

First Edition Murder

A Sandie James Mystery
Book One



Tessa Kelly

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A Sandie James Mystery, Volume 1

Tessa Kelly

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First published in 2019

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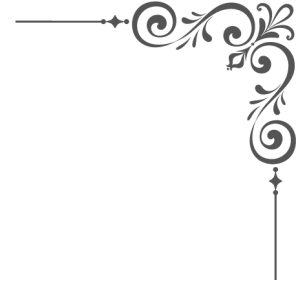
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To my mom, who remains my biggest cheerleader. Thank you
for believing in me!

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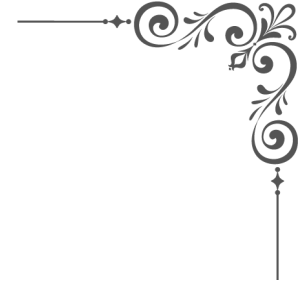


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end of **FIRST EDITION MURDER**



Sandie and Family

Sandra (Sandie) James. Sandie is almost thirty, five foot seven, slender and attractive with hazel eyes and wavy, chestnut hair. Rather graceful from years of ballet classes. Has a Master's Degree in Literature which doesn't pay the bills, so she works part-time in her sister's bakery. Sandie lives with her best friend, Felisha.

When not working at the bakery, she loves gardening and playing with her dad's springer spaniel, Marlowe.

Katherine (Kathy) Thompson, older sister and owner of Kathy's Bakery, the best bakery in the world (according to Sandie, anyway).

Kathy is thirty-eight, petite, dark-haired, and thin despite being a bakery owner. Or perhaps because of it—the job does take a lot of energy. She is married to Jeff Thompson, but the two have a strained relationship. Her husband is often disrespectful toward Kathy. Sandie does her best to keep her opinions about Jeff to herself.

William (Will) James, younger brother, police detective at the local precinct.

Will is twenty-eight, tall and lanky with blond hair and deep-blue eyes. Has a strong penchant (some would say obsession) with XTRA Screamin' Dill Pickle Pringles, which he superstitiously must eat every morning before going on shift as he believes they bring him luck. When not preoccupied with his job, his smile can light up the whole room.

Will is fiercely protective of his sisters.

Nicolas Andrew James, the gang's father. Retired. Runs a used bookstore from the first floor of his two-story brownstone with the chipped yellow façade, where the siblings grew up. Considers the bookstore more of a hobby than a business.

Nicolas is sixty and is in decent shape. Has dark-brown eyes, salt-and-pepper shaggy hair, and a strong nose. Dresses mostly in faded t-shirts and jeans. Is the owner of a happy springer spaniel named Marlowe and two temperamental cats, Asimov and Hemingway.

Marlowe, of course, is named after the famous literary detective from the mysteries of Raymond Chandler, the writer with whom Nicolas is obsessed. (Perhaps even more so than Will is with the Pringles.) Nicolas's collection of Raymond Chandler first editions is still missing *The Big Sleep*, the first mystery in the series. This fact is a source of great distress to Nicolas.



Chapter 1

Whoever said weddings are a joyous occasion never catered one in high heels and an evening gown.

I winced behind the extravagant buffet table in my silver stilettos and threw a cheerless glance across Luce della Vita's main dining room. The newlywed Mrs. David Sorrento, and the reason for my current suffering, wore a strapless white sequin and lace ball gown with a daring neckline and a lengthy train.

Marrying for the second time at forty-one, Angela's first wedding took place at City Hall when she was three months pregnant with her daughter, Kimberly. In Angela's own words, this time was her first "real" wedding. Her opportunity to sparkle.

The only thing that stopped her from taking the reception out of Cobble Hill, our cozy little corner of Brooklyn, and ritzing it up at the Manhattan Four Seasons, was her fiancé's insistence on setting a budget. David saw no excuse for wasting a fortune at someone else's establishment when his restaurant could provide the perfect venue. It took some arm twisting for Angela to agree to settle for a humbler location, but she was adamant that everything should be as "fancy-schmancy" as she could make it, and that included the wait staff.

Over the course of a week, the entire first floor and rooftop of Luce della Vita had been scrubbed clean of its laid-back neighborhood vibe and transformed into something barely recognizable. Hanging installations of white flower garlands with twinkling lights covered every inch of wall space and hundreds of pillar candles in tall glass cylinders accentuated the lavish centerpieces on every table.

At any other time, I wouldn't begrudge Angela her dream wedding or grumble about having to wear heels and the flowy dark-blue halter dress another caterer lent me on short notice, but after three hours of dashing up and down the restaurant stairs with wine bottles, I wanted to say *addio* forever to all evening wear. Still, the reception wasn't likely to wind up anytime soon. I had to resign myself to another two to three hours of glamorous misery.

At least I could give my tired feet a small break.

The guests, drinks in hand, milled around by the champagne fountain; the bruschetta and crab cakes I was serving had less allure now than an hour ago. Which meant, no one would notice if I took off my shoes for a few minutes.

I slipped out of my stilettos and wiggled my aching toes on the cool floor. What a relief. The polished wood felt like heaven under my feet.

“Sandie, it’s almost time to cut the cake!” My older sister nudged me as she hurried past in her slim black gown, carrying a tray of prosciutto, and goat cheese stuffed figs. “Go around the room and see that everyone has a dessert plate. And please, put your shoes back on! The last thing I need is a fight with Angela.” She dashed into the kitchen in the back, and I stifled a groan.

At thirty-eight, petite and dark-haired, Katherine was as tireless as she’d been at twenty—and with feet made of steel, apparently. Her heels, even higher than mine, hadn’t stopped her from flying around the place all evening.

Of course, Kathy was used to being on her feet. She must’ve given up sitting fifteen years ago when she opened her bakery down the street. These days she was a well-known baker with clients all over the neighborhood, and even several in Manhattan. She didn’t usually cater weddings but agreed to help out as a favor to Angela and David after Luce della Vita’s chef fell ill at the last minute.

The carrot that had roped me in was Angela’s promise of double pay. As a recent Master’s in English graduate with the rent looming in five days and zero news from the ninety-eight job applications I’d sent out, I couldn’t afford to be picky about work.

All things considered, I was lucky. Most of my former classmates were in the same boat as me, with no successful siblings to give them a job. The only problem was that baking and catering had nothing to do with my career aspirations.

“Hey, Sandie-rella! You heard your sister: get those glass slippers back on.”

I whirled around to face Sonny, Luce della Vita’s landlord and David’s silent business partner. He was also Angela’s ex-husband,

and the only guest at the wedding who hadn't bothered to put on a tie or to shave for the occasion.

In his fifties and looking not a day over sixty, Sonny's sloppy appearance was nothing new. Given the special occasion, though, I wondered if the missing tie was meant as a silent protest against the wedding.

According to Kathy's nosier customers, Sonny hadn't taken it well when David and his ex-wife suddenly became an item. This, and the fact that David was to be the new stepfather to Angela and Sonny's nineteen-year-old daughter, had been the subject of much gossip at the bakery lately. Angela, of course, seemed blissfully unaware of this gossip as she floated among her tipsy guests through the candlelit fairyland she'd worked so hard to create.

Sonny leaned toward me, invading my comfort zone. "I've got an idea, Sandie-rella. Why don't I make like Prince Charming and put those babies on for ya?"

I did my best to keep from smiling as I rolled my eyes. "Try that and you'll find yourself very un-charming with a black eye."

"Ahh, you're breaking an old man's heart. I only wanted to help!"

He made a pouting face, though his eyes expressed a sentiment that was anything but heartbreak.

"Thanks, Sonny. I think I'll manage."

I slipped into my shoes again, instantly growing two inches taller than Sonny. My eyes fell on his wife, alone at a table in the back of the room. Lauren hadn't moved from her spot all evening, and the plate of food in front of her looked untouched.

"I have a better idea," I said. Taking a plate off a stack on the side table, I piled it with Gorgonzola and strawberries and handed it to Sonny along with a sparkling flute of the bubbly. "Instead of playing Prince Charming, why don't you take these to your wife? She doesn't seem to be enjoying her food."

A little smile played on Sonny's lips and he cocked his head at me.

Had I overstepped my boundaries implying he was neglecting his wife? I simply felt sorry for her, forlorn in her corner. But, after all, Sonny's marriage was his business.

He waved his hand, dismissing the food and the champagne. "Don't worry about Lauren. She's fine, just keeps complaining of a headache. I told her to go upstairs and lie down, but she won't."

"Probably doesn't want to miss out on the fun." Or to leave Sonny alone in proximity of his ex. The latter explanation seemed more likely.

I put the plate down and adjusted my dress, wishing the hem were a few inches shorter. Not that I considered myself a klutz, but the thought of tripping and sprawling out on the floor in front of everyone had been haunting me all evening. I touched my fingers to the Connemara pendant hanging from my neck. Set in a delicate silver setting of swirly shamrocks, the rare green Irish marble was thought to bring luck. I hadn't taken it off since I picked it up in Dublin four years ago, and it's become my habit to hold it whenever I felt worried or anxious. Hopefully, with its help, I would get through this evening unscathed.

The clicking of heels on the polished floor announced the approach of several young women, then Sonny's daughter broke away from the others and waltzed over to us, her sleek, dark hair swinging behind her. She looked like the younger, taller version of Angela

"Dad, they're going to cut the cake. Let's go!"

Sonny appraised her with a proud grin, put an arm around her, and kissed her on the forehead. He beamed at me.

"Just look at her. Isn't she gorgeous?"

"She sure is." I returned Kim's bright smile, but a part of me wondered what she felt about the wedding. Her mother, marrying her father's business partner. The bakery's rumor mill had been strangely silent on that count.

"Come on, kiddo." Sonny squeezed Kim's shoulder. "You can stand next to your old man when they cut the cake."

They walked off toward the champagne fountain where Kathy and Valeria, her long-time employee, were wheeling out the cart with the five-tier chocolate cake my sister had decorated with white roses. I started on the way to them. At the same moment, the door to the restaurant banged open and my dad, who hadn't been invited to the reception, stormed in. His shaggy salt-and-pepper hair stuck up in all

directions as if he'd been running. Heads turned to follow him as he marched straight into the bar.

From across the room, Kathy shot me a look of alarm. I nodded and hurried after him.

"Dad, what are you doing here?" I kept my voice low. "Can't you see there's a private event going on?"

He slammed a twenty on the polished counter. "A brandy. Keep the change."

Liam, the bartender, poured Dad's drink with a deadpan expression as if serving a reception crasher was a normal event.

Dad picked up his brandy, the muscles in his jaw twitching. I couldn't imagine what had made him this angry.

"I want to have it out with that weasel," he muttered.

Before I could stop him, he stormed past me into the main room where everyone was watching the newlyweds feed each other forkfuls of my sister's chocolate creation.

Kathy tried to block his way. Her loud whisper carried over to me: "Dad, what are you doing?"

Dad nudged her aside and got into Sonny's face. He waved the brandy in front of his nose. "See this drink? Bet you don't even know what it means. Do you? Philistine!"

Sonny's eyebrows shot up and he quickly took a step back. "Take it easy, old man! What's your problem?"

"You're my problem!" Dad yelled. "Snatching that book out from under me again. That's the second time now. Second! You haven't even read it, have you? I know you haven't!"

Kathy sidled up to me, her forehead riddled with deep frown lines. A few paces away, her husband, Jeff, was shaking his head in disapproval. He didn't attempt to intervene, though. Big surprise.

"Dad," I touched his forearm. "Settle down. Please."

He shook me off without taking his eyes off Sonny. "Okay, I'll give you a hint: this is a brandy I'm holding. What does it mean? Go ahead, tell me!"

Sonny's expression darkened. "You're off your head, old man. Get out of my face!"

Dad's voice went quiet, though it carried clearly across the hushed restaurant. "Is it for you at least? The book. Tell me it's for

you. Your father was a collector, right?”

A deep crease appeared between Sonny’s eyebrows as if the question pained him. “I’ve got no use for collecting stuff anymore. I sold off my dad’s collections, put the money in this restaurant.”

Dad took a step closer to him. “Brandy,” he said, raising his highball glass to eye level. “It’s what Philip Marlowe drinks at General Sternwood’s in chapter one.”

“How interesting.” Sonny rolled his eyes. “So what?”

“So, you don’t deserve that first edition! You’ve got as much use for it as a dog has for a diamond tiara.”

Sonny shrugged. “It’s not for me. I have a collector client who commissioned me to bid on it. I won it fair and square, so quit acting like a lunatic.”

Dad’s nostrils flared. To dramatic gasps, he threw the contents of his glass in Sonny’s face.

Sonny went livid. “What the—?” He swung at Dad but David caught his fist, stopping it in mid-swing. He pushed Sonny aside, then he and his brother Alex forced Dad out of the room.

I hurried after them while Kathy and Angela stayed behind to assure the guests that the incident was over.

At the bar, Alex had Dad by the shirt collar. David stood next to them, glaring.

I knew Dad was in the wrong, but the thought of watching him being thrown out in front of everyone was intolerable.

“Alex, just let me handle this,” I pleaded. “Go back in there and enjoy the party.”

Alex didn’t take his eyes off Dad, but he relaxed his grip on his shirt. Taking a step back, he smoothed his tuxedo front and nodded at Liam.

“Give me another brandy.”

He took the drink from Liam and put it on the counter next to Dad. “Look, Nicolas, only reason I’m not kicking you out is that you’re Katherine’s dad. But if you stay, you keep quiet. And keep away from Sonny. Get it? I won’t have you spoil my brother’s wedding.”

Dad’s expression was still dark, but he nodded.

“It’s alright,” I said. “I’ll stay with him until he’s calmed down.”

“Fine by me.” Alex pointed a finger at me. “But you better keep him in check.”

“I will.”

With another warning look at us, Alex and David returned to the party.

I leaned on the bar and waited for Dad to say something. He emptied his glass and stared into it for a long moment. Finally, he muttered: “*The Big Sleep*. A first edition, signed by Raymond Chandler. That weasel outbid me for 8,000.”

I sighed.

Since Mom died two years ago, I worried that Dad’s enthusiasm for collecting everything Raymond Chandler related had turned into an obsession. It haunted Dad that *The Big Sleep*, Chandler’s first Philip Marlowe mystery, was the only title he was missing; he’d searched for months for a signed first edition.

“When did this auction take place?” I asked.

“This afternoon,” Dad growled. “The bastard got out of there so fast I never even had a chance to confront him.”

“He must’ve been in a hurry to get to the reception,” I said.

Which explained Sonny’s rumpled appearance. It was a wonder Angela hadn’t given him hell for showing up looking like that.

I glanced at Liam. “Would you get us a ginger ale?”

Liam nodded and poured the soda into a tall glass, then set it on a coaster in front of me. I slid it toward Dad.

“I’m sorry, Dad. I know how much this means to you. But please don’t make another scene. Don’t embarrass Kathy and me. Drink this and try to cool off.”

He shrugged and nodded reluctantly.

I looked around. At the other end of the bar, Dora Novak sat by herself, nursing a red wine and looking very pretty in a gray silk dress and a cream shawl. Her being in the bar, instead of the party, was not a coincidence.

In her late fifties and single, Dora was nice and friendly, and she seemed to genuinely like Dad. I wished he’d take notice. Because, hard as it was to admit, Mom wasn’t coming back, and I hated seeing him alone. I nudged him in the side.

“Look who’s over there. Go and chat with her. You know you’ll make her evening.”

Dad glanced in Dora’s direction and turned to his soda again. “I don’t know. Last time I ran into her, she was kind of frosty with me.”

“Duh! What do you expect? She’s been dropping hints all over the place, and you’ve ignored her. She’s feeling rejected. But you obviously still have a chance, or she wouldn’t be sitting there. Go over to her, offer to buy her another wine.”

He kept staring into his glass. I wasn’t sure he even heard me.

“It eats at me,” he said after a pause. “A fool like Sonny getting that first edition. He doesn’t even read Chandler.”

“His client probably does.” I wasn’t sure my words would go down as a consolation.

Dad sniffed. “Shouldn’t you be helping Kathy hand out cannoli to that crowd in there?”

“Yeah. But can I leave you alone?”

He shot me a glare. “I don’t need babysitting.”

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t start any more fights.” He gulped down half of his ginger ale and slammed it on the counter.

His manner didn’t reassure me, but the party in the other room was in full swing and Valeria was signaling from the doorway for more champagne flutes.

I hurried out of the bar, worrying about Dad and not fully aware of my surroundings, and ran smack into Lauren who had finally decided to leave her corner. She gasped, spilling red wine on her dress.

“Lauren, I’m so sorry! I didn’t see you coming.”

She winced and shook her head, looking paler than usual. “I was going upstairs anyway because this headache just keeps getting worse. I told Sonny I needed to lie down. He should be okay without me for a while.”

I followed her gaze to a table at the center of the room where Sonny had his arm draped over his ex-wife’s shoulders, oblivious to everyone, including David throwing him dark glances from over by the fountain. It was doubtful Lauren’s absence would make a difference to anyone.

“Are you sure you should be alone if you’re not feeling well?” I asked her.

“Oh, I won’t be alone.” She gave me a tired smile. “I asked Valeria to come with me. You can spare her for the rest of the night, can’t you?”

It made sense she’d asked Valeria since she and Lauren had been friends for years. Because Sonny and Lauren’s house was right next door, Valeria often stayed over to save travel time when she had an early shift at the bakery the next morning. Now, she wobbled over in her purple dress, the big plastic bag with her change of clothes slung over her shoulder.

I stuck my fists on my hips and mock-frowned at her. “So, just because Lauren’s your friend, you get to shimmy on out of here while I’m stuck working?”

Valeria’s wide mouth stretched into a grin as she play-punched me on the shoulder. “That’s right, sucka! I’m outta here.”

They headed out, leaving Kathy and me to pick up the slack. An hour later, I leaned against the wall and stifled a yawn. Kathy appeared next to me with a look of understanding.

“Hold on, Sandie. It won’t be long now. They’ll do the fireworks, and then we can clean up and go home.”

“It can’t come soon enough.” I glanced at the bar, but Dad wasn’t there. Alarmed, I straightened away from the wall. “Where is he?”

“I just saw him a few minutes ago,” Kathy said. “Maybe he’s in the bathroom?”

“That’s fine, as long as he stays away from Sonny.”

“If they were at it again, we’d hear it. They’re not exactly quiet.” She sighed. “I think I’m past caring. Remind me to never cater one of Angela’s weddings again. Speaking of which, she wanted more wine and dessert before the fireworks. Can you see to it that everything’s set up for that?”

More wine meant a trip to the cellar. I trundled across the main room and down the stairs. Like the rest of the place, the staircase had been decked out with a gazillion fairy lights hanging from the walls. But not the cellar. I welcomed the quiet as I stepped down into the dimly lit space, glad to be alone for a few moments.

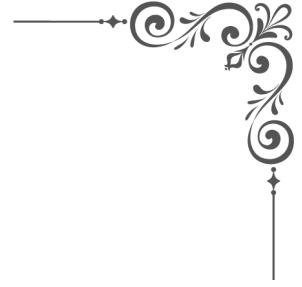
But I wasn’t alone.

I stared at the two people in front of me, not quite understanding what I was seeing.

Sonny lay on his back with a dark pool of blood spreading out under him. Stooping over Sonny, Dad appeared to be just as immobile. Except for his left hand, which shook. It held a gun.

Before I could think of what to do, there was the sound of fumbling footsteps on the stairs behind me, and a couple waddled down, the quiet cellar exploding with their laughter. It died abruptly as if suffocated by the lack of air. The couple's eyes glazed in horror.

Then the woman's scream filled the cellar like the siren of an approaching squad car. The martini sloshing from her glass, she whirled round and tripped up the stairs, her scream trailing in her wake.



Chapter 2

I approached Dad and pulled him away from Sonny's body, trying not to look too closely at the pool of blood darkening the floor. The shock had made Dad slow to react, and he moved as if in a dream. Other guests were gathering behind us, alerted by the drunk woman's screams. Someone must have told Kathy because she came running down the stairs, stopping on the last step and clasping her hands over her mouth to stifle a gasp. Then she rushed over to help me get Dad away from the body.

We walked him to a low stool next to the wine racks lining the walls and sat him down.

There was a rapid clicking of heels on the stairs, and Kim flew into the cellar, followed by Angela and David. With a cry, Kim rushed to her father's body, but David grabbed her by the elbow.

"No, stay back!"

"Let go of me, that's my dad!" She tried to free herself from him, but Angela rushed over and together she and David restrained her.

Over the hushed whispers behind us, I heard David dial the police. The precinct being only blocks away, we had five, maybe six minutes before the place was swarming with cops. I wished I had my phone so I could text my brother and tell him what happened. A detective with the Brooklyn police, Will would be on call tonight. If I could alert him, he would find a way to get here first.

Unfortunately, my cell phone was upstairs with my change of clothes. There was nothing to do but hope Will would be the one to answer the call. I took Dad by the shoulders and looked into his eyes.

"Dad, what happened here? Talk to me! Whose gun is this?"

He frowned and lifted the gun to eye level. Was it the murder weapon? Though no stranger to guns, I had to fight the instinct to recoil.

Dad stared at me and shook his head. His mouth slightly open, he looked almost surprised. "It's mine," he said. "I keep it in my study. What's it doing here?"

My heart sank. Now that I had a better look at it, I recognized Dad's Colt Government pistol, passed down to him by his father. I'd watched him use it in target shooting plenty of times when we visited Dad's side of the family outside Louisville. As with most Kentucky natives, the love of firearms had been ingrained in Dad since childhood. The love that, to Mom's intense disapproval, even the decades of East coast living hadn't managed to shake. Mom used to say Dad's interest in firearms would bite him in the butt one day. It seemed she had been right.

The commotion on the stairs announced the paramedics' arrival, followed by the cops and two unfamiliar plain-clothes detectives. They had their weapons drawn as they approached us. Dad started to get up, but the taller of the two men put up his hand in warning.

"Sir. I need you to put down the weapon and step aside slowly. You, too, ma'am."

We did as he said. The man picked up the gun and examined it carefully, then handed it to his partner. "It's been fired recently." He looked at Dad. "I understand you were found with the gun at the crime scene?"

Dad nodded.

"Name?"

"Nicolas James."

"Is this your gun?"

"Yes. Had it for fifteen years. I've got a permit for it." Dad swallowed. "But I didn't shoot him. I swear."

The first man walked over to Sonny's body and consulted with the paramedics in low voices. The other, a dark-haired man with a receding forehead, turned to the small, well-dressed crowd around Sonny.

"Move away, people. This is a crime scene. I'm Detective Greene. My partner, Detective Carver, and I will head the investigation. Go upstairs and don't disturb anything. Don't leave the premises, either because I'll need to take down everyone's statements." He switched his attention to Dad again.

"He didn't do it," I said, helping Dad to sit back down. "This is all some kind of horrible mistake."

The detective's deep-set eyes narrowed on my face. "And who are you?"

"Sandra James." As much as I tried to look calm, my shaking voice gave me away. "This is my Dad. My brother, William James, is on the force."

At the mention of Will, the detective's eyebrows shot up, causing his receding hairline to move up and down. He scratched his balding spot and cleared his throat.

"I see."

What did that mean? I got the impression the fact that Will was on the force didn't play in Dad's favor.

"How well did you know the victim?" Greene asked.

"Not well. Just from the neighborhood. Well... he came into my sister's bakery a lot," I hastened to add as his eyes drilled into me.

At that moment, there were more footsteps on the stairs, and to my relief, my brother appeared. Like the other detectives, he wasn't in uniform. He came straight over and hugged me, then squeezed Dad's shoulder reassuringly.

"I came as soon as I heard," he said.

I let out my breath in relief. Surely, Will would clear up this whole terrible mess. He'd see to it that the cops treated Dad fairly.

Detective Greene cleared his throat again. "Look, James. I know this is your family and all, but let's get clear on something: this is my investigation."

Will turned to him with a steely look in his eyes. "This is my father, Detective. I won't get in your way, but don't expect me to go home."

Behind us, the paramedics lifted Sonny's body onto the stretcher and covered it with a white sheet, then carried him up the stairs. Where his body had been, there was now a chalk outline marking the floor, next to some old scuffs.

Detective Carver, who had gone upstairs to take down witness statements, returned to the cellar and said something to Greene in a low voice.

Greene turned to Dad. "Is it true you were involved in a heated argument with the victim earlier this evening?"

Dad shrugged. " I was steamed, sure, but then I sat in the bar for a while, had a couple of sodas and cooled off. Thought maybe I could try and reason with Sonny. I wanted that first edition. If it came down to laying more cash than Sonny's collector was offering, I decided I didn't care anymore. I'd just fork it over. I found Sonny and convinced him to meet me somewhere private. Told him I just wanted to talk business. You know, calmly. And that I'd make it worth his while. He agreed, said we could meet in the cellar in twenty minutes. I had another ginger ale at the bar and came down here. Found Sonny already dead, and my gun was lying next to him."

"And you just picked it up." The detective's voice was grim.

I swallowed. This looked really bad for Dad.

"I shouldn't have. I know." Dad covered his face with his hands and shook his head. "I didn't think of it. I saw it, I picked it up..." He went quiet and let his hands fall to his sides. His eyes suddenly glazed as he stared at something over my shoulder.

Turning around, I saw Sonny's wife and Valeria coming down the stairs. Someone must have gone next door and told them what happened. Or they could've heard the squad cars arriving.

We all stared at them. The air in the cellar seemed to grow colder.

Lauren wore slippers and a mint green bathrobe over blue satin pajamas. She made two steps toward the chalk outline before an officer stopped her. "Ma'am, you can't go over there."

She put her hands over her mouth, her big gray eyes glassy. The rest of her suddenly looked small and frail.

The detective made a beeline to her. "Ma'am, I understand you're also related to the victim?"

Lauren was too shocked to answer.

"She's his wife," Valeria mumbled.

"And where were you when this happened?"

Haltingly, Valeria explained about Lauren's headache and the fact that they'd left the party early. "Then we were in the house next door the whole time," she added when she finished.

The detective lifted an eyebrow. "So, the victim lived next door."

"Yes. In the house adjacent to the restaurant," I said. "Sonny owns... owned... both of these buildings."

"I see." He wrote something down in his pad, then looked at Valeria. "What did you do after you left the party?"

"I was watching a movie downstairs after Lauren went to bed."

"That would be upstairs?"

"Sure."

"Neither of you left the house for any period during that time?"

"No."

"Did you hear anything suspicious?"

They didn't. Not until the squad cars arrived.

Greene made some more notes in his pad, told an officer to take down their information and said he'd be in touch.

"Can we take my Dad upstairs with the others?" Will asked.

The detective nodded. "I'll be up there in a few."

"Can't we take him home?" I asked as we guided Dad up the stairs.

Will shook his head, avoiding my eyes. "No, we can't."

In the main dining room, detective Carver was still questioning the guests. As we came up, he had just switched his attention to Dora hovering nearby.

"Did you see or hear anything prior to the murder, ma'am?"

Dora had her cream-colored shawl wrapped protectively around her body. She shook her head. "I was upstairs when that woman ran up screaming. I came down here with the other guests and saw Sonny dead on the floor."

Someone touched my shoulder and I turned to see Will, looking pale and drawn. The balding detective stood close behind him.

"They're taking him in," Will said.

"They're arresting Dad?" I clutched at his hand. "You can't be serious!"

He swallowed. "Dad had the motive, the means, and opportunity."

"Who cares? You know he didn't do it."

"Yes, I do. But that's not how it works."

Carver approached Dad and took him by the elbow. "Nicolas Andrew James, you have the right to remain silent..."

I couldn't believe any of it was happening. "Will, they can't do this! There's no way Dad would ever kill anyone, especially over a

book!" I turned to Dora standing a few paces away. "Back me up here. Dad couldn't have possibly done this!"

To my great surprise, Dora hesitated. I stared at her.

"Dora?"

She nodded quickly as if suddenly remembering where she was. "Of course, Sandie. Nicolas couldn't have done it."

The detective led Dad out and steered him toward the squad car. The rest of us followed them.

Lauren stopped in the doorway and her eyes locked on Dad. I didn't think she had blinked once since she saw the outline of Sonny's body.

"We should get you upstairs," Valeria said. "I'll stay over like I was going to."

Lauren didn't seem to hear her. She just kept watching Dad. Valeria stepped from foot to foot and shot me an imploring look. I nodded.

"She's right, Lauren. Go upstairs... get some rest." Though, rest was probably the last thing on Lauren's mind. But what else can you say when tragedy strikes out of the blue?

Lauren shook her head. "Why would he do that? Why?"

I wasn't sure if she even knew she'd spoken the words out loud, but they sent a shiver down my spine, waking up something primal and protective deep inside. This was my dad, my family she was accusing. My voice came out harsher than I intended.

"He didn't do it, Lauren. It's all a mistake."

She turned her eyes on me slowly, as if only just realizing I was standing there. "How can it be a mistake? You were the one who found him with the gun in his hand. Weren't you?"

Before I could answer, her eyes fluttered closed and she sank to the ground. Will barely managed to catch her and keep her from cracking her head on the asphalt.

Two paramedics hurried over and took Lauren from him. They checked her vitals and assured us she would be okay.

"Will you take care of her?" Will asked.

