



ANN WARNER

a novel



THE BABBLING BROOK
NAKED POKER CLUB

BOOK
ONE



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THE BABBLING BROOK
NAKED POKER CLUB

BOOK ONE

by

ANN WARNER

The Babbling Brook Naked Poker Club - Book One
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Library of Congress Registration TXu 1-985-149

Edited by
Pam Berehulke, Bulletproof Editing

Cover design by
Kit Foster Design

Kindle Edition

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Dedication

To Delores Warner—Sister-in-law, sister-in-heart, and Graphoanalyst
extraordinaire

Book Description

A painting worth millions, valuables gone missing, a game that is more than a game. And that's only the beginning as an elderly widow befriends a young woman and tries to prevent her from making the same mistakes she has made.

Chapter One

Josephine

When Thomas died, I discovered he'd shifted control of our assets to our son, and one of Jeff's first decisions was where I would live. It was obvious from the speed with which he accomplished my move, he'd been planning it for some time.

Had he asked my opinion, I certainly wouldn't have picked Brookside Retirement Community. For one thing, there's no brook, and for another, the cutesy bird-and-flower theme is simply annoying. Although I have an apartment and I'm free to interact with other residents, or not, as I choose, I still wouldn't have chosen to live here.

The hallways are lined with both fussy bird prints of dubious quality and flamboyant floral bouquets in need of dusting. Each wing of the complex (there are five) has a combination bird-and-flower name. I live in the Morning Glory-Mourning Dove wing—or GloryDove for short. I suppose that's better than the Snapdragon-Titmouse wing. I've already noticed people who live in SnapTit tend to hesitate when asked which wing they're in.

Carrying the theme beyond pictures and floral arrangements, each wing has its own glass-fronted cage filled with tiny birds that dart about and tweet continuously.

Next to the mandatory enclosure of birds in the front lobby sits a morose parrot in a cage so small it can't even spread its wings, let alone do a quick flit. I feel sorry for the parrot who, like many of the residents here, is in his nineties, but I do steer clear of him. He has a reputation for biting, not that I blame him. If someone confined me to a small cage next to the roomier quarters of luckier members of the species and forced me to listen to all their nonstop celebrating, I'd bite too.

So far, the only bright spot has been Lillian Fitzel. When I told Lill that, she

laughed that deep, rich chuckle of hers.

“Me a bright spot, Josephine? Why, I’m as black as the bottom of my granny’s favorite cooking pot.”

Lill’s the one who said Brookside should be rechristened Babbling Brook, a tongue-in-cheek reference to both the nonexistent waterway as well as the more irritating residents.

Jeff parked me here because he considers me elderly, but I’m only seventy. Much too young to be shut away with a bunch of old people, fake flowers, and birds.

I’ve decided I won’t have it. I’ve spent fifty years living a life of duty and restraint, and I’m not wasting another minute. As soon as I get my financial and legal affairs in order, I’m out of here.

~ ~ ~

Shortly after Lill and I struck up our friendship, she invited me to become the fourth in a group that plays cards two days a week. I’m not crazy about card games, but I decided it might be a welcome distraction. At least until I get my next move figured out. Unfortunately, I quickly discovered it wasn’t going to provide as much of a distraction as I’d hoped since the other two women in the group are both as dull as case knives. Not a sliver of intellectual curiosity between the two of them.

Myrtle, who would make two of Edna or three of Lill, is never seen in public without makeup and carefully styled hair. She favors flowing garments in bright colors that flutter when she moves. It makes me tired just to look at her.

In contrast, Edna’s makeup ends at her chin, and her scanty hair often looks like a gerbil has been playing in it. Setting off polyester pantsuits that should have been sent to a landfill forty years ago is a strand of yellowing pearls she’s never without.

When it was finally my choice what to play next, I simply couldn’t resist the imp sitting on my shoulder, and the words “strip poker” tumbled out.

Myrtle sat back and thumped the table. “You can’t choose that.”

“Why can’t I? You picked hearts.” And if there’s a stupider game, I don’t know what it is, although in the interest of ongoing relations, I refrained from sharing that opinion out loud. “At least strip poker will be interesting.”

Myrtle’s bosom heaved, something that always makes me want to move

rapidly out of her vicinity.

“Well, I never. Josephine Bartlett, you’re just, just—”

“What kind of poker?” Lill chimed in. “Strip poker can be played any number of ways.”

“How about five-card draw?”

“I don’t think poker is a very ladylike game,” Edna said, her nose elevated.

Edna’s a priss, if I do say so, although I can’t take credit for coming up with the descriptor since her bizarrely appropriate last name, Prisant, got there first.

“And what exactly has being ladylike gotten any of us lately?”

“I don’t know about you, Josephine,” Myrtle said, “but Bertie Teller came over and sat next to me at the last movie night and held my hand during the scary parts.”

“If Bertie Teller tried to hold my hand, I’d deck him. Not that it would take much. The old fart totters around here cackling like a demented hen.”

“You’re just jealous because nobody wants to sit with you.” Edna always seems to have two cents ready to pitch into any conversation.

“Better off alone than stuck with a Bertie,” I said. “Are we going to talk or play?”

Edna lowered her nose with a sniffy noise. “But really, strip poker? I’m quite certain nobody wants to see you naked.”

“They won’t since I plan to win.”

Myrtle placed a finger in the corner of her mouth and cocked her head. “I think it could be amusing.”

I sometimes wonder if she practices expressions in the mirror.

“Nobody wants to see you naked either, Myrtle. Trust me on that,” Edna said with another sniff.

I was tempted to hand her a tissue, but doubted that would go over very well.

Myrtle turned her head and gave Edna what I’ve labeled her Queen Elizabeth stare. “I think they’d rather see me than you.”

“Whatever.” Edna has at least one grandchild and proves it by keeping up with the latest slang.

“How about nobody gets naked,” Lill said. “That is, not literally.”

Lill is skinny enough she could be planted in a field to scare off crows, but she has this deep, resonant voice that never fails to startle me.

“After all,” she said, “the staff won’t stand by and let the four of us strip

without stepping in with the meds. But perhaps metaphorically?”

“What exactly do you mean, metaphorically?” Edna sniffed again; I suspect golden retriever genes in there somewhere. “And yes, Ms. Vocabulary, I do know what metaphorically means. I just don’t see what it has to do with strip poker.”

But I did. It was as though Lill and I had discussed this ahead of time. And she was right. There is more than one kind of naked.

“How about the biggest loser at the end of the afternoon pays up with a personal story,” Lill said, confirming what I’d guessed she was going to say. “And it should be something that isn’t all sweetness and light.”

“I absolutely agree,” I said, jumping back in to take control of what was, after all, impulsive or not, my idea. “And I want to hear something down and dirty I won’t forget in five minutes.”

Edna huffed. “You never forget a thing, Josephine. It’s one of your least attractive qualities. And what are we going to use to keep track, anyway?”

“Doesn’t matter. Toothpicks, pills, dust bunnies.”

Edna snorted. I suspect she doesn’t like me. And just to be clear, if I could vote her out of the group, I would. Unfortunately, she was here first. And fair is fair.

“Never mind that,” Myrtle said. “If we’re going to do this, you have to tell us the rules, Josephine.”

