebrow.

“I deserve that,” Abby said over her shoulder as she headed to the door. “I’ll see you later. Enjoy the cinnamon rolls. And please share them with the kids if you feel like it.”

Jane chuckled. “Will do. You’ll have to bring your kids over some time.”

“Oh, you don’t want that. My little demons are nothing like your children. They strive to drive all adults they meet insane,” she said as she stepped outside. “Have a good evening!”

Jane waved and closed the door. She walked to the kitchen and put the cinnamon rolls high up in one of the kitchen cabinets so that the kids wouldn’t see them yet. Maybe she’d tell them about the rolls in the morning so they could have them for breakfast.

She looked over at her phone, Abby's words echoing in her head. Should she try the dating app? While she didn't expect to meet guys as good looking as Abby's brother, it wouldn't hurt to see what was out there.

After she sat down at the table, she swiped her phone and found the app. Once she opened it she saw a tab that said, find your match. She tapped on it. It went through a tutorial showing her to swipe one way for yes, and the other way for no. The only way a person would ever know you said yes was if they said yes too.

"Oh, well that's nice. At least people's feelings wouldn't be hurt," Jane muttered.

The app asked a series of questions to find what kind of guy she might be interested in before showing her any matches.

The first couple of matches were a definite no, but then she swiped and found Marcus's profile. Curiosity had her looking at what he'd written and the photos he'd uploaded.

He mentioned that he'd recently gotten out of a bad relationship and that he was looking to get into the dating scene again. How he liked to laugh and spend time with his sister and family. It was all very basic stuff that almost

everyone said to describe themselves, none of it very surprising or informative.

Jane moved back to the photos and decided to go ahead and swipe yes for him, even though she knew there was no chance. Was there an algorithm for the app? If so, it should show her more men who looked like him. She knew she had a weakness for a strong jawline.

As she swiped, the screen shifted into big blue letters. YOU MADE A MATCH!

Jane stared at it for a moment, unable to comprehend. “Seriously?” she said to herself. She touched the x in the corner and then it brought up the ability to message. She sat there staring at it, wondering what to say when she saw three dots appear. They stayed for a moment, then disappeared, then came back again. Eventually, a message appeared.

Looks like we matched, Marcus wrote and sent a smiley face emoji.

Looks that way, she replied. Her face started to hurt, and she realized she was grinning.

Maybe we should try going out sometime? he sent.

Maybe we should, Jane replied. Was she flirting? Was that flirting? She couldn't remember anymore.

What are you doing this weekend? Maybe Friday or Saturday?

She had to think. She had some places to clean, but other than that, nothing. *I'm free as a bird*, she replied and then cringed.

Thankfully he didn't seem to mind. *Okay, let's go for Saturday night. I have a few things to deal with during the day, but then I'll be all yours.*

Jane felt a surge of fear or excitement. She wasn't sure which it was. *Perfect. Let me know what time and where you want to meet when it gets a little closer*, she wrote.

I most certainly will, came the reply.

She set her phone down and stared at it for a moment. She just made a date. With a handsome guy. What was the world coming to?

She walked over to the cinnamon rolls and scooped one out on the plate before sticking it in the microwave to warm it up. When it was done, she pulled it out and returned to the kitchen table.

What would she wear? Where would they go? She hadn't gone on a date since her husband had left, and he hadn't

been in the habit of taking her out and giving her a reason to dress up. Oh, no! Would Marcus expect her to wear a dress?

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Slow down, Jane,” she told herself before taking another bite of the cinnamon roll.

CHAPTER 12

Jane never had a reason to visit the only jewelry store in Alma, because she never shopped for expensive jewelry for herself. Everything she bought was either from the mall in the city or some big chain store. But she'd always been curious about the jewelry store and was eager to go into it and see what made the store so popular.

As she got out of her car, she looked up at the building. Just like the other historic buildings, it was two stories with the shop below and apartments above it. The intricate details along the top had been painted a few years ago during the revitalization project, and the color was just as bright as ever. The front of the store was nothing but windows with a sign that read "Match Jewelry."

As she walked over to the door, Jane could see the shining wood walls inside with sconces for lighting. Each display case had built-in lights so that the shopper could see whatever was inside in all its sparkling glory. As Jane pulled the door open, a soft bell tinkled somewhere inside.

"Hello!" a woman with dark curly hair called out in a sing-song voice. "Good morning."

“Hello,” Jane replied. “How are you this morning?”

“Just wonderful. My name is Margaret. What can I do for you?”

Jane began to move along the display cases. “I’m just browsing this morning,” she replied.

“That’s absolutely fine. How are you going to find your next favorite piece of jewelry if you don’t go on the hunt for it?” Margaret said, chuckling. “Just let me know if you have any questions or if you’d like to see something.” She moved away to where she’d been rearranging a display of necklaces.

Jane casually browsed and decided to go for the direct approach. “I’ve heard that your store has been thriving while everyone else’s seems to be suffering. That’s quite an achievement considering the way things have been lately. What’s your secret?” Jane asked.

Margaret looked her over. “Sometimes you just have to be willing to go the extra mile when it comes to business. Sacrifices have to be made. You make a choice and then you follow through with everything you have.” She lifted her chin at the end as if challenging Jane to disagree.

“What do you think of the fact that two businesses have been vandalized? The two that were probably doing the best

here in town, besides yours, were suddenly trashed. If either one of them would have had to stay closed the next day for clean up, it could have been extremely detrimental to their bottom line,” Jane pointed out. “That’s not their fault. They’ve been working hard, too.”

“What do I care about a business that isn’t mine? All I’m worried about is what is happening here, not somewhere else.” Margaret held out her hands, gesturing to her store.

“That makes sense,” Jane said. “But still, it seems as though you’d want others to thrive too, because that brings business to town which could help you too.”

Something caught her eye in the display case in front of where she was standing. She’d always loved opals and there was a very pretty little opal ring in it. The ring wasn’t big, but she’d never really cared for fancy things.

“Can I see a ring?” she asked. She doubted she could afford it, but she wanted to look at it and maybe try it on her finger. She could dream a little, couldn’t she?

“Of course,” Margaret said as she moved over to the display case where Jane was standing. She unlocked it and asked, “Which one are you interested in?”

“The small opal ring,” Jane replied as she pointed at it.

“Beautiful and dainty,” Margaret said with approval. “Perfect for anyone who isn’t into flashy things.”

Jane knew that was her. She didn’t like big rings for a number of reasons, and she rarely wore any jewelry while she was working. But that didn’t mean she didn’t like something a little sparkly from time to time.

Margaret handed the ring to her, and Jane slipped it on and peeked at the price tag. It was much more affordable than she’d thought it would be. “If you had to say who you thought might be behind the things that have happened to the other stores, who would you say?”

Margaret pursed her lips slightly. “I’m sure they have a different clientele than I do,” she said. “But there is one guy who comes into almost every business around the square and bothers the employees. He’s unnerving and a little creepy. Sometimes he just comes in and stares at people. Maybe they threw him out and he came back for some sort of revenge?”

“Do you know the guy’s name?” she asked.

“I was told his name is Greg Adams. He’s a very unsettling fellow.” Margaret shivered. “I believe he manages the apartments over on the north side of town.”

“The two-story gray ones?” Jane asked.

“Those are the ones,” Margaret nodded. “What do you think of the ring?”

Jane had it on her finger, part of her debating. “Can I think about it?” she asked as she slipped it off her finger and handed it back.

“Of course,” Margaret said as she took it from Jane. “But I don’t have another one like it, so if someone else comes along to buy it,” she shrugged as if to say it was out of her hands.

“I understand,” Jane said as she watched Margaret put the ring back in the case, already missing the way it felt on her finger.

The front door opened, and they both turned to see who was entering. Jane recognized the man from having seen him at the museum. It was Vincent from Valued Security. He was wearing the same work shirt from the other day and his work boots clomped on the floor as he took a few steps inside.

“Morning,” he said with a nod. “I’ve been going around to everyone to see if their security is up to par or if they’d like to consider upgrading, considering what’s been happening in town,” he said. “I can do some basic stuff that really is affordable and help protect your business.”

Jane thought that was incredibly considerate of him, considering. With everyone worrying about what was going on, having a local security expert check what was in place had to bring people a sense of comfort.

Margaret waved her hand at him. “No, I don’t need to waste money on that nonsense. Thank you anyway.” Her tone was cool and dismissive, which surprised Jane.

“Are you sure?” he asked, his forehead wrinkling in concern. He seemed a little taken aback. “So far the businesses that have been hit are the ones that don’t have security. You’re leaving yourself open and vulnerable.”

Jane could tell he was really trying to talk her into it, and she understood why. Not only would this sort of thing help sell his service, but if he was right and they didn’t have systems in place, it would be almost impossible to find out who was responsible for trashing the stores. These places needed to at least have an alarm or a camera to keep an eye on things.

That’s when she realized that she hadn’t heard that part yet, about the stores not having security. Why hadn’t she thought to ask about that?

Vincent turned and left the store, obviously dejected. “So, is there anything else I can help you look at or do you

want to keep asking questions?” Margaret asked.

Jane frowned. “Thank you for your time,” she said as she turned around and left. She didn’t like Margaret’s tone and now she had someone else she wanted to ask a couple of questions.

As she pushed the door open she saw that Vincent had parked next to her and was just starting his truck.

“Hey, wait,” Jane called out as she waved him down. He rolled down his window and leaned on the door.

“Yeah? Can I help you with something?” Vincent asked.

“You said the businesses that were vandalized didn’t have security. How do you know that?”

He looked down as if he was embarrassed. “Well, I’m assuming they didn’t because I don’t have them as clients,” he explained. “I’m cheaper than anyone from the city, so I doubted that a new business would hire one of the other guys when there’s a local, less expensive option right here in town.”

Jane saw his point. “No, that makes sense and you’re right, why would they? Do any of the cameras that you’ve installed point in the direction of the businesses that were hit?” she asked.

There were several other buildings both across the street and behind the parking lot of The Book Bar and Mickey's Diner that, if they did have cameras, might have seen something.

Vincent stared at her for a moment with an unreadable expression before he shook his head. "Nope. Not one of them saw anything. They weren't angled right."

"Dang," she muttered. Jane had been hoping that he might have been able to help her out by giving her some kind of a clue, considering everything he had access to. "Well, you have a good day."

"You, too," he replied hesitantly. She didn't blame him. She'd practically run him down and then asked random questions about some burglaries. She would have looked at herself weirdly, too. He backed out of the parking space while she went to her car, wondering what she could do next.

"You need to go to work, Jane, that's what you need to do," she told herself as she looked in the rear-view mirror before pulling away.

CHAPTER 13

Jane had work to do that she couldn't put off any longer. Driving to the city, she put on her favorite playlist and let her mind wander as she drove.

It was strange that these burglaries were happening in Alma, but the fact that both places were popular and neither of them had security in place seemed odd, but it was a small town and people talked. All it would take was one employee to tell the wrong person that they didn't have a security system yet and then they'd have a target on their back.

Whoever it was, they not only knew that, but they also had some kind of a problem with the two businesses. She thought back to Jerry Sigler, but shook her head. She didn't want to think about all of that. She wasn't investigating it. Not officially, so she brushed the thoughts away.

Eventually, she pulled into the Hanning's driveway. She knew they'd keep her busy and that would help distract her from her thoughts.

She was in one of their bathrooms wiping down the shower when she thought about Henry and the broken mechanism in the basement for what had seemed to be a door.

When she'd seen those cracks form, she'd felt like she was in some sort of a movie. One where treasure was real and there were bad guys at every turn. Of course, there were no bad guys here.

The Hanning's home was unusually clean today. They hadn't had a party for a while and they'd recently been away on a trip, so Jane had been able to keep everything clean while they were gone. When they returned, they'd been so busy that they hadn't done much around the house, and Mrs. Hanning was out that morning.

Jane moved from room to room, first starting with the corners to make sure there weren't any cobwebs or dirt that had collected since her last visit. After that, she would start in one corner of the room and pick up anything that didn't belong there while simultaneously dusting.

She used a small laundry basket to put the misplaced items in so she didn't have to run from one end of the house to the other, risking that she might get distracted. This way, she stayed in one spot and was able to fully focus on what she was doing.

Once the items were all picked up and the surfaces dusted, she'd pull out the broom or vacuum and get to work on

the floors. She always made sure she moved the furniture a little so she could see if anything was under it.

She used this tactic for almost every room she cleaned, especially at homes like the Hannings, where rooms were often unused. It helped to ensure that she didn't miss anything.

When she was finished, Mrs. Hanning still wasn't home, so she left her a note. They'd started to pay her cleaning fee by way of a direct deposit, so Mrs. Hanning didn't need to be there in order for Jane to get paid. And Jane was very happy that they were paying her that way, so she didn't have to stand around and ask for her money. She'd always hated that part of her business.

Jane locked the house and headed to her car. She'd been able to distract herself from thinking about the burglaries by thinking about the treasure, which made her think about Henry. How had he been doing with that broken door mechanism? Was he getting close to figuring it out or close to giving up? She hadn't heard from him, so she decided to call and find out.

"Hey, how's the problem with the door mechanism going?" Jane asked when Henry answered.

“Still working to get it free, but I’m getting closer,” he said. “It’s a pretty sophisticated one, though.”

“I’m sure you’ll get it,” she said absently.

“How are things going with you? I take it you’re probably working now, or did you get the day off?”

“I’m just leaving a client’s house and was wondering how you were doing with getting to see what’s behind the door.”

“I’m pretty anxious to get in there, but I won’t do it until you and Libby are with me, and Tyson too, if he’s interested.”

“You never know with him. He’s at that age where nothing is cool,” Jane grumbled. He wasn’t as bad as some kids she’d seen, but sometimes he made her feel like she was about one inch tall.

“I’m sure it’s just a phase,” Henry reassured her.

Her phone beeped as though she had an incoming call. She pulled it away and saw her home number. “Well speak of the devil,” she sighed. “Hey, Henry? I have to let you go. Tyson’s calling on the other line.”

Tyson didn’t call that often, so it must be something important. Jane hoped nothing was wrong at home.