"Yeah. We got this, Detective. We'll take her inside; you stay with your family." They nodded at Valeria. "Ma'am, do you have the key to the house?"

Most of the crowd had already dispersed. Angela took Kim home, though David and Alex were still giving their statements.

I turned to Will. "I don't want to leave Dad on his own. I'm going to the precinct with you."

"Sandie, no." Will put a hand on my shoulder. "There's nothing you can do for Dad right now, and you look like you're barely standing on your feet. Go home. I'll take care of Dad, I promise. I'll text you as soon as there's any news."

Kathy came up to us at that moment. She was holding herself around the middle like she was freezing, even though the night was warm.

"Jeff's gone to bring the car around," she said. "We'll drop you off on the way."

The blue Sedan appeared at the far end of the narrow one-way street. I shook my head as it approached; I didn't want my sister driving me when I needed to be alone so I could think.

"Thanks, Kathy, but I'm going to walk home."

Her eyes widened and she shook her head. "Sandie, no. It's almost one in the morning! And what about your feet? You've been complaining about those shoes all night. Now you want to walk home? That's eight whole blocks!"

I shrugged. "It's fine. I can't even feel my feet anymore."

"That's because you're in shock," Will said. "We all are. You shouldn't be alone right now."

The squad car with Dad in the backseat drove past us slowly as we watched it go by. Dad didn't look at us. His head was slumped forward as if he was asleep, though, of course, he wasn't.

As soon as the squad car was gone, Jeff pulled up to the curb and Kathy hustled me inside. "Don't be difficult, Sandie. After what happened tonight, I'm not letting you walk home alone."

There was no arguing with my big sister when she was being this bossy. I climbed into the back and immediately realized what a relief it was to sit down. Leaning my head against the headrest, I closed my eyes and rubbed my neck to let out some of the tension.

As Jeff rounded the corner, Kathy reached over from the front and handed me the plastic bag with my change of clothes.

"I grabbed these before they herded us out of the restaurant. I'm sure you want to change out of those heels."

"I do. Thanks."

I kicked off my stilettos and slipped into my worn and comfortable flats, then put my green jacket over my shoulders. Along the quiet street, the sleepy rows of brownstones followed us on both sides.

"A heck of a night," Jeff remarked.

Kathy sighed. "I just can't believe Sonny is dead! I mean, one minute I was pouring him the champagne, the next... It's like some kind of nightmare. And Dad? How can anyone think he'd ever do a thing like that? It had to be someone else at the party. Right?"

Jeff grunted. Kathy stared at him with a frown. "What does that mean? Jeff?"

He shrugged. "Look, if you're going to talk about this all night, I'm putting the radio on. Give me a break, okay? I don't want to hear about your dad anymore, I'm beat."

Kathy fell silent.

Seething inside, I did my best to keep my face neutral. This wasn't the first time I'd witnessed my brother-in-law being unsympathetic to Kathy, but if I'd ever learned anything during my years in high school, it was that you never interfere in other people's relationships. Whole friendships had been ruined beyond all hope of repair just because you may have mentioned seeing your best friend's boyfriend with that buxom brunette who sat behind him in Economics.

Besides, I knew from earlier experience that if I were to say something, Jeff wouldn't hesitate to tell me off the same way he did my sister.

And, anyway, what did he have to complain about? After he'd helped us carry the wedding cake from Kathy's bakery, he had simply joined the party, leaving us to do all the running around.

Several tense minutes later, we pulled up to the seven-story building in the middle of the quiet block I'd been calling home for the past three months. I hastened to get out.

"Thanks for the ride, guys. Are you opening the bakery tomorrow?"

“Of course we are,” Jeff muttered, looking ahead and tapping an impatient rhythm on the steering wheel. “Murder or not, we still have a business to run.”

Ignoring him, I gave my sister a warm smile. “See you tomorrow, then.”

She reached over and squeezed my hand. “We’ll wait until you get inside. But, listen, don’t hesitate to call me if you need to talk tonight.”

“Sure thing.”

With a wave to her, I slipped into the building’s spacious lobby and waited behind the door, listening. On my left, the mirrored wall showed a reflection of a pale young woman in a hunter green jacket over a blue evening gown. The light-brown chignon at her nape was falling apart and she looked like she was in dire need of sleep.

Outside, the sound of my sister’s departing car faded into the distance. I opened the door and stole outside again.

Sleep would have to wait. There was someplace else I needed to go first.



Chapter 3

I walked up the block and rounded the corner to Smith Street, a popular destination for trendy cafés, restaurants, and boutiques in our neighborhood. Most of them were closed by now, except for a few bars, where music and loud voices spilled out through the open doors and windows. I walked past them at a brisk pace.

Three blocks down, Dad's house stood tightly wedged into a solid row of buildings. The chipped yellow façade set it apart from the rest, as did my childhood memories of growing up within its walls with my siblings.

The ground floor, once a spacious family room, was now taken up by Dad's used-book store. I unlocked the metal grate over the storefront and lifted it just high enough to open the front door.

The musty smell of hundreds of books filled my nose. To the left of the entrance stood the small register and an L-shaped desk next to it, piled high with books. In front of me three rows of bookshelves emerged out of the darkness, their outlines only just visible in the sliver of streetlight stealing in through the window.

I sneezed. The store needed some serious dusting and airing out.

There was a rapid patter of footsteps on the parquet, and Marlowe, Dad's brown and white springer spaniel, rushed out at me from the depth of the book aisle. He sniffed my legs, long tail beating the hem of my dress with enthusiasm. I crouched down and took his shaggy head between my hands to rub him behind his floppy ears.

Marlowe was just a puppy when I rescued him from the life of illegal dogfighting in Seattle. Now, three years later, he was my Dad's pride and joy. As he gave a low whine, I sighed.

"You're waiting for him, aren't you, Marlowe? He won't be coming home tonight, sweetie. It's just me."

Straightening, I reached over and lit the small table lamp on Dad's desk.

In the sudden light, two balls of fur, one black, the other with brownish stripes, unfolded on a large pillow on the windowsill. Two pairs of eyes stared unblinking accusations at me. Then Asimov, the

younger and friendlier of the two cats, leaped gracefully to the floor and padded over noiselessly, stopping to sit at a wary distance from Marlowe. Hemingway, the black one, stretched and gave a demonstrative yawn. Turning his back on me, he curled up again and covered his face with his paw.

I rolled my eyes. “Sorry to wake you, Your Highness. It’s not like we have a real problem. Just a small matter of Dad being the number one suspect in a murder.”

I picked up Asimov from the floor and walked down the book aisle. On both sides of me, the shelves burst with volumes in desperate need of sorting and alphabetizing. Mom and Dad had started the bookstore together five years ago, as part of their retirement. For the past two years, with Mom gone, Dad treated the place as more of a hobby than a business, so it tended to get neglected a lot.

At the back of the store, an open door led to the rest of the house. Passing the kitchen, I made sure the dog and the cat dishes had food and water. Dad had been in such a state over losing the bid on Raymond Chandler, I wouldn’t have put it past him to leave the house and forget to feed his small menagerie.

Seeing that the dishes had food in them after all, I moved on. Marlowe pattering behind me, we walked up the flight of carpeted stairs to the second floor. Dad’s office, only marginally less cluttered than his store, was the first door on the right, followed by the master bedroom. I turned on the light in the office and stepped around the papers that were strewn about on the floor.

The glass cabinet next to the work desk contained Dad’s prized Raymond Chandler collection. There were some short stories, hardcover anthologies of Chandler’s works, and of course, the first editions of Philip Marlowe detective novels with an empty spot left for *The Big Sleep*. Dad often complained that his collection would never be complete without it.

I went to the desk and pulled out the old, duct-taped swivel chair. A newer edition of *The Big Sleep* stared up at me from among Dad’s paperwork. I picked it up and read the first passage. In spite of myself, the corners of my mouth lifted in a smile—Dad certainly wasn’t the only Raymond Chandler fan in our family. Even at the

worst of times, the irreverence and the subtle humor of Chandler's writing sent a tingle of pleasure down my spine.

But what was it about first editions that made some people lose their heads? As far as I was concerned, a great book would be great no matter how many printings it had gone through.

With Asimov curled up in my lap and Marlowe staring up at me from the floor, I set the book aside and opened the top desk drawer.

Dad's Colt Government pistol was missing.

Though I had been expecting this, a weight of disappointment settled on my chest. A part of me had hoped that the pistol found next to Sonny's body was a doppelganger, that Dad's Colt was still safely tucked away in his office. Seeing the empty drawer snuffed out that hope like one of the victims in Chandler's books.

I leaned back in the chair and closed my eyes, rubbing my temples as if that could erase the visual of Dad standing over Sonny's prone body. That had been branded in my brain now.

But what about Dad? What if he would have to spend the rest of his life locked in a tiny cell, being punished for a crime he didn't commit? Mom had often berated him for keeping the pistol in the house, but no amount of reasoning would have made Dad part with his grandfather's Colt, even if it meant never taking the weapon out of storage.

Unfortunately, Dad owning a pistol was no secret in the neighborhood. The question was, which of the people who knew about it could've had the opportunity to sneak up to Dad's office and take it, and when?

I pushed my chair away from the desk, careful not to tread on Marlowe's tail. My eyes roamed the office in search of anything unusual.

It was no use. Even if the theft had happened recently, the habitual mess made it impossible to tell. The rest of the house bore no signs of a break-in.

Did the intruder have a key?

The only ones with the keys to the place were Kathy and me, and our brother Will. My own key never left the key chain. I made a mental note to find out if either Kathy or Will had recently misplaced theirs, or given them to anyone. It was unlikely, though.

Of course, the killer could have stolen the gun by sneaking into Dad's office while Dad was in the house, but Dad rarely had guests. He and his buddies preferred to hang out at their favorite pub down the street because it had a wide selection of dark beers and a dartboard in the back.

That left only one other possibility: the gun was stolen while Dad was in the book store downstairs. It would have been easy. Dad had no security camera in the shop, and he often neglected to lock the door that led upstairs. Someone could've slipped up here while he was distracted by a customer. If the intruder knew where to look, it would have taken him less than two minutes to get into Dad's office and grab the pistol from the top drawer.

But who had the motive for this? Who wanted Sonny dead badly enough to go to all the trouble of stealing the gun?

I shuddered, a cold finger of fear running down my neck. All the facts so far were pointing to premeditated murder. The person, whoever he was, must've been thinking about it for days. Maybe, weeks. Planning his strategy, waiting for the opportune moment to strike while the rest of us went about our lives, unaware of the evil in our midst.

I shook myself from my thoughts. Giving in to gloom and paranoia wasn't going to help anyone, least of all Dad.

The antique clock on the wall showed it was half-past two. I had done what I came here to do and it was time to get home. Lifting Asimov who'd gone to sleep in my lap, I rose from the chair and was about to go, but a folder on Dad's desk drew me back. The sage-green Manila folder. I knew it well, though I hadn't looked inside it in years. It had been stashed away in the attic when I moved out. Why did Dad take it out again after all this time?

Sitting down again, I pulled the folder toward me. It contained the short stories I'd written in middle school, including the first five chapters of a fantasy novel I started but never finished. Back when I thought I would grow up to be a writer.

I leafed through the loose pages, remembering how I used to print each one out in four copies and leave space in the margins for my family's commentary. Even if I didn't know their handwriting, I could always guess whose page I was holding. Kathy's contained

sparse praise and mild criticism, and Will usually limited himself to one-word comments like “cool”, or “thumbs up”, or “lame”. Dad’s feedback was more generous, but Mom always filled the pages with copious notes. She took my writing seriously for some reason and often said that we had a future writer in the family.

Of course, by high school, I had discovered boys and writing became forgotten. And now, Mom was gone. Things had certainly turned out differently than what my twelve-year-old self had imagined.

I closed the folder and headed to the door with Asimov in my arms, then stopped and waited for Marlowe to follow me.

“Get up, sleepyhead! I’m not leaving you here by yourself overnight. Until Dad comes home, you’re staying with me and Felisha. How does that sound?”

Marlowe jumped to his feet. The late hour seemed to have little effect on his energy levels as he cheerfully trotted after me and sniffed at the cat carrier I picked up in the kitchen.

As expected, Asimov went in willingly, but Hemingway hissed and beat his tail in protest. Once inside, he erupted in earsplitting yowling.

“Shame on you!” I wagged my finger at him, but he refused to be silent.

There was nothing for it. With Marlowe secured on a leash, I turned off the table lamp in the store and squeezed outside, locking the door and pulling down the grate behind me.

Weighed down by the cat carrier and Marlowe, I slowly waddled down the block. Marlowe kept straining at the leash and made me pause twice while he lifted his leg against the lamp post. Each time we stopped, Hemingway redoubled his yowling, which was so loud I was sure he’d wake up half the street. At any moment, I expected an angry rebuke from one of the windows above.

It was with enormous relief that I finally reached my building. I took the elevator to the fifth floor where Felisha and I shared a two-bedroom apartment. Having met in French during the first semester of college, we stayed friends even after she dropped out two semesters later, deciding disciplined studies weren’t her thing.

Felisha's friendship had been my saving grace during the terrible upheaval of my last year as an undergrad. As it was, the experience had sent me on what turned into a two-year backpacking and healing journey around the world. The journey that ended with the rescue of Marlowe in Seattle.

I finally returned to New York, feeling strong enough to apply for my master's of literature at Columbia. But, if not for Felisha's shoulder to cry on all those years back, I might never have finished undergrad at all.

Now, for the first time in our lives, Felisha and I were roommates.

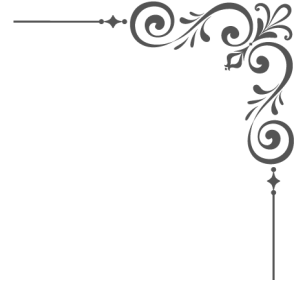
I'd moved in with her, following the expiration of the sublet on my upper Manhattan studio. The rental belonged to an eccentric Italian studies professor. During a year-long sabbatical in Rome, she'd needed a responsible graduate student to take care of her talking parrot. She returned to the States a month after my graduation from Columbia. I regretted losing the sublet, but not the parrot whose talking consisted mainly of reciting love poems in Italian.

As luck would have it, Felisha's long-time roommate had decided to move in with her boyfriend, leaving the spare bedroom empty.

The old lady who'd rented Felisha the apartment was a friend of her family. She agreed to give Felisha a steep discount, as long as she promised to keep the place clean and not throw any wild parties. Apart from moving in with Dad, the discount made it the only place in the neighborhood I could afford. The little closed balcony it came with gave me a chance to start the herb garden I'd been wishing for.

As I shuffled in through the door with my brood, the spicy scent of sage and lavender hit my nose. Felisha's aromatherapy candles, which she used to cleanse the place of negative energy. If she was burning them, it meant she'd heard about the murder.

Before I could put the carrier down in the foyer, she hurried out of the living room. The excess of beaded bracelets jangling on her wrists set Marlowe's ears at attention. The terry robe thrown over her trademark Strawberry Shortcake pajamas alerted me that we had company.



Chapter 4

“Oh my gosh, Sandie! We’ve been so worried. Where’ve you been? We were about to call the police!”

I set down the carrier and let Marlowe off his leash. He immediately began to sniff Felisha’s robe.

“I was at Dad’s, getting these guys. And who is we?”

“We is me,” Will said, coming out of the living room after Felisha. Marlowe yapped in excitement and hightailed it over to him. Will knelt to scratch the dog behind the ears. “Felisha called me when you didn’t show up. I came over straight away.”

“Valeria texted me about what happened at Luce della Vita,” Felisha explained. “She said you were on your way home. Then you didn’t come in and I tried calling you, but it went straight to voicemail.”

I poked inside the plastic bag for my cell phone rattling around at the bottom under my clothes. It had been switched off.

Guilt prickled in my stomach. I hadn’t intended to make them worry.

“The battery must’ve died,” I explained. “I didn’t even check it, my mind was so full of everything else.”

Felisha’s eyes softened. “It’s okay, Sandie. We understand.” Then she pointed her chin at the cat carrier. “But they can’t stay here. You know I have allergies.”

“But...you’re not showing any symptoms,” I pleaded. “Maybe you’re not allergic to Hemingway and Asimov. I felt so bad about them being back at Dad’s all by themselves.”

At that moment, Asimov stepped cautiously out of the carrier. He looked around, flicked his tail a few times, and sat on the floor to lick his flank. Hemingway stayed inside. Of course. He’d have to be coaxed out with treats.

Felisha broke out in a smile at the sight of Asimov. “I wish I could have a cat! I’ve always wanted one.” She bent down to stroke Asimov’s back and let out a sneeze that sent him hurtling into the living room and under the sofa. Her face fell. “Oh, no. It’s started already.”

Will got to his feet and patted me on the shoulder. “Glad you’re safe, Sis. I was about to go out searching for you.”

“I’m fine,” I told him. But my stomach gave a loud rumble. We all laughed, then grew serious again.

Felisha headed into the kitchen. “I got some raw milk cheddar at the health food store today. I’ll make us grilled cheese sandwiches, and we’ll talk.”

“Raw milk cheese?” Will wrinkled his nose.

She gave him a stern look. “It’s good for you.”

“So is a colonoscopy. I still don’t like it.”

“Did you get any gorgonzola?” I asked, ignoring him.

She wrinkled her nose. “You know I can’t stand that stuff. It’s stinky!”

“It’s gourmet. And delicious.”

“Not in this house. You’ll have to, like, eat it somewhere else.”

I rolled my eyes. “Okay. Raw cheddar it is.”

Will took a beer from the fridge and sat at our small kitchen table while Felisha got busy with the food. I threw a yearning glance at the coffee maker—too late for caffeine. I poured myself a glass of milk instead and pulled up a chair opposite my brother.

He ran a hand through his blond hair. “So, Dad’s been processed,” he said. “Was tough watching him being locked up. I almost stayed at the precinct overnight.”

I reached across and gave his hand a comforting squeeze. “Staying overnight wouldn’t have solved anything. If we’re going to help Dad get out of this mess, we need to be rested and clear-headed. I don’t believe for a moment he did this awful thing.”

“Me, neither.”

“What did they say at the precinct?” I asked.

“The captain was sympathetic. Greene and Carver, not so much.”

I cleared my throat, wondering if it was okay to broach the subject. “Is there some sort of trouble between you and those two?”

Will nodded, reluctantly. “Greene’s never forgiven me for making detective before him. I had a better performance record and higher test scores, but he had more years on the job. He feels the department should’ve respected his seniority.”

“Will he make things difficult for Dad?” I asked.

“Greene is a good cop,” Will said with conviction. “He won’t make professional jealousy cloud his judgment.”

“Good.” But I wondered how well he really knew his colleague.

Over by the stove, Felisha flipped the grilled cheeses until the thick golden coating of cheddar spilled over the crust. She stacked them on a plate and set them in front of us, then took a seat at the other end of the table, fidgeting with an aquamarine bracelet on her right wrist. New, if I wasn’t mistaken. Apart from aromatherapy and health food, jewelry making was Felisha’s biggest obsession.

“Did you tell your captain many people knew about your dad’s gun?” she asked.

“Of course.” Will took another swig of his beer. “Until the ballistics report comes back we won’t know for sure it’s the same gun that killed Sonny. Though I wouldn’t hold out hope. The problem is finding out who could’ve gotten inside Dad’s house and taken it.”

“Are there any other suspects besides your dad?”

“I asked Dad if he could think of anyone else who might’ve had the motive to kill Sonny. He said he overheard some rough words between Sonny and Angela at the pub one night. That was about a month before the wedding.”

I put down my grilled cheese. Felisha and I both leaned in toward him.

“And?”

“Dad said Sonny’s exact words were, ‘Dave doesn’t know, does he?’ And Angela had this look on her face like she was about to hit him. She told him he better keep his mouth shut, or else.”

“Holy cow!” Felisha’s eyes widened. “She was threatening him?”

“Yeah.” Will nodded and finished his beer. “But that fight could’ve been about anything. It’s not enough to make her a real suspect.”

I felt a sudden twinge of guilt. Here we were, desperately trying to find a way to pin this murder on someone else other than Dad, forgetting that we were talking about real people. People with loved ones and troubles of their own. People, whose lives had been darkened by this sudden death.

Angela was starting a new chapter with David and she’d seemed so happy at the wedding. And Kim, who just lost her father...

But, for them at least, there would be other beginnings. Their lives would go on, hopefully to better and happier things. Sonny would never have another beginning. He'd never even get to see his daughter graduate from college.

Someone had planned this thing. They'd stolen Dad's gun, stood in front of Sonny and pulled the trigger. And now, Dad was getting the blame.

No, we weren't being callous, we were simply doing what we had to.

As if to underscore my point, Asimov chose that moment to leap up onto the table. I quickly scooped him up and set him down in my lap, where he curled up and purred as I scratched him behind the ears.

If we were to save Dad from prison, we had to stay objective and consider anyone with a motive a suspect. Which brought me to my next question,

"Will, when you were at the precinct, did you get any new information? Do Greene and Carver have any idea who stands to benefit from Sonny's death? How much money did he have?"

"I don't know the exact amount," Will said. "With the two houses and some stocks, he could be worth over five million. It's going to be split up between Lauren, Angela and Kim. The house he lived in goes to Lauren, along with some money. The restaurant building will be Kim's once she is twenty-one, and Angela gets Sonny's share of the restaurant."

"But since Kim's not twenty-one yet, Angela is going to be in charge of her stuff until she's old enough," said Felisha.

"There's something else, too," Will said. "Detective Carver phoned Sonny's lawyer, and he said Sonny called him a week after the wedding was announced because he wanted to change his will. It's possible he was going to cut someone out."

Felisha's eyes lit up. "That's motive, right? Is Angela our new suspect now?" Suddenly, she gave a loud sneeze, spraying all over the unfinished grilled cheeses. "Sorry." She pouted. "It's definitely the cats, Sandie. My allergies are totally acting up!"

"You're right." I got up from the table, keeping Asimov at a safe distance from her. "This was a bad idea. I'll keep them in my room

tonight and take them back to the shop tomorrow morning.”

“Well...” Felisha looked suddenly conflicted. “We’ll see. Maybe I can take some allergy medicine or something.”

“Uh-oh.” Will suddenly grinned. “You’re not letting these cats go without a fight, huh? Dad’s gonna have to wrestle them from you when he gets back.”

I swallowed a lump, suddenly overcome by a desperate need for reassurance that all would be well.

“We will get him out,” I said. “Right, Will? It’ll be okay.”

He stopped smiling and met my eyes with a steady gaze. “I’m not gonna let him down, Sis. Trust me.”

A rush of warmth swelled in my chest. Reaching over, I ruffled his crew cut. “It’s pretty late, little bro. Do you want to spend the night? You can sleep on the couch.”

He shrugged. “Nah, I gotta head home.”

“No, you should stay!” Felisha got up and edged around the table, keeping her distance from Asimov in my arms. “The couch pulls out. You’ll be totally comfortable.”

“No, guys. Come on.” Will drummed his fingers on the table, looking uncomfortable. “I can’t stay, I really should go.”

Felisha and I exchanged a scrunched eyebrow look. What was going on here? I narrowed my eyes at my brother.

“Will, you don’t think we have cooties, do you?”

He laughed. “Okay. If you’ve got to know... it’s because you don’t have Pringles.”

It was the last thing I expected to hear. “What?”

“I have to have XTRA Screamin’ Dill Pickle Pringles for breakfast,” he said slowly. “If I don’t, I can’t go on duty. Okay?”

Felisha continued to look puzzled as she stared at him, but I suddenly snorted. “Wait. You think if you don’t eat Pringles for breakfast, something bad will happen at work?”

“Something like that. Yeah.” He stared down at the table, not meeting my gaze.

“I thought only sports players had these kinds of superstitions,” I said.

“Cops do, too. And there’s more at stake with what we do.”

Like losing your life, instead of a silly game. A shiver ran down my spine, filling me with regret for having laughed at my brother. Sometimes, I forgot how hard Will's job really was. Having to face danger on a daily basis, little rituals like Pringles for breakfast were a survival mechanism that helped him to keep showing up for duty. How was it that I didn't know about this until now? I'd thought I knew my brother so well. Maybe I'd been away from my family for too long...

"But why the Pringles?" I asked.

He kept his voice monotone, the way he did when trying to keep a lid on his emotions. "I was out of corn flakes one morning and all I had was a can of XTRA Screamin' Dill Pickle Pringles, so I had 'em for breakfast. There was a shootout that day, my first one. I didn't get hurt, so..."

"So now you have them every morning, as a good luck charm," I said.

"I guess, you do understand."

I did.

My fingers closed around the green pendant at my neck. After all, wearing a lucky Irish marble was really no different than Will's chips-for-breakfast idea, if it made him feel more in control of his life.

Felisha and I followed Will out into the hallway.

"I'll get some of that flavor for the next time you come over," I promised, glancing at Felisha. A fierce opponent of MSG, she never let me have store-bought chips in the house. This time, she nodded reluctantly.

Once the door closed behind Will, I picked up the carrier with Hemingway and took him and Asimov into my room. The door would have to stay closed to minimize Felisha's discomfort.

As I was getting ready for bed, my thoughts returned to Angela. Could she have been the one behind Sonny's murder? If so, would the police be able to prove it? I'd read somewhere that, while almost forty percent of all murders in the United States went unsolved, each year nearly 10,000 people got wrongfully convicted of serious crimes.

The police would do their best to bring Sonny's killer to justice but with Dad's future on the line, I couldn't sit back and wait and hope for

a happy resolution.

I needed to do something. I was a civilian and personally acquainted with the people involved. They would see me as less of a threat than a police detective, and open up where otherwise they would keep their mouths shut.

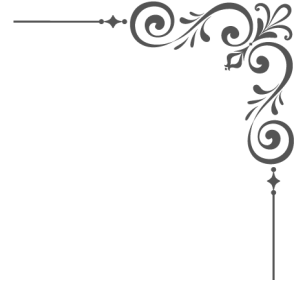
But where would I start? I glanced at Marlowe scratching himself at my feet.

“You know you’re named after a brilliant detective, right? Help me. What do I do?”

Marlowe turned his brown head and stared at me with his sad, liquid eyes. He stood up and put his head on my knee with a low whine.

I reached to rub him behind the ears, then smiled.

I’d had an idea.



Chapter 5

I stifled a yawn and gulped down the coffee in my stainless steel portable mug as Marlowe dragged me down the narrow, tree-lined sidewalk. He'd awakened me at five-thirty in the morning by standing on his back legs with his front paws on the comforter and the leash in his teeth. It was so not my definition of an ideal morning.

Most days, I liked to take a leisurely shower and enjoy a cup of coffee or two, spend some time tending to my rapidly growing herb garden, and only then choose my outfit for the day. Not today. I had to forget about all that as I flew around the place like a tornado, barely remembering to pour cat food into Hemingway and Asimov's bowl, while Marlowe whined and scratched at the door.

Now he was pulling on the leash with enviable energy and a zest for life while eagerly sniffing everything in his path. Obviously spending half the night awake wasn't an impairment like it was for the rest of us.

"Marlowe, slow down," I chided. "Why can't you be a night owl like me?"

Marlowe wagged his tail without turning and only pulled harder on the leash.

The dog park was twelve blocks away. On reaching it, I set my charge free and he trotted off across the lawn toward a tall black poodle. A profusion of sniffing and tail wagging ensued but quickly evolved into a spirited chase with lots of barking and playful biting.

A few feet away a blue-eyed husky sat on his haunches next to his owner and watched the two friends attentively as if he hadn't made up his mind whether to approach them and introduce himself.

The husky's owner didn't suffer from the same indecisiveness. Liam waved his hand and strode over to me across the grass.

"Hey, gorgeous! Haven't seen you in this dog park before."

"Dad told me Marlowe likes this one. Someone had to walk him after what happened last night."

Liam's expression turned sympathetic. "Your dad and Marlowe come here pretty often, but there's another dog park just three blocks from you, in case you can't make it here."

“That’s good to know. Should make my life easier until Dad comes home. Thanks, Liam.”

Of course, I knew all about the other dog park. Liam was the real reason Marlowe and I had made the long trek this morning instead of going to one of the closer dog parks. I figured it was a good pretext to catch Luce della Vita’s bartender outside of work and see if he had any pertinent information that would help me unravel this case. After all, a bartender was usually the eyes and ears of an establishment.

I glanced over at Liam’s husky still watching Marlowe from the sidelines. “I take it our dogs aren’t friends?”

“They are. Julep is just bashful. He takes his time before approaching other dogs. He’s been that way since he was a puppy. I got him at the pound and the vet thinks he was traumatized by something that happened there.”

“Wait. Julep?” I narrowed my eyes at Liam’s orange t-shirt with a picture of a martini with olives on his chest. “As in, a mint julep? A bartender naming his dog after a drink. How original.”

Liam cocked his head at me. “How do you know it doesn’t have a different meaning? You’re into literature, right? A mint julep could be a reference to *The Great Gatsby*.”

“Is it?”

“Well...” He scratched his ear. “Not really. But someone with a dog named Marlowe shouldn’t be rolling her eyes. A lit major naming her dog after a literary character. Doesn’t get more original than that, does it?”

I snorted at his sarcasm. “Trust me, I had nothing to do with naming Marlowe. That one’s all on Dad. Mom wanted to name him Basket, after Gertrude Stein’s Poodle, but Dad won the coin toss. But I have to admit, the name Marlowe suits him.”