“Okay, how about this? We’ll all start out with the same number of toothpicks or whatever. Then the one with the fewest left by the end of the afternoon has to tell a story.”

“I think Myrtle means the specifics,” Edna said with a frown. “You know. What beats what. Aren’t there flushes and pairs and full houses and the like?”

Truly, Edna is such a pain sometimes.

“Well, a flush and a full house beat a straight,” I said.

Lill was obviously trying not to chortle. Unsuccessfully, I might add.

“I don’t see what’s so funny,” Edna said, giving Lill a sour look.

Edna has no sense of humor, which, while we’re on the subject, is her least attractive quality.

“As you very well should know, Lillian, there are no stupid questions.”

Edna’s voice, with its upper pompous notes and its underlay of whine, always grates on me. If she did indeed once teach American youth the

fundamentals of English usage beyond four-letter words, she would know that most questions are either stupid or show a lack of attention by the questioner.

It took a further fifteen minutes of wrangling, but we finally managed to get through the list of what beat what with Myrtle demanding excruciating detail and writing it all down. Then Edna suggested we liberate a box of paper clips from the associate activities director's desk to keep track. By that time, I was profoundly regretting my suggestion.

My mood was not improved when the best I could muster on that first hand was a pair of treys. I folded early, conserving my resources. Myrtle won that hand with the full house she'd telegraphed by running her finger over the list of what beat what and settling it near the top.

In succeeding hands, the gods of poker continued to favor Myrtle. But although I couldn't beat her with cards, I was able to stem my losses by watching where on her list her finger ended up.

"About time for a story, isn't it?" Myrtle reached out plump hands to pull the latest pot to her side of the table, leaving the rest of us with dribs and drabs.

I did a quick count. "Edna has the fewest clips left, so she's the one who has to tell a story."

Edna sniffed. "If a person didn't know better, Josephine, they might suspect you kept folding just so you wouldn't have to tell a story."

I have to admit, Edna in her own vague and annoying way sometimes has a point.

"So. Okay. A story." After sniping at me, Edna appeared eager, which in my view, did not bode well. "Well, then. When I was nine and my sister—Helen was her name—was ten, she's dead now, you know. Of the cancer, about fifteen years ago." She pulled out a tissue and dabbed at her nose. Finally.

I sighed, wondering if she would ever get to the point.

"Anyway, as I was saying, Helen and I were given a cocker spaniel puppy that Christmas. We were supposed to share her. I named her Jonquil, and I loved her with all my heart. She was my best friend. When we got home from school, she always came to me first. And she slept on my bed and followed me everywhere."

Satisfaction made Edna's voice even more annoying than usual. Although I wouldn't call the look on her face a satisfied one. It changed as she spoke to something much more complex.

"Then one day, Helen took Jonquil for a walk into the woods next to our

house. When I went looking for them, I found them in the small clearing where we often played. Helen was tying a rope around Jonquil's neck, and when I asked her what she was doing, she lifted the rope with Jonquil dangling on the end." Edna paused and blinked with a far away look in her eyes.

"There was a tussle. I ended up with Jonquil, but Helen had a bad scratch on her cheek and bruises on her arm and she'd ripped her dress. She ran away while I comforted Jonquil.

"When I got home, Mother came rushing out. She grabbed me by the arm, and before I could say a word, she started thrashing me. You see, Helen told her that I'd attacked her when she tried to pet Jonquil, and Mother believed her." Edna paused, and for an instant, seeing the expression on her face, I could tell the story still pained her.

"After that, I wasn't allowed to pet Jonquil or take her for walks. And Helen..." She shook her head and sniffed. "Helen always told Mother the instant I got near Jonquil. It went on..." Once again she paused to compose herself. "For years. But I finally got back at her." A smile crept over Edna's face, and it wasn't a nice smile.

"What did you do?" Myrtle said, sounding breathless.

"I seduced her fiancé, then I told him I was pregnant so he had to marry me."

We all sat blinking at Edna. Her story was more down and dirty than I, at least, was expecting.

"And then what?" Myrtle said. "What happened after that?"

"Nothing."

"What do you mean, nothing?" Myrtle said. "Were you pregnant or not?"

"Of course I wasn't." Edna gave a *so, there* huff.

"What happened when he found out you weren't?"

"I just told him I'd had a miscarriage. But not until after we were married. He never knew it was a trick."

Myrtle frowned. "How do you fake a miscarriage?"

"Oh my, you do have a lot of questions. But I only owed one story, isn't that right, Josephine?"

Mesmerized, I nodded, and Edna closed her mouth and made the sign for zipping her lips.

I might just have to revise my opinion of Edna. It appears she's a pistol, as we used to say. None of the young people today know what that means. To them a pistol is just something they use to shoot someone.

As we gathered up cards and chips, one of the staff stopped by our table and reminded us there would be a concert beginning in fifteen minutes. Edna's story had so preoccupied me, I hadn't even noticed the slow shuffle of other residents taking the seats nearby. But now I did.

The perverse mood that had led to my suggestion we play strip poker dissipated, leaving behind a bad taste in my mouth. Unfortunately, the next time we played cards, it was Edna's turn to choose what we'd play, and she chose the Naked Poker Game, as she called it.

"After all," she said, "I shouldn't be the only one who has to tell a story."

So that's how it started, and I have no one to blame but myself.

Chapter Two

Myrtle

It's clear as a sunny day, Josephine doesn't think I'm very bright. And compared to her, I'm not, I suppose. I can't use a computer or a cell phone, and I'm much more interested in spending time with friends and family than doing all the reading Josephine seems to do.

The woman comes up with the oddest things. Like saying that hummingbirds deliberately build their nests near hawks so the hawks can chase off blue jays, which like to eat hummingbird eggs. Hummingbird Home Security, she called it.

I doubt that; I really do. After all, what's to stop the hawk from making a quick snack out of a nearby hummingbird.

Another time she talked about feral pigs being killed with sodium something or other. It makes them go to sleep and never wake up, but animal rights activists say it's cruel. Personally, I would think not waking up would be vastly preferable to being shot.

But while Josephine might be smarter than I am, I'm the one Bertie likes. Josephine keeps making snarky comments that I find upsetting until I remind myself she only does it because she's jealous.

Bertie told me he likes me the best because I'm so restful to be around—unlike Josephine—and I agree. Sometimes Josephine is as sharp and uncomfortable as a tack poking through a seat cushion.

Bertie also said he just knows I was a wonderful mother because I'm so nice. And of course I am. Was. Am. A wonderful mother, that is. My five children and fourteen grandchildren are constantly in touch. And the ones living close by visit me all the time.

That's one thing I've noticed about Josephine. Nobody visits her. It surprised me when she said her son lives in the area, since I've sure never heard anyone say they've met him.

The only reason she's a member of our little group in the first place is because Edna and I needed to add people after our other two partners died within a week of each other. Edna suggested Lillian, and she, unfortunately, suggested Josephine, and now we're stuck. And we don't even play real cards anymore.

If I could come up with a replacement, I'd surely vote to boot Josephine out. Too bad Bertie doesn't play worth beans. If he were playing with us, I expect, now that we're playing poker, we'd be treated to more Bertie stories than any of us would care to hear. I like the man, but I like to talk too.