“Okay, I’ll let you know when I have something,” Henry said before she clicked over to Tyson’s call.

“Hello?” Jane asked, her hands stilling as she waited. Was something wrong? She couldn’t help worrying that Libby or Tyson had been hurt.

“So I know what you’re going to say, but hear me out,” Tyson began.

Jane wanted to groan and instantly say no, but she forced herself to say, “I’m listening.” At least it wasn’t some sort of emergency she’d have to hurry home for. She took a deep breath to slow her heart which had been beating a little faster from fear for her children.

“So Micha called and a bunch of us want to go to the movies and then hang out at the arcade there for a while. Libby can totally stay by herself. It’s not like I actually do anything,” he began.

“Absolutely not,” Jane said firmly. “Libby can’t be left alone.” She should have known he’d try something like that. Actually, she’d been surprised he hadn’t already.

“It’s not like she can’t handle herself,” Tyson pressed. “She’s old enough. You really should trust her more.” Which made her want to laugh.

Jane saw what he was doing, and she wasn't falling for it. "There's no way," she replied. "It's not a matter of me not trusting her, it's illegal, Tyson. I could go to jail if she's left alone." That might have been slightly dramatic, but still, she knew how the laws worked.

"But I really want to go!" Tyson whined.

"Then take your sister with you," she replied. "Either you both go or neither one of you goes." He had to know she wasn't going to relent on this one.

"Can't you come home?" he asked.

"I'm in the city, Tyson, cleaning people's houses. I can't just leave," she reminded him. She might not be in the middle of one at the moment, but she would be once she went to her next client.

"But I can go if she goes?" he asked carefully, changing tactics.

"That's right, and no scary movies."

"No, it's not one of those. She'd be okay," Tyson admitted. "Fine, I'll take her."

"Okay, make sure you take your cell phone with you and let me know how you're getting home."

"I will," he said, sounding defeated. "Bye."

“Bye,” she said before hanging up and chuckling.

Kids, she thought.

CHAPTER 14

As she left the Hannings' home, she got a call from her next client to say she had to cancel her cleaning appointment, and since the kids weren't at home, Jane decided she could spend the time doing a little more investigating into the burglaries.

Libby and Tyson would be gone for a while longer, and if she went home now, she'd just feel the need to clean or work on one of the many unfinished projects around the house. She liked the idea of talking to people around town more.

She decided she'd see if she could find Greg Adams and find out what exactly it was about him that made Margaret and the other business owners uncomfortable. Even though the other businesses hadn't mentioned him, but if he frequented them along with Margaret's jewelry store, and he made her uncomfortable, there was a chance she hadn't been lying when she said others felt the same way.

But why was he like that? Having someone stand around and watch, but not doing or buying anything, was odd. However, Margaret seemed a bit snippy and possibly judgmental, so Jane wanted to hear from Greg himself what he was up to.

On the way home after she'd talked to Greg, she'd stop by the newspaper to see if Lucy Parker was there. If she'd been snooping around and asking questions, maybe she knew something.

Usually there wasn't much that was interesting to report on in Alma, so Lucy could just be looking into it for the paper. Since Jane had never met her it was hard to say, but Jane was willing to bet Lucy might have something interesting to talk about.

With any luck, one of them might have a little information that would help Jane find her elusive answers, because she was finding it hard to believe that nobody had seen anything. No cameras, no people out walking, and no one spotting anything.

Jane wasn't sure what time the businesses had been burglarized, but that didn't usually seem to matter, because people were always around. With those thoughts floating through her mind, she headed to the apartments that she'd been told Greg Adams managed.

The gray apartments on the north side of Alma weren't a big complex. There were three long two-story buildings with a smaller one-story building in the center with a wooden sign in front of it indicating it was the office. As Jane pulled into the

parking lot she chose a spot as close to it as possible. She didn't want to be parked in someone's regular spot when they came home from work.

Jane stared at the building for a moment, a million thoughts running through her mind. One of which was, should she be doing this?. What if they found out she was doing her own investigation and didn't want her to?

"Surely they won't care if I can help in some way," Jane told herself before she climbed out of her car.

The windows and doors to the building were darkly tinted, making it impossible to tell if it was even open. As she reached for the door on the building and tugged, she was prepared for it to be locked, but it swung free, allowing her to go inside.

When she was inside, she saw a bank of mailboxes in front of another set of doors. She pushed them open and found herself in a comfortable lobby with tiled floors and soft gray walls. On the far side of the room was a counter with a man sitting behind it who was playing with a Rubik Cube.

Beneath the counter were various flyers and signs, which she thought were probably about local businesses. As she drew closer she saw there was a small plaque on the counter that

said the man's name was Greg Adams. He didn't look up, and Jane wondered if he was ignoring her or just totally immersed in what he was doing.

She stepped forward and cleared her throat, but he only frowned at the cube and continued to twist it. She stood there and watched even longer while convincing herself that he had to know she was there. How could he not?

Her patience started to wear thin. "Excuse me," she said as she stepped closer to the counter. She didn't want to disturb him, so she'd given him a moment, but this was getting ridiculous.

"One second," the man said, still not looking up. He twisted another two sections of the cube and frowned as if it hadn't given him the results he'd wanted.

Jane wanted to huff in indignation but held it in. Who was this guy anyway? A small part of her wanted to reach across the counter, yank the cube from his hand, and shatter it on the wall, but she knew that was just her frustration showing. Patience was not a strong suit of hers.

He sighed as though he was put out before setting the cube down and then turning to look at her. "Yes?" His tone suggested he was irritated by the interruption.

“So sorry to disturb you,” she began, her tone slightly sarcastic. “But if you’re not busy, I have a few questions I’d like to ask you.”

She swore she saw him roll his eyes before picking the cube back up. “We have two-bedroom and three-bedroom apartments only. If you’re looking for a one-bedroom, try The Heights.”

“That isn’t what my questions are about,” Jane ground out. “I already have a place to live.” She was doing her best to stay calm, but his rudeness was grating on her.

“Oh, okay,” he said, setting the cube back down. He seemed utterly unperturbed by her annoyance. “Then what is it?”

Jane took a deep breath to calm herself. She wasn’t going to let this young man bother her, even if he was pushing it. “I’ve heard you hang out a lot in the stores around town. Is that true?”

If he found her question strange, he didn’t show it. “I really like the whole concept of how businesses are run,” he said. “So I like to go and spend some time in them to see how they operate. I watch how they handle customers, and what products they sell. Sometimes I go home and find out how

much what they sell can be purchased for so I can try to determine their markup.” He tilted his head to the side. “I enjoy numbers.”

Now that she was talking with him, she had to admit there was something different about him. Not necessarily bad, but different than most people. He didn’t seem to blink as often, either.

“Have you heard about the two businesses that have been burglarized?” she asked. Her leg brushed something, and she stepped back from the counter. She didn’t want to accidentally knock something off of it.

“I have. They were both relatively new, and opened in the past year and a half. Most people think it’s just kids being kids, but I don’t agree with that.” He blinked once and continued to look at her with something that seemed to be of interest.

As Jane looked down to make sure she hadn’t knocked anything off the counter, she saw a smaller, more permanent sign. On it, it said “I’m not rude. I’m autistic.”

“Yeah, I had to put that up a while back,” he said as Jane realized she read it out loud. “My personality was causing some real trouble with the tenants, but now it’s all good. They

get me, and I don't have to struggle with social interaction.”
He reached for the Rubik Cube and picked it up again.

Things started clicking into place for Jane after that.
“You were having trouble with people?” she asked.

“Yeah, sometimes people think I'm staring or I'm rude because I'm honest. Maybe sometimes I can be a little strange.” He shrugged his shoulders as he started twisting the cube again. “But so can other people. I personally think it's better to be brutally honest than to lie to people all the time.”

Jane had to admit that he was right. “I can see your point,” she replied. “Do you have problems with the business owners when you go to their businesses to watch?” She had a feeling she could see where this was leading.

He stopped twisting the cube then. “Most people don't mind. They've gotten to know me and accept me for who I am. But there are one or two who treat me like some kind of weirdo who has the plague.”

Jane was glad she'd kept her patience with him. He hadn't been trying to ignore her. She'd known a couple of autistic people. and while they were vastly different on the spectrum, she could see similarities in the man in front of her.

“Is Margaret Green from the jewelry store one of them?” she asked.

“How did you know?” he asked.

“Lucky guess,” she muttered. She was starting to see what was happening. Greg was a little different and dismissive Margaret had never bothered to find out why. She just assumed things. Jane thought it would have been smarter for her to educate herself about people like Greg, rather than make rash judgments, but not everyone worked that way.

Jane decided to use Greg’s complete honesty with him to see if it might help her cause. “I’m looking into those burglaries to try to find out who’s responsible. Do you know anything about them?”

“I don’t really know much, but I’ve heard a few things from other people. Some people are saying that the doors were all locked tight but that somehow the person broke in and trashed the place. But the interesting part is that the doors were locked again after they trashed it.”

“You mean the vandal locked the doors behind them?” Jane asked, surprised.

“That’s right. I’ve also heard that neither place had any security and that they’d never changed the old locks. Some

people think it might be a past employee or owner.”

“Interesting,” Jane replied. “Have you got any idea who might be behind it or know of someone I could talk to so I can try to solve this?” She knew it was a long shot but decided to try.

“Well, I would talk to Lucy Park if I were you. She’s a friend of mine, and she’s been looking into them, too. Maybe you guys can help each other?”

Jane was surprised to hear that name again. “Maybe I will, thank you.”

“Come back if you ever need an apartment,” he said, losing himself in the Rubik Cube again.

“I will. Thanks,” she said before turning to leave.

CHAPTER 15

Jane knew where the newspaper building was, but wanted to make one stop before she went there.

She didn't know why she cared so much, but the fact that Margaret had accused Greg of being weird when the woman hadn't bothered to understand him, really got under her skin. So she decided to take a small detour to educate the woman. Maybe the next time Greg went in her store she'd be a little more polite and understanding.

As she turned the corner and pulled up in front of the jewelry store, she noticed a sign in the window. "Be back soon!" it said and showed a time that was thirty minutes ago.

"Guess I'll have to try again some other time," Jane sighed. She put her car in reverse and decided to try to find Lucy Park.

The radio was playing and when the song stopped, the DJ came on. Jane ignored it until she heard something that caught her attention.

"Recently our small town has seen its share of crime," the DJ said. "Two of our local businesses were broken into and vandalized in the past week. Alma City Police are asking

residents to let them know if they've seen or heard anything in connection with these crimes.

“The first business, Mickey's Diner, was broken into a week ago Monday. The Book Bar, the following Thursday. Police say they can't rule out the possibility that this might happen again, so they're encouraging everyone to double check their locks and ensure they have some form of security in place to prevent future burglaries.”

Jane shook her head and turned the radio down. If the police had turned to the local radio station, she figured that their investigation probably wasn't going all that well.

She slowed down for a stop light and turned down the radio. A pop country song came on and she had no interest in getting it stuck in her head for the rest of the day. While she waited for the light to turn green, she scanned the radio for another station.

Jane hadn't realized that she'd pulled up in front of The Book Bar as she waited for the light to change. Her eyes drifted to their store front and then back to Mickey's Diner. What did they have in common? Was there something she was missing?

She wished she had someone she could talk to about this stuff. Someone who could help her work through her thoughts and put them in order a little better than her just writing them down in a notebook, because that wasn't helping with this investigation.

The light turned green, and she pushed on the accelerator, leaving those thoughts behind in her exhaust.

A few blocks later, Jane pulled into a parking space on the side of The Alma Times building. It was an old, square, brick building, and the paper had been printed there since The Alma Times started. It published things of interest to the neighboring small towns, so it had quite a lot of subscribers.

The old printing presses had been removed and there was more room for desks, which could be seen through the large windows along the side of the building.

As Jane climbed out of her car, she saw a young woman leaving the newspaper office. The tote bag she was carrying said Alma Times on it, so Jane assumed she must work there. Jane hurried over so that she could hopefully find out where Lucy Park was.

From what she could see through the windows on the building, all of the desks were empty and there weren't any

cars left in the small parking lot.

“Excuse me,” Jane called to the woman. “Has everyone left for the day?”

“Yeah, sorry. I work at the front desk, and I’m always the last one here. You might want to come back in the morning.” The woman turned to get in her car.

“Do you know Lucy Park?” Jane asked. “She’s the one I’m looking for.”

The woman froze. “I’m Lucy Park.”

Jane couldn’t believe her luck. “So you’re investigating the burglaries?” Jane asked.

The woman seemed to pale as her eyes grew wide. “How did you know that?”

“I talked to Greg Adams. He said he’s a friend of yours and that you’ve been investigating them. Are you doing it so you can write an article or something?”

Lucy looked down at her car as if embarrassed. “Well, not officially, no. But I have been asking questions and trying to decide what’s really going on. The paper doesn’t want to report on it yet since there’s nothing but speculation.” She wrinkled her nose at that.

Jane already liked her. She apparently wasn't the type to sit around and twiddle her thumbs. "Do you have any thoughts on who did it?"

"And who are you?" Lucy asked suspiciously.

"Sorry, I'm Jane," she said as she moved closer and extended her hand.

"Jane Barrow?" Lucy asked, which made Jane pause.

"Yes, how did you know?"

"I've heard about you. You own a cleaning business, but recently you've been helping people with their own little mysteries." She seemed to eye Jane approvingly. "What has you working on the burglaries?"

"I could ask you the same thing," Jane replied.

"Fair enough," the young woman said. "Okay, I'll go first. I'm looking to make a name for myself at the paper by blowing open this story. From what I've heard, most people believe it's bored kids or some druggie from the city, but I think they're wrong."

"I agree," Jane said. "Although I don't have a solid suspect in mind yet."

"Me neither," Lucy replied. "But I've talked to the owners of those businesses along with a few other business

owners around town. I feel like I'm on a wild goose chase jumping from one person to the other." She brushed a few dark strands of hair away from her face.

"I've found that's normal," Jane said. "The investigations I've done before were that way too, and this one is proving no different. But what about the police? Why haven't they figured it out by now?"