We paused and watched as out on the lawn, Marlowe succeeded in catching his tall friend and made an unsuccessful attempt to bite his ear.

“Anyway,” I said. “I guess I’m stuck being the dog walker until this whole horrible mess with Dad gets sorted out.”

Liam shook his head. “I’m still in disbelief over what happened last night. For the record, I don’t think your dad would’ve killed Sonny

over a book.”

“He wouldn’t kill anyone, period. Thank you, though.” I gave him a grateful smile. “I hope the police come to the same conclusion. Still, can’t imagine anyone around here being capable of something like that.”

I decided not to mention Angela as a possible new suspect. When hunting for information, it was always better to pretend to know less and let the other person reveal his cards.

Liam shrugged. “I don’t know who’s capable of it, but if I were the police I’d double-check where Kim was at the time of the murder.”

“Kim? Why do you say that?”

The thought that Sonny’s daughter might have anything to do with the murder hadn’t even occurred to me.

Had I been taken in by Kim’s apparent closeness with Sonny? It would be an unforgivable gullibility for a sleuth. If I were to help solve this murder, I’d have to be more vigilant in the future and not be dazzled by appearances.

“I know Sonny and Kim were all chummy at the wedding,” Liam said. “But things weren’t always so great. Just last week, I heard her screaming bloody murder at him.”

“Where? At the restaurant?”

“In the cellar. I went down to get a bottle of wine for a customer, and I overheard her and Sonny having an argument. Didn’t want to barge in on them, so I went back upstairs. Had to tell the customer we were out of that vintage and lost the bar a couple hundred dollars that night.”

“A terrible loss, I’m sure.”

He smiled. “People need to keep their family problems away from their place of business.”

“Sometimes our passions get the best of us. Don’t you agree?”

He shrugged. “I believe in balance and self-control.”

A surprising revelation, for a bartender. I’d always assumed he was a party boy. But we were getting off-topic. “Did you hear what they were fighting about?”

“Just a few words.” He ran a hand through his longish hair. “Like I said, I didn’t want to eavesdrop. But I guess she was unhappy with Sonny over something, and I think it had to do with money. She kept

screaming he was a control freak, that he couldn't do it to her, and that she wouldn't let him. And he told her it was his money and he damn well could do whatever he thought was necessary."

I frowned. "Sounds serious. Wish I knew what it was all about." Maybe Will could find out, though. I made a mental note to tell him about the argument before I went to work.

Work!

I looked at the time. "Oh, no. Liam, I have to run, I'm sorry. Kathy's expecting me at the bakery in less than an hour."

Out on the lawn, Marlowe and the black poodle hadn't tired of chasing each other yet. They looked like they were just warming up. Julep had joined in with them, as Liam predicted, and was being as rowdy as the other two.

It was a pity having to cut their fun short, but if I didn't hurry I'd be hearing about it from Kathy. Or worse, from Jeff. And I still needed to make a phone call.

"Marlowe!" I patted my leg, hoping it wouldn't take too much work to tear my dog away from the fun. To my relief, Marlowe stopped abruptly in mid-chase and obediently trotted over, though he looked none too excited about having to leave.

"Sorry, pal." I put the leash on him again. "Some of us do have to work for a living." Then I straightened and smiled at Liam. "I guess we'll be off now. Thanks for the chat and the company."

"Right on." He suddenly put an arm on the small of my back and kissed me on the cheek. "If you need anything, you know where to find me."

I hid my surprise behind a smile. Not that the attention of a good-looking bartender who liked dogs and had a sense of humor was completely unwelcome. Until today, the extent of my interactions with Liam had mostly been limited to exchanging hellos and other small pleasantries. This was a first, and it didn't seem like mere friendly sympathy. At least, I thought it didn't. I may have been good at analyzing complex literary themes, but when it came to dating and picking up cues from men, I wasn't exactly a genius.

But at the moment, it didn't matter whether Liam was flirting with me because I had other things on my mind. Like the fact that Sonny

and his daughter had had a heated argument about money a week before his death.

The sun was beginning to heat the sidewalks as Marlowe and I hurried home. I got my phone out of my pocket and dialed my brother. He picked up on the second ring.

“Hey, Sis. Is this urgent?” He sounded brusque.

“Sorry. Did I get you at a bad time?”

“No.” Will exhaled loudly. “I just got mauled by a puma.”

I stopped in my tracks. “What?”

“I just left Angela’s house.”

“Oh. You went to talk to her about what Dad said last night?”

“Yeah.”

That sure explained his grumpiness.

“Can’t imagine it being a pleasant conversation.”

“They never are.” He cleared his throat. “But it’s fine. I’ll live.”

I lowered my voice. “Can you tell me what she said?”

“Sure, it’s not confidential. I’m officially off the case, remember? Anyone I talk to about this is strictly on a personal basis.”

“Good. So, what happened? What did you find out?”

“Angela says she spent a night at Sonny’s house about a month ago,” Will said. “David was out of town and Lauren was visiting her parents. Angela was drunk, but she claims nothing happened with her and Sonny. She says she told David and he was cool with it.”

“Really.” I raised a meaningful eyebrow at Marlowe, and he gave a low huff as though agreeing with my skepticism.

“I know.” Will chuckled, but his laugh sounded strained.

“There was something else, wasn’t there?” I asked.

It took him a moment to answer. “She said I had some nerve questioning her when the police already have their killer.”

“What?” My voice rang out shrilly, startling Marlowe.

“Don’t take it personally,” Will reminded me. “This is a murder investigation. People are going to get freaked and super defensive. Besides, it’s Angela. You know how she is.”

That was true. I’d seen Angela angry before and could easily picture her eyes popping out of their orbits as she yelled at my brother.

“What else did she say?” I asked, laboring to sound calm.

“Just kept yelling that she was the victim, that Dad ruined her wedding and I should be kicked off the police force for being the son of a murderer. Thought she'd take my head off.”

“Hmm. Sounds like the lady doth protest too much.” I kept my tone light, though inside I was seething.

Poor Will. He didn't deserve this. None of us did.

Sure, it was no secret Angela had a temper. Did that make her capable of murder? And what about her new husband?

“I wonder if David was really so 'cool' with Angela spending the night at Sonny's,” I said.

“I thought about that,” Will admitted. “Things might be even more complicated. Detectives Greene and Carver spoke to some of the Luce della Vita wait staff this morning. According to one of the waitresses, Sonny and Dave's partnership wasn't all that solid either. The waitress overheard Sonny demanding that Dave show him all the financial paperwork for the restaurant. She said she heard Sonny saying he had proof David and Alex were going to cut him out of the partnership.”

“Do you think he had proof?” I asked. “Or did he just suspect it?”

“That's what we gotta find out. At least, there's good news,” he added. “Dad's going before the judge in a couple of hours. If all goes well, they'll let him out on bail.”

“I hope so. I hate to think of him spending another night in that place.” Then I remembered why I called. “Was Kim there when you talked to Angela?”

“No. She mighta been in the house, but Angela never let me in. Why?”

“I found out something about Kim today,” I said. “It sounds like she also had a problem with Sonny.” I related Liam's account about the fight he'd overheard in the cellar. “What do you think? Can you try and find out what that was all about?”

“Definitely. I'll pass the info on to Greene and Carver,” Will said. “They'll get to the bottom of it. Thanks, sis.”

I was about to let him go when another thought struck me, “Hey, I was just thinking. What about that book collector from Boston, the one who hired Sonny to get the Raymond Chandler edition?”

“What about him?”

“Is there a way to find out his name and address? From Sonny’s phone, maybe?”

“There should be.” Will sounded thoughtful. “You think he’s got a connection to the murder?”

“Not sure. It’s just a feeling I have. Something about that whole thing doesn’t seem right.”

“Well, I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks, Will. Later.”

I put the phone back in my pocket. In spite of myself, my thoughts returned to Angela’s words about Dad and how the police had their killer already. My hand tightened into a fist on Marlowe’s leash.

Will told me not to take Angela’s words personally but it was easier said than done. It would take a lot of Felisha’s aromatherapy candles to erase this one. All I had to hope for was that others in the neighborhood didn’t share Angela’s attitude toward Dad.

Approaching my block, I rounded the corner and nearly bumped into Dora.

“Sandra!” She flinched and took half a step back.

Was I making her uncomfortable? She’d always been friendly with me before. Or did she also believe Dad was guilty?

“Hi, Dora. You okay?”

“Sure... sure. Just going for a walk and then maybe an early lunch.”

“Oh, so you’re heading over to Kathy’s? I’ll be running there myself, just as soon as I drop off this rascal at home.” I nodded at Marlowe who wagged his tail vigorously.

“Well.” Dora crossed her arms over her chest and stared at the sidewalk. She was definitely acting odd. “I was thinking of trying that new place on Henry Street. I’ve been hearing great things about their brunch specials.”

“I see.” She was even avoiding Kathy’s bakery, her usual lunch place. It wasn’t difficult to guess why. How could she give up on Dad so quickly? Did she seriously believe he’d killed someone?

I had thought she really liked him. Maybe he’d been right in not pursuing her after all.

“Um, so how’s your dad?” Dora asked in a quiet voice.

I forced out a smile. “We’re hoping they’ll let him out on bail tonight. Will’s seeing to that.”

“That’s good. It was awful watching the police take him away last night. ”

Finally, some sympathy for Dad. I felt a slight thawing in my chest. Maybe I’d read too much into Dora’s words before.

“You should go by and see him once he’s out,” I urged her. “I know it would lift his spirits.”

“You think so?” She looked me in the eyes for the first time. There was so much uncertainty and hope in her gaze I knew she hadn’t given up on Dad.

“Of course. It’ll make him happy to know you’re on his side. Now, I’m sorry, but I really gotta go. I’m late as it is!”

Marlowe and I reached my building at a run. As the elevator rose to the fifth floor, I caught my reflection in the smooth metal surface of the doors. I looked tired, but also hopeful. My conversations this morning had filled me with a feeling that the investigation was moving along. Soon, Dad would be home and the real killer would be in the police custody. Sure, there was no new evidence yet, but things were looking up.

Perhaps, there might even be a new message waiting for me upstairs from a potential employer, inviting me to come to an interview.

Still flying high on my newfound optimism, I checked my email as soon as I got out of the elevator.

That optimism proved unfounded. There were no new messages.



Chapter 6

The bright-red front of Kathy's bakery stood out in the middle of the block as I rounded the corner thirty minutes later. The glass door was wide open and two tables had been placed out on the sidewalk so that customers could enjoy the weather. No one was taking advantage of them at the moment.

Apart from my brother wolfing down a chicken pesto on focaccia, the only other customer in the bakery was Mrs. O'Hara, an elderly widow with such a deep penchant for Kathy's carrot cake that even murder couldn't deter her from her daily fix. She had finished paying as I came in and Josh, Kathy's newest employee, came around the counter to help carry her food to the table.

"Is over there okay?" He pointed with his chin to the long table in front of the plush burgundy couch by the wall. A company of eight could easily fit there. "No one else is taking up space, so you might as well make yourself comfortable."

"Why don't you take it to one of those nice tables outside," Mrs. O'Hara said, then her eyes met mine. "Such a nice day, dear. Makes you want to sit out there and take it all in for a while."

Not a word about the murder or Dad's arrest, though she had to know all about it. In a neighborhood like ours, news traveled fast. This was what I liked about the old lady: she wasn't one for gossip.

I smiled, relieved. "Good morning, Mrs. O'Hara. How are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine." She waved a dismissive hand. "But like I told your sister, if there's anything you need, dear, just ask."

"That's very kind of you."

I stepped aside for her and Josh to pass.

"Hi, Sandra." Josh gave me a quick nod, barely glancing in my direction. Maybe it was my imagination, but I had the distinct impression Josh didn't like me much. I told myself it didn't bother me.

The door swung closed behind them, giving Will and me a moment alone. I made a beeline to his table. "How come you're not at the station this morning?"

Will swallowed a chunk of his sandwich and chased it down with coffee. "Been following a lead on a case a few blocks down and

decided to stop by for a bite before heading back.”

“A lead? Something about Dad’s case?”

“No, this was unrelated. I went there after Angela’s.”

I nodded. My brother was discreet. He didn’t often talk about his cases and I respected that. But the fact that Will wasn’t officially investigating Dad’s case meant we could discuss it.

“Did you find anything out about that book collector yet?” I reached for the small glass vase with the peach dahlia at the center of the table and turned it around. The flower was noticeably wilted as were the ones on the other tables. Kathy had a habit of changing them regularly. That she forgot was just another reminder of the shadow that had fallen on our lives.

Will took another big bite of his focaccia and I had to wait for him to swallow before he answered. “I called Detective Carver after we hung up, mentioned it might be a good idea to look him up. He agreed. He’ll go through Sonny’s emails and phone calls and see what they can dig up. When he finds something, he’ll let me know.”

“Thanks, Will.” From the bakery’s back room, Kathy signaled that it was time for me to get to work. I nodded to let her know I wouldn’t take more than five minutes, then reached over and took a sip of Will’s cappuccino.

Outside, Josh placed Mrs. O’Hara’s carrot cake and coffee on the table and stood aside, leaning against the bakery’s glass door. He stretched, his short-sleeve tee tightening around his shoulders. It looked like he, too, wanted to take five.

I couldn’t blame him. The day was beautiful and sunny, a day meant for bumming around at the beach, not being stuck inside discussing murder. I sighed and turned back to my brother.

“I’ve been wondering, why did Sonny decide to change his will? Don’t you think that’s a little strange?”

Will nodded. “I’ve been thinking it too. It might be that he wanted to add someone in, or cut someone out.”

“Yes, but why now?”

He stared at me over his coffee cup. “You think he knew he might die soon?”

“Not in the sense that he knew he’d get killed,” I clarified. “What do you know about his health?”

A look of comprehension dawned on Will's face. "You might be on to something there, Sis. If he had health problems and didn't want his family to know about them, it shouldn't be difficult to find out. Besides, the preliminary autopsy results should come in soon. Then we'll know more."

The door opened again, and Josh walked in and went behind the counter. Will stuffed the rest of the sandwich in his mouth and downed his coffee in one big gulp.

I snorted. "Careful! Did you forget how Mom used to scold you for scarfing down your food?"

He rolled his eyes. "The way you and Kath eat, if I didn't hurry, there'd be nothing left for me. Speaking of Kath..." He nodded towards the back room where my sister's pinched eyebrows and thin lips spelled trouble for me.

I hurried to get up. "Thanks for the info. Text me if you find out anything new."

"Sure thing, Sis."

I headed for the back to face Kathy's wrath, then decided to fortify myself with an iced coffee first. It wasn't like she could get any angrier with me than she already was.

Slipping behind the counter, I edged past Josh who was busy cleaning the milk steamer. He paid me no attention. I reached for the milk jug on the counter beside him, conscious of our hands brushing as I did.

This was the extent of our usual contact. Not that the thought of asking Josh out hadn't crossed my mind when he first started working at Kathy's but dating in the workplace was hardly a good idea. Especially when Josh also moonlighted as a part-time assistant at Dad's book store. Also, while I had no doubts about Josh's good looks, the jury was still out on whether I liked his character. His standoffishness and sarcasm made me wonder if we had anything in common.

Josh's deep brown eyes crinkled at the corners as he smirked and nodded toward the back. "Let me guess: you think she isn't mad enough at you yet, you trying to see what it'll take for her to start throwing thunderbolts with her eyes."

I shrugged, squishing down irritation. Not at his wit, but at the smirk which brought up memories of my ex. Memories I was eager to keep buried.

“Don’t worry. I can handle my sister.”

“Sure, why not? Can’t be all that bad when the boss is family, right?”

I straightened as I faced him. “I’m not treated any differently than you or anyone else here. What I had to talk to my brother about was important and Kathy knows it.”

He paused cleaning the steamer and frowned at me. “I didn’t say you were treated differently, just that it must be nice to work for the family when they’re as cool as your sister.”

“As in, because I’m related I get to do what I want. Is that what you mean?”

He shrugged. “Look, forget it, okay?”

Perhaps, I was reading too much into his words. I took a deep breath and told myself to calm down. Still, how could Josh act so unconcerned when Dad was in trouble?

“You wouldn’t say ‘forget it’ if your Dad was being held on suspicion of a murder he didn’t commit,” I said.

I spun on my heels and headed for the back room without giving him time to retort. The jury had just got back with the verdict on Josh, and it wasn’t promising. Just as well. My track record with men didn’t exactly inspire confidence.

My last serious relationship ended in a spectacular crash-and-burn while I was still in college. I stopped by my boyfriend’s place to hide his present under the Christmas tree and found him there with his other girlfriend, the one I hadn’t known existed. That was five years ago.

After graduation, I headed abroad, spending the next two years backpacking through eight different countries and working at odd jobs until finally getting myself together enough to come back to New York. These days, even the mention of a relationship tended to raise the hairs on the back of my neck.

I decided not to give Josh another thought.

In the back room, Kathy was busy measuring sugar into the huge bowl where peanut butter for the cookies was being mixed. The

place was filled with delicious smells from the two giant ovens behind her.

She didn't look up or say anything as I came in. I hesitated, then decided it was best not to explain my lateness and just get to work. I put on my striped-red apron, tied my hair up in a ponytail, and washed my hands. Then I hurried over to my work table and surveyed the day's projects waiting for me on the metal rack: five specialty birthday cakes to be decorated before closing time. I would have to work straight through lunch to get them done by five p.m.

At the next table over, Felisha's rolled-up sleeves displayed her bare wrists, the bakery being the only place she ever took off her bracelets. She had a tray of Kathy's famous cheesecake brownies in front of her and was cutting them in even squares with a serrated slicing knife. She paused to grin at me.

"You're kinda late today. What's up?"

Then she noticed Kathy's fuming stare and her smile vanished as she bent over her tray again.

Kathy finished mixing in the sugar, straightened and rubbed her forehead with the back of her hand. It left behind a white smear of flour. Abandoning the peanut butter concoction to churn in the giant mixer, she hurried toward the walk-in fridge. As she passed my table, I touched her shoulder.

"Kath, I just wanted to know if he had any news about Dad."

She stopped with a sigh, then shook her head. "It's okay, Sandie. I'm not really mad. I was nervous because Jeff was starting to grumble about your lateness, and I'd rather not have another fight with him."

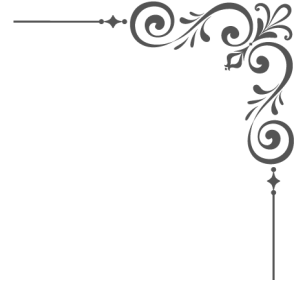
I threw a glance at her husband at the other end of the bakery. He was putting together a new rack for the cookies and making a big production of it as if the job was exceedingly taxing. He was deliberately avoiding my gaze.

"Well, don't worry," I said. "Jeff will have nothing to complain about. I'll have everything done before he heads out on deliveries. I'm very motivated to leave here on time."

"Why?" Kathy raised an eyebrow at me. "You've got some big plans? A date maybe?"

“Of course not.” I took a tissue from the tissue box on the shelf and wiped the flour from her forehead. “You think I'd go on a date when Dad is in so much trouble? But I do have to stop by somewhere tonight. So, yes, I guess I have plans.”

And they involved going over to Luce della Vita after work. Having learned what I did from Will, I knew I had to do some major snooping around.



Chapter 7

Like I promised Kathy, I worked hard all afternoon, taking no breaks for lunch. But amid the baking and decorating, my thoughts kept circling back to the intriguing new piece of information Will shared that morning. If the waitress's account was to be believed, there had been trouble among the partners of Luce della Vita. Was it serious enough to kill over? The more I thought about it, the more Sonny's alleged fight with David seemed probable.

In the beginning, when the restaurant first opened, the partnership must've been a great solution. Sonny had the money to make the business happen, and that attractive proposition made it easy for the Sorrento brothers to overlook the cons in favor of the pros. At first.

By all accounts, Sonny was often querulous and short-tempered. As months went by and the restaurant started to turn a profit, the downside of the partnership became more difficult to ignore.

Or it may have been that the brothers simply got tired of having to answer to a third person and wanted to take the reins in their own hands.

Whatever the reason, the partnership soured and the Sorrento brothers were looking to dissolve it. If Sonny found out about their plan and threatened to stop it, that would amount to a pretty solid motive for murder.

By the time I finished drawing a frosting teddy bear on the last birthday cake, my mind was made up. I couldn't wait. I needed to find out whether there was any substance behind this lead.

As I hung up my apron and let out my ponytail, Felisha looked up from a tray of chocolate cupcakes she was decorating with pink roses.

"You're leaving already?" she pouted. "I thought we were walking home together. We could, like, stop by the health food store and get groceries."

"Groceries?"

Felisha wanting to food shop with me could mean only one thing.

“Let me guess,” I said. “You found some new and complicated recipe, and you want me to be your guinea pig. Am I right?”

“Not a guinea pig.” She grinned. “Call yourself a lucky beta taster.”

“Lucky. I’m still nauseous from the bouillabaisse you made me last month.”

“But I thought you liked my food?”

“I do. Your grilled cheeses are great! I’m just not the biggest fan of the stuff you make from recipes.” Softening at her expression, I added, “Okay. I’m sorry. Tell me what you’re making me this time.”

For some reason her cheeks, already pink from the heat of the ovens, turned even redder. “I was thinking, jambalaya and a seafood gumbo?”

“Really? You’re making soul food?”

Then I understood. My eyes focused on Tyrone mixing focaccia dough at the work station by the window. Tall enough to be a basketball player, the tight white t-shirt he wore accentuated the lean muscles of his arms and torso and set apart his jet-black dreadlocks, tied at the nape with a rubber band.

At forty, Tyrone looked no older than twenty-eight and had the kind of skin that made him the envy of most women. Catching my gaze, he rewarded me with a wink and an easy grin. The combination was disarming, and he knew it: carried it with him like a colt at the hip, prepared to draw at a moment’s notice.

Which explained, in part, the three ex-wives and two children.

Nope. Boyfriend material Tyrone was not. But my long friendship with him extended back to my early college days and the shared memories of late nights spent chasing down our favorite artists at music festivals and reggae bars. Through all that time, we’d never become anything more than good friends. And that was probably the reason why, as Cobble Hill residents went, the guy was still one of my favorite people.

Felisha wasn’t easily persuaded to give up once she had set her sights on someone.

Maybe, with a nudge from a mutual friend, it just might work out between them.

I leaned closer to her, making sure my voice wouldn't carry.
"Alright, spill it. How many times have you been out together?"

Felisha squeezed out two more roses on the last cupcakes, put the tray back on the rack and got out the raspberry cheesecake bars that needed to be packed into carton boxes for delivery. Her eyes were lowered, but it wasn't hard to see they kept straying over to Tyrone's table. Finally, she looked at me.

"We went out twice last week. I thought we had a great time, but now he's barely talking to me. Do you think he's lost interest already?"

It was possible, knowing Tyrone, but I had a more likely explanation.

"It could be he's not in the mood to flirt after what happened last night."

Felisha gulped. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't even be talking about this now."

"Don't be silly! You're allowed to like a guy, and it's nice to have a reason to think about something else besides murder."

"That's true." Her eyes brightened. "Tyrone must be worried about your dad, too. He likes him, right?"

"They always got along," I agreed. "Back when Tyrone's first wife threw him out, Dad let him stay at our house for six months rent-free. Tyrone offered to pay, but Dad wouldn't hear of it."

"You never told me that." She pursed her lips. "So for six months he, like, lived down the hall from you?"

I snorted. "Don't worry, nothing ever happened. He's like a big brother to me." I took out a stack of flat carton boxes for the Linzer tarts and started putting them together and lining them with the wax paper. "Here's a thought, why not ask him over? You could make him that jambalaya thing instead of me."

"That was the idea. But I wanted to practice on you first."

"Oh, I get that. And I'm so flattered! But... just tell him you need help to prepare it."

"But I wanted to impress him!" she protested.

"So impress him by letting him impress you."

Felisha giggled. The idea appealed to her. "Do you think it'll work?"

“Are you kidding me? You know how much he likes to cook.”

A smile brightened Felisha's face. “Okay. I guess. I'll ask him.”

“Great!” I gave her the thumbs up. “Save me some food.”

I looked toward the front. Most of the boxes had already been packed and Jeff was busy carrying them out to his car. He would take them over to Manhattan, to the fancy markets and coffee houses that were my sister's biggest clients. The remainder of her clientele were the numerous small cafés around our neighborhood. Summer or winter, Kathy delivered to them personally, by bike.

From where I stood, I had a good visual of the front of the bakery and the sidewalk. I waited for Jeff to get in the car before abandoning my work-station, then waved goodbye to Felisha and Tyrone and headed for the front. A moment later, the back of Jeff's Chevy disappeared around the corner. Behind the counter, Josh had his back to me, busy cleaning the espresso machine. I slipped outside while he wasn't looking. Since I intended on snooping around, it was best he didn't know where I was going.

I walked briskly to the end of the block. On account of the murder, Luce della Vita was staying closed tonight, but through the half-opened windows on the ground floor, I could see that the darkened barroom was operational. A couple of regulars were already parked on the high stools at the counter, cradling pints of dark brew in their hands. Cradling, or guarding them against one another, I could never tell for sure which.

Liam and Alex Sorrento sat in a corner apart from the customers, paperwork spread out before them on the table. Liam seemed to be listing which liquors they were running low on. He looked up as I walked in.

“Hey, gorgeous! Didn't think I'd see you in here today.”

I smiled. “It's been a tense day, I felt I needed a little something to pick me up.”

“Right on.” He glanced at the papers in front of him. “We're almost done here. This shouldn't take more than ten minutes. And then I'm all yours.” He grinned in a way that was slightly suggestive. “Do you mind waiting?”

“Not at all. Take your time, I'm not in a hurry.”

Throughout our exchange Alex stared steadfastly at the table. He finally looked up at me. "Hey, Sandie." His voice was hesitant. "Sorry about your dad. How's he doing?"

"He's hanging in there." I gave him a tense smile. "We're all hoping he won't have to hang in there for too much longer."

Not if I could help it.

Alex nodded, but it was plain to see he was eager to be done with the pleasantries.

So was I.

I made a beeline for the furthest end of the bar, strategically choosing it for its closeness to the bathrooms. Perched on the bar stool, I took my phone out and pretended to scroll through my messages. A sidelong glance at Alex and Liam a minute later confirmed they were paying me no more attention. The two regulars at the other end of the counter were engrossed in an animated discussion about the Giants or something else sports related.

I stretched and glanced around, affecting a look of boredom, then quietly slid off my stool and ambled toward the restrooms. Pausing in front of the door marked "Ladies," I looked back. No one was watching me. Not one of them even glanced in my direction. Good.

Quietly, I slipped past the restrooms and into the adjoining hallway with narrow stairs, which I took to the second floor. From here, the stairs continued up to the canvased roof garden, which usually opened with the warm weather.

On the second floor was Luce della Vita's smaller dining room, reserved for private events and parties, as well as the three offices in the back, one for each partner in the restaurant. The ones with David and Sonny's names on them were locked but, just as I had hoped, Alex's door stood slightly ajar. Inside, there was a desk and a filing cabinet next to a coat rack in the corner. Several paintings in various sizes hung on the walls, abstract representations of our neighborhood by local artists.

I made straight for Alex's desk. Ten minutes wasn't long, but it only took me five to find the folder I was looking for: the partnership contract. A quick glance over the clauses confirmed what I had already suspected, but I would need to study it thoroughly to be sure. Fishing my phone out of my pocket, I took a photo of the first page.

“Can I help you with that, Sandra?”

My stomach did a somersault as I jumped and faced Alex standing in the doorway. He leaned on the door frame with his hands crossed over his chest. His dark eyes bored into mine with an expression that spelled out barely contained anger.

I'd never seen Alex mad before. He looked older, the rough lines in his face far more pronounced as the muscles in his jaw contracted. I stared back, transfixed. Something about his demeanor put me in mind of Tom Reagan in Miller's Crossing. Cool and handsome, but deadly when angered. I swallowed. It seemed pointless to try and make up a story about why I was there.

Alex's eyes traveled to the contract. “What are you doing with that?”

When I didn't answer, he straightened away from the wall and advanced on me, stepping around the desk between us.

My mouth went dry, but I stood my ground. It would be a mistake to let him know I was scared.

“I said, what are you doing with those papers?” Alex repeated.

There was no other way out except to tell the truth.

Or to confront him with it. After all, it was probable that Alex and his brother were the reason that my dad had to sleep in a locked cell last night.

I straightened, steeling myself for the fight. “Fine, Alex. I know that you and David wanted Sonny out of the partnership. You were fed up with him, right? You wanted to run this place without his interference, but Sonny wasn't about to go quietly.”

Alex's expression didn't change. “Why do you think that?”

I tapped the contract with my fingers. “I only got a quick look at this, but I think that when you drew this up you made an oversight. You forgot to make the provision for dissolving your partnership. Which means, the only way to give Sonny the boot was through the courts, and that could get really expensive, seeing how he didn't want to go.”

The corner of Alex's mouth twitched, but not in a humorous way. “I see. So you figured Dave and I wanted Sonny out so bad we were willing to kill for it?”

“It’s a possibility. In any case, it’s a pretty strong motive. I think the police will agree.”