Actually, I'm rather enjoying the Naked Poker Game. I'm now old enough to tell my best stories without worrying what people think. But when I told the story about my missing out on being named Miss Ohio because Miss Congeniality sabotaged me, I could tell Josephine didn't believe it.

I suspect she's jealous of that as well as Bertie. For sure, she wouldn't have lasted five minutes in a beauty pageant. For Pete's sake, the woman wears jeans. What does she think she is, forty? And she doesn't wear makeup or dye her hair.

And I must say, Edna thoroughly annoyed me one day by saying Josephine's hair didn't need to be dyed, because the gray bits looked like highlights.

Bullfeathers!

Chapter Three

Edna

Josephine doesn't like me much, but darned if I let it bother me. She thinks she's so smart. So what am I, chopped liver? I taught school for twenty years, I'll have you know. Geography, grammar, and social studies. And nobody could keep control of a classroom the way I did. Nobody. So, there.

And I did it without any of those fancy degrees young people get these days. Not that I would have sneezed at the chance to go to a nice college. No, I would have jumped at it. But times were tough back then.

Ah, well. Spilled milk, water under the bridge, and all that, and doggone it, I'm too old to still be grieving.

I was a good teacher, though. And my students knew I wouldn't put up with any shenanigans, just like I didn't let Helen get away with what she did to me and Jonquil.

I've had other chances in my life to right wrongs, and I took them. Never could abide a person who hurt someone else on purpose. That's why I made sure that big kid who bullied the little kids had an accident. It was unfortunate that he ended up paralyzed, but what I did saved a lot of other children pain. That boy was not going to stop hurting the little kids until someone stopped him. That's for sure.

I'd be willing to bet Josephine hasn't righted a single wrong in her entire life.

Chapter Four

Lillian

I taught math in the Cincinnati public schools for thirty years, and when I retired, I needed a hobby. I chose Graphoanalysis because the idea of being able to evaluate someone based on their handwriting intrigued me. In the first workshop I took, when the instructor called handwriting a blueprint of the psyche providing insight into how the writer has responded to their life experiences, I was hooked.

Usually, I don't mention I'm a Graphoanalyst, though. It makes people nervous about writing me notes. They don't realize it takes a great deal of effort and very careful measurement to know anything about them. Although they're correct in thinking I could evaluate them, it's not something I do for my own amusement.

A valid analysis requires context. You see, the traits displayed in a sample can be either bad or good depending on what's going on in the writer's life. Aggression, for example, can be a negative in someone whose life has no direction, but a positive in someone trying to get ahead in their career.

Once I got my Graphoanalyst certification, a cousin on my momma's side put me in touch with the police. I helped in one serial murder case and two kidnappings. One of the kidnap victims was killed, though, and I was awful sad about that for a long time. Because of that, my Roger, he wanted me to stop, so I did give up working with the police.

But when one of my former students recommended me to a large international corporation based in Cincinnati, Roger agreed that would be okay. They needed help to choose the right people for management positions, and I did analyses for that for several years. When I informed the CEO I was ready to retire for good, he took Roger and me to dinner at one of the most expensive and exclusive restaurants in Cincinnati.

He told me at dinner I'd been a wonderful asset to the company, and that in

his opinion, the increased stock price over the years was partly my doing. He had a twinkle in his eye when he said all that. I expect because he knew, although we'd not met before, that I'd recommended him for advancement early on.

But I digress. As I was saying, give me a paragraph or two of handwriting and I can tell a lot about the person who wrote it. Can't tell whether it's a man or a woman, their age, or whether they're left- or right-handed. But I can tell if that person is creative or conventional, fearful or egotistical.

I can also tell if two people are a good match, although my own children chose not to listen to me. Both my daughters are now divorced, which was no surprise. Oh well. Guess we all have to make our own mistakes.

Lately, I've begun collecting writing by the staff here at Brookside. I've become quite adept at finding crumpled papers in wastebaskets. I'm putting all the bits I find into a file folder for a rainy day. My plan is to write an article for a Graphoanalysis journal entitled: "Personality Characteristics to Be on the Lookout for in Retirement Home Staff." With the number of us old folks just going up and up, it should be most helpful.

Although it takes effort to do an in-depth analysis, I do quickie ones all the time. All I need is a person's signature, and I can tell you if that person is open or is hiding something.

It's simple, really. The more illegible the signature, the deeper the secret. Now, Edna and Myrtle both have perfectly legible signatures. Which I admit is odd in Edna's case, given what she did to her sister. But then, she was open about what she'd done. Her husband, poor man, would likely disagree about Edna's openness and honesty, although maybe he never knew the truth. I confess, I would find it most interesting to take a look at her writing.

I'd also like to take a peek at Josephine's. She's such an enigma, or a 'nigma, as my momma would say. A signature that's mostly easy to read, with only a couple of minor flourishes, and yet she's never invited any of us to her apartment. In fact, the woman who cleans my place told me Josephine is so set on her privacy, she doesn't even let a housekeeper in the door. It's certainly mystifying.

Despite those oddities, I like Josephine. Tart as lemon juice, but not a prejudiced bone in her body, something I'm quite certain about since I've had years of practice recognizing prejudiced bones.

It's a wonder, really, I ended up in a lily-white place like Brookside. But Roger and me, we worked real hard and saved our pennies. Before he died, he said he wanted me to live in a nice place, and he thought Brookside sounded real

pleasant. Still miss that man. Oh my, I do.

It did take a while for me to feel at home here since I'm the only black person living at Brookside. I have noticed something real interesting, though. Seems the more wrinkled the skin, the less the color matters.

What's helped take my mind off things, like missing Roger, is playing cards. It makes for a more interesting day, even when Josephine is tormenting Myrtle about Bertie.

Have to confess, I don't disagree with Josephine. For me, it's much better living with memories of my Roger than it would be with the reality of a Bertie, but I suspect for Myrtle, any man is better than no man. For sure, that woman's not giving up her belle-of-the-ball status without a fight.

We've heard all the stories about how she was the pumpkin queen three years in a row in the small town where she grew up, and I don't believe I'd admit to something like that. I could see Josephine was thinking the same thing, and I nudged her with my foot. Didn't want her and Myrtle falling out. I quite enjoy our little poker games.

Myrtle also told us she made the finals in the Miss Ohio contest, which was clearly the highlight of her entire life. She's convinced that if she'd been Miss Ohio, she would have ended up as Miss America.

Personally, I think the judges might have balked at having a Miss America named Myrtle Grabinowitz.

Chapter Five

Josephine

Two weeks into our poker sessions, the other three, or at least two of the three, colluded to take me down. I'd been careful up to then, playing conservatively, bluffing only occasionally, and continuing to fold early when I had a terrible hand, especially if Edna stifled a smile at the sight of her cards or Myrtle's finger landed near the top of her list.

But as the others improved their play, strategic folding was no longer the given it once was. Myrtle sucked me in by acting unhappy with her cards and sliding her finger way down the list, even as she continued to push more clips into the center of the table. I thought she was having a senior moment.

I had a pair of jacks so I thought I was safe, but Myrtle laid out a straight. "Bet you didn't expect this," she said, collecting the pile of clips with a triumphant grin.

Edna also wore a satisfied look along with the ugliest of her pantsuits, the beige one that makes her and her pearls look jaundiced. Lill glanced at me and shrugged.