"Have you met our local police?" Lucy asked, her face twisted in disgust. When Jane shook her head, Lucy sighed. "Let's just say they would make the town look bad if the local news interviewed them."

"All of them? Surely there's a good one or two."

"Not in my experience," Lucy replied. "I also haven't talked to all of them either. And I don't plan to anytime soon."

"I wonder if we should get together and compare notes," Jane said. "If you've been doing your own investigation and so have I, we might be more effective if we work together."

"I don't want to share credit on the story," Lucy said with a shake of her head. "I know how my boss is, and she'd come up with some sort of an excuse as to why I wasn't qualified if it wasn't all me."

“I don’t want the credit,” Jane said quickly. “I just want to know what’s going on in our town. We work together, you write your story, and I get answers. It’s a win-win for both of us.”

Lucy considered what Jane had said. “Okay, but I can’t do it right now. I’ve got prior commitments. But maybe if we exchange numbers we can work out a time tomorrow?”

“Sure, that works for me,” Jane said.

“Perfect. Besides, I have all my notes at home on my laptop. Obviously, I remember most of it, but some of it gets a little confusing.”

“I understand completely,” Jane said before they exchanged numbers. “Text me tomorrow and we’ll set up a time.”

“I will,” Lucy promised.

Jane headed back to her car and wondered if this would be the thing that would help her figure out who was responsible. Knowing that someone had supposedly gotten through locked doors was unsettling to her.

“Maybe that’s just a rumor,” she decided. Whenever something happened, rumors spread like wildfire in Alma and this time was no different.

Her phone dinged indicating there was a message and it pulled her from her thoughts.

We're getting a ride home. It was Tyson.

Great, let me know when you're headed home, Jane replied.

He sent back, *K*, and that was it.

Jane sighed. She absolutely despised it when he just sent the letter *K*.

“Guess it’s time to go home,” she said to herself as she started her car. “Maybe I can convince myself to relax for a while.” She chuckled, knowing that would be almost impossible.

CHAPTER 16

Jane wasn't sure what to do with herself when she got home. Since Libby and Tyson weren't around, she decided to sit outside and enjoy the weather. She'd thought it would be impossible for her to relax once she got home, but the kids had surprised her by loading the dishwasher and they'd even switched the laundry over. Because of that, she decided she could enjoy a little down time while they were away.

She poured herself a glass of ice water and grabbed Annie's frisbee before taking the dog outside for a little game of fetch as she waited for the kids.

A text came from Tyson saying they would be heading home soon. Jane was glad because if she had much more alone time, she might be forced to do something more productive, and she was starting to feel the weight of the day's activities in her body.

Jane walked around the yard, picking up sticks and anything else that had been strewn around in the yard, knowing that she needed to mow it soon. She carried them over to the edge of the property by the flat rock she'd discovered when they first moved in. She was pretty sure

someone had probably set it there a long time ago to mark the property line, although as far as she knew no one had ever built around the old farm.

Just as she was walking back up to the house, she saw dust rising up in the distance, letting her know a car was coming down the road. Once it cleared the trees, she saw that it was a blue van.

The van pulled in and as soon as it came to a stop Tyson and Libby climbed out and waved to the people inside before they closed the door. Libby started skipping toward the house while Tyson shoved his hands in his pockets and walked as though he was deep in thought. His eyes were on the ground, his face impassive.

Uh oh, he looks unhappy, Jane thought as she plastered a big smile on her face, hoping she was wrong. Sometimes she noticed he was just quiet and introspective, but not normally when he'd been with his friends.

“Hey guys, how was your day,” Jane said as they drew closer. “Did you have a good time?”

“Hey Mom, I had fun!” Libby said happily. They met up and Jane turned and headed to the house with them. She gently touched Libby's head before putting her arm around Tyson,

giving him a little side squeeze. He didn't object, which made her wonder if he needed it. She reached for the door and held it open for both of them.

"How was it, Tyson?" Jane asked. From his grim expression, she was a little worried Libby might have embarrassed him.

"It was good," he replied as he continued to walk. "I'm not really hungry, can I skip dinner?" he asked. His tone was flat, and he leaned against the kitchen wall as if he didn't want to linger. They had followed Jane into the kitchen where she planned to start dinner.

"Sure, if you really don't want to eat," she answered, a little surprised. He almost never skipped dinner unless he didn't feel well. "There are sodas and bottled water in the fridge if you'd like one," she said. He nodded and peeled himself from the wall to get one.

"I'm kinda' full on popcorn," Libby admitted as she rubbed her belly. "So I'm not super hungry either."

"Why don't we make some cookies then?" Jane asked as she watched Tyson choose a drink and then shut the fridge.

"Yeah!" Libby cried out.

"I'm going to my room," he said as he walked away.

Once the sound of his footsteps told her that he'd gone upstairs, Jane turned to Libby. "Did you upset your brother today?" She went to the cabinet and started pulling out the ingredients for peanut butter no-bake cookies.

Libby shook her head. "No. Actually, he was pretty happy most of the time. It wasn't until later that he seemed really quiet." She frowned. "Do you think something is wrong?" She sat at the table and started playing with the container of oatmeal like it was a bongo drum.

"I don't know," Jane admitted. "But if he wants to talk about it, he will," she decided. He was getting old enough that she wasn't really sure how to handle him. Did she push for details or wait for him to talk? She still wasn't sure.

"Why don't you drag your chair over to the stove and you can stir while I put the stuff in the pan?" Jane said.

Libby eagerly complied as she dragged her chair loudly across the floor before jumping up on it. Jane turned the burner on and began to add the peanut butter, butter, cocoa, and vanilla.

"Maybe it's because he likes a girl?" Libby offered as she watched her mother.

“What?” Jane asked, her hands freezing in mid movement. “Why do you say that?”

Libby reached for a big plastic spoon to stir the contents of the pot, mindless of the bomb she’d just dropped on her mother.

“I don’t know, there was a girl there that he talked to a lot and he was smiling a bunch too. But when we left he seemed like he was mad or something. I thought maybe she made him mad.” Libby explained.

Jane wondered if there was a bit of truth to what she was saying, even if the details might not be completely there.

“Well, maybe he just needs a little time,” Jane said. She hoped he hadn’t asked her to be his girlfriend only to get turned down. That would be heartbreaking. Maybe it was a good idea she was making cookies.

Jane and Libby worked side by side until eventually, they dropped spoonfuls of the mixture on waxed paper to let the cookies cool. Jane had put some of them on a cookie sheet so that she could slip them in the freezer to cool faster.

“Can I go play on the computer now?” Libby asked.

“Sure thing, just make sure it’s something I’ve approved of,” Jane answered.

“Of course,” Libby groaned before disappearing with a still soft cookie.

“I saw that!” Jane called after her. The only answer she got was a giggle.

Wanting to check on Tyson, Jane pulled a couple of cookies from the fridge and put them on a paper towel before heading upstairs. She could hear soft music coming from her son’s room, which was surprising. Usually, he was wearing those big headphones he liked so much.

She knocked on the door before twisting the handle and going into his room. “I brought you a couple of cookies.” she said as she went in.

“Thanks,” he said as he took them from her. As he set them on his desk, she noticed that he was cleaning his room. And not the bare minimum he usually did, either. He was doing a deep clean and there were more dirty socks in his dirty clothes basket than she’d seen in her life.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m pretty sure you can tell I’m cleaning, Mom,” he said in a tone that said she was being ridiculous.

Jane guessed she deserved that. It was pretty obvious. “Okay, I guess my question is why?”

He shrugged as he continued to move around his room picking stuff up and putting it away. "I don't know. It just seemed really dirty in here, so I thought I'd clean it." He stopped and turned to her. "Do we have some of that room spray? The stuff you spray on everything when you're done?"

"Yeah, you want me to get it for you?" she asked.

"Please," he replied.

"Okay, be right back," Jane said.

As she headed downstairs to get the spray, she couldn't help but wonder if Tyson talking to a girl and now cleaning his room were linked. She grabbed the spray and headed back to his room.

"So, how were the movies and the arcade?" she asked when she returned.

"Pretty fun. I played against some new kid named Sam, a lot."

"Is Sam in your class?" she asked, not really wanting to talk about the new kid. She wanted to learn about this supposed girl that was there. Had she gone with the group, or had he met her there?

"Yeah, the family moved here a couple of weeks ago from Colorado. Some small town. Think it was Cottonwood

something.”

“From one small town to another,” Jane replied, trying to keep the conversation going as much as possible.

“I guess.” Tyson hadn’t stopped moving as he continued picking things up and moving them around wherever he felt they needed to go. “We played a lot of ‘Shooting Madness’ together.”

“What’s that?” Jane asked.

“It’s a game where two people try to shoot all the bad guys. It has plastic guns and everything,” Tyson answered. “Then you see who can get the most points before the time runs out.”

“That sounds fun,” Jane said with a smile. She stood there, hoping he’d elaborate, but nothing came. She wanted to grab him and shake the information from him but knew that would get her nowhere. She was just going to have to be patient. “Okay, well I guess I’ll get out of your hair.”

“Thanks for the cookies,” he said as he started to make his bed.

When she stepped back out into the hallway and shut the door behind her she wondered what had gotten into him?

CHAPTER 17

Jane was just getting out of the shower the next morning when her phone began to ring. She almost ignored it but then she saw Lucy's name on the screen. She figured that she probably wouldn't call this early unless she'd come across something, so she reached for the phone.

"Jane, something happened," Lucy said in a whisper.

"What?" Jane asked, and she found herself wanting to whisper too.

"Can you come to Match Jewelry?" she asked.

"Sure, it will take me a few minutes to finish getting ready," she said.

"Get here as fast as you can," she said before hanging up.

As Jane set her phone down to finish getting ready, all sorts of things ran through her mind, mainly, had a burglary taken place at Match Jewelry this time? She could just imagine callous Margaret with her lips pursed looking down on whatever mess could be made in the back of a jewelry store.

However, Lucy's voice had sounded much more urgent than that. Had they caught the person? Jane's hand froze in midair as she was about to swipe on some mascara. What if it had been Margaret and they went to the store to arrest her?

Jane remembered the way she'd confidently dismissed the guy from Valued Security. Maybe the reason she hadn't been too concerned was because she was the one behind it all? That idea had Jane getting ready even faster.

When she was finished getting dressed, she didn't even bother to feed Annie, who wasn't up yet anyway. Instead, she told Tyson to do it in the note she left for him and hurried out the door.

There were thick clouds forming in the sky as she hurried to her car. She looked up at them, wondering if it was going to rain or just threaten to. A cool breeze picked up just as she got into the car and shut the door behind her.

She was supposed to work today, but depending on what she found at the jewelry store, she knew she could cancel and then make it up. Almost every client she had was aware she was a single mother with a family. They wouldn't think twice if this once she needed to reschedule. That was the perk to having great clients. They believed in and trusted you.

“I don’t know what it is yet,” she reminded herself. “It could be nothing and Lucy was just being dramatic. It’s not like I know her that well.” And with that thought, she worried for a moment she might be walking into a trap. That was, until she got to the jewelry store.

When Jane arrived at Match Jewelry, there was an ambulance pulling away, along with another police car, but two others remained. There was also a crowd of people standing around as if they were trying to find out what was going on.

There were people standing a little farther away, and a few of those started moving closer. Before long, she knew there would be a crowd that would be impossible to get through. Jane found a parking spot as close as she could get to the store and headed over to find Lucy.

The very person she was looking for materialized from the crowd. “I’m glad you’re here,” Lucy said in a low voice. Everyone around them seemed to be whispering as they stared at the front of the store. Jane recognized quite a few of the people. Most of them were the owners of the neighboring businesses.

“What’s going on?” Jane asked quietly.

“They targeted Match Jewelry,” Lucy began. “The vandals? They broke in and were apparently going to do the same thing here, but Margaret was here.” She bit her lip and looked at the ambulance that was silently pulling away.

“Oh, no,” Jane gasped. “Is she okay?” If she was in that ambulance, then things must be bad.

“She didn’t go to the hospital, so she’s okay,” Lucy replied. “But she got a good knock on the head for her troubles. The ambulance personnel had to look her over before the police could talk to her. People have slowly been collecting here since then.”

An officer pushed open the front door of the store and a dazed-looking Margaret walked out into the morning sun. A number of people approached to ask her what happened or how she was, but the officer quickly shooed them away. Someone appeared with a fold-out chair for her, and she took a seat in the shade while the others continued to look on.

“Margaret, how are you?” Jane asked as soon as she was able to get close to her.

“I’ve been better,” Margaret muttered as she held an ice pack to her head. “I’m waiting for the meds to kick in.” Her shoulders were slumped, and she wasn’t at all like the

confident woman Jane had originally met. She looked defeated.

“What happened?” Jane asked, her voice filled with sympathy.

“They came in through the back door and surprised me,” Margaret said. “I don’t know how they did it, but they got in and started knocking stuff over. I heard something, so I went to investigate.” She winced as though she had a shooting pain.

“I called out and went back there. Something hit me over the head, and it all went black. I woke up this morning and called the police.”

“What time did they come in last night?” Jane asked. She assumed Margaret must have been working late the night before, which would explain what she was doing there. Jane was expecting her to say eleven or midnight.

“It was somewhere around 2:00 a.m.,” she said.

“What were you doing here at 2:00 a.m.?” Lucy interjected, sounding more than a little surprised.

Margaret looked at the woman and seemed hesitant to answer. Her eyes moved over Lucy’s face as if she expected to find something there. She stared at Lucy for an uncomfortable

amount of time before her whole body seemed to collapse. Like a balloon suddenly deflating.

“I’ve been living in my office here,” Margaret admitted. “I sold my house to keep the business going, and I put a pull-out bed in the office.” She didn’t look at Lucy or Jane, instead she stared at her hands which were on her lap, as if she was searching for reason in them.

“That’s how I was able to get the money for the remodel and get the online storefront started. That’s why my business hasn’t gone under. After my husband left me, he cleared out almost everything from our account. Thankfully, the house and business were in my name only, so he couldn’t take them.”

A tear slid down her cheek and she angrily brushed it away. “And now this.” She sniffled. “I can’t believe it happened, and I have a mess to clean up. I should have just stayed in the office and locked the door. Then I wouldn’t have this knot on my head to show for it,” Margaret muttered.