“Oh, you do? And you figure we couldn’t find any better way to get rid of Sonny than to pump him with lead under the noses of fifty guests at my own brother’s wedding?”

Okay, he had a point. I licked my lips. Maybe I was making a huge fool of myself.

“Yeah, Sonny was a pain,” Alex said. “He was a control freak. Always had to have the final say in every decision, even thought me and Dave were cheating him. We couldn’t keep anything secret from him. Guy seemed to know everything that went on around here, even found out about Dave’s wedding before it was officially announced. He was good at sneaking in and out, too. Just when you thought he was gone for the day, there he’d be, coming out of the cellar or something. It was creeping us out.”

Alex reached past me and snatched the contract from the desk. He took another step toward me, forcing me to retreat until I was backed against the wall.

I threw a panicked glance at the door past his shoulder. No way to reach it with him blocking my way. Maybe it was time to start screaming for help. But the only other people in the building were Liam and the two customers in the bar. Would they even hear me over the music downstairs?

Alex leafed through the contract and threw it open on the desk. “You know something, sister? Maybe you should take a closer look at the paperwork, next time you go accusing people of murder. What’s this? Huh?” He tapped the page with his finger.

I tore my eyes away from the tense lines around his mouth and looked down to where he was pointing, to the signatures at the bottom of the contract. Or rather, the lack of them. I stared up at him.

“You didn’t sign it. None of you did.”

“That’s ‘cause this isn’t the final version. Do you really think I’m dumb enough to keep the real contract in a drawer where anyone can get at it?”

Moving me aside, Alex stepped up to the wall and lifted one of the smaller paintings hanging at eye level. Behind it was a wall safe.

Of course. Where else would he keep important documents? I wanted to slap myself for not having guessed it.

Alex unlocked the combination and took out another set of papers, which he threw on the table in front of me.

“This is the real thing. Check it out for yourself, and you’ll see. Sonny had no choice but to leave the partnership. It was in the contract.” He flicked the passage on the second page to show me the clause. “We didn’t need to kill Sonny when we could just send him packing.”

I scanned the clause he was pointing to. It was as Alex said. I closed my eyes, stifling a groan. I owed him a serious apology. Probably, ten.

“I’m sorry, Alex. Sorry for barging in here and accusing you. I thought, well... you know what I thought. I’m sorry. I don’t know what else to say.”

His expression didn’t soften. “Listen, Sandie. Sonny was no walk in the park, okay? He could be downright obnoxious when he was drunk, and Dave and I were fed up with him. But we had no reason to do away with him.”

He took the contract from the desk and put it away, locking the safe door. When he turned round to me again, the corner of his mouth was lifted in a derisive smirk. His voice dripped acid as he spoke, “By the way, you know something, Sandie? If you’re looking for other suspects besides your dad, why don’t you ask your sister’s husband what he was doing at the time of the murder?”



Chapter 8

“JEFF!”

As much as I wished to appear calm, I couldn't keep my voice from rising an octave.

“What does Jeff have to do with all of this? He never had dealings with Sonny, they barely spoke to each other.”

Alex's grin turned nasty. “Didn't you know? Jeff had been trying to get Sonny into a partnership before Dave and I came along. He had these pretty ambitious plans for expanding your sister's bakery. Well, our better offer got in the way of all that. Jeff's not a forgiving guy, I'm sure you know. He's had a monumental grudge against Sonny for choosing us and for introducing competition to the block.”

“We're not in competition with each other,” I pointed out. “We're too different to compete.”

“We both serve lunch, don't we?”

“Yeah. But at very different prices.”

“That's true. But that's just my point. Try telling that to your brother-in-law, he doesn't see it that way.” Alex's eyebrows drew together in renewed anger. “When we were just getting started, Jeff used to come in here all the time and tell us we wouldn't even last a year. Can you believe the nerve? Well, look at us now, going on the third year and still doing swell. So, before you go throwing accusations all around, take a closer look at your own family.”

I stared at him open-mouthed, stunned by his implications. Then I shook my head. “Okay. Maybe Jeff had a grudge against Sonny. That doesn't mean he killed him. Jeff's no peach but he's not a killer.”

“But you gotta agree, it's a motive,” Alex said, folding his arms again. “And I'm sure Jeff knew about your dad's gun. He would've had much better access to it than me or my brother. Am I right? He was also hanging around at the reception that night. He had plenty of opportunities to get down to the cellar and shoot Sonny. So, there you go. Jeff had the motive, he had the means and he had the opportunity. I think the police would agree that's what they call a viable suspect.” He pointed at the door.

“Now, get out of my office. If I catch you in here again I’ll call the police on you for breaking and entering. I’m sure it’ll do wonders for your brother’s career to have both his dad and sister in the slammer.”

I stepped around him without a word and walked out of his office. Once in the solitary dimness of the empty dining room, I leaned forward on a table and drew a shuddering breath. It did nothing to calm my nerves. There wasn't enough air for that.

Alex’s arguments for serving up Jeff as a new suspect had been too convincing. Perhaps, even more than he knew since Alex didn’t seem to be aware that Jeff didn’t actually own Kathy’s Bakery.

By the time Kathy and Jeff met, my sister’s bakery was already up and running, and when they married, she remained the sole proprietor. Her husband had no legal share in the business. Knowing this, I sometimes wondered how Jeff felt about it. Possibly, some of his ill humor had to come from his resentment, having to play second string to my sister when he so obviously wanted to be in charge.

Expansion through a partnership with Sonny would’ve given him that opportunity. New papers would’ve had to be drawn up, making Jeff the bakery’s co-owner.

These thoughts rushed through me as I hurried down the stairs. All they did was bring more questions.

If the probability existed that Jeff was guilty of a murder, how would it affect us all? What would happen to the bakery if Kathy’s husband were sent to prison? Would people still want to come in?

And what about me and the rest of the staff? If Kathy and Jeff became embroiled in a lengthy trial, would Kathy still be able to afford to keep us on?

If only I had a job or a business of my own so that I didn’t have to depend on my family so much...

I stopped in my tracks. Wait.

Why was I rushing ahead of myself, letting Alex’s words get to me and stir up my fears? Jeff was no murderous maniac. He had nothing to gain from Sonny’s death and it was doubtful he’d ever kill anyone out of sheer spite.

Now that I thought about it, something in Alex’s manner had rung false, his anger swinging too far into the defensive, his attack on Jeff a bit too vehement. Could it have been a ploy to draw suspicion

away from himself? It was possible. Which meant I needed to calm down and think things over rationally.

I started walking again, my breathing easier this time. The foray into Alex's office hadn't been a total disaster. I could feel it. I just needed to find out what else he was hiding.

Once downstairs, I headed for the door, but Liam beckoned me over from the bar. I hesitated, not wanting to be there if Alex happened to come down.

Then again, if I was going to help solve Sonny's murder and clear my dad's name, I couldn't let things like fear of awkward encounters get in the way.

Liam cocked his head at me as I came over. "What's the matter? You look like you swallowed a lemon."

I forced out a smile, but it probably wasn't very convincing. "Like I said, tough day."

He nodded. "How about that drink then? It's on the house."

My head jerked toward the stairs. After what just happened, it was doubtful Alex would want me drinking anything on the house in his establishment. Not for a long while, anyway.

As if reading my thoughts, Liam added, "Ok, it's on me. Sound good?"

I shrugged my shoulder. "In that case, all right. But only if you drink one with me."

"Deal. What would you like?"

"A white wine, please."

"Coming right up." With a sideways glance at me, Liam uncorked a new bottle and poured out two glasses of sparkling white wine. Reaching behind him, he took a dark bottle from the collection of liquors on the glass shelf and added a splash of Crème de Cassis into my glass. With a flourish, he placed the festive-looking drink on the coaster in front of me.

I couldn't help but grin. Liam managed to find just the thing to pick up my spirits.

"How did you know Kir Royale was my favorite?"

"That's what you always get. I noticed." He gave me a wink.

I leaned forward, doing my best to hold on to my poker face. "So you must be really good at noticing stuff."

His eyes found mine and held them for a protracted moment, then traveled down several inches, making my cheeks grow hot. Subtle, Liam.

“I only notice the things that interest me,” he said.

I widened my eyes, feigning innocence. “Things? Like what?”

He deflected without missing a beat. “Like that pretty green pendant around your neck. Looks nice with the peach scarf you’re wearing. Chiffon?”

“Well look who’s in the know about women’s fashion.”

I watched him take a big gulp from his wine glass and sipped my Kir. The bubbly wine, laced with the sweet taste of black currants, was deliciously intoxicating. I took another long sip before setting the glass down and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. Liam’s eyes followed my movements, like a cat with the dish of cream. Subtle he wasn’t, but Liam was sure easy to talk to. Which was useful to me at the moment.

“Speaking of noticing things,” I said, “did you know that Dave and Alex wanted to boot Sonny from the partnership? I was surprised. I thought the three of them got along so well.”

Liam shrugged. “They wanted him out, yeah. They talked about it, but they never would’ve gone through with it.”

My pulse quickened. “Really? Why is that?”

“Because Sonny threatened to end their lease if they did.”

For a moment, I forgot to blink as I stared at him. Two more patrons walked into the bar, talking in low voices and looking subdued. It must’ve been on everyone’s minds that evening that their usual haunt had become a crime scene.

Liam downed the rest of his wine. “Gotta work, babe. Let me know if you need a refill.” He started to leave, but then came back and leaned an elbow on the counter, bringing his face close to me, but not so close that it felt awkward. “How about dinner sometime?”

I arched an eyebrow. “You’re asking me out?”

“Sure. Why not? We could go to a nice place, talk about women’s fashion some more.”

I looked down to hide my grin. It was impossible to stay serious around Liam. “That sounds like fun but not until the investigation is over. I need to be there for my family right now.”

“That’s fine. I’ll wait.” He straightened, a tiny smile quirking his lips.

I watched him stride off to take orders, admiring the way the muscles in his back rippled under the white tee he wore loosely tucked into his jeans. Then I took a long, satisfying sip of the Kir, the bubbles tickling the roof of my mouth. My thoughts circled back to the murder.

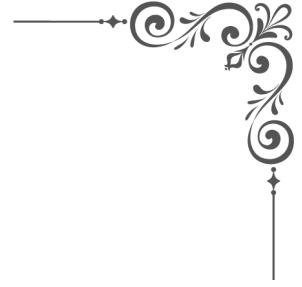
I was right after all. Alex didn’t tell me the whole truth upstairs. In their venture, Sonny was both partner and landlord. He held all the cards. The Sorrento brothers may have had their contract, but it didn’t matter. They were stuck with him. It was so obvious, I couldn’t believe it hadn’t occurred to me from the beginning.

Of course all facts appear obvious once revealed, and maybe that wouldn’t stymie an experienced detective, but being a newbie it certainly confused me.

Then again, being new was not an excuse. If I were to stay ahead in this game, I’d have to learn to arrive at the truth faster.

The good news? David and Alex were still in the running as prime suspects in the murder and that meant Dad was one step closer to being cleared.

Rallied by this thought, I finished my drink and stepped outside into the warm summer evening. That was when I noticed I had a new text from Will.



Chapter 9

Hey, Sis. Where are you?
'Outside Luce della Vita. We need to talk.'
'Great! Head over to the bakery.'
'Why?'
'We're all here with Dad.'

Dad was out on bail! What a relief knowing he wouldn't be spending another night in that awful place. My fingers flew over the tiny keys.

'I'll be right over!'

I put my phone back into my pocket. As I looked up, Dora rounded the corner of Luce della Vita and headed in my direction.

"That's twice in one day," I said. "Are you going over to Kathy's?"

She gave me a tentative smile. "I felt bad not coming over for lunch this afternoon. Heard from Mrs. O'Hara the bakery was very quiet today, so I thought I'd stop by for tea and a scone and show my support."

"Well, your timing couldn't be better. Will just texted me that Dad is out on bail."

"Nicolas is in there?" Her face showed apprehension. "Then maybe I should come by at another time."

"Don't be silly!" I protested. "You should come by now. Please. Dad needs all of our support."

She hesitated a moment, then nodded. "Alright. You've convinced me."

We walked down the block to the bakery. The iron grate had been partially lowered over the front, but the lights inside were on.

Dad sat on the couch behind the long table by the wall with Josh, Felisha and Tyrone. Everyone had food and drinks in front of them. I didn't see Kathy or Will.

Bending low, Dora and I climbed under the grate.

Dad looked up from his half-empty beer bottle. "Hiya, kid! Was starting to think you weren't going to show up. Out partying tonight?"

I squeezed into the tight space between the table and the couch to give him an awkward hug. "Of course I'm not partying, Dad. Just

bar-hopping." I grinned and step back to look him in the eyes. "How are you?"

"Ah, you know. Not out of the woods yet. But at least I'll sleep in my own bed tonight. That's something, right?"

He smiled but the worry in his eyes was plain to see. Beneath the calm façade, he was scared. Really scared.

"You'll be okay, Dad," I said. "We're all here for you."

"That's right," Will said, coming out of the back room with a stack of chocolate chip cookies on a plate. "We'll make sure you never have to see the inside of that cell again. You know that."

Dora came up behind me, her eyes never leaving Dad. "I hope you don't mind my being here, Nicolas. Sandie invited me just now."

"Mind it?" Dad scrambled up from his seat and pulled her in for a hug. "Can't tell you how good it is to see my friends here after that ordeal yesterday. I know it's not over yet but having all of you here helps. I'm really glad you came."

Dora hugged him back but quickly withdrew. "Uh, thanks. It's... good to see you out."

The reserve in her smile was hard to miss. Was Dora really doubting Dad's innocence? Dad must've noticed it too because his face clouded over again.

Wanting to change the subject, I took a cookie from Will's plate and looked around the café. "Where are Kathy and Jeff? Aren't they here?"

"I called Kathy as soon as I knew Dad was getting out," Will said. "She said she'll rush through deliveries to get back here. Jeff is on his way back from the city he should be here soon."

At the other end of the counter, Felisha poured herself an iced coffee. I went over to her and leaned close. "Guess you and Tyrone had to put off your evening together?"

"Shh!" Her eyes darted to the table where Tyrone sat talking with Josh over sandwiches and apple tarts. She fidgeted with her bracelets. "I never got a chance to ask him over. I thought I might ask him tomorrow night. Will you mind clearing out?"

"Not at all. You guys can have some privacy."

"Thanks. You're the best." She gave me a grateful smile and headed over to join them.

The door opened and Valeria entered followed by Lauren. Everyone turned to stare at them.

Lauren froze in the entrance as if the sight of Dad frightened her.

Valeria waved a general greeting. "Yo, peeps! What's this, a party? And no one invited me?" Then she saw Dad. "Oh, hey! They let you out already, huh?" She gave him a high-five.

An amused smile lifted a corner of Dad's mouth. "Guess they did. For now, anyway."

Valeria pointed a thumb at Lauren. "Just dragged this one out for a walk and I wanted an iced coffee."

In the entrance, Lauren hugged herself around the middle and didn't quite meet anyone's gaze. "We shouldn't be here, Val." Her voice was barely audible. "I told you we should've gone somewhere else."

In the fallen silence, Dad handed me his beer and walked over to her, looking straight into her eyes.

"Hi, Lauren. I never got a chance to say it last night... I'm so sorry about Sonny."

She didn't say anything, just stared at him with that deer in the headlights look she had on the night before.

Dad cleared his throat. "Look, Lauren, I swear to you I didn't do anything to him. I'd never do anything like that, no matter what. Sonny and I had words, that's all. You gotta believe me, please!"

My chest tightened at the desperation in his voice. Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw Dora retreating back to the table. Her face was pinched and drained of color.

For the first time, the stark reality of Dad's situation became fully clear to me. Even if he wasn't convicted, his life would never be the same again. The mistrust and suspicion that had been planted by the accusation would follow him anywhere he went because there would always be someone around like Dora and Lauren. Someone who would doubt his innocence and make it clear they didn't trust him.

It wasn't enough to simply reclaim Dad's freedom. The only way to truly save him was to prove his innocence beyond the shadow of a doubt. And the only way to do that was by finding Sonny's real murderer and bringing him to justice.

I walked around the counter and came to stand beside Dad. "Come on, Lauren. At least give him the benefit of the doubt. He deserves that much, doesn't he?"

In the continuing silence, Lauren nodded slowly. "Of course, Sandie. You're right. Your father deserves the benefit of the doubt." She didn't sound convinced, though.

"Cool." Valeria grinned as she poured herself a huge iced coffee, mixed in a generous splash of cream and added four sugars. "So we can stay for a few minutes."

Lauren's eyes darted to her. "What?"

"I want cookies!"

Another awkward silence followed. I couldn't believe Valeria's cluelessness. Didn't she understand how awkward it was for Dad and Lauren to remain in the same room together? Then Dad said quietly, "Valeria's right, Lauren. You should stay and have some dessert with us."

Backed into a corner, Lauren gave a slight nod. "Alright, Nicolas. Just a few minutes."

I turned to Will who stood frowning at my side. "Remember I said we needed to talk? I've got some new info."

He nodded. "Me, too. Let's go into the back room."

Out of earshot, Will leaned against the wooden table and crossed his arms over his chest. "First things first, we looked into Sonny's medical records. You were right to think Sonny had a strong reason to make out a will."

"He was sick," I guessed.

"Very sick."

"What was it? Cancer?"

"Yep. Advanced stage. His doctor told us there was some hope, but things didn't look good."

"Who knew about it?" I asked.

"Well, Greene and Carver hadn't had time to question everyone about it yet, but it seems Sonny kept it a secret. Probably didn't want his partners to know. Or maybe it was for his family's sake, didn't want to upset them."

"What about Kim?" I asked.

He shook his head. "That's a dead end. Detectives Greene and Carver went to question her this afternoon. Turns out, Sonny didn't like Kim's boyfriend and he wanted to send her off to a college on the West Coast. He thought it would be a good excuse to get her away from the guy. It was a good school, too. Expensive. But Kim dug her heels in and told him she wanted to stay local. She and the boyfriend were planning on going to the same community college. Then, out of nowhere, the guy dumped her for someone else. After that, Kim and Sonny squared things off."

"Is that all true?" I asked.

"Carver spoke to the ex-boyfriend. He confirmed Kim's story."

I frowned. "Could Sonny have had anything to do with the boyfriend's change of heart?"

"You mean, did Sonny have a forceful chat with him on the side?"

"He could've threatened him or paid him off. Then, if Kim found out..."

Will rubbed his jaw. Then he shook his head. "That's just conjecture, Sis. We've got nothing pointing us in that direction. Plus, the boyfriend's story checks out. He just got back from a vacation in Cancún. It was a trip for two."

So, that was that. I leaned back against the worktable, turning the information in my mind. As desperate as I was to find Sonny's real murderer, I felt relieved to know Kim was no longer a suspect. The fact that Sonny had genuinely cared for her had been obvious to everyone. As terrible as his final moments must've been, at least his last thought wasn't the realization that his own daughter wanted him dead.

"So what about you?" Will asked. "What did you find out?"

"Well, it sounds a bit more complicated than that stuff with Kim." I told him what I'd learned from Alex and Liam.

Will nodded as he listened. "Okay, this is good stuff. I knew about the clause in the contract and the Sorrentos wanting Sonny out," he said. "But the fact that Sonny was threatening to rescind the lease puts a whole new spin on things. I'm going to look into it tomorrow. Thanks, Sandie, this is valuable info."

"By the way," he added, "I also looked into that book collector from Boston like you asked."

I straightened, my fingers tightening on the edges of the table. "What did you find out?"

"Hate to disappoint you," Will said, "but the guy checks out. His name is John Edwards. Looks like he had commissioned Sonny to bid on several rare books for him over the years. He called him recently about getting the first book, *The Long Goodbye*. Then three weeks later, he emailed to commission *The Big Sleep*."

"I see. So, just another guy obsessed with Raymond Chandler?"

"I got the impression he collects first editions in general," Will said. "He's not Chandler-specific, like Dad."

"No one is Chandler-specific like Dad."

I threw a glance toward the café where Dad and Josh were talking together over beers. Josh's expression was earnest as he listened to Dad. He wasn't smirking, the way he did around me.

I frowned. Now that I thought about it, Josh seemed to get along with everyone around here but me. Not that it mattered. Why should I care if Josh and I were friends?

Will cleared his throat. "See something there you like, Sis?"

Now he was actually smirking at me too! I took a deep breath, resisting the urge to punch him.

"Look," I said, eager to change the subject. "Don't you think it's odd that this John Edwards and Dad went for the same books? Twice? Remember how Dad got when Sonny outbid him at that first auction?"

"Hmm." Will nodded. "Yeah. He didn't take it lightly."

"That's the understatement of the year."

And then, just weeks later, the same thing happened again. Something about that didn't sit right with me.

"Did Sonny keep records of his transactions with John Edwards?" I asked.

"I'd like to take a look at them."

Will thought about it. "I could send you a copy, but you can't tell anyone. I don't wanna get into trouble."

"Of course." I stared at him. "So, what now?"

"Now, we go and have some food. You know, relax and take it one day at a time."

I snorted. "When exactly did you get so laid back, little brother?"

“Little?” He straightened to his full six foot two. “Maybe you missed it, but I’m not that little anymore.”

“But still skinny as jerky.” I poked him in the chest.

“The word is lanky, not skinny. And by the way, some chicks dig that.”

“Ugh! Don’t tell me about your chicks. I don’t want to know.”

“And you won’t. Because I don’t kiss and tell.” Will slung his arm around my shoulder and steered me toward the front room.

Grabbing hot chocolates Valeria had whipped up for everyone, we joined the others just as Kathy and Jeff arrived.

“Dad!” Kathy threw her arms around his neck. “I can’t believe anyone would think you’d kill Sonny over some book. What kind of idiots are they at the police?”

Will frowned at her but said nothing as he straddled a chair and leaned his hands on its back.

“Don’t forget it wasn’t the first time he and Sonny fought over a book,” Jeff said.

We all stared at him in disbelief. Kathy opened her mouth to protest but Dad put a hand on her arm to stop her. “That wasn’t a crime,” he said.

“You also had one too many pints that night.”

“All right, Jeff!” Dad gave him a warning look but the other didn’t stop there.

“And you fell down on your way home and had to be taken to the ER to get stitches.” Dad’s hands gripped the edges of the table. “So I did. You trying to tell me something there, Jeff?”

On my left, Dora suddenly blanched and stared at Dad as if seeing him for the first time.

“Yeah. I am.” Jeff pointed a finger at him. “Who had to take you to the hospital that night? Me and Kath, that’s who. We missed a night of deliveries—that’s money we won’t get back. All ‘cause of your stupid antics, old man. You better straighten up if the police don’t put you away again. Your family’s not going to sort out your messes forever.”

Dad rose from his seat. I quickly stepped between them, my hands out to stop the impending fight.

“Dad, please. Don’t.” I turned to Jeff. “That’s enough. It happened once and I’m sure Dad’s not proud of himself, but you’re making it sound like he does this sort of thing all the time.”

“Oh yeah? What do you call getting himself thrown in jail for murder? Who has to sort it all out now? The family, that’s who.”

“Stop it, Jeff!”

Everyone turned to Kathy in surprise. Her lips trembled and large tears had pooled in her eyes. “I don’t see you sorting anything out,” she said. “My father was set up, he’s innocent. You should be supportive like the rest of us, but all you do is throw accusations around and stir up trouble. You’re making things harder on everyone. If you can’t help, then at least be quiet and stay out of it!”

Swinging on her heels, she threw open the door and was out before anyone could stop her.

We stared after her in astonishment. I’d never heard Kathy raise her voice at her husband before. What had been going on at home between her and Jeff that would drive my quiet sister to such an outburst in front of everyone?

Jeff watched the door for a moment then turned and stormed into the back.

“I should go after Kathy,” I said. But as I moved toward the door, Lauren rose from the table.

“No, Sandie. I’ll go. I think it would be better for her to talk to a non-family member right now.”

Dad nodded. “Thank you, Lauren. That’s very kind of you.”

She gave him a faltering smile and quickly went out. I watched her go, wondering how much of her hurried retreat was motivated by the desire to escape Dad’s presence.

Dad looked behind him and frowned. “Where’s Dora? I was going to offer to walk her home.”

“She was just here.” I took a peek in the back where Jeff sat brooding by himself. “She must’ve left during the fight,” I said, remembering Dora’s paleness when all the shouting had started.

“Heck. Who can blame her?” Dad shrugged and scratched the thick stubble on his chin, but his face showed signs of chagrin. Perhaps this ordeal with the police was making him reevaluate his

relationship with Dora. Did he finally realize she wasn't going to wait forever?

"You could give her a call and make sure she got home safe," I suggested.

"Yeah?" His eyebrows drew together in a tight line. "You think she still wants to hear from me?"

"You'll never know unless you try."

He sighed. "Maybe we've all had enough drama for one night. What do you think, kids? Shall we close this joint and head home?"

While the others wiped the tables and chairs, Valeria, Josh and I put away the food. Jeff finally came out, but instead of helping, leaned against the wall by the door and waited with his back to everyone. As we ducked outside he turned off the lights and pulled down the grate, then locked it for the night. Without a glance at us, he headed for his car down the block.

Will clicked his tongue. "Nice. Didn't even offer the girls a ride home."

"That's fine, we can walk," Felisha said. She turned to Tyrone. "It's not that late. We could stop by the bar and hang out...if you want."

"Sounds mighty fine, girl." Tyrone grinned and put a hand around her waist.

With a wave to us, the two of them headed down the street to Luce della Vita.

I smiled. It looked like Felisha found a way to salvage her romantic evening after all.

"How about I give you all a ride?" Will said. "My car is just around the corner."

His phone pinged and he frowned. "Sorry, spoke too soon. It's the precinct: there's a robbery in progress. I gotta go, guys."

"That's okay, just be safe." I followed him with my eyes, anxiety squeezing my throat, as he walked away at a brisk pace. My little brother, always running towards danger.

Dad patted my back. "He'll be alright, Sandie. Your brother has a good head on his shoulders."

"He does." I chose not to remind him that lots of good, level-headed cops were killed in the line of duty each year. With

everything on Dad's mind, it was just the sort of fact he could do without.

The rest of us walked to the end of the block where Josh shook Dad's hand. "See you tomorrow, Nick." He gave me his usual curt nod and he and Valeria headed straight.

Dad and I turned left and walked up the street.

"What's happening tomorrow?" I asked when we were out of earshot.

"I told Josh he can work an extra night at the shop," Dad said. "I've no head for running it right now and the guy really needs the money."

"That's good. Maybe he'll straighten things out in there. The place is a mess, Dad."

"That it is. But you know something? I kind of like it that way."

I smiled. "Yeah. I guess I do, too."

As we came to my building, I turned and looked him in the eyes. "Will you be okay tonight? I could come over and stay with you."

His eyes narrowed. "Are you going to babysit me now? Figure your old man can't be alone anymore?"

"Of course not. I just..."

He waved me off. "I'll be fine. Besides I've got Marlowe and the cats to keep me company."

"Uh, no. You don't," I said, remembering about the zoo upstairs. "Since I've been taking care of them it was easier to transfer them over. I'll run up and get them. Or you can come up with me. It might take a while to get Asimov and Hemingway into the carrier."

Dad rubbed his chin with a slight grimace. "Just get Marlowe. The cats can stay with you for now. And Hemingway you can keep, he's not much company anyway."

Marlowe was ecstatic to see Dad, and he showed it by leaping at him with lots of yapping and tail wagging.

"Holy mackerel!" Dad crouched down beside his dog and buried his face in his neck, then scratched him behind the ears. "You silly guy. It's so good to see you!"

The first genuine smile since the murder lit up his face, crinkling his eyes. It almost made me feel like everything was right with the world again.

Dad rose to his feet. "Thanks for taking care of him, kid."

"Anytime, Dad."

I watched them walk together to the corner, then went inside. As I came upstairs, my phone vibrated with an incoming call. To my surprise, it was Dora.

"Hello, Sandie." Her voice trembled which was unusual for her.

"Dora, are you okay? What's wrong? You disappeared from the bakery."

"I know. I'm sorry. Are you still there? Is Will with you? I really need to talk to him, but I don't have his phone number."

"Will's been called away on a case," I said. "I just got home myself."

"Oh." I could hear her heavy breathing on the other end. I frowned.

"Dora, what's wrong? Do you want to talk to me?"

"I... yes. Can I come over?"

"Now?" I glanced at the time: it was half past ten.

"Please, Sandie. I think it might be really important. I'm leaving my house now and I'll be over in five minutes. Sandie?"

She sounded close to panic. My pulse picked up the pace. "Is this about Dad?"

"Yes... I can't remember, but I think it was the same day. I kept thinking he was there but I just realized he wasn't. I'm almost sure... why hadn't I put it together sooner?"

"Put what together sooner?" I strained to make sense of her confused mumbling. "What are you talking about?"

"Sorry. This isn't a phone conversation, I'd rather talk face to face. Sandie? Are you there?"

I realized I'd been nodding, forgetting she couldn't see me.

"Yeah. Yeah, of course. Come up when you get here."

Asimov was rubbing against my leg and purring loudly. I picked him up and headed into the kitchen. Whatever Dora had to say, it was probably going to be a while before I went to bed that night. Which meant, I needed coffee.