I was annoyed, but mostly with myself for letting down my guard. On the other hand, as they learned to play the game, I'd also accepted as inevitable the fact that eventually I'd have to tell a story. Although, now that the moment had arrived, I still felt unready.

Maybe I could distract them, and I had just the right bit of trivia for that.

I took a breath. "Do any of you know what a nifkin is?"

"A what?" Edna said. "Spell it."

"N-i-f-k-i-n."

"Haven't the slightest," Myrtle said, collecting the paper clips and putting them in the box for the next time.

"It sounds like the name of a dog," Edna said. "Is this a story about a dog?"

“No, you told the dog story.”

“So, what is it?”

“It’s the bit of anatomy between a man’s testicles and his rectum.”

Myrtle and Edna both clapped their hands over their mouths with looks of horror that delighted me. Lill chortled.

Myrtle’s bosom heaved. “Leave it to you, Josephine Bartlett, to say testicles and rectum.”

I shrugged. “I was trying to be genteel.”

“And how do you know this bit of esoterica,” Lill asked.

“Humph. Leave it to you to call it esoterica,” Edna said.

“I read it in a book. It’s slang.”

“Are you sure the author didn’t just make it up?”

“Nope. Googled it.”

“Why do you always have to show off, Josephine? Didn’t your husband love you?”

My chest tightened because, without realizing it, Edna had hit on a truth, something I never said out loud and only rarely acknowledged in the privacy of my thoughts.

But, after all, I hadn’t loved Thomas either. Oh, maybe in the beginning, when I was young and naive, but that ended quickly. Thomas saw to that. And although I subsequently lived with that reality for nearly half a century, it still pains me when it catches me unaware.

“While the vocabulary lesson was enlightening, it wasn’t a story, and you owe us a story.” Myrtle folded her hands and rested them on the table like a couple of lumps of dough.

Darn. Well, I could always tell them a fabrication, of course, but what the heck. Why not give them the real deal? I wasn’t going to wimp out and cede the award for candor to Edna, was I? Still, I had a moment of indecision, and I needed to take a deep breath to steady my voice.

“All right. If you insist.”

“We do,” Edna said with a sniff.

Nodding, Myrtle sat back, her bracelets jangling.

I sighed. “Oh, all right. I graduated from Wellesley College in Boston in 1961 with a degree in economics and a plan to go to graduate school so I could become a professor. But then I met Thomas Bartlett, and he convinced me to

marry him instead.”

The sudden memory of that dreadful scene with Thomas, when he informed me that no wife of his was going to graduate school or to work, made my voice hitch in a disturbing way. Perhaps the truth wasn't such a good idea after all. I glanced up to see they were all staring at me.

Clearing my throat, I tried to make the next bit sound casual. “But I, ah . . . I got pregnant right away, and that meant I wasn't able to continue my studies.”

I stopped speaking, trying to come up with a way to end the story in a coherent fashion. But I could no longer remember the fake story I'd thought about telling. It was as if my brain had moved it to an inactive file labeled NO ADMITTANCE.

As they continued to stare at me, I struggled to pull myself together. “Thomas was very strict about money; I expect because he was a banker. He did, however, insist upon a gracious home, and he gave me a generous household allowance. It became my goal to provide what he expected, but for a fraction of what he thought it cost. I pinched and scraped and stretched that money ten ways to Sunday. Thomas thought he was paying for me to go to Filene's for my clothes. Instead I went to Filene's Basement. He thought the maid worked four days. She worked one. And so on. The excess went into an account I opened at another bank. When I accumulated enough, I began to invest.”

Again, memory stilled my tongue. I struggled to swallow before I could go on. “Unfortunately, it didn't occur to me until too late that making a lot of money meant Thomas would inevitably discover what I was doing.”

Myrtle leaned toward me, her mouth hanging open. “What did he do?”

I pushed that memory away as well. Thomas, his face purple, accusing me of *stealing* from him. Claiming that all the stocks I'd bought belonged to him. Insisting I sign over everything immediately. Giving me no choice.

It was those stocks that formed the basis for Thomas's personal wealth. And he'd made sure I had no access even after he died. Instead, Jeff has taken over where his father left off. Doling out pittances.

“He took all the stocks away from me,” I said in response to Myrtle's question.

What I didn't say was he took everything except what I'd had left in that hidden savings account. I'd then done what I should have done from the beginning—I formed a corporation. I called it Aardvark Holdings because I thought that was a sufficiently obscure name. Then I invested the small amount I'd managed to keep hidden, using the Aardvark name. Gradually, it built up

over the years.

“When we moved to Cincinnati in 1980, Thomas arranged for an accountant to pay the household bills. And that was the end of that. My short, shining career as an investor.” The end as well of any affection I’d had for the man who was my husband.

“Why on earth didn’t you divorce him?” Edna said.

“That’s a story for another day.”

I was tempted to use the sign for zipping my lips, like Edna had when she’d told her first story, but I resisted. It looks so juvenile. Instead, I pushed my chair back and stood, picked up the box of clips, and placed it in my tote.

I am, you see, quite appropriately, the keeper of the treasury for our little group.

~ ~ ~

The day after I told my poker story, there was a knock on my door. I ignored it. From the beginning, I’ve made it clear to everyone I’m not to be disturbed. Ever. I believe the woman assigned to clean once a week was very pleased.

Turning my attention back to my computer screen, I continued to check the latest stock reports. With Thomas gone, I no longer have to worry about confiscation.

Another rap sounded, followed by, “Mrs. Bartlett, if you don’t open the door, I’ll have to use my key.”

“You will not.”

“I need to make sure you’re okay.”

“You have my assurance I’m fine. Go away, whoever you are.”

“Please, Mrs. Bartlett. I need to see you.” The card clicked into the slot, the door opened, and a young woman stood there. An Indian, although she doesn’t have any lilt to her speech, so perhaps she was born here. Glossy hair pulled back in a French braid. Arresting gray-green eyes.

“You have no right—”

“I do. When family expresses a concern, we’re obliged to follow up.”

“And what concern is that?”

“Your son says you aren’t answering your phone, nor are you returning his calls.”

Of course I wasn't answering my phone; at least, not when Jeff called. I consider caller ID one of the more civilized achievements of modern technology.

The young woman continued to stand in the doorway, gazing around my living room. "I like this. It's so uncluttered and lovely. Scandinavian, isn't it? And is that a Laristan rug?"

Before I could answer, she shifted her gaze to the wall and her eyes widened. "Is that . . . Oh, wow! It is, isn't it? An Edward Hopper." Her tone was both reverent and shocked, but her words made my stomach cramp with fear.

"Of course not." This was precisely the reason I didn't want people coming in here, although I doubted anyone else would recognize the worth of either my rug or my painting.

She stepped closer to the painting. I forced myself to stand, although that made me almost double over with another cramp.

"It's merely an excellent copy," I said, improvising. "Who are you, anyway?" I knew who she was, but it's always better, in my mind, to be underestimated rather than overestimated.

"I'm Devi Subramanian, the associate activities director." She spoke without taking her eyes off the painting, and that did my stomach no good whatsoever.

I closed my laptop and stepped between her and the painting, forcing her to look at me. But after a brief glance, her gaze returned to the painting.