Jane didn’t know what to say. She could completely sympathize with a woman whose husband had abandoned her and left her with only the things he couldn’t take. It also explained how Margaret appeared to be doing so well when the reality was quite the opposite.

“Margaret, I’m so sorry,” Jane began, but the words sounded hollow and meaningless, even to her.

“Don’t be, it’s not your fault,” the woman muttered. “You didn’t make my husband of thirty years take off with a younger woman.”

Obviously, she was bitter and had every right to be. Maybe that was why she’d been so snappy with everyone lately. Now Jane saw her in a completely new light. Not just a cranky woman who pushed people away, but as a hurt woman who didn’t want to get close to anyone for fear of getting hurt again.

More than anything, she could understand that feeling. “No, but my husband left so he could ‘find himself’, too,” Jane said as she used air quotes. “And we have two kids, so I know a little something about doing what you can to keep going.”

Suddenly she felt bad for not buying the ring she’d eyed in the store. Jane had decided she wanted to buy it, but she just hadn’t made it back to the store yet. “I certainly won’t judge you for what you did to keep from going under, but you could have reached out, too. I’m sure the community would have tried to help in some way.”

“I was too embarrassed,” Margaret confessed. “Who wants to admit that someone had left them behind? Not when you have so many questions in your heart. Why wasn’t I enough? Why couldn’t you accept me the way I was? What was so wrong with me?” A small sob escaped her lips.

“I think you’re just tired and in pain,” Jane said gently.

“Do you have somewhere you can go?” Lucy asked.

“No, the store’s all I have, and now I can’t even go in there.” Her lips began to tremble at the realization.

Jane heard someone clear their throat close behind her. She turned around to find a man in a dark blue police uniform staring her down. “Excuse me, what do you think you’re doing?”

CHAPTER 18

Jane stared at the officer, unsure how to answer. She studied his thick eyebrows and mustache, the deep brown of his eyes. Nothing told her what to say though, and she stood there dumbly.

“Are you questioning my witness?” he asked when she didn’t answer. His dark eyes were narrowed with irritation.

Jane’s mind raced to think of a response. “I’m just trying to help,” she said lamely.

“That’s nice, but it’s really important you don’t interfere with a police investigation,” he warned. “You could get charged with obstruction of justice if you’re not careful.”

Jane nodded. “I understand.”

“You leave the investigating to the professionals. There’s a reason we have training, you know.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “Unless you’re asking questions for another reason. Where were you last night?”

She found herself staring at him for a moment, sure he was joking. He couldn’t really be asking her that question, could he? When she realized he wasn’t joking, she

straightened up. "I was at home with my children," she replied, lifting her chin.

"Then maybe that's where you should be now," he said dismissively before he turned and walked away. She noticed a cockiness in his gait that she didn't appreciate. Jane opened her mouth with a retort but thankfully Margaret said something first that kept her from it.

"I really wish they'd hurry up," Margaret sighed. "I just want to get back inside my store and clean up."

"I think you're going to need to rest before that can happen," Lucy said to her.

"I'll need to open up as soon as possible, but they didn't bother anything up front," Margaret was saying. "Maybe I can clean in between customers. I just hope nothing got damaged." She sighed heavily and Jane saw that tears were threatening to fall again.

They continued to talk back and forth, but Jane found herself focusing on the conversations going on around them instead.

"I still can't believe this is happening. Maybe I should give Vincent a call and have him update the locks or

something,” someone said. “I heard she had the doors locked, but they got in anyway.”

“Do you think they took anything this time? Maybe it’s different people? They’ve never hurt anyone before,” someone replied.

“What was she doing here then? Working late?”

“I heard it was after midnight.”

Jane turned around and saw the other business owners standing around with pinched expressions and something in her mind began to click.

She whirled back around. “Lucy, I have an idea, but we need to get all the business owners together somewhere so we can all talk.”

A woman standing nearby spoke up. “I’m sorry to jump in on your conversation, but I work at the library. We can use the back meeting room if you’d like?”

Jane nodded. That was perfect because the library was only a couple of blocks away and well within walking distance. “Good. Tell anyone who owns a business here or works in one to meet us over there. I think I know how to put an end to this,” Jane told her.

The women split up and talked among the group to spread the word. Lucy led Margaret to her car which was parked nearby. "I'm going to drive her over there, so she doesn't have to walk in this condition," she explained.

"Good idea," Jane nodded.

The rest of them started breaking apart from the others with promises that they'd keep them updated if anything else happened at the store.

"I can't believe this is happening," she heard someone say. "Who's going to be next?"

There were more voices who expressed the same concern.

"I had a feeling there would be another one," a voice nearby said. She turned and saw it was Marie, the museum docent. "Is it horrible if I say I'm glad it wasn't me at the museum?"

"No, I don't think I'd blame you one bit," Jane said as they fell into step together. "I just hope with everyone working together maybe we can find out who's responsible."

"Are you the one who organized everyone getting together like this?" she asked.

"A little. It was more of a group effort," Jane replied.

A few moments later they arrived at the library and were led to the meeting room. Margaret was in a chair near the front with Lucy. She waved Jane over as everyone found a seat. Sylvia, the head librarian, appeared near Jane, her glasses perched on the end of her nose as always. Jane knew Sylvia well since Jane routinely cleaned the library when it was needed.

“I heard that you’re the one who organized this,” Sylvia said as she took in all the people.

“I’m sorry,” Jane winced. “Lucy helped too, and I didn’t volunteer the library,” she began.

Sylvia smiled. “I’m not mad, dear. Something needs to be done to protect our own and if the police won’t do it, I’m glad to know someone will.” She gave Jane a small pat on the back before moving to the back of the room and finding a seat.

The room became quiet as everyone settled in. “I think they’re ready for you,” Lucy whispered.

Jane stood up and went to the front of the room. She hadn’t realized how many people had come, but now that she was there, she could feel the weight of all those eyes on her. She swallowed loudly, hoping she wouldn’t embarrass herself.

“Hey, everyone,” she said nervously. “My name is Jane Barrow. I own Clean Sweep Cleaning, and this is Lucy Park, who works for the local newspaper,” she said. “The two of us have been trying to figure out who’s responsible for these break-ins, but I think this is the part where we need your help.”

“So you two have been investigating the burglaries?” someone asked. “Like the police?”

“That’s right,” Jane replied. “I’ve investigated cases for clients before, so while I may not be a professional, I do have some idea what I’m doing.”

“That’s more than can be said for the local police,” someone grumbled. There were a few voices that seemed to agree.

“What needs to happen is for all of you to work together and help keep an eye out. There is no way this person or persons could commit these crimes completely unseen. Not in this modern world with cell phones and security cameras and stuff like that. We should be able to catch them,” Jane said.

Everyone muttered and nodded in agreement.

Jane continued. “I’m not saying that you shouldn’t contact the police immediately if you see something that warrants it. I don’t want to get in the way of their

investigation, and we need to let each other know if we see something.”

“How are we going to do that? I’m not going to call all these people if I think I see something,” a person from the group said. A few nodded.

“I have an idea,” Lucy said. “But it’s going to take everyone working together.”

There was a murmur of acknowledgment.

Lucy went on, bolstered by the positive response. “What if we start a group chat with everyone who either runs a business in the area or is employed by one? Even those of you who live close by could probably join. The point of the group will be to alert everyone all at once if we see absolutely anything that seems suspicious.

“I think it’s time that we all became a little paranoid. Unless the people are doing something with a criminal intent, they should have an easy explanation for what they’re doing.”

Jane liked the idea in general, but could see how it had the potential to go bad fast. “This isn’t a witch hunt, though,” she warned. “Only alert one another when you see something that really seems out of place. You wouldn’t want someone to

accuse you of anything, so let's not jump to conclusions as we point fingers." Several people nodded.

"Okay, I'm going to make the group chat," Lucy said as she pulled out her phone. "Then we'll need to add everyone to it."

"How about everyone line up over here?" Jane said, pointing to an area in front of Lucy. "She'll add you to the chat and then you can leave. I don't want to keep everyone from their responsibilities. Just try to keep an eye out for anything that seems strange to you. Whoever this is must be local and somewhat familiar with the stores. We need to find what the common denominator is between all of the victims."

There was a low mumble as everyone got up and began to form a line. Lucy was able to get everyone added quickly and efficiently. Each person ensured they were in before walking out the door. A few stopped and thanked Jane as they left. Marie smiled and said, "Good luck," before heading out the door.

With this many people on her side, Jane hoped she didn't need luck. She stepped off to the side and sent a few messages to reschedule her clients before joining Lucy and Margaret at their table.

“I just don’t get it,” Margaret mumbled.

“What?” Jane asked.

“I know I locked the door,” she said firmly. “I know it as well as I know these are my two hands.” She held her hands up and looked at them. “So tell me how they got in?”

“I don’t know,” Jane said. “Does anyone else have a key to your store?”

She shook her head. “Only my husband and why would he sneak back just to make a mess and hit me over the head?” she questioned.

Jane thought she made a good point. Who could get through a locked door?

CHAPTER 19

Something wasn't adding up. That was what kept running through Jane's mind as she watched the last of the locals sign up for the group chat. It wasn't a massive number of people, but it made her hopeful to see so many of them willing to help each other. Nobody knew who was going to be the next victim. Maybe the vandal or vandals would just stop when they did what they set out to do and no one would ever know who it was and why they had broken into the places. To know that she and the other people were trying to help bring an end to it all was heartwarming.

Jane kept thinking about the fact that Margaret was absolutely sure she'd locked her door. It was like that little piece of information was on repeat in her brain, determined not to let her forget it. Because that thought, the thought that even a locked door wasn't going to help, was a scary one.

The only things Jane knew for certain was that each business didn't have any sort of security in place, and all of them were certain the doors had been locked. Margaret was the only one with a key to her store. Unless it had been her

wayward husband, which seemed unlikely, how could they have gotten in?

Whoever it was, they would need to be very good with locks and have a reason to want to see these businesses take a blow. There was only one person on her suspect list who had the ability to get through a locked door and a motive for committing the crimes, Jerry Sigler.

Who else could it be? As far as she knew, he was the only person in Alma with the ability to pick a lock. She thought it was far more likely that was how the burglar was getting in than that they just happened to have the keys for all three businesses. People didn't just hand those out to anyone.

When she pulled up in front of Jerry's house, he was carrying a backpack from his car and headed to his front door, keys in hand. He turned to look when he saw her, a frown on his face. Jane put her car in park and shut it off.

Jerry's frown deepened as he turned to completely face her, his red Hawaiian print shirt half buttoned over his white slacks. He held his hand up to shield his eyes from the morning sun. When he realized who it was, he frowned. "Jane? What are you doing here so early?"

“I could ask you the same thing. It looks like you’re just getting home. Have you been out all night?” she challenged as she stopped in front of him. She could hear the bite of her words, but she was almost certain it had to be him. And here she was catching him coming home.

“Actually I was. A friend and I went to the riverboats to gamble last night. I got tired and got a room. I just got home, and I lost a lot of my money. So excuse me if I don’t know what you’re talking about right now nor have the patience for it.” He turned to continue unlocking his door.

“The businesses that have been burglarized here in town. Surely you’ve heard about it.” Jane took a step closer. “Everyone’s been talking about it.”

He stopped just as he got the door open. “I have. What of it?” He didn’t turn to face her, but he looked over his shoulder with interest.

She had to keep him from going inside. “The jewelry store was broken into last night and Margaret Green was hurt in the process. She knows she locked the door and others have claimed the other two businesses had locked their doors as well. I know of only one person who has the ability to open a locked door in Alma.” She looked at him pointedly.

“Just because I used to pick locks doesn’t mean I broke into these places,” Jerry said.

“Maybe not, but it does make you a very viable suspect. Not only did you have deep animosity toward two of the businesses, but you had the means to be able to do what the burglar did.” His shoulders bunched as her words struck a chord.

“What’s my motive?” Jerry challenged as he turned to face her.

“The first two were new businesses that you’ve been very verbal about. I was told you wanted them to close down because you thought they were going to bring a bunch of people from the city and ruin our town,” Jane replied.

“And they could!” he cried out, hands flying. “Don’t you see? The way this town has been saved is by flying under the radar. There’s nothing here to bring notice to us, so we get to stay safe in our little bubble. If they start drawing in people from out of town, things will change.”

“Things will change anyway,” Jane pointed out. “You can’t stop change from coming. It will happen whether you want it to or not.” It wasn’t as though a person could stop time.

You had to accept it because there was nothing that could be done about it.

“Well I vote not!” Jerry cried out, breathing heavily. He pulled out an inhaler and took a puff. “I’m sorry, but I feel very strongly about this, and I won’t change my mind.” He moved to turn back to his door.

She had to keep pushing. “Which is exactly why I’m here. You just proved my point. Did you have something to do with the burglaries?” Even if he didn’t vandalize the places, maybe he’d been the one to open the door for someone else.

“No, I didn’t,” he replied, his voice becoming low and calm as if he were trying to stay composed. “Like I said, I wasn’t even in town last night. But I’ll tell you someone who might want to hit Margaret over the head and who you should be looking into. The lady from the bakery. I saw her leave the jewelry store in a huff while I was heading out of town yesterday.”

“She was arguing with Margaret?” Jane asked.

“It looked that way. I’ve never seen someone storm off red-faced because they were having a good time,” Jerry replied.

No, she didn't suppose they did, Jane thought in agreement.

"Now are we done here? Because I don't pick locks anymore. I have very bad arthritis, okay? I couldn't do it if I wanted to," he grumbled.

Jane felt instant regret when she saw the pain on his face at that admission. "I'm sorry, I didn't know."

"Of course, you didn't," he muttered as he turned back around. "I don't tell anyone." He stopped and sighed. "And I guess I understand why you're here. Not everyone can do that sort of thing these days. Why don't you just try to put the word out? Say you need to find someone who can pick locks."

"Do you really think they'd come forward?" she asked.

Jerry shrugged. "If they're good, they'll want to show off. You might be surprised. Have a good day, Jane," he said as he walked into his house and shut his door with a final thud.