Ten minutes later, I sat at the kitchen table with the steaming mug in front of me and waited.

And waited.

And waited...



Chapter 10

Someone shook me awake. I opened my eyes and stared into Felisha's worried face. Her eyebrows were pinched in concern.

"Sandie, what's going on? Why are you sleeping in the kitchen?"

I rubbed my forehead, trying to get my bearings. Morning light streamed into the kitchen window through the light curtains. It cleared the fog from my mind.

"Dora!"

I sat up with a start.

"I was waiting for her last night. She called me when I got home, said she needed to talk. But she never showed up. I guess I fell asleep waiting up for her."

Then I noticed Felisha had on the same clothes as the night before. "Hold on. You went out with Tyrone last night. Are you just getting home now?"

She nodded, grinning, but rolled her eyes as my mouth opened wide. "Sandie! It's not what you think."

"It's not?" I narrowed my eyes at her with suspicion. Then my stomach growled.

Felisha laughed. "I'm hungry, too. I'll make us breakfast and then I'm going to bed. So glad I'm not working today! I can barely keep my eyes open." Talking over her shoulder, she took out the eggs from the fridge and cracked six of them into a bowl. "So, after we left you guys Tyrone and I played pool at Luce della Vita for like two hours. We had so much fun that we ended up going to a dance club in the city, and we stayed there till closing. Tyrone is a totally great dancer! We're going out again this weekend. Hey, Sandie? Can you make coffee while I do the omelets? Sandie! Are you listening to me?"

I looked up from checking my phone. There had been no more calls from Dora which was strange. "Sorry. Of course I'll make coffee, I just need to wake up first."

I went into the bathroom down the hall and splashed cold water on my face. Then I headed out onto the balcony to water my herb

garden.

As always, the activity brought with it a welcome distraction from my worries. I inspected the plants, satisfied how well my little garden had grown in the three months since I started it. The mint and rosemary were getting too bushy for their pots and would need to be replanted soon, and the fragrant lavender was drawing in butterflies. Even Felisha's poinsettia I'd trimmed in May was beginning to show tiny new shoots. Come Christmas it would look beautiful and leafy again.

Back in the kitchen, I opened the fresh bag of beans and poured a generous amount into the coffee grinder. As the rich, invigorating aroma filled the room, my thoughts turned, as they often did at these times, to Dad's favorite fiction detective.

The mysteries of Raymond Chandler had no shortage of compelling, complicated characters, most notably Philip Marlowe. Marlowe was tough and rugged, and everything the detective of the thirties should be. Used to getting tossed about and cracked on the head by both the thugs and the police, he often had to forego safety and sleep in the pursuit of the bad guys.

But breakfast was the one thing Marlowe never went without, and coffee in particular was his constant companion. His ritual of brewing the stuff, the "lifeblood" as he called it, was as thorough and constant as Marlowe's neglect for personal safety. Coffee was his anchor, a grain of normalcy in the otherwise surreal and often sordid life of crime solving. If it could do that much for Marlowe, I had to hope it would do the same for me and help me solve this convoluted case.

The coffee made, I poured myself a cup and sat at the kitchen table staring at my phone. "I don't get it. Dora was on her way over last night. She sounded like she had something important to tell me about the case. Why didn't she come?"

Felisha shrugged as she placed a Western omelet in front of me. "Maybe she changed her mind?"

"Then why didn't she call? Besides you didn't hear her on the phone—she sounded really upset."

"What else can it be, though?" She took a bite of her own omelet and chewed thoughtfully.

"I don't know. But I have a bad feeling about this."

“Have you tried calling her?”

“No. I fell asleep.” I took a sip from my mug, grateful for the caffeine jolt as the coffee traveled into my stomach, piercing the fog in my brain. I reached for my phone again. “I’m going to call her and talk her into meeting up with me before work. I’ve got to find out what she knows, I’ve a feeling it’s important.”

I dialed Dora’s number but it went straight to voicemail. Had she turned off her phone because she was avoiding me?

I got up and rubbed my neck, sore from sleeping at the kitchen table. Then I made a decision. “I’m going on the offensive. I’ll take Marlowe out for a walk and we’ll go by Dora’s house. She’ll have to talk to me, she can’t avoid me forever.”

To my surprise, Marlowe didn’t come running when I called him. Then I remembered. “That’s right. Dad took him back with him last night.”

Felisha’s face fell. “I thought he might stay with us at least one more day. Are the cats gone too?”

As if in answer, Hemingway and Asimov sauntered into the kitchen. Hemingway leaped onto the windowsill and sat with his back to us, swishing his tail and feigning indifference. Asimov bee-lined to Felisha and weaved between her legs as he purred. Felisha sneezed and grimaced. “Where’s that allergy medicine?”

While she went to root for it in the bathroom, I dialed Dora’s number again, with the same result as before.

“This is so frustrating! I’ve got to talk to her, she can’t avoid me forever.”

“What are you going to do?” Felisha called from down the hall.

The decision was obvious. “I’ll go over to her place anyway and ring the bell until she opens.”

“Are you sure it’s a good idea?” She came back, her face etched with worry.

“Yes. As soon as I freshen up and change. If Dora knows something, she’s going to have to talk to me.” I downed the rest of my coffee in one gulp and headed for the bathroom.

Fifteen minutes later, freshly showered, I pulled on a light top and a pair of linen capri pants. I was wrapping my peach scarf loosely around my neck when my phone rang.

Was Dora calling to explain why she failed to show up last night? I scrambled for the phone, only to be disappointed.

“Oh. Hey, Will.”

“Sandie, where are you?” The urgency in his voice made me frown.

“Just heading out. Why?”

“Stay where you are and don’t go anywhere. Detectives Greene and Carver are on their way to see you. I just heard, thought I should warn you.”

I blinked. The detectives handling Sonny’s murder were coming to see me? “Why do they want—” The doorbell rang and I swallowed. “Never mind. I guess I’m about to find out.”

Felisha beat me to the door. She looked into the peephole and turned to me with widened eyes. “It’s two guys I’ve never seen before. The angry one showed me a police badge.”

I remembered that Felisha wasn’t at Luce della Vita the night of Angela’s wedding reception so she couldn’t know what Greene and Carver looked like. The angry one had to be Greene.

“Let them in,” I said.

Detective Greene entered first. His mouth tight, he gave our hallway a sweeping look, stopping briefly on Felisha and coming to rest on my face. He had the sort of deep-set eyes that seemed incapable of missing a detail.

Detective Carver nodded a greeting to us as he followed Greene inside. Unlike his partner, he was clean-shaven and had a smooth forehead that didn’t look like it was habitually frowning. He was sipping a large berry smoothie through a red-and-white straw.

“Miss James, there’s been another murder,” Greene said. “A body was found in the park early this morning. We’re here to ask you what you know about it.”

Breathing suddenly became a chore as the pieces of a gruesome picture came together in my mind. Though I was pretty sure I knew the answer, I still forced out the question.

“Who?”

“Dora Novak. I believe you know her?”

Felisha gasped and clapped her hands to her mouth.

I leaned against the wall, my head spinning. “How did she die?”

Greene's eyebrows drew together. "Miss James, we're here to ask the questions, not answer them."

A long pause followed during which he continued to stare at me with an expression that meant to unsettle.

I refused to be unsettled. After all, my brother was a detective and police didn't easily intimidate me. If Greene was going to barge into my home and disrupt my day, he would have to drop the tough guy act.

Detective Carver chimed in, "We don't have the autopsy reports yet. So far it looks like she's been strangled."

"Oh." I stared at the floor, my mind a white blanket of shock.

"She had her phone with her," Carver continued. "The thing is—"

"Let me guess," I said. "I was the last person Dora called last night."

"Yeah," Greene said. "So, where were you between the hours of eleven and one in the morning?"

My eyes flew up to him in shock I couldn't hide. "Wait. You think I did it? Am I a suspect?"

"Miss James," Carver cut in again, his voice friendly. "We're just following procedure. Is there anything you can tell us about your whereabouts last night?"

I hugged myself around the middle. Sometimes it didn't matter how many relatives you had in the police. Certain questions could rattle you no matter what.

"I was here," I muttered. "I got home at ten thirty and didn't leave all night."

The detectives looked at Felisha. "Can you corroborate that, Miss?"

"I..." Felisha gulped and looked at me. "I was out at a club all night. I just got home."

"Can someone else confirm your alibi?" Carver asked me.

I shook my head. "I was home alone." The gears in my brain starting up again, I cleared my throat and took a deep breath. I told them about my conversation with Dora and how she never showed up after she'd called me.

"What do you figure she wanted to talk to you about?" Greene asked.

“I don’t know. She wouldn’t say over the phone. I think she had information about Sonny’s murder, though.”

“What makes you think that?” Carver asked.

“Just... what she said and how she said it.” I repeated Dora’s words to him.

Carver took a last, rather loud sip of his smoothie and waved the empty container. “Sorry, you got a trash can here?”

“It’s in the kitchen,” Felisha said in a tiny voice. “I’ll show you.”

“Don’t bother.” He flashed her a smile. “I’m sure I can find it.”

He strolled down the short hallway and I wondered if it was just a ploy to check out the premises for possible clues. The remaining three of us waited in tense silence until Carver came back.

Greene gave him a disgruntled look. “All done?”

“You bet!” Carver’s voice was cheery.

Greene looked at me. “We’re finished here for today, Miss James. Don’t leave town while the investigation is underway.”

As the door closed behind them, I turned to Felisha. She looked just as bewildered as I felt, but she took me by the shoulders and steered me back into the kitchen.

“Grilled cheese,” she announced in a voice full of grim determination. “You need grilled cheese. And a lot more coffee.”

I gave her a weak smile. “Food? Is that your solution to every life’s problem?”

“Do you have a better one?” She forced me onto a chair and poured me a fresh cup of coffee, then peered into my face with concern. “Don’t be offended but you look like you’re about to puke. Maybe you should skip work today.”

“I can’t. You know the rent is due in three days, and I’m still a hundred dollars short.”

Felisha frowned. “But I thought Angela’s wedding reception was supposed to take care of that.”

“That was the plan except Angela never paid us.”

“What?”

“I can’t exactly blame her. With everything that’s happened, she must’ve forgotten.”

Felisha folded her hands over her chest. “Sandie, you know this isn’t right. No matter what happened, she still needs to pay you

guys.”

I sighed. “I know. But she and David haven’t been around. Kathy’s not going to go to their house and demand our paychecks and neither am I. And I can’t exactly ask Alex, either. I’m probably his least favorite person right now.”

“Really?” She blinked. “Why?”

I waved her off, remembering that Felisha didn’t know about my less-than-friendly tête-à-tête with the older Sorrento brother. “It doesn’t matter.”

Her eyes turned soft. “Look, don’t worry about the money. You can just owe me, it’s no big deal. I understand.”

I shook my head vigorously. Most months, Felisha was barely making her own rent, so I wasn’t about to capitalize on her sympathy.

“I’ll just have to work harder at the bakery for the next couple of days, that’s all. Now, didn’t I hear talk about a grilled cheese or something?”

As Felisha set about making my sandwich, I stared into my coffee and tried to come to grips with the news about Dora.

She was gone, having taken what she knew with her, and there were now two murder suspects in the James family instead of one. What worried me the most was that, of everyone, this news was going to hit Dad the hardest.

Could things possibly get any worse?



Chapter 11

Kathy met me at the bakery door. I couldn't be sure if the deep circles under her eyes were due to finding out about the new murder or the fight she'd had with Jeff the night before.

She wrapped me in a tight hug before walking me in. "Will called me about Dora. I spoke to Dad and he sounded devastated. Can't imagine how you must be feeling. You really didn't have to come in today."

"No. I knew you needed me." I decided not to mention my rent. Kathy would just try to pay me for the catering even though she hadn't been paid herself, and Jeff would take issue with that. The last thing I wanted was to cause more tension between my sister and her husband.

"At least sit down for a few minutes." Kathy pointed me to the couch and sat next to me.

A cheesecake brownie and a large mocha with whipped cream appeared on the table in front of us. I looked up expecting to see Valeria. To my surprise, it was Josh. His cheeks were slightly pink.

"You look like you could use a whole lot of comfort food," he said.

I was touched by his unexpected concern. "Thanks, Josh."

"No problem." Pivoting on his heels, he stuck his hands in his pockets and walked behind the counter.

I thought he would get back to whatever he was doing when I came in, but he returned with an iced coffee for himself and a root beer for Kathy. It was still early for customers—assuming we had any today—so he pulled out a chair and sat down. His deep brown eyes fixed on me for a moment longer than usual before flicking away.

"I was sorry to hear about Dora," he said. "She seemed like a nice lady, always friendly when she came in."

I nodded. "She was. We all hoped she and Dad would..." No. It was too sad to think about. I concentrated on getting all the whipped cream off my mocha instead.

"How did it happen?" Josh asked.

My breath hitched. I had spoken to Will on my way over and he filled me in on the details. Knowing them hadn't made me feel any better, especially since it was a fair guess that by the days' afternoon the whole thing would take center stage in the neighborhood's gossip mill. Josh might as well hear it from me, instead of the colorful versions that were most likely going to sprout from this.

"A dog walker found Dora's body early this morning," I told him. "It was just a block away from my house. The police say she was strangled. They thought at first it might've been a mugging gone wrong but nothing was taken from her, so it couldn't be that."

The door opened and Tyrone and Will walked in. They made a beeline over to us.

Tyrone shook his head in a stunned way. "Can't believe what happened. You okay, girl?"

Tears welled in my eyes but I blinked them away and took a swig of the hot mocha.

"No, I'm not okay. I know Dora had something important to tell me last night. Maybe she had a new lead or... what if she'd figured out who killed Sonny? If only I hadn't fallen asleep last night! I should've gone out to meet her. Then she'd still be alive today and we would know what she knew."

"Or you might've ended up like her," Will said. "Don't do this to yourself, Sis. I see people blaming themselves in these situations all the time. Fact is, you couldn't have known this would happen and Dora shouldn't have gone to see you so late at night. She should've waited till morning and gone to the police."

Anger twisted in my stomach. "Are you saying it's Dora's fault she got killed?" Sure, Will was a detective and had to stay logical but blaming Dora for her own death—that was just cold.

"Of course I'm not saying that. All I meant was I wish she'd waited. And I wish she hadn't dragged you into this. It's worse for Dad now, too. He's got no alibi for the time of the murder."

Everyone looked at Will.

"Is that true?" Kathy asked, going pale. "They think Dad might've done it?"

Will sighed. "Unfortunately, yes. If what Dora knew implicated Dad, it would've been motive for him to kill her."

I swallowed, grateful Dad wasn't there to hear Will's words. "Did the police notify her relatives yet?"

"She didn't have any," Kathy said. "She was alone."

"How do you know that?"

"She told me once. She had an aunt who died last year and left her some money but she had no other family. That's why she used to hang out at Luce della Vita almost every night. She was lonely."

The five of us sat in silence after that, lost in our own gloom. Then Will rose from the table. "I better get going. They're making Dad come in for questioning and I want to drive him there."

Kathy rose, too. "I better call Jeff. He got in so late last night, he was still sleeping when I left."

I almost choked on my mocha. Kathy's words were like a cold finger brushing the back of my neck, making all the little hairs stand on end as my conversation with Alex and the things he'd said about Jeff came hurtling back to me.

Will met my gaze and I saw the same alarm in his eyes. He had to be thinking what I was thinking: that Jeff also had no alibi for Dora's murder.

He scratched the stubble on his chin. "Uh, Kath? When exactly did Jeff get back last night?"

Kathy's thin five-foot-two frame went visibly rigid. A look of sudden fear flashed in her eyes. "I don't know... not that late. I can't remember." Then she straightened her shoulders and turned to face him square on. "You don't actually think Jeff did it. Do you?"

Will cleared his throat. "Kath, don't get mad. It's just—"

She marched up to him and stared him down, her eyes throwing lightning bolts. "Don't you even go there, Will! My Jeff is not a murderer so get that thought out of your mind."

I couldn't help but feel relieved it wasn't me Kathy was angry with. Not many people knew this but my soft-spoken sister could be damn intimidating when she wanted to be.

Will clearly agreed. He seemed to shrivel under her glare. He raised his hands in a pleading gesture. "Kath, please. It's not me who calls the shots in this case. I don't decide who the suspects are but Greene and Carver do, and they don't usually miss much. They might ask for Jeff's alibi, so I'm just hoping he has one."

Kathy wasn't willing to be pacified. She crossed her arms, her face a stony mask. "Will, I think you better leave now."

"Don't do this," I said as I started to get up. "You know he's just doing his job. He has to ask these questions."

Kathy shot me a look that nailed me to my seat.

Will pushed his chair away from the table and got to his feet. He looked like he'd been slapped. Without a word, he turned and left the bakery. I watched him go with a hard lump in my throat. We needed to find Sonny and Dora's killer fast, before this case tore our whole family apart.

Kathy stalked off into the back room, chin raised and lips pressed together in a tight line. Josh and Tyrone headed to their workstations, subdued, their movements careful so as not to explode the charged atmosphere.

I took my half-finished mocha and followed my sister. She may have been able to fool the guys with her angry front but you didn't share a room with someone growing up without getting to know them well. She was an inch away from breaking down.

I found her downstairs riffling through paperwork and old receipts in her tiny cubbyhole of an office. Even from the back, I could see her hands shaking. I approached her and lay my hand on her shoulder.

"Kathy? I'm here if you want to talk."

She stopped fidgeting with the papers, then turned and hugged me as sobs racked her body.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have thrown Will out. I feel awful!"

"I know. You can apologize to him later, I'm sure he'll forgive you."

"I'll call him. I'll make him dinner," she said between sniffing. "You think he'll like that?"

"That'll be a good start to mending things," I agreed, reaching for the tissue box and handing it to her.

Kathy let me go and took several tissues out, then dabbed her eyes. She shook her head. "I just keep thinking about poor Dora. I can't believe she's dead. And Dad..."

"I know," I said again, not sure what else I could say.

"Who could be behind it all?" she asked. "It makes my blood cold knowing there's a killer among us. And Jeff, going out last night?"

Where did he go? What was he doing?"

I shook my head, though I had been wondering the same thing. "I'm sure he'll explain everything once he comes in."

But would he? And would the police believe his alibi if he had one?

One problem at a time, I told myself. There was nothing to do but wait and see.

The news about Dora spread through the neighborhood like wildfire. Strangely enough, it had the opposite effect on business than Sonny's murder. Before noon customers were flocking in, asking questions, exchanging gossip and comparing notes.

I stayed in the back room to keep my distance from everyone. Kathy who usually helped out at the front whenever it got busy chose to hide out with me and sent Tyrone to aid Josh with the lunch crowd. She was right to do so. As I passed close to the café on my way to the walk-in fridge, I heard the guys answering customers' questions which, not surprisingly, had nothing to do with the specials.

"Is it true the police are saying it was Nicolas who did the second murder?" a customer asked.

"Did he kill that poor woman like he did the restaurant owner?" another one asked before Josh had a chance to say anything. "I knew there was something strange about that man. I wish they'd just lock him up already! I'm scared to go out alone in the evenings."

Their words rooted me to the floor. Some of those people had known my dad for years. How could they believe the worst about him so easily?

I pressed myself into the corner between the door to the café and the fridge, wondering if my turn for verbal lynching was coming up.

"Ma'am," Josh said in a calm voice. "The police don't think Nicolas actually killed anyone. They're close to proving he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. And as for last night, he's got an alibi."

Josh was lying to protect Dad. My chest swelled with a warm wave of gratitude.

The customer, apparently, wasn't convinced. "Wait a second, you're the guy that works in Nick's bookstore, aren't you? Did he pay you to give him an alibi, or what?"

Josh's voice hardened, his next words letting the customer know the conversation was over. "Here's your large cappuccino, ma'am. Would you like anything to eat with that?"

I didn't wait to find out if the customer had ordered a snack. What I'd heard was more than enough.

I went through the rest of my day surrounded by a dense fog. My mind reeled from the shock of Dora's murder and its implications on us all. How had my Dad, our whole family, even the people who worked for us, suddenly become the center of such terrible speculations?

It was a relief to finally leave the bakery and go home. As I was rounding the block, I saw Kim walking down the other side of the street. She looked lovely in a short, pale-yellow sundress but the dark circles under her eyes testified of lack of sleep.

Poor Kim. What she must've been through in the past three days. There was nothing I could do to help, except give her my condolences. Changing direction, I dashed across the street.

Kim saw me and her steps halted. The lines of her mouth tightened and her eyes flashed with hatred. Then she turned and stalked in the opposite direction, high heels clicking an angry rhythm on the sidewalk.

I stood frozen in the middle of the street, crushed and deflated. Obviously, like her mother, Kim held my family responsible for her father's murder. I rubbed my temples where I could feel a dull headache coming on, then continued toward home.

Asimov and Hemingway met me at the apartment door with loud meowing when I got in. The two pairs of eyes, one green, the other tawny, stared at me with anguish that, coming from them, could mean only one thing.

I shook my head. "Uh-oh. Did Felisha forget to feed you guys?"

Felisha had called earlier to ask if I'd be okay without her because her parents were freaked out by the news of the second murder and had insisted she stay over at their house. Not wanting her to worry about me, I told her I'd be fine. So, I had the place to myself for the night.

I kicked off my shoes and followed the cats into the kitchen. They made a beeline over to their empty dish and stared up at me from

the floor, tails swishing anxiously.

Yep, they were definitely starving. I opened a tin can of cat food and flopped the gelatinous stuff into it. As the cats pounced on the food, I poured myself a glass of Felisha's mint lemonade from the fridge. Cold and refreshing, it was just what I needed to take the edge off the day and soothe my headache.

I took another sip and tapped my fingers on the counter, wondering what to do for dinner. Cooking for one didn't appeal. I opened a drawer with the takeout menus. While I was sifting through them a text from Will came, letting me know the detectives had finished questioning Dad and had released him.

I thought about going over to Dad's and seeing if he was all right but then decided against it. Knowing him, he would want to be alone tonight. Just in case, though, I texted him with the offer to make him dinner, which he would probably decline.

Checking the rest of my messages, there was a new email from Will, but before I opened it my eyes were brought up short by a subject line that read, "Invitation to an Interview". My heart skipped a beat.

The email was from *Money Tycoon*, a financial journal. It wasn't one of the places I'd applied to. They'd found my profile on LinkedIn and were inviting me to come in for an interview.

I chewed my lip. Working for *Money Tycoon* wasn't what I imagined when I pictured my dream job, but it was the first interview invitation I'd had in months.

I dialed the phone number provided at the bottom of the email.

A peppy woman's voice answered, "*Money Tycoon*, Megan speaking. How can I help you?"

I told her my name and the reason I was calling.

"Oh, yes," the voice trilled. "I see you're one of the people we sent the email to. Can you come in this Wednesday at nine a.m. sharp?"

I faltered, a little blindsided. "Well, uh. Yes, yes of course. Where are you located?"

Her voice edged with irritation. "The address is at the bottom of the email you were sent."

I silently slapped my forehead. Great first impression, Sandie. She thinks you're a moron.

"Thank you, I'll be there at nine," I said in a voice that strove to preserve my dignity.

The secretary hung up before I could say goodbye and I looked at the email again. *Money Tycoon* was on Pearl, just off Wall Street. I stared at the address with a strange sinking feeling, then reminded myself a job interview was a job interview. Even if it was on Wall Street.

It was a chance I'd been waiting for, to break out on my own and start on a career path. I checked my messages again. There was a text from Dad, not surprisingly asking for a rain check on dinner.

I sent Kathy a quick text to let her know I'd be late for work on Wednesday and opened Will's email. It contained the information I'd asked for about Sonny's communications with the book collector from Boston. I marveled at my brother. Even with everything that had happened today and last night, he still remembered to send it to me.

I looked through the file, frowning. The police didn't think there was a connection between Mr. Edwards hiring Sonny to bid on the Raymond Chandler books and the murder, but something about the situation kept nagging at me. Making up my mind, I dialed John Edwards' number.

He answered on the third ring. "John Edwards." The man had a pleasant voice though he didn't sound very young. I thought he might be in his late fifties.

"Hi," I said. "My name is Sandra James. You don't know me but I'm helping out with a murder investigation of Sonny Klein."

"Mr. Klein is dead?" he sounded taken aback.

"Yes. I understand you recently commissioned him to bid on two first editions of Raymond Chandler for you: *The Long Goodbye* and *The Big Sleep*."

John Edwards cleared his throat. "Miss James, your information is only partially correct. I did commission Mr. Klein to bid on *The Long Goodbye* for me, but not *The Big Sleep*."

I blinked as my mind morphed into a supersized question mark. "But he said—"

“The fact is,” John Edwards interrupted, “I already own a signed first edition of *The Big Sleep*. I’m not in the market for collecting every existing copy of that book so I didn’t need to commission another one.”

“I’m sorry.” I paused, knowing I risked angering him if I persisted. But this had to be straightened out if I was going to get a clear picture of what actually happened.

“Mr. Klein told us so himself the day he died,” I told him. “He said your secretary had emailed him with the commission.”

There was a moment of silence on the other end. Apparently, it was Mr. Edwards’ turn to pause. “Miss James,” he said finally. “I don’t know why Mr. Klein would tell you that. Ronda, my secretary, is away on an extended vacation this month. She’s getting married in Hawaii. This information can be easily verified, of course. Until Ronda gets back, I’m having to manage things on my own around here. So, you see, while it’s technically possible for Ronda to have sent that email to Mr. Klein, I think you’ll agree it’s not very probable she did. I certainly didn’t give her any such instructions.”

Was he lying? I could see no reason why he would. But if John Edwards hadn’t sent the email with the commission, then who had? I paced the floor, my heart pounding.

“I have to confess,” I said. “I’m not an official investigator in Mr. Klein’s death.”

“Oh?” Mr. Edwards’ voice turned noticeably colder. “Perhaps it wouldn’t trouble you terribly to tell me why you are calling me under false pretenses?”

“It’s my father, Nicolas James,” I hurried to explain, “He is a suspect in the case but I know he didn’t kill anyone. The entire case against him hinges on losing that first edition to Sonny.”

“I see.” He sounded thoughtful. “Would you mind telling me more?”

I explained to him what happened at the wedding.

“I’m sorry, Miss James,” Mr. Edwards said when I finished. “I really am. But I’ve told you everything I know. If I had any information that could shed the light on this mystery, I would tell you.”

He sounded sincere. I thanked him.

“Actually you’ve already helped a lot, Mr. Edwards.” After another short pause, I added, “I hope I won’t offend you when I say this, but I’ve never understood why people collect first editions. Whether it’s the first edition or the fiftieth, a great book will always be great. Right? Philip Marlowe doesn’t get any less interesting in later editions, so what’s the difference? Some people seem to become... obsessed with collecting.”

Mr. Edwards laughed. “If you wanted to discuss human psychology, you called the wrong person, Miss James. The obvious answer would be that one day, these books will probably be worth a fair bit more than they are now. Did you know that there are only five thousand copies of the first edition of *The Big Sleep* in existence?”

I didn’t.

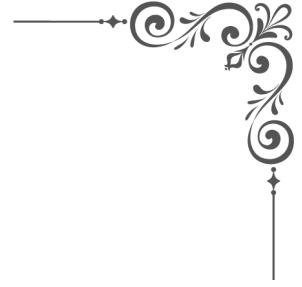
“Obviously, this makes *The Big Sleep* one of the most valuable books in the collection. Its value will eventually rise a great deal, but that’s still in the future. It won’t happen in my lifetime. For me, collecting first editions is about creating a link to the past. I look at my collection and it makes me feel connected to the authors who wrote those books as if I had a privileged bond with them, shared only by the very few. You might think what I’m saying is vanity. Maybe it is. Maybe it also makes me feel a little more timeless. It’s hard for young people like you to understand this. You think you’re all immortal. Funny how quickly that particular illusion dissipates. It might be the same for your father, but I think you should probably ask him about it instead of me. Don’t you think?”

I smiled. “For someone claiming no knowledge of psychology you’re very perceptive, Mr. Edwards.”

I thanked him for talking to me and we hung up. I pressed the phone to my forehead and squeezed it hard with my fingers.

My hunch hadn’t steered me wrong. Whether Mr. Edwards was telling the truth or not, the fact was that someone had emailed Sonny to order the first edition of *The Big Sleep*. Someone who knew about Dad’s obsession with the book. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly to calm my racing heart.

My investigation had just gained a new lead.



Chapter 12

“Are you ready for your big interview tomorrow?” Felisha asked as she put away the cake decorating supplies.

My stomach flipped and I paused in the middle of scrubbing a large blob of pink frosting from the table. “Uh. I guess.”

It was the end of the workday at the bakery and Kathy had left to make deliveries. Jeff was doing last minute bookkeeping in the basement before heading out to the city. The rest of us were finishing cleaning up the back room.

My lack of enthusiasm drew Felisha’s attention. She scrunched up her eyebrows at me. “What’s the matter? Are you nervous? You shouldn’t be. You know you’ll ace it.”

I shook my head. “It’s not that. Well... not just that.”

The truth was after the initial surprise the night before, I was starting to have second thoughts about the interview. With everything we were dealing with, was it a good idea to start a new job right now?

“It’s the timing of it,” I said. “It feels all wrong.”