Although it terrified me, it was also both impressive and surprising that she would so immediately recognize Edward Hopper's work. While distinctive, it's definitely not as well-known as Picasso's or even Wyeth's.

"Does management know you have such a valuable painting hanging on your wall?"

Enough. I maneuvered her toward the door. "Of course not, because it's not. It's an excellent copy. Painted for me by an artist I met years ago who needed money." I stopped improvising abruptly, my mouth suddenly too dry to swallow.

Although I wanted to order her not to mention the painting, I knew that would only add to her certainty it was the original she rightly suspected it to be.

It was particularly upsetting to have this happen now, after all my efforts to keep the painting a secret—always paying the storage unit fees from my Aardvark account, maneuvering to recover the painting after the move to Brookside, and the continuing struggle to keep visitors to a minimum.

And if my son did force a visit on me, my plan was to stash the painting under my bed, although it would be tricky for me to handle on my own. Of

course, that might not be necessary since I doubted my son or his wife would recognize the painting's value.

But I didn't want to take any chances. If they were to recognize the painting, I'm quite certain Jeff would give me no peace until it was back under lock and key in a vault somewhere. And it's already been shut away far too long.

Damn Thomas.

And damn this Devi person.

I glared at her, and after a moment, she inclined her head. "I don't know what you're up to, Mrs. Bartlett, but if you ever need any help, let me know."

Although I wanted to tell her I wasn't "up to" anything, I decided I'd already used up my quota of misrepresentations for the day. But her words and the tone of her voice did have one effect.

They eased my fear. If only slightly.

Chapter Six

Devi

I left Josephine Bartlett's apartment, thinking about the painting and my responsibility to Brookside's management in its regard. I doubted they knew it was there, and they needed to know. For starters, there were insurance and security considerations.

But, although I hadn't given Mrs. Bartlett my word not to tell, I'd implied it. Besides, both she and the painting would be safe as long as only the two of us knew it was there, hiding in plain sight. And I could help her keep it safe by volunteering, as I had this morning, to be the one to speak to her whenever that became necessary.

I figured she had to love the painting a great deal to be willing to risk having it in her apartment, and that's a kind of love I understand. There was a painting of a medieval lady at the Winterford Art Institute that I'd visited every day, pretending it belonged to me, and that daily visit to "my" lady was one of the things I missed most when I had to leave Chicago.

So, was I going to report the painting? My head began shaking as if I were carrying on a conversation with someone. It made me realize I was going to keep Mrs. Bartlett's secret.

With that decision made, I glanced at my watch to see I had only fifteen minutes before I needed to be at the front door to usher a group aboard the Brookside shuttle bus for a trip to the grocery store. I was thinking about that, and hurrying, when Eddie Colter stepped out of an adjoining hall into my path.

Eddie is the community's resident hunk. Although we're in Ohio, Eddie manages to look like he's just waded ashore, leaned his surfboard against a beach shack, and run his fingers through his sun-bleached hair.

Lately, we've had several encounters, and I've begun to wonder if he's running into me on purpose. Once he stopped me with a touch on the arm to talk, and he didn't remove his hand until I backed away. Another time, he leaned

toward me and blew in my ear.

“Hey, hey, pretty girl.” His hand snaked out to circle my wrist, and I quickly backed out of touching distance. “Where you going in such a hurry?”

“Outing in ten minutes.” I plastered my professional smile in place and tried to step around him, but he moved to block me.

I stepped to the other side. Again, he blocked me.

“Sorry, Eddie. I don’t have time to dance right now.”

“I’m not interested in dancing, pretty girl.” With that he grabbed me by the shoulders, pulled me against his chest, and kissed me.

When he started to stick his tongue in my mouth, I bared my teeth and growled. Squirming, I tried to free myself, but his grip was too strong. Then I heard the sound of a nearby door opening.

Eddie must have heard it too. He released me, and with a grin, finally let me pass.

Shaking, I hurried away, scrubbing at my mouth and trying not to gag. He’d tasted of old coffee and stale cigarettes.

I knew reporting him to management was a nonstarter. He’d likely claim I’d thrown myself at him, not the other way around. And looking at him, who would believe I hadn’t?

Chapter Seven

Josephine

Unsettled by Devi Subramanian's unauthorized visit to my apartment and still worried that she would tell someone about the painting, I went to join Lill, Myrtle, and Edna for our regularly scheduled poker game. Now that my cover had been blown, I didn't like leaving the painting unattended, but my only other option was to invite everyone to my place—a truly dreadful idea.

When I reached the lobby, I checked the schedule of activities and saw that Devi was on an outing. That meant the painting was safe, at least for the time being. Somewhat reassured, I joined the other three.

“Before we get started,” Myrtle said, “I want to ask your opinion about something.”

She jiggled like she needed to pee until Edna said, “Well, what is it?”

Today, Myrtle was wearing a magenta top that made her look like a bougainvillea bush in riotous bloom. It was, however, a vast improvement over Edna's ensemble, a tired brown sweater and tan slacks.

“It's that Eddie Colter. You know, he's been so helpful about doing my shopping.”

“Then what's the problem?” I said, trying to move things along.

“Yes. What is it you want our opinion about?” Lill asked.

Myrtle frowned. “It's just that the last few times he's shopped for me, he gave me the wrong change. At first it was only off by a dollar or two, but this last time it was more, and I wondered what you think about that.”

“Is it off by too much or too little?” I've discovered with Myrtle it's always a good idea to clarify.

“Too little, and this week it was a whole five dollars short.”

“Did you say anything?”

“Yes, I did. Later, when he came by to help with my medications.”

“He helps with your medications? Isn’t that Louisa’s job?” Not that I needed or wanted that kind of help. But I liked to know who was who and what their roles were.

“I suppose. It’s just, he is very good-looking.” She tittered, and I tried not to snort.

The man has a fake tan and dark roots. I suppose the muscles are real enough, although, personally, I don’t find that kind of distorted body type the least bit appealing.

“I didn’t mention it earlier because the amounts were so small.”

“How did he respond?”

“He looked annoyed, then he asked how much he owed me. I told him, and he scratched his head and said if I was such a good accountant, he’d maybe have me keep track of everything for him. Then he handed me a five-dollar bill. I felt funny taking it since someone else had to have gotten too much change, and that would mean Eddie was the one out of pocket.”

“Did you take it?” I was intrigued, despite my intention not to be.

Myrtle shook her head. “I told him I couldn’t do that to him, after he’d been so nice. He laughed and put the money back in his pocket.” She sat back with an expectant look.

“Is that all?” I said.

“It’s just that when I asked him to shop for me this week, he said he was booked up. It occurred to me that maybe he’s been shorting me, and when I noticed, he dropped me.”

“Does he charge you anything to shop for you?” Edna asked.

“It’s part of his duties. So he shouldn’t get extra, but most of us give him small tips.”

“And you think Eddie is using the shopping as an opportunity to supplement his income over and above the tips?” It seemed pretty small potatoes to me, frankly.

“It might be worth checking,” Lill said. “I doubt most people will keep track the way Myrtle does.”

“I suppose it could be an interesting exercise.” After all, we’d about plumbed the depths of naked poker.

“What do you think we should do?” Myrtle looked at me, and I wondered when she’d appointed me the queen.

“I suppose we could each put together a shopping list for Eddie and then

check our change.”