As Jane headed back to her car, she decided she had one more stop to make.

CHAPTER 20

Jane was back at White's Bakery, waiting for her turn in line once again. This time there was only one person in front of her, but even so, she was still impatient while she waited.

Finally, the woman left with a bag of doughnut holes, and it was Jane's turn.

"Good morning," Evelyn said brightly. "What can I get you?"

"I would really like to understand why you were leaving the jewelry store yesterday as though you and Margaret had just had a fight." Jane was finished with being polite. She was looking for answers now.

"Who told you that?" Evelyn asked, her eyes narrowing.

"I saw you," Jane lied. "You stormed out of the jewelry store all red in the face." Evelyn didn't have to know who drove by, only that she'd been seen.

"Okay, I admit that I did," she sighed. "But after our conversation, I kept thinking about the way she seemed to be doing so well while the rest of us were struggling so hard. So I went over there to have a conversation with her."

“Clearly the conversation didn’t go well,” Jane pointed out.

“No, it didn’t. She told me it wasn’t any of my business,” Evelyn sniffed.

Jane didn’t point out that it really wasn’t her business because Jane knew none of it was really her business either. “And then what happened?”

Evelyn blinked. “Nothing. I came back to the bakery and that was that.”

“What about last night? Where were you?” Jane pressed.

Evelyn frowned. “At home in bed with my husband. Where do you think I was and what’s with these questions?”

“Margaret was attacked last night when her store was broken into. Maybe you wanted to get even with her for whatever your argument was about and thought that you could use the burglaries as a cover?” Jane knew it was a bit of a stretch, but it was the only trail she had left to follow at this point.

Evelyn’s eyes became wide. “Is that what happened this morning? I couldn’t leave because I was so busy. I was going to stop by later and see what had happened.” Her voice was

softer now, as if she was starting to understand Jane's insistence.

"Do you know anything about lockpicking?" Jane asked, sure she already knew the answer, but she asked anyway. She was starting to think that once again she was on the wrong trail.

"No," Evelyn replied incredulously. "Why would I?"

"I don't know," Jane sighed. "Can I get the chocolate covered cream filled Long John?"

"Sure," Evelyn replied as she moved to fulfill the order.

Jane paid for her Long John and headed back to her car. She sat in the driver's seat for a moment, taking a bite while she continued to think. Maybe whoever was responsible really had somehow gotten keys to each business. That was the only thing Jane could think of.

Lockpicking wasn't exactly something everyone knew how to do. Having keys to each business was much more likely. But now that meant she'd have to broaden her list of potential suspects. Still, she could ask around town and see if anyone knew of someone who could pick a lock. She could make a fake ad or something and see what came of it.

Just as she was taking another bite of her Long John, her phone rang. She hurried to swallow before answering.

“Hey, I have good news,” Henry said as she answered.

“You found the treasure,” she said, her voice filled with hope.

“No,” he said, “but I think I’m getting close with the door mechanism. If you and the kids want to swing by when you get off work, I hope to be almost there by then.”

“If you get it open, you go in whether we’re there or not,” Jane said. “This is your thing.”

“I promised Libby I wouldn’t do anything without her that I could help. I plan to keep that promise,” he said firmly.

“Well I kind of skipped work today, so if you’d like, I can go home and get the kids,” Jane replied.

“That would be great. I was wondering how hard it would be to wait once I get it free,” he said, sounding relieved.

She laughed. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

After she ended the call up she began to wonder if she was getting too involved in the burglaries. After all, she’d just taken a day off to deal with a burglary and not to spend time with her kids. And now she was seriously considering putting out a fake ad to find people who were lockpicks.

“What am I doing?” Jane asked herself as the realization set in. These burglaries had nothing to do with her. She’d helped the business owners all get together to try to keep an eye out for one another. She’d already seen them start to work together in the group chat. Maybe it was time for her to take a step back and wait and see what happens.

Jane headed for home to get Libby and see if Tyson wanted to go on the treasure hunt with them. After that, she decided she’d spend time with her kids. She realized it had been a while since she’d taken a day off and there was no way she was going to spend it on something that didn’t have to do with her. Besides, what was there left for her to do? Nobody knew anything. Now she supposed it was time to sit back and wait.

“Maybe I should schedule a time to get Brett over to the house to help me with the living room floors,” she mused. The hardwood in there was worn but beautiful, and she wanted to preserve it. She knew it was too big of a project for just one person to get done in a day, and there was no way she could have her living room floor unwalkable for very long.

She dialed Brett and he answered on the second ring.

“Hey, Jane. How’s it going?” he asked easily.

“I have a project I think I’d like your help with, but it’s going to take some time.”

“Oh?” he asked. “What’s the project?”

“I’ve decided to redo the living room floor. Strip it, stain it, the whole thing,” Jane said with a sigh. Just thinking about it made her back ache, but oh would it be worth it in the end.

“Wow, that’s going to be something,” Brett replied. “Let me look at my schedule and see when the best time would be for me? I’ll make sure it’s on your days off.”

“Perfect,” she replied.

“You might want to ask friends to help, too. The more hands on deck, the faster we can get your floor back in order.”

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll see what I can do.”

They hung up and she wondered who she could get to help her with something like that? She’d have to think about that.

CHAPTER 21

When Jane and Libby showed up at the museum, Henry was eagerly waiting for them with Marie, the museum docent. Both had smiles on their faces as if they'd just had the best day of their lives.

“There you are,” Henry said happily. His T-shirt was dusty and so were his tan cargo pants. His hair was messy as though he'd been running his fingers through it.

“We came as fast as we could,” Libby informed him. “But there were slow people on the street.”

He chuckled. “Well, I appreciate that.” He looked at each of them and then clapped his hands. “Are you ready?” he asked.

“Yeah!” Libby cried out, the only one willing to match his enthusiasm.

They made their way to the basement and over to where Jane had discovered the engraving. Only now there was a lot more there that hadn't been there before. Now there was some sort of contraption rigged up with pulleys and ropes that were fastened to the wall.

“You've been busy,” Jane said, eyeing the contraption.

“I believe the hole is a door that was meant to swing inward somehow,” he explained. “But I think I have it set up so that we’ll be able to pull it out instead. I tested it a little earlier and it seemed to work,” he said as he pointed to the floor where there were a few scratch marks. “Hopefully it will come all the way out with a little more leverage.”

“You’re the expert,” Marie replied. She was twisting her hands in each other, as if too nervous to stand still.

“Here we go,” Henry said as he took his place and wrapped his hand around a rope. He began to pull, and the stone door started to move. First, slowly, and then with a little more momentum.

“Let me help,” Libby said, and she went to Henry’s side and began to pull on the rope too. It moved a bit more, the sound of stone dragging across the floor filling the basement. Then, as if it moved past whatever had been slowing it down, it opened far enough for a person to fit through.

“I want to go in!” Libby said eagerly as she rushed to the opening.

Henry grabbed her and pulled her back just in time. “Not yet, we have to make sure it’s safe,” he said gently as he

reached for his bag. He pulled out what looked like heavy-duty glow sticks and cracked them.

“Whoa, I want some of those,” Libby said in awe.

Henry chuckled. “Let’s toss these inside and see what’s in there. Then, we’ll get the flashlights,” he instructed. “I want to make sure there’s no critters or anything before we put in brighter light or step in ourselves.”

Henry and Libby tossed the glow sticks in, and they illuminated the room enough to see that although it wasn’t massive in size, there were crates and trunks stacked around in it. They all watched as if expecting something to move in the darkness.

“Okay, now we need flashlights,” Henry said, breaking the quiet. He handed them each a flashlight and they flicked them on. “I’ll step in first to make sure it’s safe,” he said as he slowly inched forward, eyeing the wall and the ceiling as he went, as well as gingerly testing the floor. After a few steps, he moved with more assurance. He shone his light up at the ceiling and all around the room before turning to them.

“Okay, looks safe to me.” He looked around a little more. “Seems like a sturdy room, too.”

“Why don’t you go first, hon,” Marie told Libby. “If that’s okay with your mom?”

“Can I?” Libby asked eagerly.

Jane’s head was filled with all the things that could go wrong, but the look in her daughter’s eyes told her what her answer would be. “Okay, but we’re going to be right behind you.”

Libby nodded and slowly entered the room after Henry.

Jane’s eyes slid over the walls as she followed her daughter in, her flashlight going everywhere. It looked like a natural cave, just big enough to be called a room. There were old steamer trunks and crates that looked to be full of things. “Do you think this is the treasure?” she asked as she eyed the one closest to her.

“Look,” Libby called out. She had her flashlight shining on the wall next to the door they’d come through. There, the rock was smooth, and something was engraved.

“Looks like an inscription. Let me get my tools and clean it so we can see what it says. Marie, why don’t you try opening that trunk?” he suggested.

Marie was standing beside an emerald-colored steamer trunk that at one time had probably been very expensive. It

was in great shape, considering its age and they could easily make out the color even with the film of dust on it. The cave must have been airtight.

Marie reached down and flipped the latches on the trunk before carefully pulling the lid open. “Oh,” she gasped.

“What is it?” Henry asked as he returned.

Jane already had her flashlight shining inside for Marie. “It’s filled with clothes,” she replied, a little surprised. Of all the things she thought they would find, it wasn’t clothes.

Marie carefully lifted up the garment on top and found it was a gown. A sachet bag tumbled from it and Jane picked it up. As she did, she could faintly smell the remnants of rose. “They must have put this in there to keep the clothes smelling fresh for as long as possible.”

The trunk contained many different garments, all in pristine condition. Marie oohed and aahed over them and had already started talking about how to best display and preserve them. The clothes looked like they hadn’t been worn much, if at all, which excited Marie.

“Let’s see what else is here,” Henry said. He moved to a crate that was on the top in the center, looking as though it had been put there for a reason.

He slid the lid free and lifted out a small black book that had been placed on top. Using his light, he turned to the first page.

“Fear not, this is not what you seek,” Henry read. “I suspect it will be a good long while before my treasure is found. But I think someday, someone will come in search of it. So here I have collected things from my home that we no longer need. Friends have added to it as well, as a sort of time capsule for our time.

“We hope you enjoy this peek into the past, future explorer. And don’t forget to look everywhere for the clue to the next place you seek. Then it’s signed, J. Howland.” He stared at the words for a moment.

“He must mean the engraving Libby found,” Jane surmised.

“I would guess, but we’ll still make sure,” Henry replied before breaking into a grin. “Do you realize what this means?” He looked at each of them. “This is a time capsule from the early 1800s! Who knows what we’ll find!”

“I want to know what this says,” Libby said as she turned and shone her light on the engraving.

“Oh, right,” Henry said, almost forgetting. He’d dropped the brushes he’d brought in but picked them up again and headed to the wall. “Keep the light on it for me, Libby,” he said as he began to brush the wall. After a few moments he began to read as he cleared the words.

*“At the first ray of dawn
in the late hours of summer,
The shadows point the way,
Where I shall rest forever.*

*Find the true treasure
As you seek to find more
In the churchyard of olde
Where most will ignore”*

“Find the true treasure as you seek to find more?” Marie echoed.

Henry shook his head. “I’m not sure what it means, but we’ll figure it out,” he replied. “We’ve come this far.”

“Do you know which of the churches it could be talking about? There are, what? Three? Four?” Jane asked.

“I think one closed last year,” Marie volunteered.

Jane watched as Libby traced her fingers over the engravings, knocking more dirt loose. She couldn't believe what a brave little girl she had.

“We'll worry about the next step later,” Henry said as he turned to the crates. “I want to know what's in these right now,” he said with a grin.

CHAPTER 22

After the crazy day she'd had, Jane decided she wanted to make a margarita at home and let her hair down.

She and Libby had helped Marie and Henry look through some of the trunks and found that it was mostly clothes, commonly used items for the time, books, and some journals. Marie was excited and Henry promised her that the museum would end up with the items and that his home museum wouldn't take them, although they may want to borrow them on occasion.

They'd gone home and told Tyson all about it, who looked a little bummed he hadn't gone. After that, Jane made sure the three of them spent time together just being a family and enjoying each other's company.

But now the children were in their rooms, and she was ready to take the edge off of life. She poured the tequila in and mixed everything with a straw before going to the living room and kicking up her feet.

She idly sipped her drink as she scrolled through her phone, enjoying the down time she was giving herself. After a while, she realized that her glass was empty, so she decided to

make another one since it had been so delicious. The next thing she knew, the world had gone a little wobbly. Thankfully, somewhere in between, she'd sent the kids to bed and had managed to get through a bedtime story as well.

When she stumbled on the last step as she returned to the couch she wondered if maybe she'd put a little too much tequila in her drink.

“Oh, well,” Jane said aloud. Hadn't she earned a little tipsy time? A little time to simply forget? After all, this was hardly where she'd thought she'd be in her life when she'd looked toward the future. She was on a dating app, for goodness sake. That thought instantly spiraled into another. The thought of Marcus.

She didn't have to lie to herself, she found him attractive. Extremely. He was like every guy she'd ever had a crush on rolled into one. He was younger, but not too much younger, just enough that the idea of going on a date, a real date with him, seemed almost plausible.

But as handsome as he was, she didn't buy it. Abby had said he'd only swiped yes on a couple of profiles. The fact that hers, out of all the local women who might be on there, was one he said yes to seemed ludicrous to her. There were the guys you married and then there were the ones you only got to

look at, and Marcus was in the second category. Like Brad Pitt or other beautiful celebrities.

Before she even thought about it, she'd opened the app and sent a message.

Seriously, why did you swipe yes on me? she sent. A small voice in the back of her head screamed as she pressed the send button, but she was too far gone to care at the moment. A part of her tried to calculate how long it had been since she'd had her last drink, and she realized that it was probably a lot longer than she thought. Her customary two margarita nights seemed to have been too much this time.

The bubbles on the app popped up, surprising her a little. She wasn't sure what time it was, but it was probably late enough. Her eyes glanced up at the time. Yep, definitely late enough.

Excuse me? he responded.

She knew this could blow it all, but she had to know. She had to understand why he picked her.