“Sandie!” Felisha rolled her eyes. “You can’t put your whole life on hold because of the murder. You’ve been waiting for months to get an interview. What if it takes you that long to get another one?”

I sniffed. “Gee. Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“You know what I mean! If you don’t go for it you’ll be kicking yourself later.”

Was she right? Would I regret this opportunity if I turned it away? Probably.

I sighed. “I’m being silly, aren’t I?”

Felisha gave an emphatic nod. “Yep!”

“Okay.” I grinned. “You’re right. I promise I won’t let myself have any more doubts.”

There were stomping footsteps on the basement stairs, and Jeff emerged carrying several plastic bags with the boxes for deliveries inside. I went back to scrubbing the frosting from the table to avoid making eye contact with him.

Since his blowout with Kathy the other night, Jeff's mood got progressively worse. Being questioned by the police about his whereabouts for the time of Dora's murder only added fuel to the fire. On learning I was the last person to talk to her and had also been questioned, he'd stormed out of the room and slammed the door. He never said a word about it but from his behavior, it was evident he held me personally responsible for his troubles.

A shadow fell over me as I worked and I glanced up to see Jeff scowling at the pink stain. He jabbed his chin at it without meeting my eyes. "You should've cleaned it before the food coloring could set into the grain. Now you'll never get it to come off."

I kept my expression neutral as I dipped the cloth I was using into the soapy solution and went back to scrubbing. "I'll do my best, Jeff."

Still avoiding eye contact, he pulled down the corners of his mouth. "It'll make a permanent stain."

I opened my mouth to point out that with all the other stains the table had accumulated over the years, one more spot wouldn't make much of a difference. Then I reined myself in. If Jeff was looking to pick a fight talking back would only fan the fire.

After a moment, he sniffed and stalked off toward the front, picking up several more bags of delivery packages.

Felisha edged over to me and nudged me in the side. "No offense but I'm always glad when he leaves for the day. How does Kathy put up with him?"

I frowned at her. It was a fair bet many people felt about Jeff the way Felisha did. Still, he was my brother-in-law and it wasn't okay to gossip about Kathy's marriage.

Felisha put a conciliatory hand on my arm. "Sorry, I get it. I'll try not to talk about him like that anymore."

I smiled. "Thanks."

"But do you think Jeff could've done it?" she whispered.

I sighed. "I hope not. I hate to even consider the possibility."

As Alex had pointed out, Jeff had the motive, the means and the opportunity. He knew of Dad's desire to complete his collection. And he had a flimsy alibi for the night of Dora's murder, supposedly having gone out to a sports bar in the city. It was packed that night,

and when questioned, none of the bartenders remembered seeing him there.

Jeff, with his bad temper and money fixation. Now that I thought about it, his over-inflated ego must've suffered from not having the ownership title to Kathy's Bakery. How far would he have gone to get what he wanted? Was he capable of revenge?

I pictured my sister's husband raising a gun at Sonny's chest and pulling the trigger. It didn't seem impossible. After the way Kathy had reacted to Will's questions the other day, I hated to think what Jeff's arrest might do to our family.

I swallowed and shook my head. This was getting ridiculous, letting my fears run away with me again when I needed to stay calm. Just because Jeff might be capable of murder didn't mean he was guilty of it.

The stain was refusing to come off, relenting only a tiny bit around the edges where it now looked paler. I left it be and finished cleaning the other tables, then helped Felisha organize the walk-in fridge for the next day, while Tyrone mopped the bakery floor. After that he and Felisha headed into the café.

I popped into the small bathroom to let out my ponytail and throw on my scarf. By the time I came out the café was empty except for Josh who was putting up the chairs on top of the tables.

"Where are the others?" I glanced in the back room in case I'd missed them.

"They're gone," Josh said. "Tyrone's friends came by in a car, they were going to some club opening. Felisha went with them."

"Nice of her to wait long enough to let me know I was being ditched."

"Cut her some slack. They just started going out, her head is in the clouds."

"That's what worries me."

Felisha and Tyrone were sure spending a lot more time together and she was even changing her plans for him now. Getting attached too quickly had been Felisha's problem in the past. I hoped she wasn't about to repeat her pattern and get burned again.

"She's a grownup," Josh reminded me as he put up the last chair. "She can take care of herself, right?"

“Grownups make bad decisions too sometimes,” I said. “You’re right, though. I should stay out of it. She needs to do what she feels is best for her.”

“No, it’s nice that you worry about her. Makes you a good friend.” Josh suddenly turned to me, looking hesitant. “Your Dad asked me to work at the book shop tonight. If you’re going home now I could walk with you.”

Josh, offering to walk with me? Making me comfort food? I hoped I didn’t look as surprised as I felt.

“Uh, sure.” I shrugged, trying to look nonchalant. “That sounds good.”

Out on the sidewalk Josh slung his messenger bag over his shoulder and helped me pull down the grate. As we walked to the corner, he stuck his hands in his pockets and looked at his feet. Light summer breeze ruffled his dark curls.

I caught myself biting my thumbnail. Josh and I had never been alone together. What would we talk about? After a few minutes of awkward silence, he scratched his ear and cleared his throat.

“How’s the job hunt going? Are you still looking for work in the city?”

“You know about that?” I failed to hide my astonishment, but I was sure I had never told him about my job search.

His cheeks turned slightly pink. “Felisha said something. Or maybe Katherine, I can’t remember.”

I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “Actually, there’s been a breakthrough on that front.” I told him about my interview with *Money Tycoon*.

He cut his eyes at me and the setting sun caught the gold flecks in his irises. “Do you want to work for *Money Tycoon*? I thought you were interested in working for a literary magazine?”

Again, I was surprised he knew or cared. “Of course I do. Working for a literary magazine or a publishing house would be my dream job but competition for those spots is fierce. Besides, I haven’t been pursuing that lately at all.”

“Because of the murder?”

I nodded.

“I heard you’ve been looking into it,” he said, a tiny smile tugging at the edges of his mouth. “Got any ideas who might’ve done it?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. Was he mocking me? But his eyes had a serious expression for once. Relieved, I shrugged. “I really think it’s all connected to that first edition business. The murderer posed as the buyer and commissioned Sonny to bid on the book knowing Dad would be outraged. I feel like we’ve been circling around the solution without seeing it. Like maybe the answer is there in plain sight but we’re overlooking something important.”

Josh ran his hand through his thick hair. “Whoever he is, I hope he’s found soon. I hate that Nicolas is a suspect.”

“Thanks,” I said, instantly warming up to him.

“I mean it. Your dad is great. Sometimes I stay at the store after we’ve closed up and we just hang out and talk. Not to sound selfish, but I’d really miss it if he had to go away.”

I stared at Josh, seeing him through a new filter. Dad was picky about his friends and didn’t spend his time with just anybody. If he was taking a special interest in someone there was usually a good reason. But why hadn’t he ever mentioned his friendship with Josh to me?

“So... What do you talk about?” I asked.

“You know, stuff. Books, art. I showed him slides of my paintings. He said he liked them, even gave me some ideas on a series I’m doing for an art show.” His expression suddenly turned bitter. “I wish my dad was more like yours. Mine still doesn’t get why I wanted to come to New York. He thinks pursuing art is just a hobby, even after all my years at art school.”

I reached to give his arm a comforting touch but then stopped myself. We hardly knew each other and touching would lead to all kinds of awkwardness.

“I’m sorry,” I said instead. “That must be rough.”

But my mind was buzzing. Why was Josh suddenly opening up to me? Was it because he was worried about Dad?

Whatever the reason, I couldn’t deny it felt nice.

Josh gave me an earnest look. “I’m not complaining. I just wish they’d clear your dad of the suspicion already. We’ve been talking

about it a lot lately, he's been filling me in on what's been going on with the investigation."

I frowned. Not that I thought Josh was untrustworthy, but Dad shouldn't have been discussing the details of the murder with other people.

After a pause, Josh added, "I don't get how the killer shot Sonny in the cellar and then went back upstairs without anyone seeing him. He should've at least crossed paths with you or your dad."

"That's the puzzling thing," I agreed. "There was nowhere for the killer to hide down there, so someone should've seen him coming up but no one did."

"Suppose he put on a ring of power and vanished into thin air."

"What, like Bilbo Baggins?"

"Or Gollum in his case."

I snorted with laughter. "I had no idea you were a nerd."

His eyes crinkled. "A closeted one, yeah." He added in a quieter voice, "If you ask me, it's got to be David or Alex. They hated having Sonny for a partner but they were stuck with him anyway. They had the most to gain from his death."

Before I could say anything, there were running footsteps behind us. We turned just in time to see Will catch up to us. He was breathing heavily but his eyes were alight with excitement.

"I just went by the café and saw you'd already gone."

"Was there a new development in the case?" I asked.

"You bet. New information came to light. I think it's definitely going to clear Dad."

I grabbed his arm, my pulse quickening. "Go on."

A white Yorkie materialized out of nowhere and wound his leash around Will's legs while yapping loudly. Will made clumsy attempts to disentangle himself but his efforts only encouraged the little menace to jump around more while the dog's owner pulled on the leash, making things worse.

I bent down, grabbed hold of the Yorkie and forced him to stay still while Will got himself free.

"Don't touch my dog!" The owner scooped up her charge, freezing me with a glare over her aviator sunglasses before marching off.

The guys and I exchanged eye rolls. I pointed to the ice cream parlor down the block.

“Let’s go somewhere more private.”

We went inside and ordered three chocolate milkshakes, then sat down at a counter away from curious eyes and ears and Will leaned in closer to us. “Get this. Angela Sorrento has a friend—well, *had* a friend, more like. Doubt they’ll still be on speaking terms after this. Her name’s Crystal Moreno. She and Angela have worked at the same hair salon for years. They were chummy enough that Crystal was invited to the wedding. She was at the reception, too.”

“Crystal Moreno...” I tried to remember the faces of the hairdressers I’d seen at the salon. “Is she about Angela’s height? Dark hair, loud, talks with her hands a lot?”

“That pretty much describes her. How did you know?”

“Got a haircut from her once when Angela was out sick. She also came into the bakery a few times. She loves Kathy’s cheesecake brownies.”

“Who doesn’t?”

“Hey, I know who you’re talking about,” Josh said with a smirk. “The loud one, right? Mrs. Robinson.”

I frowned at him. “What do you mean?”

“She likes to hit on me, always makes suggestive comments and stuff. One time she even stroked my hand when I gave her change back.” He shrugged but it was hard to tell whether Crystal’s come-ons made him feel uncomfortable or smug.

I squished down my growing irritation. Crystal was free to flirt with whomever she wanted and Josh had a right to like her attention. It certainly had nothing to do with me. Except, the thought of Crystal being mixed up in the murder suddenly became a bit more attractive.

“Did she have the motive to kill Sonny?” I asked hopefully.

“Not her,” Will said. “Crystal was questioned after the murder along with everyone else. She said she didn’t see anything suspicious that night. Claimed she knew nothing that would be helpful.”

“And now she’s saying different?” I guessed.

“Yep. Came forward today out of the blue. She told detective Greene that Angela was having deep financial troubles, and that

they started about a month ago. She was playing around with investments and made a pretty risky deal. I don't know much about this stuff, so I can't explain it too well. Seems, the way it works is you invest money in a venture and if you get lucky you triple your investment in one fell swoop. But if you don't get lucky, you lose triple what you invested."

Josh gave a low whistle. "And Angela was unlucky?"

"Oh, yeah. Not only is she in debt, she's also been hiding it from David this whole time. She's terrified he'll find out."

"Sure. Since she basically tricked him into marrying her debt," Josh said. "That's a whopper of a motive."

Will nodded, grinning. "Right on, bro. Angela needed her share of the inheritance. She must've known Sonny was going to change his will, so she had double motive to act quickly."

They hi-fived each other as if their favorite team had just scored a touchdown.

I sipped my milkshake and stared at the ice cream menu above the counter without really seeing it. A nudge on the shoulder from Will brought me back.

"Hey, Sis. Didn't you hear what I said? I thought you'd be more excited about this."

"I am." I cleared my throat. "It's just that... if Angela wanted to keep her financial troubles a secret, why would she tell Crystal about them?"

"She didn't mean to," Will said. "She and Crystal had gone out to a bar and Angela had about a dozen White Russians and ended up spilling everything. Both literally and figuratively, 'cause she also spilled a drink all over herself. It was the same night that she slept over at Sonny's. Crystal thinks she doesn't even remember telling her anything."

"What does Angela say?" I asked.

"Claims she'd told Sonny about her finances and he agreed to bail her out. But there's no written proof. Nothing. Just her word. Detective Greene asked Lauren if Sonny mentioned anything before his death and she said she knew nothing about it."

"But isn't it odd?" I persisted. "Crystal's been keeping quiet this entire time and now she suddenly decides to report it. What made

her change her mind?”

Will frowned. “If you’re thinking she’d been paid to do it, the police checked her finances. There’s been nothing suspicious there.”

“What if she was paid in cash?”

“That would be pretty hard to prove. Besides, her statement checks out. We’ve run Angela’s finances and the woman is in deep trouble. She had every motive to kill Sonny. Greene’s charging Angela as we speak. He’s certain he’s got a case against her. It’s a done deal.”

Except, it was all wrong. I sat back in my seat, struck by the thoughts Will’s sudden revelation brought to light. The guys watched me with raised eyebrows as I shook my head. “No, Will. Greene’s got the wrong person. I’m sure of it.”

He puffed out his cheeks in frustration. “It’s like you’re not happy Dad’s going to be cleared.”

“That’s not true and you know it,” I said, keeping my voice even. “I just don’t want the wrong person to suffer the consequences of us not being thorough enough.”

“Okay.” He shrugged. “Enlighten me, then. Who did it? Do you know something we don’t?”

I chewed my lip. “Yes, I think the evidence points very clearly to one person. It just seems impossible for that person to have done it.”

I rose to my feet. “I have to go. I’ll call you if I think of anything.” I was out the door before either of them could stop me.

Will’s new information had parted the shroud of mystery around the killer’s identity, but if my hunch was correct, the last thing I wanted was to spook the killer by bringing in the police before I had everything figured out. There was still much to be done if the case was to be brought to successful completion. Until then I would have to keep my guesses and conjectures to myself.



Chapter 13

The chair was as hard as a subway seat. It must have been put there on purpose, to keep the potential employees from feeling at ease. They shouldn't have bothered. The black suit with the pencil skirt I was wearing accomplished the job just fine. Business attire always made me feel like an impostor.

I squirmed forward to the edge of the seat and crossed my legs, keeping my back straight under the interviewer's critical stare. From her tight bun to the icy-blue eyes behind a pair of slim designer glasses, the woman looked like she was born wearing expensive business clothes. Could she tell my outfit came from a thrift store?

As she took her eyes off me and studied my resume, I allowed my gaze to flicker to the large office window behind her. It gave an eagle eye view of Wall Street below, where hundreds of men and women carrying briefcases hurried on their way to and from meetings.

What was I doing here? I belonged in this setting about as much as a smoking gun belonged at a wedding party. I should be back home, in my cozy neighborhood, helping Will solve the murder that was causing my family so much anguish.

The woman cleared her throat, bringing my attention back to her. She gave me a formal smile that didn't reach her eyes.

"I see you're currently employed at a bakery." There was an edge of disapproval in her tone. It wasn't unexpected. Decorating cookies and cakes had little to do with editing financial articles.

"I also completed an internship as a personal assistant to a Pulitzer-winning novelist while studying for my master's," I pointed out, hoping she'd ask me more about that instead. "It involved a lot of administrative as well as editing skills," I added when she didn't.

The woman pursed her lips. "Ms. James, we do like our new employees to have more experience going in. As it is, we're looking to fill the position of an assistant copy editor quickly. We are prepared to offer you the job, though because of your limited experience the starting salary would be slightly lower than the going rate. Be assured that it's still a demanding job, one that requires

putting in long hours, sometimes coming in before 9 a.m. and staying past 6 p.m.”

The number one thing they teach you about acing a job interview is you're never supposed to raise objections. I nodded and smiled. “Of course. I understand.”

The woman's expression remained impassive. “Oh, and one more thing. The person who previously occupied the position quit unexpectedly last week, so we're looking to fill the position immediately. Will you be able to start on Monday?”

I swallowed. Monday! This was all happening so fast. I wasn't ready for it. And what about Kathy? I'd be giving her less than a week's notice. With all the work going on at the bakery, she'd be in a tough spot until she found a replacement for me. This would also give Jeff another reason to grumble.

Seeing me hesitate, the woman raised her perfect eyebrows. “Do you need to think about this? We'll be interviewing candidates until Friday. You can call and let me know by then.”

I thanked her, wondering if my momentary hesitation had cost me the spot. Well, that couldn't be helped. With a sigh, I headed toward the elevator.

Out on the street, the heat was already rising off the sidewalks. It was going to be another scorcher. As I walked to the subway, keeping within the cooler shadows of the buildings whenever possible, a bright shock of purple and red on the other side of the street drew my eye. The woman was hard to miss in this neighborhood. She wore a red tube top, paisley hot pants, and platform shoes, turning a few heads as she walked. I recognized a familiar face: Crystal Moreno, Angela's friend from the hair salon. The coincidence was too good to let it slip by.

As Crystal reached a store and went inside, I dashed across the street after her, closely avoiding being hit by a speeding car.

The store was a boutique, one of the ritzy places that sold no more than twenty items, so that each one could have its own personal spotlight on the shelf. Like movie stars, made up to dazzle and intimidate all but the worthy ones, their worthiness determined by the size of their wallets. Without looking at the price tags, I knew I didn't belong in that category.

At this early hour, Crystal was the boutique's only customer. She was twirling in front of a full-length mirror, a dark-red designer handbag hanging from the crook of her elbow. Unbidden, an image of Crystal running her long crimson fingernail down Josh's arm flashed into my mind. Ugh, not now! What was the point of being jealous? With a deep breath, I threw all the weight of reason against the unpleasant feelings, reminding myself Josh hadn't even seemed concerned that his "girlfriend" turned out to be up to her waist in a murder case.

The saleswoman arranging scarves on a shelf behind the counter threw a dubious glance between Crystal and me, though Crystal seemed too enthralled by the bag to notice her or me. I put on a bright smile as I approached her.

"Hey, Crystal! It's Sandie, from Kathy's bakery."

She turned with a look of surprise that was immediately succeeded by a wide-eyed grin, as if she just saw a long-lost friend.

"Sandie!" She pulled me in for a suffocating hug. "What you doing here, girl?"

I waved in the direction I'd come from. "Just coming back from a job interview."

"On Wall Street?" Crystal gave a whistle that caused the saleswoman to stop what she was doing and arch her eyebrows at her. "No wonder you don't come to the hair salon no more. Gonna be one of those big shots now, huh?"

I shook my head. "Not really. More like one of those gofers who have to bring coffee and bagels to the big shots."

She chortled. "Well, you gotta start somewhere, right? Or you'll be stuck making cookies and donuts for the rest of your life."

I put together a smile to humor her. Talking about my floundering career wasn't why I'd followed her into the store. What I hoped to find was something more about the unexpected turn of events the murder case took yesterday, and the reason Crystal had suddenly become such an integral part of it.

I nodded at the bag on Crystal's arm. "That's beautiful. Are you buying it?"

Crystal turned in front of the mirror again, stroking the bag as if it was a beloved family pet. "I've always wanted a designer handbag.

You gotta have one. You just got to! And I'm not into labels but these days everybody judges a book by its cover. So you gotta have a designer handbag and show 'em who's boss, right? I mean, yeah, it's pricey and all. But it's totally worth it!"

I touched the bag, pretending to be checking out the stitching. What I really wanted was a peek at the price tag. As my eyes zeroed in on the numbers, I had to keep myself from whistling, too. Pricey was an understatement. I gave Crystal a bright smile. "I think this is worth every penny."

"I know, right?" She beamed at me and looked into the mirror again. "Been trying to save for one, but you know how it is, with one thing or another, money just goes down the drain. Now I can finally afford it."

I looked at my phone and made an alarmed face. "Jeez, is that the time already? Kathy's going to kill me if I don't get to the bakery soon."

"Uh-oh!" Hand on her hip, she made a scolding sign with her finger. "So what you doing chatting with me? You better hurry, girl. And don't be a stranger! Call me up, let's do lunch!" She blew me a kiss and hurried off to the counter with her handbag.

Out on the busy street again, I gave the boutique one more glance. There were two possibilities as far as I could see. Either hairdressers these days were paid a lot more than they used to, or Crystal had recently come into unexpected money that suddenly made her able to afford handbags that cost three times my monthly rent. The timing of it all made me lean towards the latter.

I took the train back to Cobble Hill and sat in the corner of the car, half-empty at this hour. My thoughts turned to the job interview. I was finally getting what I'd been striving for all these past months, my first real job out of grad school. Apart from the salary increase I so desperately needed, this was my chance to strike out on my own and not be reliant on my family anymore. It was what I had wanted for so long, but now that it was almost within my grasp, why did it suddenly feel like I was standing at the edge of a precipice? And why was my stomach flipping at the thought of leaving the bakery?

It was nearly lunchtime when I got to the bakery, and work was in full swing. Josh and Valeria were both working the counter, and the

hiss of the espresso machine drowned out the buzz of chatter.

I hurried through the café into the back room, hot with two ovens going and filled with the smells of freshly baked brownies and chocolate chip cookies. A quick glance at the few trays cooling on the racks by the wall told me there was still a lot left to do. My being late had set us at least three hours back, and I would have to work extra hard to catch up.

I went straight into Kathy's tiny office where I'd left a change of clothing and spare flats the night before. Quickly, I changed into my capri pants and a light-green t-shirt, then tied my hair up in a ponytail and washed my hands. Glancing at myself in the mirror, I couldn't help but smile. This felt right. This was the me I was comfortable with.

As I came out of the office, Felisha looked up from decorating a cake creation on the workstation in front of her. She grinned. "Sorry I skipped out on you last night. Josh told me you were kinda upset."

I took out the next cake. The instructions on the paper said the customer wanted a ballerina drawn on it in pink frosting. She had provided a picture of a girl in a pink tutu on pointe.

"Josh was stretching the truth," I said as I poured white frosting into a bowl and mixed it with the pink food coloring. "I wasn't upset. Besides, Josh offered to walk back with me. I don't know what's gotten into him but he's been acting almost friendly lately."

"Maybe it's because he noticed you finally warmed up to him?" Felisha said.

I blinked at her. "What are you talking about? I tried to be nice to him. He was the one who was either mean or just ignored me."

"Really?" Felisha looked confused. "You're so serious around him, you never even say 'hi'. I thought you didn't like him."

"That's silly. Why shouldn't I like him?"

I lowered my eyes and pretended to concentrate on my drawing. But my mind churned. Had I misread Josh? It was true I'd acted stiff around him. Because he made me nervous, and because I believed he was too good-looking not to be trouble. Was his standoffish behavior simply a reaction to my apparent dislike? I'd been so sure of his prejudice. Perhaps it was I who was prejudiced.

We worked in silence for a few minutes, then Felisha asked. "How did your interview go?"

"They sort of offered me the job," I said, glad about the subject change.

Felisha scrunched up her forehead. "What do you mean, sort of?"

"Well, it's mine if I agree to start next Monday."

"Oh, wow! Sandie!" She dropped the pastry bag she was holding and dashed around the table to give me a big hug. "That's great! Are you excited?"

"I guess." I turned to the shelf that held the containers with the multi-colored sprinkles the customer wanted on the tutu. "It's just that this is all happening so fast. I won't be able to give Kath a notice. How's she going to manage?"

"I'm sure she'll understand," Felisha said. "She knows you're working here on a temporary basis until you find something in your field."

"Except this job is pretty far removed from what I actually want to do with my life. Also, I'll miss seeing you guys every day."

Felisha grinned. "Now you're coming up with excuses. I think you're just getting cold feet, like before a wedding. A new job is a commitment. You know?" She took a long sip from the large iced coffee standing next to her on the table before picking up the pastry bag again. "You'll have to pay your dues, Sandie. That's how it works. No one starts out with their dream job. *Money Tycoon* is just a stepping stone to where you're going. You should definitely take the job. Follow your dreams, right?"

Was fear of change the true reason behind my hesitation?

I'd always thought of myself as brave. Perhaps I'd been wrong. Maybe I was simply scared of leaving the safety of my familiar life and plunging into the unknown. In which case there was only one thing to do: face that fear head-on.

"Okay," I said. "You're right. And thanks for the pep talk."

Getting back to work, I left the cake for a minute to turn on the big mixer and measured out the ingredients for the peanut butter bars. The rich brown batter began to churn, sending up delicious smells of peanut butter. My thoughts began to churn with it too.

Was working for *Money Tycoon* really my dream? All this time, I had thought I knew what I wanted. Now, suddenly, I wasn't so sure. And what about the investigation? Far from being complete, it now looked like the wrong person was going to be charged with the murders. Besides, until the real killer was caught, there was no real guarantee Dad was off the hook. How could I go off into the city and abandon him in the middle of a crisis? Especially when I was so close to the solution. So close, and yet not close enough. It was right under my fingertips but still eluded me, refusing to get pinned down. Pieces of the puzzle were still missing, and I sure wasn't going to find them on Wall Street.



I WALKED OVER TO DAD'S after work and got there just as he was closing the book shop for the night. I couldn't help noticing his hunched shoulders and the look of sadness in his eyes, rimmed with dark circles. But he greeted me with a smile.

"Hey, kid. Come on in, I was just about to make a pitcher of my specialty iced tea."

It was exactly what I needed. "Sounds great, Dad."

Ten minutes later, we sat in the shabby armchairs in his office, and Dad poured two tall glasses of his iced tea, the 'specialty' part being the splash of brandy he added to it.

"I was going to call you today," he said, "so it's good you came by. Can you close up the shop tomorrow? Josh asked for the night off, he's got an art thing. And I've got a darts tournament with the guys at the pub. Would hate to miss that."

He hadn't even mentioned Dora, which meant her death hit him much harder than I'd thought. Since he was obviously not ready to talk about it, I knew not to push the matter. He would open up in his own time. If not, it would be pointless to try and coax it out of him.

I took a sip of my iced tea. It had a nice kick to it. "Sure, Dad. I'll close the shop. No problem."

Not to mention, I could use the extra money as I was still woefully short on rent.

Marlowe trotted in and took his post at Dad's chair, resting his head on Dad's feet. Dad bent down to rub the dog's head. He settled back again and fixed his eyes on me.

"So? What's the trouble?"

I blinked. "What makes you think there's any trouble?"

"Because you've got it written all over your wrinkled forehead."

"Wrinkled?!" I grabbed a compact mirror from my shoulder bag and examined my face in the lamplight. It was smooth, not a wrinkle in sight.

He chuckled. "Gotcha."

"Dad, that's mean."

"Okay, okay. Sorry. But I'm your dad, Sandie. I can tell when you're worried about something."

I didn't want to talk about my interview with *Money Tycoon* again. Instead, I jabbed my finger at the sage-green Manila folder still lying on his desk. "Why do you have it out, Dad?"

He picked up the folder and opened it, looking pensive.

"Nostalgia, I guess. Was going through some of the old stuff in the attic and found your stories. Wanted to give them another look and thought I might have them made into a book. They're quite good."

I smiled. "You sure you're not just missing the way things used to be when Mom was alive and we were kids and living here?"

"Suppose that's part of it," he conceded. "But your mom and I thought you had a real talent for writing."

I laughed. "You were my parents, you had to think that."

"Ahh, Sandie." He clucked his tongue. "You know your mother didn't give praise where it wasn't due."

I reached for the folder and leafed through it. "You really think they're good?"

He nodded, tracing the beads of condensation on his glass.

"Shame you didn't stick with it, though."

"Sometimes I wonder why I didn't," I said.

"Guess it wasn't your passion."

"I guess not." But I wondered.

I sank back against the chair and looked at the first editions of Raymond Chandler on the bookshelf behind the glass. The books that had become the source of so much trouble for us lately.

“Speaking of passion, are you going to temper your collecting from now on? I mean, after everything that’s happened?”

Dad took a long drink of his tea and set the glass on his desk. I kept myself from wincing. Dad had never had much truck with coasters. “Probably not,” he said after a moment. “Life’s too short, Sandie. You should have the courage to go after your dreams, even if they give you a major headache at times. Just make sure they really are your dreams, and not what other people think you should want.”

I frowned, all my recent doubts and fears stirring up again. “How do I know if my dreams are my own?”

“Oh, you’ll know.” He leaned back with a faraway look in his eyes, nodding to himself as he spoke. “It’s the things that make your soul sing. They give you that feeling of floating on air, so to speak. Dreams are like secret passages inside you, Sandie. Ones that are truly yours will lead you to the light, the others only to a dead-end. So make sure you choose the right ones.”

I stared at him with the glass frozen on its way up to my lips.

It was that moment they talk about. The Thunderbolt. Dad’s words had been what I had needed all along, the final nudge to push all the pieces of the puzzle into place.

Setting the glass down, I jumped to my feet. “Dad, this was great but I’ve got to go. Thanks so much for the tea and the talk!”

Leaving him to stare after me with his mouth open, I rushed downstairs and out onto the evening street.

Will!

I needed to see my brother and tell him everything. But as I walked a few steps, I paused, suddenly wavering.