“But he may know we’re Myrtle’s friends and tell us he’s booked up, like he did Myrtle,” Edna said. It was an excellent point, actually.

“Do you know who he’s shopping for besides you, Myrtle?”

“Well, Bertie, of course.”

“Of course.” The updates on Myrtle’s romance were almost as boring as her stories about her beauty contest experiences.

“You know, he might be on his guard with Bertie, now that you’ve raised the issue,” Lill said. “Is there anyone else?”

“I’m sure there must be, but I don’t know who they are.”

“What day does he do the shopping?” I asked.

“Thursdays. And he delivers everything by noon.”

“Okay. Here’s what we do. On Thursday, we deploy our forces to see who gets a delivery, and then we check if they got the right change.”

“Deploy our forces?” Edna said. “Really, Josephine. You sound like an army general.”

“It’s a good idea,” Myrtle said. “He comes in the back entrance, don’t you expect? And Josephine’s apartment overlooks the parking lot. We could meet there Thursday morning and keep watch.”

That was certainly slick of Myrtle, but I had no intention of being so blatantly forced into hostessing. “I have a better idea. I’ll keep watch, and the three of you pick strategic locations to wait. Then I’ll let you know when he arrives.”

“How will you let us know?” Myrtle asked.

“You all have cell phones, don’t you?”

“I don’t,” Myrtle said.

I sighed. “Can you borrow Bertie’s?”

“I suppose.”

“Are we settled on a plan then?” I said.

The others nodded, and I proceeded to deal the first hand.

Chapter Eight

Lillian

After Myrtle's report of Eddie's doings, I pulled out my folder of staff handwriting samples to discover I had nothing written by him. So, how could I get him to write something for me?

I fixed myself a cup of tea, and while I sipped it, I said a prayer. By the time I finished both tea and prayer, I had an idea. First, I searched out a card from my supply of all-purpose cards, the ones that come in the mail from one of those charities. I had some with pictures of wolves, which seemed appropriate. I picked the thinking-of-you card and put it in my purse along with a pen. Then I wrapped my right hand with gauze.

When I was ready, I went searching for Eddie. He usually hangs around the lobby as we come in for dinner, and although it was a little early for dinner, that was, after all, better for my purposes. I smiled with satisfaction to find him, as expected, sitting in the corner of the lobby, using his phone. I walked over to him and waited until he looked up.

"Mr. Colter, I'm so glad you're here."

"I'm glad you're glad, Lillian," he said with that smile that's as fake as his hair color. Or maybe that's a false assumption. Something I intend to find out.

"I want to send this card to my friend, but you see, I've injured my hand and I can't hold a pen. I thought, that is, if you wouldn't mind, you could write the message for me?" I held out the card and the pen, and he took them.

"What do you want me to write?"

"Let's see. How about . . ." I dictated the rambling message I'd decided on. After a couple of short paragraphs, I judged I'd pushed his patience to the limit. "Just sign it Lill."

He did so and handed me the card. I thanked him, stuffed it into my purse, and headed in to dinner, patting myself on the back for my resourcefulness.

I finished eating earlier than the people who had joined me, and I sat for a

time tapping my foot in impatience to be off. My momma was a real stickler about us staying at the table until everyone, meaning my poppa, had finished eating, and it was a rule I imposed on my own children. However, after several minutes of watching the not completely silent chewing of my companions, I decided Momma would forgive me if, just this once, I broke the rule.

Back in my apartment, I set the portable desk I use for my analyses on my dining table, and I pulled out the card. I already had my reading glasses, a magnifying glass, a lamp, a protractor, and a ruler ready to go.

Sometime later, I sat back, rubbed my neck, and looked through my notes. It was, on balance, a most fascinating sample.

My first observation—the extreme back slant of the writing—required only a glance. That was suggestive of a self-centered, selfish personality and was the first trait I listed on my “green sheet.” It was followed by “irritability” after I noted a thick scatter of temper ticks—short, straight strokes at the beginning of words. Additional strokes within his oval letters like *a* and *o* led me to add “deceitfulness.”

None of that was good, although it was also no surprise. But what sent a cold finger running up the knobs of my spine was the presence of straight, rigid strokes in the loops of each *p*, *g*, and *y*. Paired with the temper ticks, it was a strong indicator he had aggressive, possibly violent, tendencies.

Chapter Nine

Devi

Thursday morning, I once again snagged the assignment to speak to Mrs. Bartlett. It was easy to do since no one else wanted it.

“That woman is just plain nasty,” was my boss’s opinion. Although, as much time as Candace spends interacting with the residents versus in her office on her computer, I was uncertain how she would know that.

While I agree Mrs. Bartlett isn’t a warm, cuddly person, not like Myrtle Grabinowitz, for example, she’s potentially much more interesting. Besides, I wanted another look at the painting.

After my third knock, an irritated voice told me to go away. I repeated what I’d said the last time, about needing to see for myself that she was okay, and the door opened a crack.

“What do you want?”

“Why, to speak with you.”

She glared at me.

“About the painting.”

I used my sweetest tone, but I could tell from her expression she recognized a threat when she heard one, and she didn’t like it one bit. Nor did I like doing it, but it served its purpose. The door opened further, and she stepped away so I could enter.

“Why don’t I make us a fresh cup of tea?” I said, seeing she had a half-full cup sitting next to the chair nearest the window.

“Why don’t you tell me why you’re here? And then get out of my apartment.”

“Could we at least sit down?”

Huffing, she perched on the edge of a chair, and I seated myself on the couch.

“My assignment this morning is to make sure you know your son is coming for a visit.”

She closed her eyes, then opened them and blinked rapidly. “When?”

“Saturday morning. The manager assured him you’re settling in nicely, but he insisted on seeing for himself. And since you’re not answering your phone . . .”

“My son and I don’t get along.”

After our last conversation, that was no surprise.

“I consider it one of the advantages of living here,” she said. “That I don’t have to see him very often.”

I couldn’t imagine my mother not wanting to see me. Didn’t even want to try. “We can’t stop him from visiting, but if you spoke to him occasionally, that might satisfy him.”

“You said something about the painting?” She was obviously finished with the topic of her son.

I wondered what caused such a rift. I love my own family dearly. “If you let me take a good look, I promise I won’t tell anyone about it.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

I had to admire her composure, although not her honesty. “Those are my terms.”

She sat staring at me for a time. Then she shrugged. “Okay.”

While I stood and moved closer to the painting, she looked at her watch and then out the window before going to the kitchen and making tea.

Although final proof might require forensic testing, I was certain the painting was the real deal. Eventually, I returned to the sofa and picked up the tea she’d set there for me. I discovered it was an exceptionally fine Lapsang souchong.

I took a second sip and smiled. “You’re full of surprises, Mrs. Bartlett. I didn’t know you could get such good tea in Cincinnati.”

“I have it flown in from Taiwan. From my tea broker.”

Brookside is a nice place and not inexpensive by any means, but I doubted it catered to very many people who had their own tea brokers. Of course, the painting was already a major clue that Mrs. Bartlett was not a typical resident.

“Excuse me a moment.” She stood and looked out the window, then came and sat down and asked me where I’d learned about tea.

“My Indian grandmother. She used to say there’s no problem so heavy that a

good cup of tea won't lighten it."