I'm not trying to sound crazy or weird, but why did you say yes to me? You're very attractive and seem like a nice guy. You could probably have any single woman in town and probably some of the married ones as well. Abby told me you

only said yes to a few women in town. I'm just wondering why I was one of them.

Her hands were shaking as she pressed send, but she was feeling like she had to know. Before she went on a date with him, she wanted to know where they stood. If he was just doing it to be nice, then she didn't need his date. Maybe Abby said she was a single mom and he thought she'd be easy. Her thoughts ping-ponged from possibility to possibility.

Jane, I don't know if you've looked in the mirror lately, but you are very attractive yourself, Marcus replied. *Then, but that wasn't all that made me say yes. I've had a tough time lately and I'm looking for a reason to smile again. You gave me that the other day. I'm still not sure what tomorrow brings for me, but I moved into my own place today and I'm just taking it one day at a time. I'd like it if we got to know each other better in the meantime. What do you say?*

Jane could feel embarrassment mixed with something else flooding through her. She couldn't put a finger on what the other feeling was, but she did know that he just made her feel weak.

I think I can handle that, she typed back with a smile on her face.

LOL, I'm glad, he replied. But I'm serious about the fact I got a place, so I hope you don't expect somewhere too expensive. I practically drained my account with the deposit and first month's rent.

I don't need anything fancy. She sent back. I'm easy to please. We could share a bag of popcorn and I think I'd be fine with it. As long as I don't have to cook it.

That's good to hear, he replied.

Still tomorrow at 7? She sent back.

And not a minute later.

She grinned as she closed her phone. Maybe she should make a celebratory margarita? No, probably better if she didn't.

The next morning, Jane's eyes were so dry she could barely open them. She was glad it was her normal day off, because otherwise, she wouldn't have been able to work. The last thing she wanted to do was reschedule two days of work.

She rolled over to reach for the glass of water she always kept by the bed and saw it was gone. Her stomach rebelled at the movement and her head wasn't too pleased either. She had a horrible hangover.

As she dragged herself to the bathroom to shower, she remembered bits of the night before. The messages she sent to Marcus. She groaned as she pressed her forehead to the shower wall. How pathetic had that been?

Still, he did answer, she reminded herself. And he did explain why. No getting angry or questioning why she would want to know. Just a straight answer. She respected that and if she was being honest with herself, made her attracted to him even more.

As Jane stepped out of the shower, she realized something. She hadn't told Abby that she was going on a date with her brother. On second thought, she'd never said anything to the kids! What if they were mad when they found out?

She hesitated before brushing her teeth. She should say something to Abby. While she brushed her teeth she came up with a message to send and then typed it out when she was done. She explained that she and Marcus matched and decided to give it a chance and that she hoped she wasn't mad at her. As she sent it off she finished getting ready for the day, the ibuprofen and Gatorade she drank finally kicking in to help her feel a little more alive. *Mental note, only one margarita from now on*, she thought.

As she was heading downstairs, she got a reply.

I know. Marcus told me. Do you know what you're doing? Abby wrote back.

No, and I'm nervous, Jane admitted.

That's so cute, he said the same thing, Abby replied.

Jane stared at the message. He was nervous, too?

CHAPTER 23

Jane had waited a while after the kids woke up to talk to them about her date. They were both prone to being grumpy when they woke up, a trait she knew they probably got from her, and she didn't want to start off on the wrong foot. She really had no clue how they were going to take it, so she wanted to start off on as good a foot as possible.

Thankfully, neither one of them seemed to care all that much. It might have been the fact that she kept insisting she wasn't even sure if there would be another date that made them so unconcerned.

Marcus had said he couldn't afford much, which didn't bother her. She'd planned to pay for her own portion anyway. Wasn't that what people did these days? She wasn't sure. Would he be offended if she offered?

She went about her day and when it was time to get dressed for her date, she decided on a pair of dark cropped jeans and a loose blouse tucked in, but mostly unbuttoned with a sleeveless top underneath. It wasn't fancy, so she didn't look like she was trying too hard. She left her hair down, but ran a

straightener over it to calm some of the strange waves that she sometimes acquired.

“Okay, how do I look?” Jane asked the kids after she came back downstairs. They were both sitting in front of the living room TV, playing Minecraft.

Libby looked up first. “You look pretty,” she said, flashing a smile.

Tyson only glanced in her direction. “You look like you always do,” he muttered.

“Thanks,” she sighed, unsure if the last remark was a compliment or not. “Okay, I’ll only be gone a few hours, so I’m sure you’ll be fine. There are snacks, but don’t eat them all. Message me if you need absolutely anything.”

“Mom, we’ll be fine,” Tyson said easily. “Go.”

“Yeah, Mom. We’ll be fine,” Libby said with a chipper grin.

Jane double checked that the back door was locked, and that Annie had her food and water for dinner before finally telling herself she needed to go.

“Love you, be good,” she said as she forced herself to grab her things and head out the door.

“Why am I so nervous?” Jane asked herself as she headed to the car. “It’s not like I haven’t met him. He’s nice. He’s nice looking. It can’t be a completely horrible night.”

But as she got in the car she realized that was what scared her the most and put a tremble in her body. What if they had a nice time? What if she liked him? Just the thought that she was going on a date made her feel like she was doing something wrong. She was leaving her kids alone at home, while she went out on a date, for crying out loud.

Jane forced herself to take a deep breath. “It’s not a crime,” she reminded herself. “You are still attractive. You are still a person who deserves love.”

She continued to repeat the words she’d been telling herself since the divorce. She wasn’t sure if the affirmations were good enough, but they did take some of the tension from her body, which she was grateful for. She started the car and headed toward town.

They’d agreed to meet at El Marron, the local Mexican restaurant, for dinner. Jane found a parking spot and looked around to see if anyone else was pulling in at the same time. That’s when she spotted Marcus as he climbed out of a truck that looked like it had been recently washed. She climbed out

of her car and met up with him on the sidewalk in front of the restaurant.

“Hey,” he said with a nervous smile.

“Hey,” she replied.

“Glad you came. You look great,” he said as he extended an arm for her. She slipped her hand around it, feeling the solidness of his arm beneath her fingers.

“So do you,” she said as she let him lead her inside.

The hostess asked how many, and he told her two before she led them through the restaurant. They were seated in front of a large mural of a sunset painted in golden hues. The air was filled with the tantalizing aroma of sizzling fajitas and the cheerful buzz of other diners. The hostess gave them both menus before promising their server would be right with them.

Jane stole a quick glance at the menu, trying to calm her nerves. She knew she needed to breathe, so she focused on that as her eyes looked over the words.

“I have to admit, I’ve never eaten here before,” Marcus said as he picked up his menu.

“Well you’re in for a treat, the guacamole here is to die for,” she replied.

“I trust you,” he said with a smile. “I like it when a person knows what they want and just says it.”

“Then you’re just going to love me,” she said, teasing.

He laughed again. “I bet.”

The waiter arrived, and Marcus ordered a bowl of guacamole to start, along with some margaritas. Jane opted for a classic chicken enchilada plate, her usual.

As they waited for their drinks, they chatted. They talked about their interests, hobbies, and places they’d like to travel. Jane was pleasantly surprised to discover how easy it was to talk to Marcus. It was as if they’d known each other for years.

Their drinks arrived and they clinked their glasses together before sipping on the refreshing margaritas. Jane was glad to notice that they didn’t pour nearly as heavily at the restaurant as she had at home. The ice-cold tang of lime was the perfect antidote to her frayed nerves, and she found herself relaxing just a little more.

They continued to chat, and their laughter flowed freely as they got to know each other. Jane had a feeling of connection she hadn’t experienced in a long time. Even before her husband had left, she didn’t remember feeling this listened to.

When the guacamole arrived, Jane couldn't help but watch Marcus's reaction as he took his first bite. His eyes lit up and he let out a satisfied sigh.

"You were right, this is amazing," he said as he dipped another chip into the bowl.

Jane grinned. "Told you so."

Their dinners came soon after that, and Jane's enchiladas looked as deliciously cheesy as ever. Marcus had chosen the carne asada and he looked at it eagerly. "I hope this is as good as that guacamole," he said as he unwrapped his silverware.

"I can't say for sure, because I've never tried it," Jane said as she began to dive into her enchiladas. They each enjoyed the meal they'd chosen and shared a bit of them.

Between bites, Marcus told her a funny story about a situation he found himself in while hiking with friends recently and Jane couldn't help but giggle along with him. She found she really liked listening to him. He had a way of telling stories that was so genuine she was sucked into every word.

As the evening wore on and the plates were cleared away, Jane was glad that she'd taken a chance swiping on Marcus. Her initial nervousness had long since faded and was

replaced by a comfortable sense of ease. She found she didn't really want the night to end.

"I can't believe how quickly time has gone," Marcus said as he glanced at his phone and sighed. Jane had noticed that he'd left it face down and most likely on silent through the whole meal, which was something she appreciated. "I've really enjoyed dinner with you, Jane."

Jane felt her heart skip a beat at the praise. "I have too, Marcus. I didn't expect to have this much fun."

"What? Did you think I'd be a stick in the mud?" he asked with a chuckle.

"I really didn't know what to think," she admitted. "I think that was the worst part."

They paid the bill and Marcus walked her to her car. "Maybe next time we can do something besides just go to dinner," he said gently.

"Maybe. You know, I could have paid for my half," she reminded him. She'd offered earlier, but he'd flat out refused.

"Not with me, you won't," he said firmly and chuckled. "I promise I'm not always this broke."

They'd come to her car and now she could feel her nerves returning. "Thanks for everything," she said as her

bottom touched the car door.

Marcus stepped just close enough that she could smell his cologne and see the reflection of the parking lot lights in his eyes. She looked from one eye to the next before her eyes slid down to his lips. He licked them as if he could feel the weight of her gaze.

“W-What are you thinking about?” she asked nervously. She wanted to reach out and grab his collar and press her lips to his. She wanted to bury her face in his neck and feel his arms wrap around her. Maybe it was the remnants of the tequila talking or all those lonely nights, but she wanted to stop fighting the attraction she was feeling. Even as she was thinking about it, she wondered if she might regret it.

She didn't have to worry though. Marcus leaned forward and when he was close to her lips whispered, “All I've been able to think about all night is what it would be like to kiss you.” Then he slowly leaned forward and brushed his lips to hers.

Unsure at first, she returned the kiss then her world exploded in a world of color and sensations. Somehow, his hand was under her hair, guiding her to him, as if cradling her. The other rested on the car behind her, as if he needed something to help hold him up.

Jane was grateful for the hard, cold metal pressed at her back or she was sure her legs would have given out. Had she ever been kissed with so much passion? So much desire?

When he finally pulled away, they were both breathing heavily. They pressed their foreheads together and Jane let out a nervous chuckle.

“I’ll talk to you soon, Jane,” Marcus promised before forcing himself to pull away.

Jane found she couldn’t move her legs yet, so she stayed where she was as she watched him walk back to his truck. When he reached his door, he turned to look back at her. “Good night,” he said, his voice full of promise.

“Good night,” she said, forcing herself to get in her car. She started it and turned on the lights, feeling shaky for a different reason on her drive home.

CHAPTER 24

Sunday morning, the sun streamed through the windows, casting a warm glow over the breakfast table where Tyson and Libby sat waiting, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee mixed with the scent of pancakes sizzling on the griddle. It was a calm and peaceful morning in their home, and Jane was starting to feel like she was getting a handle on the single parent thing.

Jane poured syrup over Libby's pancake and formed a smiley face before sliding it in front of her daughter. Libby giggled in delight as she picked up her fork and began to eat. Tyson, meanwhile, was slowly buttering his pancakes before methodically cutting them in squares. Only then did he slowly drizzle syrup over them.

Jane watched him and wondered if something had him preoccupied. "Tyson, is something on your mind, honey?" she asked as she started on her own plate.

Tyson glanced up from his plate, his eyes reflecting a mixture of thoughts. "Well, Mom, I had a really weird dream last night."

Jane looked up from her pancakes, intrigued. “Oh? What was it about?”

Tyson took a sip of his orange juice before he began to explain. “So, in this dream, I was a famous astronaut. I was on a mission to a new planet, I guess. Everything was so strange. The sky was purple, and the trees looked like they were made from crystals. Then, I had this team of scientists with me, and we found aliens that came up and talked to us. But we couldn’t understand them since we didn’t speak their language. It was so weird.”

Libby’s eyes widened with wonder as she listened to her brother’s account of his dream, her pancake momentarily forgotten. “Aliens, Ty? Like from space?”

Tyson nodded. “Just like that. I was working hard to find a way to talk to them with this device I was building, but I woke up before I could get it to work.”

Jane smiled at her son’s vivid imagination. “Wow, that sounds like quite the dream.”

Tyson nodded. “Yeah, it was really strange.”

Libby stuffed a bite of pancake in her mouth and said around it, “I had a dream too, Mom!”

“Swallow first please,” Jane reminded her. Once she’d swallowed, Jane said, “Okay, what was yours?”

Libby’s eyes sparkled with excitement as she began to share her dream. “I had a dream I was a princess, and I had a magical dinosaur that was my best friend. We went looking for treasure in a sparkly forest. And when I found the treasure, it was all magic books!” She giggled.

Jane laughed. “That sounds like a fun dream, Libby.”

“I think I want to be a princess when I grow up,” Libby sighed. “Because it was great.”

Tyson chuckled and ruffled his sister’s hair affectionately. “You’d make a great princess, Libby.”

“You think so?” she squealed.

“Yeah, I do,” he said with a smile.

Jane was putting away the mess from breakfast when Tyson came running down the stairs.

“Don’t run,” Jane said, her voice a monotone.

“Sorry,” he said, breathless. “Can I have a friend come over?”

Jane looked over at him. “What friend?”

“Sam. The friend I was telling you about,” he pressed.

“That’s right,” she nodded. “As long as Sam’s parents are okay with it and your room’s clean.”

“It’s clean,” he said nodding. “So I can?”

“Sure, for a while. What are you going to do?”

“Just play games in my room,” he explained. “We’ll leave you alone.”

“Okay then,” Jane relented. “I guess that’s fine.”

“Thanks, Mom!” he yelled as he ran back upstairs.