No. It was too soon to go to Will. I had the puzzle firmly in place, but it was still only a theory. I had no proof, and no strategy to force the killer from the shadows.

What I really needed was to be alone and think things through. I picked a direction at random and started walking. Before I knew it, the long stretch of the Brooklyn promenade was before me, and the jagged Manhattan skyline glittered with hundreds of lights across the East River. I leaned against the iron railing and stared into the dark

water below. As I stood there, a plan of action began to form in my mind.

I had been right not to go to Will, because, for this to work, I would have to act alone. The law was less restricting on civilians like me, but Will could easily lose his job if he got involved.

My pulse quickened with excitement. Yes, I could do this. But to implement my plan, I would first have to take several steps of preparation, and that included paying a visit to an acquaintance. I nodded to myself.

Tomorrow.



Chapter 14

It was early morning when my train arrived at the station. Warm breeze greeted me as I stepped through the sliding doors and out onto the open platform which was unsurprisingly empty. At this hour, I was the only one making the journey downtown. The uptown platform on the other side was full of people. Heading off to their jobs in the city.

The doors closed behind me and clamor filled the air as the train sped away. One after the other the cars flashed past me, empty save for a couple of teenagers in the last car, probably skipping out on school to bum around at the beach.

The half-curious eyes of the crowd on the other side followed me as I put away my phone, making sure to erase the browsing history. Just in case. Then I walked to the end of the platform and descended the long metal stairwell to street level.

Dense rows of low buildings stretched out before me in four directions, their uniformity broken up by regular cross streets. This was a commercial street. As in my neighborhood, most of the ground floors were taken up by small businesses, eateries, and storefronts.

An Italian bakery on the corner stretched out its feelers to me, trying to rope me in with tantalizing whiffs of freshly baked bread and something else I couldn't identify. It beckoned, at once spicy and sweet, unrelentingly daring me to go in. My mouth watered at the thought of a fresh cannoli, and I turned toward the bakery like a homing pigeon.

Snap out of it, Sandie.

I gave myself a mental slap. Italian pastries weren't the reason I'd made the forty-minute train ride to downtown Brooklyn this morning. Of course, I could compromise and get the cannolis on my way back. But business first.

I scanned the surroundings, checking the numbers on the nearest buildings to verify them with the address I had on my phone, then headed up the street, leaving the massive steel pillars of the above-ground subway behind me.

The house was located at the end of a tree-lined residential street, five blocks from the waterfront that carried down whiffs of fresh salty air. Officially, the business provided car maintenance and repair services. Behind the scenes, the owner's dealings were on the shadier side. It wasn't the sort of place I would normally set foot in, but today I needed to talk to one of its employees.

I stopped in front of the open doors and took a deep breath before walking into the darkened space. This was a first for me.

A short man in a greasy dark shirt and dark stubble over half his face came out of the side door, wiping his hands on his gray overalls. "Hello, toots. What can I do you for?"

"I need to see Bennie," I said. "Is he here today?"

"Who's asking?"

I turned around to face a tall, gangly man with a cropped haircut and very black eyes under thick dark eyebrows. Bennie had a prior arrest record and an inside track with the seedier side of Brooklyn that led him to occasionally serve as an unofficial informant for the police. I'd met him once on a police ride along with Will, but it was over two years ago and I doubted he still remembered me.

"I'm Sandra James," I said. "You know my brother, William."

"Oh, right, right. You came for that part he ordered?" His eyes darted shiftily over my shoulder to the man in the overalls, probably worrying his boss would find out his employee was having regular dealings with the police.

The man jabbed his chin at Bennie. "You got this one?"

"Yeah, yeah. It's cool, Tony."

Before I could say anything, he grabbed me by the elbow and pulled me to the other side of the shop where a dark car stood, missing its front wheels. Glancing behind me, I saw the older man retreating into his office with a look of disinterest.

I cleared my throat. "Uh... Bennie, I didn't come for a part."

He lowered his voice. "I know, I know. But your bro, whatever he wants this time, tell him I don't got no news for him. Tell him not to come here asking, I don't want no trouble with the boss. Okay?"

"Sure. But I'm here for myself, not for my brother." Also lowering my voice, I added, "I need you to do something for me."

"Oh, yeah?" He frowned. "Like a favor or something?"

“Of course not. I’ll pay.” Though I’d have to dip into my rent money for that. My insides clenched with worry but I forced myself to relax. This had to be done. It was more important than rent.

Bennie’s eyes brightened. “Okay. What do you want?”

“I need you to make me a bump key.”

He whistled. “What, you’re going into crime? A cop’s sister?”

“No, I’m not. I’m trying to help someone who’s in trouble, to prove they’re innocent. But I can’t do that without a bump key.”

“Look, lady.” Bennie raised his hands in protest. “I don’t want no more trouble with the law.”

“You won’t have any trouble,” I assured him. “It’s just a bump key, it’s not like I’m asking you for a gun or anything. Trust me, you’ll only earn points with my brother if you help me out.”

At the mention of my brother, he wavered, chewing the inside of his cheek.

“You paying cash?” he asked finally.

“Of course.”

“Fine. I’ll make you one.”

A half an hour later, I left the place with the freshly-made bump key in my bag and my nerves singing a tight tune. If my theory was correct, there was only one way to prove it, and it would require doing some breaking and entering. As I got on the uptown train, I took out my phone and scrolled through the contacts until I found Valeria’s number, then typed the text message.

‘Hey! Are you at the bakery today?’

It was Valeria’s day off, and she had made plans to go shopping with Lauren, but I played it as if I’d forgotten.

A minute later, my phone pinged with a reply. *‘Day off. Why?’*

‘I have the afternoon free. Want to catch a matinee?’

‘Can’t. Going shopping with Lauren. Did you ask Felisha?’

‘Yes, but she’s busy,’ I lied.

Her reply came as an emoji, sticking out its tongue at me. I snorted. *‘Thanks. Very nice.’*

Another tongue, then a conciliatory text, *‘Next weekend?’*

‘Sounds good.’

It was good indeed. I smiled to myself at the same time as my stomach flipped with nerves. Everything was ready, and the pieces

were set in place for the next part of the plan.

Back in my neighborhood, I went by my house to drop off the cannoli I'd bought for Felisha. She had been out with Tyrone again the night before and was still asleep in her room, so the cats met me at the door with hungry meowing. I hurried into the kitchen to pour food into their dish and stash the box from the bakery into the fridge, then quickly watered the plants on the balcony, the ones that needed it, grabbed my bag and my peach scarf and headed out.

I took a different route than usual to Kathy's Bakery and reached the block from the opposite side, coming out next to Luce della Vita. I hurried past the restaurant, glancing into the open bar windows as I went. The darkened place was empty inside, except for Liam who was leaning on the bar scrolling through his iPhone and didn't see me.

The adjoining house was Sonny's place. I stopped in front of it and glanced up and down the street to check that no one was coming, then tried to steady my breathing. My pulse hammered a drumbeat in my ears.

I touched my fingers to the Connemara pendant around my neck and gave it a squeeze for luck.

Okay, Sandie. Here goes nothing.

Approaching the front door, I slipped my hand into the pocket of my jacket. It closed tightly around the bump key.

Lauren and Valeria would be at the shopping center by now, and the house had to be empty.

With a deep breath, I took out the bump key and inserted it into the keyhole. I almost expected it not to work, but then there was a satisfying click and the door opened. I threw one more glance down the street. On the corner, a guy in light gray sweatpants and dark sunglasses lit a cigarette. He wasn't looking my way, so I pushed open the door and slipped inside.

Most of the first floor was taken up by a carpeted sitting room. It had several armchairs and a dark-green couch facing a big screen TV. A half-closed door at the back led into the kitchen. I gave it a quick glance, then headed toward an open archway that gave onto the narrow corridor leading toward the stairs. If I was right, what I was looking for had to be upstairs on the second floor.

Though I knew I was alone in the house, I found myself tiptoeing up the steps. One of them creaked, making me freeze in place. I made a mental note to step over it on my way down.

The upstairs hallway, covered in new parquet, was just as narrow as the downstairs one, but the spotless white walls gave it a more open feeling. Up here was another sitting room with a TV and a master bedroom, followed by a closed study. Further down the hall were the bathroom and a walk-in closet.

Passing the living room and the bedroom, I put my new key into action on the locked study. It opened with as much ease as the front door. Unlike Dad's office, the furniture here was polished and spotless and the floor empty of papers. Instead of old books, the tall glass cabinet against the wall contained an impressive collection of expensive liquors. Behind the large mahogany desk, stood a dark wood wall entertainment unit with a small, older model TV with a built-in VCR player. I nodded with satisfaction. It was as I expected. So far, my theory checked out.

The VCR was empty, as was the shelf below which should've contained the tape collection. This didn't surprise me but... I looked around, frowning. Where could the other thing be? If I didn't find it before Lauren and Valeria's return, all of this would've been for nothing.

I searched the room, walking the perimeter and inspecting the walls inch by inch. There was nothing out of the ordinary. Could I have been mistaken in my conjecture?

Or, maybe, what I was looking for wasn't in the study at all.

Going out into the hallway again, I headed into the bathroom, but a thorough inspection of it revealed nothing out of the ordinary.

The only other place I could think of was the walk-in closet.

Lit by a single light bulb, it was much roomier than it had looked on the outside. I pushed aside the clothes on the hanging rack and felt the walls with my fingers. My breath hitched.

The seam in the wall was so thin, a regular person would never spot it there unless he knew to look for it. As I applied pressure to it, the seam widened, then swung open.

A secret doorway!

I clapped my hands to my mouth and bit my lower lip to keep from squealing. I suspected there was a secret passage in Sonny's house, but now it was actually in front of me. I'd found it!

Peering inside, I saw a steep stairway going down into darkness. I lit the flashlight on my phone. Though I was certain of where the stairs led, I still needed to make sure. I started forward with caution. Down on the first floor there was a sound of the front door opening and closing.

My blood froze. Only one person lived in this house now, and she was obviously back early from her shopping.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. The step I remembered gave a soft creak. I couldn't stay there and hope Lauren wouldn't open the closet door. I had to act.

Trying to be as quiet as I could, I slipped into the secret passage and closed the door behind me. I wasn't as quiet as I hoped, because Lauren's voice suddenly rang out outside the closet.

"Hello? Is someone there?"

Trailing the wall on both sides with my fingers, I hurtled down the stairs in the dark. At least, it wasn't a long descent. At the bottom, I came face to face with the brick wall. Pressing it yielded the desired results. It opened outward, letting me out of the passage and into the dim space of Luce della Vita's wine cellar.

My breathing ragged, I pulled the door closed, revealing the light scratches on the floor I'd noticed on the night of the murder. The scratches made by the frequent opening and closing of the door.

I sprinted across the cellar toward the stairs, making sure to give a wide berth to the spot where Sonny's body had lain the night of the wedding party. The police had taken off the tape outline, but there was no erasing from my mind where it had been.

I ran up the stairs into the restaurant's empty dining room and hurried across it to the bar. Liam was still the only person there, busy checking off the liquor supply. As his back was turned, he didn't see me slip out past him.

Out on the sunlit street again, I hid behind the corner of Luce della Vita. My heart raced and my hands were damp with sweat as I touched my fingers to the marble pendant under my shirt. Thanks, friend.

Then I waited.

Would Lauren come out to look for whoever had broken in? Seconds passed, but all remained quiet. By now, though, she would have realized the full meaning of what had happened. Behind the closed doors, was she pacing frantically around the sitting room, wondering what to do next? Was she priming herself for a false move in her panic?

I took out my phone and scrolled down for Will's number. I'd found the proof I had been hoping for, now it was time to tell my brother everything.

The call went straight to voicemail. Drat.

"Will, it's me," I said. "Call me back as soon as you can, I've got to tell you something important. It's about the case."

I put away the phone, making an effort to think calmly. The best thing to do for now was to act like nothing was out of the ordinary. First, I'd have a quick lunch at home, then head over to Dad's shop and get an early start on my shift.

Turning, I walked back up the street from where I came. The active part of the investigation was over. All I could do now was wait.



Chapter 15

“The first page has a noticeable tear at the top.”

The customer’s eyes shot lightning at me as he brandished the book in my face. “I’ve been buying used books for years, and three dollars for this is an outrage. It shouldn’t cost more than ninety-nine cents.”

I held back a groan. Why did the difficult ones have to come in five minutes before closing time? It was a quarter after eight, but the man had ignored all my hints at wanting to close the register. Pulling together my reserves of patience, I took the copy of *The Hobbit* and examined it in the lamplight. The left corner of the front page was slightly bent, but that was the extent of the damage.

“I don’t see any tears here. Besides, this is a hardcover. A new copy of this book would cost you ten dollars or more, so either way, you’re getting a deal.”

“Oh, you think so, do you?” He fixed me with a contemptuous glare. “Where’s the owner? I want to have a word with him.”

“He’s not here today. But if he were, he’d tell you the same thing I am. The hardcover is three dollars.”

He stared at the book, and a muscle twitched in his jaw. Then he slammed three dollar bills on the counter. “I’m going to complain about this. This is no way to treat a loyal customer. And don’t forget, you’re not the only used bookstore in town. Next time I might just take my business elsewhere.”

The bell over the book shop’s front door jingled as he slammed the door on his way out. I sighed. I was finally alone.

Dad was still at his darts tournament, and Marlowe had gone with him. Most pubs didn’t allow dogs, but Marlowe was everyone’s favorite. The regulars were probably stuffing him with bits of sausage and Shepherd’s pie at that very moment.

I yawned. It had been a long day, but before I could think of a good night’s sleep, there was still more work to be done.

I flipped the sign on the front door from OPEN to CLOSED and armed myself with a stack of paperbacks from the floor by the register. Walking slowly down the aisle, I sorted the books into their

appropriate places on the shelves. There were still two books left in my hands when the doorbell chinked again. I frowned. Another customer at this time?

“Hello?” I called.

There was no answer.

I edged around the bookshelves into the next aisle. Lauren stood at the other end of it. She wore dark pants and kept her hand in the pocket of her long tan jacket. My eyes flicked to the peach chiffon scarf in her other hand hanging limp at her side. No prize guessing where she'd found it.

We faced each other in silence across the dim aisle. Lauren's face was pale and drawn. She stood very still, although her nostrils repeatedly flared.

I decided my best bet was to start by being casual. Taking a deep breath, I cleared my throat. “Hi, Lauren. Did you want something? If you came to see Dad, he's not here tonight.”

She didn't return my greeting. “I know Nicolas isn't here. I came to see you.” She lifted my scarf up to eye level. “Is this yours?”

There was no point denying it, and it was time to have the truth out. I swallowed, my heart hammering in my chest. “I snuck into your house this morning and found Sonny's secret stairway. I know you used it to murder him.”

A slight tremor passed through her, but she immediately regained her composure. “What possible motive could I have to kill my own husband?”

“Actually, you had the biggest motive of anyone involved,” I said.

“Which is?” She raised her eyebrows at me.

“Money, of course. Right now, the police think Angela killed Sonny, but that's not what happened.”

“Of course it is. If it wasn't your father, then it must've been Angela. She needed the money.”

“Yes, she was having financial problems and was scared David would find out. She needed the money fast, to pay off her debts, and that would've been a good motive for murder. Except, Sonny had promised to help her out. So that makes it no motive at all.”

Lauren shook her head. “I already told the police Sonny never promised Angela any such thing. She was marrying David and

wasn't Sonny's problem anymore. Why would he help out another man's wife?"

"Because he still cared about her," I said. "And because he was dying. He was a devoted father and would've wanted his daughter's mother to be okay after he was gone."

"No." Lauren's voice rose a fraction. "This is stupid, you're just guessing now. You don't know what Sonny wanted."

"I was at the wedding," I insisted. "Angela's behavior that night is proof enough. She wasn't acting like someone overburdened with problems. Just the opposite. She was happy and excited like she didn't have a care in the world."

"She could've been faking it. That proves nothing."

Ignoring her, I went on. "I also think the reason Sonny made that call to his lawyer was to leave Kim more money than he had intended to in the first will. It's possible that with the changes he was planning, you were going to be left a pittance. Maybe you'd found out you would have to give up the house. You'd probably have enough money to live on, but not in the same comfort you've grown used to. Either way you had to stop Sonny from making that second will."

Lauren stared at me without saying a word, but her mouth tightened and her left eye twitched. I did my best to steady my breathing as I kept talking. I had to hold my line: everything depended on it.

"You were angry," I said. "I can understand that. No matter how hard you worked on your marriage, no matter how much you tried to win Sonny's love, in his eyes you would always be second best. Isn't that true? Sonny's devotion was first and foremost to Kim and Angela. They were his real family, not you."

"You're wrong!" Lauren's voice rang loud for the first time. "Sonny loved me! We had a good marriage."

"I'm not saying he didn't love you in his own way. But I suspect that, in the back of your mind, you were just waiting to be tossed aside one day. And then you overheard Sonny on the phone with his lawyer and found out he's going to change his will and leave Kim most of his money. That was the final blow. You snapped. You decided you would kill Sonny before he could put his plan into action. But you needed someone to take the blame. Then my father threw a

fit and ended up in the ER the night Sonny outbid him for the first edition of *The Long Goodbye*. That gave you an idea. You knew Dad had a gun. While he was in the hospital, you came here. You picked a moment when Josh was busy with a customer and snuck upstairs. It wouldn't have taken more than a minute to get into Dad's office and find the gun in the top drawer of the desk. All you had to do after that was to arrange for Dad to have another public fight with Sonny. You pretended to be John Edwards's secretary emailing to order the first edition of *The Big Sleep*, knowing Dad would fly into a rage if Sonny outbid him again."

"And how was I supposed to convince Sonny I was this secretary?" Lauren asked with a slight sneer.

"It would've been easy," I said. "When I was on the train this morning, I did a quick search on my phone, and there are articles on the internet that teach you how to spam, or spoof, an email address. I'm sure, once the police look into this, they'll verify I'm right. So, when Dad showed up at the wedding reception, you saw your opportunity. You knew about Sonny's secret passage. He'd been using it to keep tabs on his business partners by sneaking in and out without being observed. Complaining of a headache, you left the party with Valeria so that she'd be your alibi. While she was watching a movie downstairs, thinking you were asleep in your bedroom, you snuck through the passage down into the cellar and shot Sonny."

Lauren's eyes were too wide now. Unnerving. I wished she would blink. "That's a nice theory," she said. "But you're forgetting about timing. How was I supposed to know Sonny would be in the cellar, and that he'd be alone?"

"The same way Sonny knew when the cellar was empty. That little TV in his office is a monitor, connected wirelessly to a hidden camera in the cellar, which I'm sure you removed after you shot Sonny."

"Again, it's nothing but guesses," Lauren said. "None of this is true. You don't have any proof."

"No, Lauren. You gave me all the proof the night of the murder," I said. "I just didn't realize it at the time. But going back over that night, it became clear."

Looking at her, I was stunned. I hadn't known her face could get any paler.

"What are you talking about?" she whispered.

"It was when the police were taking Dad away. I said he didn't do it, that it was all a mistake. You turned to me and you said, 'How can it be a mistake? You were the one who found him with the gun in his hand.'"

"So?"

"How could you have known that it was me who found him? You got to the scene after everyone else did."

She swallowed visibly. "The detectives must've told me."

"No, Lauren. The detectives didn't tell you anything. That's not how it works. You knew it because you'd been watching the cellar on the monitor upstairs. And you realized your mistake as soon as you said it. That's why you faked a faint, to confuse us and take our attention away from your blunder."

"What about Dora?" Lauren asked. "Was I supposed to have killed her too?"

"Yes. You believed yourself safe, except for one thing. Someone had seen you sneak into Dad's office. Dora. At the time, she must've misconstrued the whole thing, suspecting you and Dad of having an affair. That's why she was acting so reserved towards him. She didn't realize the meaning of what she'd seen until later when she heard us talking at the bakery the night Dad got out on bail. Then she knew Dad wasn't home the evening you came over, and she guessed what you were really doing there. It's what she was coming to tell me that evening, but you stopped her. You had to."

I watched her, but Lauren's face was like a sphinx now. I licked my lips. My mouth was parched.

"I heard the first murder is the hard one," I said. "After that it gets easier. Is that true?"

Lauren's eyebrow twitched and she looked down for a moment, then her eyes met mine again and there was a new expression in them, as if she'd come to a decision. I held my breath. Was she going to confess?

Her lips trembled. "It's more like you realize you've got no other choice anymore," she said quietly. "Once you've set it in motion, it's

like you've thrown yourself into the rapids. You're just trying to keep your head above water and not crack it on any stones."

Slowly, she lifted her hand to her face and wiped her eyes, letting my scarf float down to the floor. "I didn't want to kill Dora. I liked her. But I had to do it. She was going to ruin everything."

When I didn't say anything, she added, "I don't want to kill you either, Sandie. If only you hadn't meddled in this..."

Her left hand came out of her pocket holding a gun. A small one, a newer model than Dad's.

I stared at it. Did Sonny experience the same emotions the night he stood in the Luce della Vita cellar, facing Lauren with the gun? Did he feel the last moments of his life more keenly because he knew they were his last? Or did everything simply become a blur of terror?

Heart in my throat, I backed away as my hand closed around the marble pendant at my neck. Please, don't let me down!

"How did you know?" Lauren asked. "About the passage. Sonny had been very careful. He'd made sure no one would know about it. Even Angela had no idea. I found out by accident."

"It was something Dad said the other night," I said. "About dreams and secret passages. I was stuck until then. Everything was pointing to you, but I couldn't figure out how you'd done it. Then I remembered Alex Sorrento complaining about Sonny creeping him out, knowing things he shouldn't. It all clicked."

Lauren sighed. "I wish it hadn't." She took a step closer to me and lifted the gun higher, taking aim. "I'm sorry, Sandie."

Before I could protest, the door to upstairs flew open behind me, and Will and Detective Greene stepped into the shop, their guns trained at Lauren.

"Lay down your weapon and put your hands above your head!" Greene yelled.

Behind Lauren, Detective Carver and two other cops stormed in through the front door. Lauren's lips trembled. She stood frozen, then slowly bent her knees and put the gun on the floor.

Carver approached her from behind and cuffed her hands. "Lauren Klein, you are under arrest for the murder of Sonny Klein and Dora Novak."

They led her out of the shop. My ears vaguely registered the Miranda rights being recited to her on the way to the squad car, but it was all in a haze. I slumped against the wall as if a coat hanger had suddenly been yanked out of my back.

Will came over to me and lifted me up again. "It's over, Sis. Well done."

"You took your time," I croaked. "For a moment there, I thought she'd beat you to it and actually shoot me."

"Come on!" He laughed. "Have some faith in me. I wasn't going to let anything happen to you."

"Did you get the confession?" I asked, running my fingers over the wire the cops had attached under my shirt.

He nodded. "It's all good. I mean, I don't condone that whole breaking and entering stunt you pulled. That was dangerous. But you did the right thing calling me this afternoon."

I was still having a hard time breathing. "I've just never had to stare down the barrel of a gun before."

Will gave me a one-arm hug. "You've done some first-class detecting there. Cap will be impressed." He tugged me toward the exit. "Let's go."

I gave him a wary look. "Where are we going? Better not be to the precinct. I've had enough of police stuff for one day."

"Duly noted." He chuckled. "We've done our part, they don't need us for the rest of it. Besides, you shouldn't be alone tonight. I'll text Felisha to come and get you."

"She's still at the bakery," I protested.

"It's fine. I'm sure Kathy will let her go once I tell her why."

Felisha got there in an Uber five minutes later. "Holy cow, are you okay?" She gave me a suffocating hug. "Come on, the car is waiting."

"Aren't we going home?" I asked.

"No way! And Will, you're coming with us." She tugged him by the sleeve and hustled us both into the Uber.

The driver tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. "Where to now, lady?"

"Take us back to the bakery." She grinned as I raised a questioning eyebrow at her. "Have patience. You'll see."



Chapter 16

There was a party in progress at the bakery when we got there. Kathy had closed up for the night, though a couple of regulars stayed and joined in the celebration. At the long table by the wall, Dad was talking loudly with his pub friends. Next to him, Marlowe had stretched out on the floor gnawing a biscuit.

“Dad, did you cut your tournament short?” I asked.

He got up and gave me a one-armed hug. “Made it over here as soon as I got Will’s text. Don’t know how to thank you, Sandie-sweets. You saved my bacon and my reputation. I feel like a new man!”

“You don’t need to thank me,” I said, hugging him back. “You’re my dad.”

Behind the counter, Valeria was making her famous Cobble Hill Croque Monsieur sandwiches for everyone. She grinned at me as if nothing out of the ordinary happened in the last five days. “Yo, gangsta! What up?”

Josh handed out frothy drinks on the house from the espresso bar. In the corner, Jeff sat by himself with his arms crossed over his chest, watching him darkly. As Kathy and Tyrone came out of the back room with platefuls of cheesecake brownies and a Linzer torte, he sprang to his feet, upsetting his chair.

“Sure, bring out the brownies and the torte,” he muttered, not looking directly at his wife, but somewhere past her shoulder. “What about the rest of the stuff? The cakes, and the peanut butter bars, and the fruit pies? Empty the whole fridge and give it all away, right? Who needs the money anyway?” With a grunt, he pushed past Kathy and into the back.

The rest of us looked at her in uncertainty. Kathy rolled her eyes. “Ignore him. Enjoy.”

Dad raised his cappuccino to get everyone’s attention. “Here’s to Sandie! She’s done a job worthy of Philip Marlowe.”

I rolled my eyes, but everyone else raised their own coffees and soft drinks with cheers and exclamations of “Hear, hear!” It made my cheeks grow hot.

Dad downed his cappuccino in a single gulp and set it down in front of Josh. "Barkeep! Hit me."

"Yes, sir." With a smirk, Josh filled the tin container with milk and turned on the steamer.

Dad gave my shoulder a gentle squeeze. "So? We're all waiting." I blinked. "Waiting for what?"

"For the detective to lay her cards out on the table! We're all dying to know how you figured out it was Lauren."

"Yeah! Spill the beans, Sandie," Felisha said. "We totally have to know how you cracked it."

I grinned. I'd been hoping someone would ask me about that because I was dying to tell them. I poured myself a hot chocolate from the pitcher Josh had set out and leaned on the counter while the others arranged themselves to face me.

"Actually, I suspected Lauren from the start," I said. "It seemed too convenient that she was the only person who left the party early and had a strong alibi. But it was just a suspicion. I couldn't prove any of it. I might've doubted Lauren's alibi if it had been someone other than Valeria with her that night. But I could see no reason why Valeria would lie for Lauren. When she told us Lauren never left the apartment, I believed she was telling the truth."

"Hey, I was!" Valeria said as she plopped onto a chair at the other end of the table and slid the plate of sandwiches toward the center. She put her heavy elbows on the tabletop and propped her chin with her hands. "I never seen her leave the house. She tricked me."

"She tricked all of us," I said. "But I know she was your friend. I'm sorry."

Valeria shrugged a shoulder, but her expression turned gloomy. "She's no friend to me no more! I'm never talking to her again."

Kathy took her hand and squeezed it. "You know you still have us, right?"

"But none of you have a house so close to work where she can crash whenever she wants to," Josh said with a sardonic smile.

"Josh!" Kathy gave him a disapproving look, but Valeria shrugged again. "Nah, it's true. Now I have to take the train home every night."

"Anyway," Will said with emphasis. "We all fell for Lauren's alibi, but Sandie still had her doubts. Right, Sis?"

I nodded. "Then Crystal came forward out of the blue with evidence about Angela's money problems, and my suspicions deepened. It seemed more than probable that Crystal had been paid to say that and yesterday, when I saw her shopping for a designer handbag, it only confirmed what I'd been thinking."

"And then Dad said something about dreams and secret doorways," Will added.

"I did?" Dad quirked an eyebrow. "What did I say? I can't remember."

I grinned. "It's fine. Just know it was good stuff, Dad."

He raised his paper cup to me again. "Glad I helped, then."

"So, I put that together with what Alex Sorrento said about never being able to keep anything from Sonny. It made me wonder if Sonny didn't have some secret entrance into Luce della Vita no one knew about, and that maybe Lauren had found out about it and used it to murder him. After that, all I needed to do was get into Sonny's house and poke around a bit."

"Sure. A small matter of breaking and entering." Will narrowed his eyes at me in mock disapproval. "It's a good thing you're a civilian, Sandie. If I did that I'd be suspended from work. Or worse."

"That's why I didn't tell you about my plan," I said. "I didn't want to get you into trouble. When I saw the stairway in the wall, I knew I had my proof. But I wanted to go one step further. I wanted a confession. So I left my scarf behind to let Lauren know I'd been there and discovered her secret. I knew she'd come for me. She'd have no other choice. I called Will and told him everything. The detectives had me wear a wire while they hid in the back of Dad's shop and waited for Lauren to show up."

"You weren't scared?" Felisha asked, her eyes wide.

"I was," I admitted. "But I had no other choice. I had to protect Dad and save Angela from going to jail."

Tyrone grinned. "You should be a cop, girl." He gave my arm a playful pinch, while Felisha scowled at him.

I shook my head. "Thanks, but no thanks. That was enough excitement for me. Let someone else do the police stuff now. I'm done with that."

“Too bad,” Will said, kneeling on the floor to play with Marlowe. “The police are losing an asset.”