Mrs. Bartlett cocked her head and examined me. "You have a non-Indian grandmother?"

"My dad married an Indiana girl instead of the Indian girl his parents picked out."

"And what did they think of that?"

"They weren't very happy. At least at first. My mother won them over by having me." I grinned at her and was surprised when she smiled back.

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind stopping by tomorrow afternoon?" she said with another glance out the window.

I set my empty cup down with a happy sigh. "Because?"

"I don't want my son and his wife to see the painting, but I'll need help taking it down."

It was the real deal then. There'd be no need to hide a copy. "I could do it right now."

"No. That's all right. Tomorrow will be better."

"Of course. I'm happy to help."

"Good." Mrs. Bartlett stood and reached for my cup in a clear sign of dismissal, not one of additional hospitality.

Without further ado, I left.

Chapter Ten

Josephine

Our Eddie surveillance went so well that at dinner that evening, my co-conspirators, minus one, were all bubbling like crock pots over what they'd discovered.

"Where's Edna," I asked.

"She's no longer on the meal plan," Myrtle said. "Told me she was tired of eating mystery meat. As to what we discovered, well, besides Bertie, who was shorted seven dollars on his change, we identified three additional customers."

"All three remembered how much money they gave Eddie, and they still had their receipts, but two of them couldn't verify how much change they'd received," Lill said. "However the one who could was eight dollars short, and she wouldn't have noticed anything was amiss without our help. They all just glance at the receipts. It never occurred to them to check the amount of change."

"What do we do now?" Myrtle said.

"With evidence from you, Bertie, and only one other person, I don't know if that will be enough to convince anyone in authority that Eddie's stealing." I didn't quite trust the manager, a Mr. Souter. He tends to speak to us as if we are all hard-of-hearing infants who are just learning to talk. "They could all be careless mistakes." It occurred to me that we might discuss the problem with Devi. If she could threaten me, she could do the same with Eddie.

"Do you know who Devi Subramanian is?" I asked them.

"Of course," Lill said. "She's the young woman who organizes our outings."

"What do you think of her?"

"She's too bright to be stuck in a place like this," Lill said.

I had to agree. Anyone who could recognize a Lariston rug and an Edward Hopper painting with a glance shouldn't be stuck shepherding wobbly senior citizens on mall trips. "She visited me in the middle of our operation."

“Did you let her in?” Myrtle said.

“I’m afraid I had no choice.”

“I doubt you were happy about that.” Lill’s comment tells me she’s beginning to know me a little too well.

“I just know I’d be more comfortable talking to her than to the manager.”

“I agree,” Lill said. “Mr. Souter doesn’t seem to be the responsive type.”

For me, the suggestion to enlist Devi’s help was simply an application of that old saying, *Keep your friends close and your enemies closer*.

The others considered it a stroke of genius.

~ ~ ~

When Devi arrived to help me hide the Hopper painting, I first fixed us tea. An Osmanthus Chin Hsuan tea this time. Once again, she took a sip and closed her eyes, obviously savoring the brew. My outlays for tea are one of the things Jeff doesn’t know about, although I force him to pay all my obvious expenses—my Brookside fees, food, clothing, and miscellaneous medical costs.

I also made liberal use of those assets in furnishing this apartment, clearly a wise move, now that Jeff is coming to visit. I want to keep him in the dark about my independent means, just like Thomas kept me in the dark about the movement of our assets to Jeff’s control.

It still makes me angry when I think how Jeff and Lynn hustled me out of my house a few days after the funeral, claiming that they would worry about me, that there was no way I could handle such a large place on my own, that I needed to be somewhere safe. I thought about calling the police, but once Jeff informed me Thomas had transferred the title of the house and its contents to him, I knew there was no point.

Jeff and Lynn had then helped themselves to whatever they wanted and sold the house out from under me, as if I’d died too. Not that it hadn’t been my intention to get rid of the house and most of its contents. I just wanted to do it in my own time, in my own way.

Devi set her cup down with a click. “Another delightful brew. Your tea broker does excellent work.” She cocked her head and examined me. “Will you tell me the story of the painting?”

I shrugged. “Perhaps. Someday.” In reality, I couldn’t imagine a circumstance that would tempt me to share that information. With anyone.

“Good,” Devi said, obviously unable to read my mind. “Where are we putting it? And you do realize your wall is going to look bare.”

“Under my bed. We’ll move the painting from my bedroom out here.”

Devi nodded, and we went to work. She finished hanging the replacement painting, a watercolor by Domenic Demeri, an artist who never achieved the fame I thought him worthy of.

“I like this,” Devi said, stepping back. “It might not have the emotional heft of the Hopper, but it’s very fine.”

I gestured for her to take a seat. “There’s something else I need to talk to you about.”

She grinned at me. “For another cup of that tea, I’ll listen to whatever you want to say.”

While she sat waiting for me, I brewed another pot. After our first sips, I set my cup down. “I’ve been delegated to speak to you about Eddie Colter.”

She set her cup down with a rattle and cleared her throat. “Wh-who delegated you?”

“Myrtle, Edna, and Lillian.”

“Oh? What’s it about then?”

“Myrtle thinks he’s stealing from the people he shops for. In at least three instances we’re aware of, he’s short-changed people.”

“And you think he’s done it deliberately?”

“It’s not easy to prove intent. He may just be very bad with math. The amounts, you see, are small, but over time they could add up to a substantial amount.”

“You’ll likely need more evidence to prove that. But why talk to me about it? Why not Mr. Souter?”

“I don’t like Mr. Souter.”

“You do realize I have no power here.”

“Except when it comes to threatening me that you’ll report my painting.”

“I apologize for that.” She lowered her head and stared at her cup. Then she looked up. “Although it would be easier to go back on my word about that than it would be to report Eddie.”

“You don’t have a thing for him, do you?”

She shook her head and shuddered. “Absolutely not. I can’t stand the man.”

“Why is that?” I thought her reaction extreme. I don’t care for Eddie, but he

doesn't make me shudder in obvious revulsion. "Did he do something to you?" It was a shot in the dark, but it obviously hit its mark.

"He keeps touching me, and the other day, he grabbed me and tried to kiss me."

"What happened next?" I wasn't trying to pry. But this seemed like useful information to add to our ongoing investigation.

"He let me go when a nearby door opened. But I had a feeling. . ."

I waited.

She closed her eyes and shuddered again. "I don't think he's used to taking no for an answer."

"So along with him being a thief, we're talking a potential rapist?"

"I don't know about that. I just think it's not a good idea to be alone with him."

It didn't surprise me that Eddie would be attracted to her. While he has a fake tan, she's naturally a lovely golden color. Perhaps he's smitten and just expressing it inappropriately.

"Avoiding him sounds like a good plan," I told her.

"Yes." She looked at her watch. "Sorry, I need to get going. Thanks for the tea." And with that, she jumped to her feet and headed for the door.

~ ~ ~

When Jeff and Lynn arrived promptly at ten Saturday morning, the receptionist called to let me know. Hoping to head them off, I grabbed my tote and a jacket and went to meet them.

"Mother." Jeff hugged me. He hadn't bothered to shave, so I leaned away when he tried to kiss my cheek.

Lynn also stepped up and hugged me, although I know she dislikes me. But at least she wasn't prickly like Jeff.