Jane went on cleaning up the kitchen and putting everything away. Every Sunday morning she forced herself to clean the parts of the house she hadn’t gotten to during the week. Cleaning for work didn’t exactly make her want to do the same thing at home on her day off, but she knew if she didn’t do it, no one else would.

Time passed and soon she heard Tyson calling from upstairs. “Sam’s here!” he called. “I’ll be down in just a second.”

“Okay!” Jane called. She left the kitchen sink to greet their visitor.

When Jane went to the door to open it, she was surprised to find a young girl with long blonde hair pulled back in a loose braid on her doorstep.

“Hi, I’m Sam,” the girl said with a smile that produced dimples. “Tyson said I could come over and play Call of Duty with him,” she said.

“Oh, right,” Jane said, shaking her head. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you were a girl.”

“Mom!” Tyson said from behind.

“Should I go home?” Sam asked, her big eyes filled with concern.

Jane shook her head. “No, sweetie. Come on in.” Jane hadn’t realized how surprised she was that Tyson had invited a girl over. Was this the same one he’d talked to so much at the movies that Libby had told her about?

“Can we get a soda before we go upstairs?” Tyson asked.

“Sure, but Tyson?” Jane paused to make sure he was listening. “That bedroom door stays open.”

“Mom,” he groaned.

“You heard me,” she said.

“Fine,” he said, a little too firmly. “You’re being embarrassing.”

“I know, honey,” Jane replied. “And I’ll probably only get worse.”

“Thanks for letting me come over and play, Ms. Barrow,” Sam said as she walked out the door.

“It was no problem, Sam. Are you sure you don’t want a ride home?” Jane asked.

She’d learned that Sam only lived a couple of miles away, also out in the country. Her house was closer to town, but it was only a quick bike ride to any kid with endless energy. And that was Sam. Always smiling. Jane had found that she liked the girl, and she seemed like a good influence on Tyson, which he really needed.

“No, I’m fine. Thanks, though,” she said as she headed out the door.

“I’m going to walk with her a little bit,” Tyson said as he followed her out and shut the door.

Jane went to the window and watched as Tyson walked Sam out to the road. She held onto her bike as they stopped to talk and Jane noticed that Tyson’s face grew serious, bordering

on scared. He said something and Sam smiled. Nodded. Then she took one step toward him and gave him a quick peck on the cheek before climbing on her bike and riding away.

Jane stepped away from the window before Tyson could turn around and see her, but not before she saw the smile spread across his face and the small fist pump that he did.

CHAPTER 25

Later in the day, Jane was totally immersed in replacing the trim boards when she began thinking about the burglaries in town. She grabbed the broom and swept the dust away from the crevices while she started to go through her list of suspects once again to see if maybe she'd missed something somewhere.

When she'd spoken to Chelsea, the owner of The Book Bar, she'd mentioned Evelyn White, the owner and operator of White's Bakery and Jerry Sigler. Jerry was a local man that Jane already knew wasn't a fan of his small town trying to be progressive.

Then Chelsea had told her Evelyn was upset they were selling products similar to hers. She claimed they had something of an unwritten agreement with The Book Bar that they would carry her baked goods. Mickey's Diner had made a name for itself because of their pies, another baked good Evelyn often carried. Jane felt that was the motive for Evelyn White.

Jerry Sigler, while once an accomplished lockpick due to the business he'd been involved in, now has arthritis that

would keep him from being able to try to break into anything. So even though he had a very powerful motive for wanting the businesses to be gone, he had no way to do so.

She'd learned about Tom Stevens at Mickey's Diner. He was a man who had worked for both The Book Bar and Mickey's, not lasting long at either one. He was supposedly disgruntled, but when Jane had met him at the river, he didn't seem too concerned about anything. He'd mentioned to her that Lucy Park had been asking around about the burglaries, too.

When Jane had spoken to Evelyn, she'd pointed her finger at Margaret Green. Her reasoning was that Margaret was trying to sabotage her competition. Before The Book Bar and Mickey's Diner, she had what was supposedly the most profitable store in town. But no one knew she was secretly going under.

Margaret Green had said she thought Greg Adams would be a likely burglary suspect. She claimed he was weird and liked to stand around in the stores and watch people shop or ask too many questions. But then Jane had found out that Greg was autistic, and his particular tendency was to study businesses, because he was fascinated by how they worked.

No crime there. And he also suggested that she talk to Lucy Park.

After she finished with the trim, Jane stood up and straightened her back, groaning. Suddenly, she remembered Jerry Sigler's advice about finding people who could pick locks.

Rather than put out an ad, she had a better idea. Alma was a small town, and was usual in small towns, the residents seemed to know everyone's business, at least most of the time.

She went to her phone and opened the group message between the local business owners and employees.

Do any of you know of anyone in the Alma area who would be able to pick locks or make keys?

She left off the reason why to make sure that nobody withheld any information. If she said she thought it was a characteristic of the suspect, someone might not answer simply because they'd feel that there was no way it was so-and-so.

She tucked her phone away and started cleaning up her mess. When she was finished, she decided to check on Libby. She'd run off to play, but Jane hadn't heard from her in a

while, so she quietly walked through the house toward Libby's room so she wouldn't disturb her.

Libby sat cross-legged on her bedroom floor; a colorful array of toys scattered around her. Her hair was in unruly waves, as if she'd been busy. She was talking to each of her dolls and action figures, because she had what would be considered by some to be "boy toys" as well, and she was giving each of them instructions.

Jane couldn't help but smile at the sight of her daughter's creativity in full bloom. She pushed the door open a bit wider, making her presence known.

"Hey, sweetie," Jane whispered, not wanting to disrupt her too much.

Libby looked up, her eyes brightening at the sight of her mother. "Hi, Mommy!"

Jane walked into the room, taking a seat beside Libby among her toys. She picked up a doll and straightened its jacket. "What are you playing?"

"They're going on an adventure," Libby grinned. "Dolly is the brave explorer and this one," she held up a superhero action figure with a cape. "Is going to help her along the way."

Jane smiled, overjoyed her daughter had such an active imagination. “That sounds like a lot of fun.”

“You can play too, if you want,” Libby asked carefully. “But I understand if you’re too busy.” The way her eyes dulled gave Jane the push she needed.

“No, I can play for a little while,” she insisted. “What do you want me to do?”

Libby beamed. “Okay, hold this one and then we’ll get started,” she said with authority.

They continued to play for a while, with Jane letting Libby take the lead. But then Libby began to grow quieter, and she set her toys aside.

Jane noticed the change in her daughter and moved closer to her. “Is something on your mind, sweetheart?”

Libby hesitated for a moment, her small fingers fidgeting with her doll’s dress. “Mommy, can I ask you something?”

“Of course, Libby. You can always ask me anything,” Jane reassured her.

Libby looked down at the floor, her voice barely above a whisper. “Do you think Daddy misses us?”

Jane's heart clenched at the question. Of the three of them, Libby understood the least what was happening to their family. It made it so much harder to know what to say and how to say it. Jane reached over and gently lifted Libby's chin, so that their eyes met.

"I'm sure he does, Libby," Jane replied, her voice filled with understanding. "Your daddy loves you very much. Remember how he used to tell you that all the time? I'm sure he thinks about you a lot."

Libby's lower lip quivered, and her eyes welled up with tears. "Sometimes I miss him a whole big bunch."

Jane wrapped her arms around her daughter, pulling her into the most comforting embrace she could. "I know, sweetie. It's okay to miss him. Sometimes grownups have to make hard choices and it's not just hard on them, but those who love them, too. But even though he's not here, I am, and so is Tyson. You've always got us. Don't forget that."

"I love you, Mommy," Libby sniffled as her tears subsided.

Jane kissed Libby's forehead, her own eyes glistening with unshed tears. "I love you too, Libby. More than anything in the world. We'll get through this together, okay?"

Libby nodded as she squeezed her mother tighter. “Thank you,” she said softly.

“Hey, you want me to get you a drink?” Jane asked.

“Yeah,” Libby said, her sadness now behind her. “But surprise me with something good.” She grinned.

Jane slowly stood up. “Okay. I’ll be right back,” she said.

She went downstairs and made a glass of chocolate milk for Libby before carrying it back to her. By then she was back to her pretend adventure with her stuffed animals and dolls. Jane marveled at how resilient kids could be. If only she could always brush sadness off that easily.

When Jane finally checked her phone, she saw her question had gotten a few responses. A couple of older people suggested Jerry Sigler, but most of them said they didn’t know. Until she read one message.

Vincent from Valued Security can.

Suddenly, a new possibility was before her. What did she know about Vincent? Did she even know his last name? She remembered being at Match Jewelry when he came in to ask Margaret if she was interested in security. She’d rudely

dismissed him and that night someone broke into her store and hit her over the head. Was it a coincidence? Maybe. But there was enough suspicion in her mind that she decided to send a message to Lucy Park.

Do you know if Vincent from Valued Security visited The Book Bar and Mickey's Diner before they were hit? she asked and then pressed send. She couldn't recall when she was talking to people if anyone had mentioned him visiting. But what kind of motive would a security guy have?

Then she remembered talking to him outside of Match Jewelry. He'd said he was the only one in Alma who did security. He would know who had what for security. Maybe he'd used the knowledge he learned from his job to break into the businesses?

It was a bit of a long shot, she thought, but it was still worth looking into.

Her phone dinged with a reply from Lucy. *He did, why?* She asked.

Because I have an idea, Jane texted back. Then, she went into the group chat and wrote *I need to know who uses Valued Security and who doesn't. And if Vincent has been in to talk to you about getting security for your business.*

It might be a long shot, but right now it was the only shot she had.

CHAPTER 26

After a number of messages and phone calls, Jane had a plan. They'd have to wait until late that night, but it gave her a chance to plan everything out perfectly.

She still wasn't sure that it was Vincent. Not entirely. But she'd found a pattern of him approaching a business that had no security, being turned down, and then soon after that, the business was vandalized. If it wasn't him, then it was someone close to him. Jane decided to set a trap.

There were only two businesses around the square that hadn't gotten security through Vincent. One was The Beauty Spot, a local beauty shop, and The Market Place, a second-hand store. Jane managed to get a few volunteers to help and also started talking to the owners of both places. In the span of two hours, they'd worked it all out.

She'd considered calling the local police to tell them what she'd found, but after the way she'd been treated by them, she was hesitant to do so. Besides, what if she was wrong? There was no guarantee it was going to be one of those two businesses, and it might not be Vincent. He might just be another link in the chain.

But Jane was starting to not think that. The longer they sat watching The Market Place, keeping an eye on the back door, the more convinced she was it was Vincent, because it just added up.

“See anything yet?” Lucy’s voice whispered over the walkie talkie.

“Nothing so far,” Jane replied into it. “Remember, if you get tired, you can swap out.”

“Shouldn’t you get home to your kids?” Lucy reminded her.

Jane knew she should. She’d told them she’d only be gone for a couple of hours, and they’d asked if their aunt could come over like before. Her sister, Ava, had been more than willing to come over and this time she brought her daughter.

“I’ll get there soon. I’m sure they’re still busy having fun with my sister and her daughter,” Jane said to Lucy.

So now Jane was sitting across the alley in another business watching the back door of The Market Place through a window. A pair of night vision binoculars were waiting nearby, just in case. She wasn’t sure who had brought them, but she was going to have to find out where they got them because she wanted a pair of her own.

The owner of The Market Place, Taylor, leaned against the window as well, watching the dark. She was the person who they'd planned would observe anything different, but Jane couldn't help watching while she was there. Taylor straightened slightly and peered outside. "Do you see that?" she said.

Jane hadn't been looking in the same direction, but now she was. "What did you see?"

"I think I saw someone moving in the darker shadows," she whispered.

Jane hoped the wireless camera they'd installed in the alley was still doing its job. The owners had really pulled together with their technology and time to catch who was responsible. Jane just hoped she didn't let them down.

Suddenly, the person stepped out just enough that their shoulder, arm, and leg were in the moonlight, and clearly, someone was there. Considering that the owner of the business was with her and all the employees were probably at home, Jane felt her heart begin to race.

"We might have something," Jane whispered into the walkie talkie. Somewhere upstairs a computer should be recording what the hidden camera outside was catching. The

figure crept up to the back door of The Market Place and began to kneel down.

They reached into the pocket on the leg of their cargo pants and pulled something out. They set it down on the ground beside them and began to work on the lock. Jane could see all of this through the night vision binoculars.

“They’re working on the lock,” Jane said as she passed the binoculars over to Taylor.

Taylor swore and continued to watch. “He’s in,” she said.

“He’s gone inside. Let’s go,” Jane said as they all moved as planned. Almost everyone pulled out their phone and hit record as they rushed out into the alley and to back door of The Market Place.

The plan was simple. Wait for the burglar to break in, then everyone would swarm the building through the back and front doors. The person would have nowhere to go and with so many phones recording what was taking place, there would be enough evidence to send the person to jail.

Jane followed the group, her phone out as they hurried in the door and flipped on the lights. Standing in the middle of the back room was Vincent, dressed in black. He’d already

started knocking things over. Plastic totes of clothing littered the floor along with hangars, and other miscellaneous things.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Taylor bellowed at him.

Jane heard someone calling the police, so she continued to watch what was happening. Taylor got up in Vincent’s face and began to yell at him. Jane had never heard swear words used so profusely and colorfully, and it was quite impressive. She insulted Vincent, his business, and his manhood. By the time she was done, Vincent was in tears.

“I was just trying to scare people a little,” he sobbed as blue and red lights began to shine through the front windows.

“Well, you certainly succeeded,” Jane said as she stepped forward. “You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“I was struggling,” Vincent whined.

“We all are,” Jane said patiently. “But that doesn’t give you the right to damage people’s property.”

“It could all be replaced,” he stammered.

“You could have put people out of business,” Jane said.

He looked like he hadn’t ever thought of that. The police entered The Market Place and began to take control of the

situation. Everyone shared their witness testimony and with that many people there, Vincent didn't stand a chance.

When it was Jane's turn to give her statement, the officer who had confronted her at Match Jewelry looked at her as though he was put out. "Well, well. Doesn't seem like you listened very well when we met before." She was sure she saw his mustache twitch in amusement.