Kathy leaned in and gave me a warm hug. “Leave her alone. Our Sandie is destined for other things.”

I sighed. “Just wish I knew what they are.”

“You’ll figure it out,” Dad said. “Mark my words, whatever you decide to do, you’ll be great at it.”

As the others got busy with the food, I went behind the counter to get a refill of hot chocolate.

“There’s no more,” Josh said getting up after me. “I can make you some if you like.”

“That’s okay. I’ve got the hang of this thing.” I reached past him for the milk jug, conscious of our hands brushing against each other. I wondered if he’d noticed it too.

Josh leaned against the counter and fixed his eyes on me for a long moment during which my heart began to pound. “So I heard you and Liam are going out together,” he said.

How had he found out? More importantly, was it simple curiosity that made him ask?

“Uh, yeah,” I stammered. “Maybe. He invited me to hang out sometime. But I’ve been too busy helping Dad to really think about it.” I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear and glanced up at him. He was still looking at me, but his expression was frustratingly unreadable.

“Don’t you think I should go out with him?” I prodded.

He seemed to hesitate, and my breath suddenly hitched. Was he about to tell me dating Liam would be a mistake? That instead I should go out with him?

His left eyebrow gave a weird twitch and he shrugged. “Why would I think you shouldn’t go out with him? Liam is a cool guy. If you like him, you should go for it.”

Turning away from me, he got busy wrapping up the sandwich ingredients Valeria had left on the counter. It looked like the conversation was over.

I stifled my disappointment and reminded myself that Josh and I were a bad idea. He just wasn’t my type. Or, rather, he was exactly

my type. Artistic, handsome, aloof. The type I'd always gone for in the past with disastrous results.

Besides, the whole point was moot, since Josh made it blatantly obvious he wasn't interested in me.

The front door opened and Liam came in carrying two bottles of wine. "From Angela and David," he said. "She's been released on account of Lauren's arrest."

"That's what I'm talking about!" Tyrone came forward to take the bottles from him. "Now it's a party."

Kathy put her hands on her hips. "Is that her apology for shunning us and saying Dad was a murderer?"

"Probably the only one you're gonna get," Will said with a chuckle. "Just take it and forget about it."

"Oh, that's not all," Liam said. "She also asked to give you guys this." He handed Kathy an envelope. Inside it was a check, the payment Angela owed us for our catering services.

Felisha and I grinned at each other as a knot of worry in my chest dissolved in relief. I had my rent money.

Valeria got out a fresh stack of paper cups and Liam started pouring out the wine and handing it out. As he gave me my cup, his fingers lingered on mine. The left side of his mouth lifted in a smile. "So now that things are all squared off with the murder, how about that date?"

I opened my mouth, painfully aware that the conversations had suddenly gone quiet around us. They were all waiting to hear what I would say, but it didn't seem to bother Liam at all.

"What did you have in mind?" I asked, stalling.

He shrugged. "I could take you to dinner and drinks. Maybe catch a movie after? What do you think?"

Behind the counter, Josh took a swig of his wine. Our eyes met for a second, but then he looked away. His face, like a stone mask, registered zero reaction.

I looked back at Liam. His light-blue gaze held a promise. What exactly it was promising I wasn't sure but there suddenly seemed no reason why I shouldn't find out. I smiled at him. "Why not?"

"Great!" He gave a satisfied nod. "I'll give you a call and we'll go somewhere."

The others went back to talking and laughing. Will and Dad continued to joke, asking me if I was now the neighborhood's newest amateur detective.

I shook my head. "The only reason I got involved in the first place was because Dad needed help. I'm not about to open a detective agency if that's what you're hinting at."

"What if there was a case for you?"

I turned to face Mrs. O'Hara, standing there with a slice of carrot cake on a paper plate.

"A case for me? What do you mean?"

"You see, dear." She looked shy, almost embarrassed as she spoke. "I volunteer part-time at the local homeless shelter. There's an old man, he's been living there for the past six months, poor thing. He was found robbed and beaten by the side of the road. Now he's got amnesia, doesn't remember who he is and where he's from. I thought you seem to have such a talent for figuring things out. Maybe you could go and talk to him? It would be so good if we could find out his real name and if he has any relatives."

"One solved case doesn't make me a detective," I protested. But curiosity was already itching in my brain. A man with no past. Who was he? Where was he from? Maybe there was a true mystery behind it.

As though reading my mind, Mrs. O'Hara gave me a knowing smile. "Please, Sandie. What could it hurt?"

How do you say 'no' to helping an old man to find his family?

"Okay," I said. "Tomorrow. I'll go see him."

Two hours later, Felisha and I opened our apartment door. Asimov came running forward, meowing for attention. Felisha picked him up and scratched him behind the ears, making him purr. I kicked off my shoes and went into the sitting room where Hemingway lay stretched out on the sofa. As I plonked down next to him, he narrowed his eyes and flicked his tail at me.

"Now that Sonny's killer is caught, everything will go back to normal," I called out into the hallway. "Dad will probably want the cats back. How do you feel about that?"

Felisha came in, cradling Asimov in her arms. She sighed. "I mean, I'm happy it's all over. But I'm really going to miss this guy."

Then she sneezed so loud that Asimov tumbled from her hands and darted with an angry hiss into my bedroom.

I couldn't help laughing. "Something tells me Asimov's not going to miss you as much as you're going to miss him."

Her phone pinged with a message. Felisha read it and looked up with a guilty expression.

"Is it Tyrone?" I asked.

"He's going to a dance club in the city... but I can stay if you need me," she added quickly. "Or you could come with us. His friends are really hot!" She wiggled her eyebrows.

"As hot as Tyrone?" I laughed as her eyes narrowed with suspicion and shook my head. "No, you go. I'm looking forward to a quiet night at home."

"Okay. If you really don't mind... I just need to change and... Oh, where's that turquoise necklace I made last month? I want him to see it on me." She fluttered around the apartment, talking a mile a minute. I sank back against the couch cushions with a smile on my lips.

My family was safe and our lives would be getting back to normal soon. The knowledge of it brought clarity to my mind, and the decision I'd been dreading over the past two days suddenly became obvious. It was a no-brainer, really.

Fifteen minutes later, the front door closed behind Felisha. I got out my phone and dialed *Money Tycoon*. Everyone there had gone for the day, so I spoke to the answering machine. "This is Sandra James. I'm calling to thank you for the job offer you made me... and to tell you I won't be accepting it."

I hung up and took a deep breath. It came easier than it had in days. As if a heavy weight had been lifted off my chest.

I'd been too hasty to gripe about working with Kathy. She needed me. My friends and family needed me. And maybe, at least for now, building closer relationships with them mattered more than having a career and financial freedom.

Besides, working at the bakery gave me the freedom of a different kind. The freedom of time to pursue interests I'd been neglecting for years. One in particular.

I walked into my room and fired up my laptop. As a Word document loaded on the screen, I typed the first words at the top of the blank page:

First Edition Murder
A Sandie James Mystery.

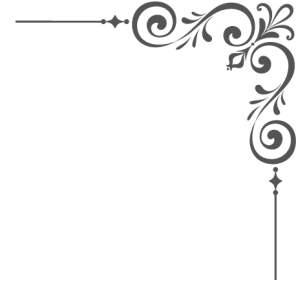
I sat back and stared at the title. Was this the soul-singer Dad had spoken of? One of those dreams that led to the light instead of a dead-end? I didn't know. But as I kept typing, an unbidden smile tugged at my lips. If dreams were like secret passages, surely, this one was taking me home.



Thank You for Reading!

I hope you enjoyed spending time with Sandie and the gang as much as I enjoyed writing about them. If you have a minute, consider leaving a review. No matter if long or short, reviews are a great encouragement for a writer to keep working!

Before you go, check out Sandie's next adventure in *THE DEADLY ART* (A Sandie James Mystery Book 2). Sandie thought her foray into amateur sleuthing ended with the capture of Sonny Klein's killer, but things get dicey again when a body turns up at an art gallery opening, and her friend is implicated in the murder. Sandie's sleuthing skills must once again be put to the test.



THE DEADLY ART

Chapter 1

It's no secret that breaking into the world of fine art can be murder. So when a friend unexpectedly becomes a success where so many have failed, you want to show up and cheer.

My heel tapped a nervous rhythm as the cab rattled down the narrow cobblestone street through the warm autumn evening. It was two months after the murder of Sonny Klein. The murder in which my dad had been the prime suspect. My roommate Felisha and I were on our way to the opening night of our friend's first-ever art exhibit.

Outside the window, converted warehouses rose on both sides. Built in the nineteenth century, the dark redbrick buildings were once used to store coffee beans. These days, they became home to high-end restaurants, boutiques, and art galleries of Dumbo, Brooklyn's trendiest art neighborhood.

An elegant evening out would be a nice change of pace. Since solving the murder and rediscovering my long-forgotten passion for writing, I spent all my free time slaving away at the keyboard. But, thrilled as I was that my friend was having an art show at one of New York's most prestigious galleries, I couldn't help being anxious, too. As the cab pulled up in front of the glass doors of the AGER, the Art Gallery on the East River, my stomach flipped.

"I'm still not sure this is a good idea."

Felisha sighed. "Don't start with this again." She took out a compact mirror and dabbed on some lip gloss, then ran her fingers through her bangs. "What's wrong with us coming? Josh invited us!"

He did. Josh asked us to come six weeks ago when he learned he'd been chosen for a showing, but then suddenly, and inexplicably,

he rescinded his invitation. Disappointed, I hung up my best dressy outfit back into the closet, but Felisha wouldn't hear of it.

She shrugged. "He didn't mean for us not to come. It's just jitters. You know, like stage fright. This is a huge night for him and we're his friends. I'm sure he wants us there for support. He'll be glad when he sees us."

She was the first one out of the cab, giggling as her heels wobbled on the uneven stones.

Lights from the gallery spilled out onto the sidewalk, illuminating the well-dressed crowd going in. The opening night attracted a lot of people. Surprising, since Josh, while certainly brilliant, was a virtual unknown.

I unlocked the car door and my hand closed around the marble pendant hanging from my neck. For luck. Behind me, through the gap between two former warehouse buildings, I caught a glimpse of Brooklyn Bridge Park with its historic Jane's Carousel standing dormant. Rising above them, the arch of the Brooklyn Bridge stretched over the East River, closing the divide between Dumbo's homey scruffiness and the immaculate, glistening Manhattan skyline. The view filled me with a quiet sense of belonging. Though I hadn't been back here long, this place was home.

Cutting into my thoughts, a black Impala pulled up to the curb and a man got out on the passenger side. I stared at him, knowing my stare was perfectly warranted, perhaps even expected.

In his late forties, he stood a little shorter than six feet. His black eyebrows and full red lips, somewhat feminine, accentuated his pale complexion. He had on a dark suit with a starched white shirt and carried an unlit wooden pipe like it was a ladies' reticule. On his head, the man wore a bowler hat.

Even for New York, this was eccentric. I frowned at the sense of déjà vu, certain I'd seen him somewhere before.

The man gave me a side glance, probably aware of the effect he made, and turned to the driver with a hard-to-pull-off expression, at once haughty and detached.

"Are you coming, John?"

The driver inclined his head, the smile on his fine-drawn lips just barely this side of sardonic. "In a moment. I still need to find a

parking spot.”

His voice sounded familiar but, again, I couldn't remember where I'd heard it.

The man in the bowler hat waved his pipe. “When it comes to great art, my friend, time is of no essence. I'll be inside.” He stuck the pipe in his mouth and ambled toward the gallery.

My eyes met the driver's and we smiled at each other, the kind of conspiratorial smile that happens at the expense of a third party. A moment later, he broke eye contact and gave me a polite nod as he pulled away from the curb.

At my side, Felisha watched the bowler-hat man with avid curiosity. “Does he think he's Charlie Chaplin or something?” she whispered.

Giggling, we followed the stranger to the gallery but at the front doors my merriment evaporated, replaced with a new surge of anxiety.

Felisha was already inside. Seeing that I stopped, she doubled back. “Oh my gosh, Sandie! Quit worrying, will you? If Josh gets mad—and he won't!—I'll just tell him I forced you to come. He can be mad at me if he wants to. I don't care as much as you.”

“I don't care if he's mad at me!”

I bit my lip, conscious of my cheeks getting hot. This was ridiculous, blushing like a school girl when everyone knew Josh and I were just friends.

Especially since I already agreed to go on a date with Liam, the hot bartender at Luce della Vita, the Italian restaurant down the street from where I worked.

Granted, Liam asked me out two months ago, and the date still hadn't happened, but that was not my fault. Things kept getting in the way. First, Dad guilted me into going with him to a family reunion in his native Kentucky. Then Liam went away to visit his sick mother in Connecticut.

And Josh? Sure, he was handsome. And smart. And talented. And the rare moments when he showed apparent interest always left me second-guessing my resolution to just be friends. But that was not the reason for my apprehension tonight.

“You know he and I haven’t always been on good terms,” I said, remembering the tension between us when Josh first started working at my sister’s bakery. “I don’t want to jeopardize our friendship by showing up where I’m not wanted.”

“But I want to see Josh’s paintings!” Felisha twisted her thick dark hair like a rope over her shoulder, pouting. “Everyone else got to see them that time he asked you guys over. It wasn’t my fault I couldn’t go. And then I had to listen to you gush over them for like a month. It’s not fair!”

That was true. Felisha was home sick the day Josh invited the gang from the bakery to toast his move to a new place. Once the evening was in full swing, Dad and I coaxed him to show us his artwork.

We agreed it was remarkable. The brushstrokes flowed as one organic whole of light and shadow, the green landscapes appearing to be alive and ready to materialize around us. It was only by taking a step back from the canvases that the viewer realized they weren’t landscapes at all, but buildings, fantastical and futuristic.

Josh titled his collection Garden Cities of the Future, and the paintings breathed with a tangible longing, a yearning for a better future. A peaceful world.

No wonder the AGER jumped at the opportunity to showcase his work. Josh fully deserved the attention he would get tonight.

Felisha’s eyebrows pinched in annoyance. “Look, we’re not talking about this anymore. Let’s go!”

She grabbed my hand and dragged me into the gallery, a large, high-ceilinged space of white walls and polished concrete floor. The mezzanine along the back provided an added level for displaying artwork.

Felisha’s mouth dropped. “Wow, look at these pieces! You said Josh was good, but I had no idea. This stuff is so different...and weird. I mean, like, what’s that?”

No kidding. My eyes fixed on the enormous artificial tree she pointed to. Stretching up in the middle of the showing room, its top scraped the high ceiling. Large glass spheres, the biggest the size of an armchair, rested on the tree’s branches and were lit up from inside to show fantastic landscapes as they slowly rotated.

I had taken enough classes in literature to recognize the tree on first sight. “That’s Yggdrasil, the tree that connects the nine realms of the Norse mythology. The globes represent planets and I guess, that blue one in the middle is Earth.”

“Earth?” Felisha frowned, then suddenly grinned. “Midgard, right? Like in the Avengers movies? That’s pretty cool!”

Cool. Sure. But what in the world was it doing at Josh’s exhibit?

I took in the rest of the artwork. There were several small sculptures mounted on stands at uneven intervals throughout the showing room. Abstract trees in dark metal. The one closest to me was slightly off-center and my fingers itched to reach out and straighten it.

On the walls and along the mezzanine, large paintings depicted a Scandinavian motif, borrowing heavily from the Norse mythology.

Something here didn’t add up.

“This looks nothing like the art I saw at Josh’s,” I said.

Felisha shrugged. “Maybe he just didn’t show you these?”

“No, it’s the style. Looks all wrong.”

A large plaque on the wall to our right drew my attention. Starkly white, with thick black letters spelling out the artist’s name.

MARCEL BRIGHT.

I groaned. Well, no wonder!

“Felisha, this is the wrong exhibit! We must’ve gotten the dates mixed up.”

“No, you got them right,” Josh said approaching us from the side.

Oh, boy.

I bit my lip as I took in his grim expression, then forced myself to smile. Not an easy thing to do with my heart sunk somewhere in the vicinity of my soles.

We really, really shouldn’t have come.



Chapter 2

“I don’t understand.” Felisha nodded at the plaque. “Why does it say Marcel Bright on there and not your name?”

Josh put his hands in his pockets, looking everywhere but at us. “The curator canceled my show. Said it was safer for the gallery to go with an established artist at this time, because of the recession. They didn’t want to take a chance on an unknown like me.”

Felisha’s eyes filled with concern. “Josh, I’m so sorry! Is that why you told us not to come?”

When he didn’t answer, she touched his arm, assuming the tone of voice she usually reserved for sick people. “Just remember this isn’t your only chance. You’ll get your break soon, it’ll be okay.”

Josh looked away from her, the unshaved stubble on his jaw accentuating the hard lines of his mouth. He muttered a half-audible ‘thanks’.

I wanted to kick myself. No wonder Josh asked us not to come. He had been in the city for over three years now and spent all that time trying to break into the art world. Just when he thought he finally made it, his big break was snatched away from him. Adding to the injury, as the gallery employee, he was expected to be present at the other artist’s opening night. Our showing up here must’ve only made his humiliation worse.

But...now what? Next to me, Felisha clasped and unclasped her clutch, then side-glanced me with a small shrug that said she was all out of ideas.

As the silence stretched on, I felt like one shipwrecked, stranded on the high seas with nothing but the empty horizon in sight. Desperate for rescue, my eyes roamed the wide showing room. They landed on the drinks buffet.

Yes! The lifeboat.

I put on a bright smile. “Let’s get some wine!”

We took our glasses and stood to the side of the buffet, watching as the people wandered about the showing room, sharing their impressions, some in hushed undertones, others with loud exclamations of delight. Clearly, the exhibit was an instant success.

“This art is pretty awesome,” Felisha said. Then she grimaced, realizing her thoughtlessness. “Sorry, Josh.”

He shrugged. “No, you’re right. Marcel’s one of the top artists today. Having him is a great boost to the gallery. You can expect half of these pieces to go tonight. There’s no way I could compete with that.”

He emptied his wine glass and asked the cute, pink-haired bartender for another one.

Felisha and I exchanged worried looks. In Josh’s mood, leading him to alcohol might not have been the best idea.

“So, who’s this artist anyway?” I asked, trying to distract him. “Is he here yet?”

Josh pointed his wine glass to a group of people gathered next to the Yggdrasil. “That’s Marcel Bright and his agent in the middle. You can’t miss them.”

I blinked at the bowler-hat man Felisha and I had seen earlier, talking animatedly to his audience.

Felisha snorted into her drink. “What? Him?”

That got a smile out of Josh. “Marcel believes he channels the spirit of a French surrealist painter, Rene Magritte. He says wearing the bowler hat and the pipe improves their connection, helps him with inspiration or something.”

The bowler hat and the pipe. Of course! They were two of Magritte’s most famous images. That much I still remembered from my art history classes.

“Now I know why he looked so familiar when I saw him outside,” I said. “He resembles the man in Magritte’s Clairvoyance painting. Must be why he jells his hair so much, to accentuate the resemblance.”

Felisha’s eyes widened. “That’s so cool! Do you think he, like, meditates to connect with that Magritte guy’s spirit? Or does he use a ouija board?” Her eyes lit on the plaque with the artist’s name. “Ooh, I bet it’s in his biography! I’m going to read it.”

She bounced off. Josh and I exchanged knowing smiles. It was plain Marcel Bright was nothing more than a cultivated eccentric, faking a personality quirk to attract attention to his art. At least, it was working out for him.

Or was it?

Now that I looked more closely, the artist wasn't talking to his audience. He addressed most of his remarks to his agent, a slightly taller man in an impeccable gray suit that didn't quite manage to hide his paunchy middle. With soothing gestures, the agent kept trying to persuade his client to calm down, but the other hissed at him and pointed at the sculpture behind them.

Hard to imagine what the country's top artist could have to complain about on his opening night. Unless, it was all part of the act.

I turned to Josh. "Maybe you should pick an artist to channel. Tell people you're the new Salvador Dali."

He smirked. "Should I grow a long thin mustache?"

"Of course! You'd look dashing, in a manic sort of way."

He actually laughed at that. His eyes crinkled in a way that always made me forget my resolution to stay platonic.

I'd made him laugh. A warm feeling spread in my chest. Even though he was upset, I managed to cheer him up.

"I love that you know so much about art," Josh said suddenly, his eyes fixed on mine.

The rest of the room disappeared under the dizzying spell of his gaze. As if he could see into my most secret thoughts. The space between us condensed and—

"Josh! You came!"

I turned around in time to see an attractive young woman with long red hair hurrying up to us. She flung her arms around Josh's neck and planted a kiss on his cheek.

"You didn't have to come, I would've completely understood if you took the night off. But this is so mature of you!"

Josh shrugged, looking only slightly thrown off balance by the interruption. "Well, I'm here. But I'm not lifting a finger tonight. Don't care what's wrong with that installation, I'm not fixing it." He glanced over at me. "Uh, Sandie, this is Caroline King. She is the assistant curator here."

Caroline unwound her arms from around Josh's neck but moved one palm to lie flat against his chest. She acknowledged my presence with a toss of the head.

“Hi, there!”

“It’s...nice to meet you.” I hoped I didn’t sound as stiff as I felt.

Caroline put her other hand on Josh’s arm and smiled at me. He’s mine, her eyes said. But maybe it was just me, feeling blindsided.

“I’ve been trying to get the brass to take this guy on for months,” Caroline said in a confidential tone. “I discovered him, you know. In a way. He’s so talented, I just can’t stand what happened. Right? I’m so disappointed in Alexa for canceling the show!”

She turned to Josh, tracing her index finger a few inches down his chest. “But don’t worry. I promise I’ll keep bugging her until she caves and gives you another shot.”

I took a sip of my wine, grateful for the excuse to hide my flaming cheeks. “So, Caroline, are you a talent scout?”

Josh bent toward Caroline and gave her a playful bump with his shoulder. “I keep teasing that she’s a closeted artist herself. She denies it, but I’ve seen her with paint on her hands more than once.”

“I wish!” Caroline laughed, her light-blue eyes never leaving his face. “I’m an artist like a plumber is a ballet dancer. But it’s fine. I leave art creating to other people and just... admire the view.” She giggled and fluttered her eyelashes at him. “The paint is from visiting artist studios, that’s all. You know Alexa’s been delegating more and more of that stuff to me lately.”

Josh looked around. “Where’s Alexa, anyway? I didn’t see her come in.”

“Who knows? She was supposed to be here hours ago. Marcel’s furious. Dan and I just got an earful from him.”

“Weird.” Josh frowned. “I thought Alexa would be all over this, schmoozing with the buyers.”

“All I know is she better show up. I’m having to do it all tonight. And you know Dan’s useless at selling.” Caroline rolled her eyes. “I charged him with sorting out the tree installation, but look at him, stuffing his face over there. Sometimes I think all he knows is how to stress eat.”

She snickered as she pointed out a balding middle-aged man with a stack of brown and pink macarons on his plate. He nodded

helplessly as Marcel blustered at him and his eyes roamed the large room as if looking for a hiding place. I felt sorry for him.

“Who is he?” I asked.

“Associate curator,” Caroline said over her shoulder. “I mean, I’d be bingeing too if my career was going down the toilet. And he wonders why Alexa was promoted ahead of him. Speaking of Alexa...” Edging slightly to put more space between me and Josh, she said in a confidential tone. “I need to talk to you. You won’t believe what Fabian Morris told me the other day.”

I cleared my throat, feeling like the third wheel. “Why don’t I let you talk? I want to see the rest of the gallery anyway.”

Josh blinked, probably remembering I was still standing there. “Okay, Sandie. Catch you later.”

I tried to shrug off the sting as I moved on. Just friends, remember? A handful of disturbed bees swarmed angrily in my stomach, refusing to get on board with the idea. Stupid bees. Why couldn't they be logical?

I made straight for the Yggdrasil, partly to distract myself and partly out of curiosity. What could be the matter with it? It seemed fine from my vantage point by the drinks buffet.

As I drew closer, though, the problem became apparent. While eight of the glass globes shined brightly from within, the largest one at the bottom remained dark and opaque. Nothing inside it was visible.

Two frazzled gallery workers were busy inspecting something at the back of the installation where the mechanism for lighting and rotating the globes must’ve been located.

“It was thoroughly checked yesterday afternoon, before the preview night,” someone said behind me. “I assure you, the whole thing functioned perfectly.”

Turning around, I saw Dan, the associate curator Caroline had been making fun of. He was about five foot six and probably in his mid-fifties, with a bald patch at the top of his head that was amply compensated by tufts of bushy hair on the sides. He wore a tan suit that had seen better days.

The other man, Marcel Bright, crossed his hands over his chest, probably trying to look thunderous and imposing. It came out

petulant at best.

“I don’t care if it was working yesterday,” the artist spat. “It’s not working today and I can’t believe no one’s done anything about it until now. The Yggdrasil is the centerpiece of my collection, it brings the whole show together.” He started to walk away, then stopped and said over his shoulder. “And let me know the first thing Alexa gets here. I need to have a word with that woman about all the lies she’s been telling me.”

Dan shook his head at one of the workers, looking dismal. “It better be up and running before Alexa gets here. She’ll have a coronary.”

“A bit odd, isn’t it?” a man standing at my side said quietly.

I recognized him as the driver who had dropped off Marcel Bright. Probably in his late forties, tall and lean and impeccably dressed in a black tux with a long white scarf. His dark hair was already showing gray, but he had remarkable blue eyes that looked at me with candor and assumed comradeship. He, too, reminded me vaguely of someone, though not anyone I’d seen in a painting. This had to be the night for puzzling out familiar faces.

“What’s odd?” I asked.

“That the curator of the gallery isn’t here on opening night. You’d think she’d get here ahead of time.”

“Maybe she’s stuck in traffic,” I said. “Or she could be having a wardrobe emergency.”

“A wardrobe emergency?” The man chuckled. “You’re clearly not acquainted with Alexa.”

“Can’t say that I am.”

“That woman is like clockwork, one of those extremely organized types. Like a military marching band.”

I laughed at the comparison. “I wouldn’t know what that’s like. But why is everyone waiting for this Alexa? Doesn’t the gallery have a director?”

My companion nodded. “Clarence McNally, yes. Normally he is the “mover and shaker” in the New York art scene, but he’s in the hospital at the moment with a burst appendix. Poor Marcel. The gallery is malfunctioning all around tonight.”

“You seem to know a lot about the art scene,” I said. “Are you an artist yourself? Or are you a collector?”

He smiled. “Neither. Marcel and I travel in the same social circles. I simply came out to support him. And to give him a ride, as it turned out. Kenneth, his agent, was supposed to pick him up, but he was indisposed earlier.” He extended his hand out to me. “By the way, my name is John Edwards.”

I took his hand, icy prickles on the back of my neck.

I knew a John Edwards, a book collector in Boston. Two months ago, he happened to outbid my dad for the first edition of a Raymond Chandler novel, the affair that almost cost Dad his freedom.

That voice! John Edwards and I had spoken on the phone while I was jumping through hoops trying to clear Dad’s name. No wonder this man had sounded so familiar.

Before I could ask him about it, the workers stepped aside from the Yggdrasil. One of them pulled a switch at the base of the trunk.

“It better work, or I don’t know what’s wrong with this damn thing.”

To his obvious relief, the bottom sphere lit up with a soft purple glow. The stark landscape inside began its slow rotation, dark and bulky. Too bulky. It didn’t fit with the rest of the installation somehow.

As I moved in to take a closer look, my breath hitched. Several of the people around me gasped or screamed at the sight of a contorted arm.

Then the rest of the body came into view, frozen inside the globe in an unnatural position no human body could handle without breaking. Like a pretzel stuffed inside a giant snow globe.

In a hush that fell on the gallery, I became aware of John Edwards coming to stand close to me. His eyes, bluer than ever, fixed on the body and dark realization etched deep lines into his mouth.

“I guess, Alexa wasn’t late after all,” he said quietly.



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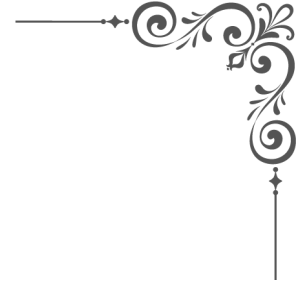
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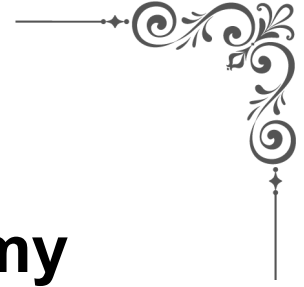


About

Tessa Kelly

As a former teacher with a degree in French, I spent several years living in an uptown Brooklyn neighborhood, frequenting its many cafes and coffee houses and getting to know it from the inside out. During my undergraduate years, I also worked at a small bakery, much like the one depicted in my novels, where I developed a lifelong fondness for cheesecake brownies.

When not writing, I love to be outdoors exploring hiking trails and often wandering off the beaten path. Some of my other passions include baking, learning foreign languages, and experimenting with natural plant dyes.

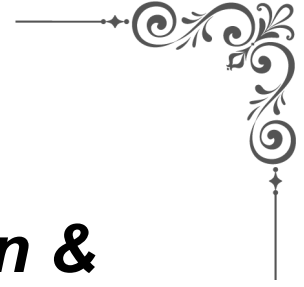


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