"I can honestly say that's one thing I'm not very good at," she admitted with a chuckle.

CHAPTER 27

Jane was just about to leave for work when she got a message from Lucy Park.

Hey, do you have a minute this morning?

Jane pulled over and drove into a parking lot so she could text her back.

Just a few, she wrote back. *Do you need something?* Jane could spare maybe thirty minutes if traffic was good in the city.

Could you meet me at White's Bakery? It won't take long, Lucy wrote.

Heading there now, Jane replied as she turned around in the parking lot. When she got to the bakery, she was surprised to see how busy it seemed to be, judging by the number of cars in the immediate area.

“Wow, I bet Evelyn's happy about this,” she muttered as she headed inside. She was just grateful she wouldn't have to stick around with such a crowd.

When Jane pushed the door open, she realized there weren't as many people as she'd originally thought, but there

were still quite a few, and they all turned to look at her when she walked in. Then the entire place erupted in applause.

“What is this?” she asked, confused. After a moment, she began to recognize most of the faces.

“Everyone wanted to say thank you,” Lucy said as she stepped forward, holding a gift box. “They all know that you don’t have any more time in your day than they have, but even so, you took the time to worry about them and their businesses.”

“That’s what you do in a town like Alma,” Jane said with a wave. “You look out for each other.”

“But not everyone does,” Evelyn said as she came around the counter with a bag of cookies and a cupcake and handed them to Jane

Lucy held the gift out to Jane. “This is for you, too.”

Jane set the baked goods on a nearby table before taking the gift. Everyone was watching her and very carefully, she slid the lid off and tucked it on the bottom of the box. Inside was a brand-new tablet.

“Everyone pitched in, and I got that for you,” Lucy said. “I remembered when you were telling me all you had figured out about the case and that you had a little notebook you used

to keep track of your thoughts. I decided that this would be a little more efficient. Plus, you can track your clients and anything else from there and sync it to your phone.”

“This is too much,” Jane said, her eyes scanning the crowd. “I can’t accept this.”

“You can and you will,” Margaret Green said as she stepped forward. “We all pitched in, and we can’t get our money back now. So you might as well enjoy it.” She gave Jane a reassuring smile.

Jane felt tears start to form. “I don’t know what to say.” She looked around again. “Thank you. Each and every one of you. I didn’t do this for the praise. I did it because I thought it was the right thing to do. Well, that, and I’m a little nosey,” she said with a laugh as the others joined her.

“But really, our town is special, and we need to keep it that way, and the reason it’s special is because we all care about each other. We look out for each other. Every one of you was willing to stay up late and stop Vincent from victimizing anyone else. You all deserve something, too.”

“We got something,” Evelyn replied. “We got our peace of mind back.” Others nodded in agreement.

“If you’re sure,” Jane said with a smile. She’d wanted a tablet for a long time, but she’d resigned herself to sticking with her notebook.

Chelsea, the owner of The Book Bar, stepped forward. “And as far as I’m concerned, you can stop in and have a drink on the house whenever you want. Heck, I’ll even let you take the books home.” She grinned.

“Now that’s a perk,” Jane said with a laugh, and everyone joined her.

Life quickly got back to normal, and Jane was able to make up the clients she’d had to miss. Just as she thought, none of them had given it a second thought and one of her clients had expressed that they’d hoped she’d taken the day to herself. She was glad to report that she’d taken at least some of the time to relax.

After work that day, she’d brought home dinner from the city to save herself from having to cook. It had been such a good day she hadn’t wanted to sully it by standing over a hot stove. Not when she knew exactly how to make her kids smile. That was by stopping at their favorite Chinese place and bringing home takeout for an early dinner.

When they were finished and the kids had gone outside with Annie, Jane cleaned up the kitchen. She'd thought about doing more work around the house, but instead she decided to carry her book outside and sit with the kids.

Jane watched as Libby and Tyson played in the yard with Annie. It was a warm evening, and the grass was lush and green. A gentle breeze rustled through the leaves of the trees surrounding their home. It was the perfect day for some family fun.

Libby ran across the yard, her long hair flying behind her like a flag. She giggled uncontrollably as Annie, with a wagging tail and a perpetually happy expression, chased after her. Annie's fluffy coat glistened in the sunlight as she bounded through the grass, her tongue lolling out of her mouth in pure joy.

"Mom, look at me!" Libby shouted, her tiny arms flailing as she ran in circles. Jane couldn't help but smile at her daughter's boundless energy. Libby had a way of making every moment feel like a celebration.

Tyson sat on the porch steps, tossing a tennis ball in the air that he'd brought out to play fetch with Annie. That was how Libby came to be running around with her. She was teasing the dog as though she would get the ball first. He

tossed the ball and then watched Libby and Annie's game with a mixture of amusement and affection.

Annie, ever the obedient dog, brought the tennis ball back to Tyson, her tail thumping against the ground in anticipation. He reached down to pet her, his fingers ruffling her soft fur.

"Having fun, Mom?" Libby asked, as she stopped to catch her breath.

Jane nodded, her heart swelling with love for her children. "I am, sweetheart. It's days like this that make all the hard work worth it."

Tyson threw the ball again, but Libby, clearly tired, decided to join him on the porch steps. She plopped down beside her big brother, her face flushed with the exhilaration of their game.

"Tyson, can I throw the ball?" Libby asked, her blue eyes wide with hope.

Tyson smiled down at his little sister and handed her the tennis ball. "Of course, Libby. Just be sure to throw it gently, okay?"

Libby nodded eagerly and took the ball in her small hands. With all her might, she tossed it across the yard, but it

didn't go very far. Annie trotted over to retrieve it, wagging her tail as if it had been the best throw she'd ever seen.

Jane couldn't help but laugh at the sight. Libby had a lot to learn about throwing a ball, but it didn't matter. What mattered was the joy on her daughter's face as she participated in the game with her older brother.

As the evening wore on, the family continued to play together. They took turns throwing the ball for Annie, each of them reveling in the simple pleasure of being outside together. The yard was filled with laughter, barking, and the sound of children's voices.

At one point, Libby decided to take a break from playing with Annie and lay down on the grass. She looked up at the sky, her small fingers tracing the last clouds that were still in the sky.

"Mom, do you ever think about what the clouds look like?" Libby asked, her voice filled with wonder.

Jane sat down beside her daughter, gazing up at the sky. "All the time, Libby. Sometimes, they look like animals or objects, and sometimes, they're just beautiful shapes."

Libby pointed to a cloud that resembled a dragon with its wings outstretched. "Look, Mom, that one looks like a

dragon! Do you see it?"

Jane squinted at the cloud and nodded, playing along. "You're right, Libby. It does look like a dragon. And it's flying across the sky."

Tyson joined in, lying down on the grass next to them. "I see a spaceship over there," he said, pointing to a different cloud formation. "It's on a journey to another galaxy."

The three of them spent time cloud-gazing, each one finding different shapes and stories in the ever-changing canvas of the sky. It was a simple but magical moment, a reminder of the beauty that could be found in the world when they took the time to look.

As the sun began to dip below the horizon, casting a warm, golden glow over the yard, Jane knew that this was a day she would always cherish. It was a day filled with love, laughter, and the simple joy of being together as a family. And as they watched the sun set, with Annie curled up beside them, Jane couldn't help but feel grateful for the moments that made life truly special.

CHAPTER 28

Marie greeted Jane and Henry at the entrance of the Alma History Museum with a smile on her face.

“Welcome,” Marie said, her voice tinged with excitement. “I’m so glad you two could come. I’ve been working hard to clean up everything we discovered downstairs, and I can’t wait to share them with you.”

Jane and Henry had talked about the items that they’d found. At the time they’d been dirty, and they weren’t even sure what some of them were. Marie had been eager to look everything over herself, something Henry had graciously allowed without any fuss.

Marie led them through the narrow corridors of the museum, their footsteps echoing on the hardwood floors. The walls were adorned with faded photographs and antique paintings that told the story of the town’s rich history.

As they entered a well-lit room filled with glass display cases, Jane and Henry’s eyes widened in amazement. The cases were already arranged with some of the items, and they glistened under the soft museum lighting.

“Let me start with this,” Marie said, gesturing to a beautifully preserved dress. The gown was made of rich, deep green silk and adorned with delicate lace. “This piece would have been worn by a prominent lady in our town. It’s exquisite, isn’t it?” she asked as she pointed to it.

Jane couldn’t help but reach out to touch the fabric, marveling at the craftsmanship. “It’s stunning,” she said, her voice filled with awe. “I can’t imagine how much work went into creating something like this.”

Henry nodded in agreement; his eyes fixed on the dress. “It’s a work of art, for sure, and the fact it has a connection to Alma’s history makes it even more special. Maybe even more than the treasure.”

Marie smiled at their enthusiasm and moved on to the next display case. “Here we have some other clothing items,” she explained. “This pair of leather boots belonged to a local blacksmith, according to the books that were left, and this pocket watch was carried by the town’s first train conductor. They represent the time when our town was growing rapidly because of the expansion of the railroad.”

Henry examined the rugged leather boots with a sense of admiration. “You can almost feel the hard work that went into making these. It’s incredible how much history is tied to

everyday objects like these.” He grinned. “Stuff like this is why I got into history in the first place.”

Marie nodded. “That’s exactly what we hope to convey with this exhibit. History is not just about grand events; it’s also about the lives of ordinary people who lived in our town and contributed to its growth.”

The tour continued, with Marie showcasing a wide range of items, from vintage photographs and handwritten letters to antique tools and kitchen utensils. Each artifact had its own story to tell, and Jane and Henry found themselves captivated by the tangible connection to the past.

As they moved through the exhibit, Marie shared anecdotes about the families who had donated the items and the roles they’d played in shaping the town’s identity. She spoke passionately about the dedicated team of museum volunteers who had painstakingly helped her clean and restore the artifacts, ensuring that they would be preserved for future generations.

When they finished, Marie explained that they would rotate items out as the other ones were ready to be exhibited. “These are just the first ones we could display,” she explained.

“You and your volunteers did an amazing job,” Henry proclaimed. “I don’t know of anyone who could have restored them better.”

“Thank you,” Marie blushed. “That’s high praise knowing where you work.”

Jane and Henry thanked her again for inviting them to see the pieces and then headed back outside. They’d parked beside one another and so they slowly made their way to the cars.

“I can’t believe we’re the ones who found that stuff,” Jane finally said.

“I know, this treasure hunt has been better than I could have ever imagined.” When he looked at Jane his eyes were sparkling, and they were filled with emotion. “I’m so glad I met you that day at the library.”

Jane was confused for a moment, only remembering when they’d found him at the park. “Oh, that’s right! You came to the library before it opened, and I had to send you away.”

“I knew then you were going to be important,” he said with a smile.

Jane looked down. “I don’t know if I’m the important one. Libby’s been more help than I have.”

“You’ve helped more than you know,” Henry replied, his voice filled with meaning.

Jane looked up at him, and she wondered if he felt that pull, too. The one that made her want to reach out and brush away the hair that had fallen over his forehead. He looked like he was going to say something, but his words never came.

“Well, I guess I better get going. I have a lot to do,” Jane said. She’d almost said she needed to get ready for a date, but for some reason she kept that information to herself.

“Oh, right,” he said, collecting himself. “Me, too.” He smiled. “See you around? We still need to work out what that next part means. I’ve got some ideas but wouldn’t mind the opinion of a local.”

“Call me whenever,” Jane said with a smile before climbing in her car.

Henry nodded as he opened his door. “Will do,” he said.

“You organized all of that?” Marcus asked with surprise.

Jane nodded. “I did, with some help, of course.”

They were sitting across from one another in a sushi restaurant in Kansas City on their second date. Marcus had insisted he choose something more upscale to balance out the first date. Jane honestly hadn't minded what they'd done for their first date, but she wasn't going to argue if it meant that much to him.

She'd just shown him the video she'd recorded from her phone the night they'd caught Vincent, and how everyone had taken matters into their own hands.

"That's amazing," he said as he leaned back.

Jane shrugged. "I don't know, but it does feel good," she said.

Knowing that she'd help stop the local business owners from having to fear for their businesses did make her feel good. This time, rather than just helping some rich person with their troubles, she'd used her skills for what she felt was for a better use.

"I'm really glad I'm getting the chance to know you," Marcus said as he reached across the table and held her hand. It surprised her at first, but she let it happen, relaxing into the contact. It felt good to be desired again.

She and Marcus continued their dinner and then he took her to the City Market, and they walked among the booths and performers. As Jane was munching on a churro, Marcus slipped his hand in hers and she smiled. When was the last time she walked hand in hand with someone? She wasn't sure.

“I want you to know that I don't want to move fast, not by any means,” he carefully said, “But I would like to meet your kids sometime. That is, if you're okay with it,” he added.

Jane thought about it as she finished the last bite of her churro. Did she want that? He must have seen the confusion on her face because he stammered on, “N-not that it has to be anytime soon. It's just, well, I wanted you to know that I, uh, like kids. So it, uh, wouldn't bother me.” He ran his hand through his hair. “I'm really fumbling this.”

Jane tossed her head back and laughed. “It's okay, I know what you mean. And honestly, I haven't really thought about it that much. I mean, I think the second date is a little soon...” she paused to give him a look.

“And I get that,” he said, nodding.

“...but it would be nice if things continue this way for you all to meet. Then you could just come over to the house and spend time with all of us or something.”

Jane wasn't sure how that might go over with the kids. They'd reacted well so far to her dating, but she wasn't sure they understood the scope of what that meant. Another man coming around, spending time with them all, might be upsetting to them. She shook her head, pushing the worry away. She'd cross that bridge when she got there. Then she had an idea.

“Hey, I actually have a question for you. How do you feel about redoing old wood floors?” she asked.

He frowned. “I'm not against it, why? Do you need an extra set of hands?”

She grinned. “You bet I do.”

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ABOUT DIANNE

I live in Huntington Beach, California, with my husband, Tom, a former California State Senator, and my boxer dog, Kelly. My passions are cooking, reading, and dogs, so whenever I have a little free time, I am either in the kitchen, playing with Kelly in the back yard, or curled up with the latest book I'm reading.

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