"You didn't have to come meet us," Jeff said. "We want to see your place. Then we thought we'd take you to lunch."

Rather than argue, I turned and led the way back to my apartment. I stepped inside, then watched the two of them enter and look around.

"Well," Jeff said. "You've, ah, fixed this up . . . nicely."

I didn't understand why he was surprised. After all, he'd paid the bills.

Lynn frowned. “But what happened to all your things?”

My “things,” as she called them, were leftovers from their house after they’d appropriated what they wanted from mine. “Goodwill was thrilled to take them off my hands.”

“This is—”

“That’s okay. I know it’s not your taste, Lynn.”

“I thought you were into antiques.”

“No, Thomas was. Not me.”

“That’s one of the things I need to talk to you about, Mother,” Jeff said, standing awkwardly in the doorway.

“What? My new furniture?”

“Sort of.”

Ah, he wanted to talk about my spending. How pleasant.

“Maybe we should sit down?” Lynn said, glancing from Jeff to me.

“Yes, perhaps we better,” Jeff said.

I moved quickly to take a seat in the chair by myself, forcing them to sit together on the sofa opposite me.

Jeff, wringing his hands, was still examining my things. He frowned at my rug, which well he might. It had been my single largest expenditure. Then he spotted the Demeri painting, and his frown deepened.

“Is that new?”

“No, I’ve had it for years. It was upstairs in the guest bedroom.” Clearly, it was superior planning on my part to hide the Hopper.

He continued to frown. “I don’t remember it.”

“You must have overlooked it. You were so busy deciding what else you’d help yourselves to.”

“Now, Mother, I don’t want to fight with you. You’d just lost Dad, and since you were moving in with us, Lynn and I took on the burden of deciding. We wanted to make your transition as easy as possible for you.”

I doubted they’d given a single thought to making my transition easy. And saying they expected me to be living with them for more than five minutes was, at the least, a gross exaggeration.

“You could have asked me what I wanted to take.”

Jeff’s lips went through a number of contortions that made him look distinctly odd. “Yes, I suppose you’re right. We should have.”

“What is it you want to talk to me about?”

“Since you moved here, your expenses have been far greater than expected. I need to make sure your resources last the rest of your life. But in order for that to happen, two strategies are essential. One is that you not make any more large purchases.”

“And the second?”

“That you agree to a lower monthly allowance.”

“Lower by how much?” I said, ignoring the rest of his request.

“I believe you should be able to manage your incidentals on Dad’s Social Security check, and that will leave sufficient resources for your Brookside fees.”

“How parsimonious of you.”

“Now, Mother, I’m doing it for your own good.”

“Of course you are. I hope you don’t expect me to pay for lunch.”

He looked away, as well he might. No doubt he was dipping into the “resources” whenever he could.

“How much is in the accounts?” I’d asked him before, and he’d always evaded the question.

“There’s enough to last as long as you live, but only if we start conserving now.”

“There’s no way I can possibly spend five million dollars, even if I live to be a hundred.” But I could certainly figure out some good uses for it.

His mouth firmed, making him look exactly like his father. “Five million? Really, Mother. Where did you get an idea like that?”

“Didn’t your father ever share with you where most of that money came from?”

“Of course. He said he made some excellent investment choices. But the market’s been, well, not good these last few years.”

“Are you saying there’s less than five million?”

He squirmed and didn’t answer. The fact was if Thomas hadn’t changed anything, several of the stocks I bought back in the sixties had appreciated so much, there should be considerably more than five million. But the way Jeff was acting . . .

I didn’t need another dime from those accounts, but fair is fair. It’s my money. And my intention has been to recoup as much as I could through periodic requests for large amounts. I planned to then transfer those assets to

Aardvark's coffers, and those resources would eventually pass to groups I judged much more deserving than my son.

"I'm sorry, Jeff. Unless you're willing to give me a full accounting that proves such austerity measures are necessary, I'm not going to agree to a lesser amount."

"I don't need your agreement since everything's in my name."

"That's true. And I know what you're doing here is legal. But that doesn't make it right."

"I'm doing what Dad asked me to do. Taking care of you."

"English is such a funny language, is it not?"

"What? I don't know what you're talking about."

"Taking care of me. There's more than one way to interpret that."

As he sat there, his face twitching in a most unbecoming manner, I sighed inwardly. He'd been such a darling little boy. So sweet and loving; the light of my life. Something else I held against Thomas.

Why hadn't I asked for a divorce?

In the beginning, I stayed because I'd feared Thomas would take Jeff away from me. But it turned out he took Jeff away anyway, by turning him against me. By the time I realized that was happening, divorcing Thomas would have meant revealing the existence of Aardvark Holdings, and I'd had no intention of letting him take anything more from me. Instead, I shaped a life separate from his, although we still shared a house.

I stiffened my spine and faced Jeff and Lynn. "You do what you have to do, Jeff. And now I'd like you to leave."

"What about lunch?"

"I think you and Lynn will have a much more enjoyable lunch if I'm not there." I stood.

Jeff did as well. "I was hoping we could make a fresh start today."

"A fresh start?"

"Yes. You and me, and Lynn, of course. I know you're angry at Dad for setting things up the way he did. But all I'm trying to do is the best I can."

"Do you really believe that? That asking me to justify every penny I spend and to give up my allowance is the best you can do for me?"

He closed his eyes, and when he opened them, the expression on his face was so bleak that for a moment, I considered whether he might be telling the

truth. Suppose, for example, Thomas had invested heavily in technology stocks right before the bubble burst, and left Jeff holding the bag, so to speak.

I've invested very little in technology myself, aside from early purchases of Intel and Microsoft that I've since sold. One of my best performers is actually a stodgy old Kansas City railroad stock that has appreciated several thousand-fold over the years.

Before I realized what I was doing, I reached out and touched Jeff's arm. He jumped.

"Did your dad lose the money, Jeff?"

"Of course not," he snapped.

With that, my tenuous feeling of sympathy, along with the chance we would see eye to eye anytime soon, snapped as well.

I walked over to the door. "Thank you for coming. And just so you know, there's no need for you to visit me." I opened the door.

"Damn it, Mom. You need to answer your phone then."

"Yes. Of course. I'll be sure to do that."

There were no hugs this time. When I closed the door on them, it took all my strength to make it back to a chair before my legs gave out. I allowed myself that bit of weakness, but I was determined not to cry.

My grief was not about the money, but about the loss of trust. But, after all, that had been lost long ago. And it was unlikely we'd ever regain it.

~ ~ ~

Sunday afternoon, Devi showed up. Since she usually has weekends off, I was surprised to see her.

"I thought I could help you re-hang the Hopper," she said.

"Yes, I'd like that."

"How was the visit with your son?"

"Not good."

I motioned for her to sit at the table. I heated water, chose a robust black tea, and carried the teapot to the table.

Devi jumped up and got two cups out of the cupboard, a clear sign she was beginning to feel at ease with me. I was unsure if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

“He scolded me for spending so much on furnishing this place, and he said he planned to cut my allowance.”

“You’re not going to have to fire your tea broker, are you?” Devi had a twinkle in her eye.

“Definitely not. Jeff did notice the painting, by the way, so it’s a good thing we hid the Hopper.”

“You can’t hide it forever, you know.”

“What? I thought you said you wouldn’t tell.”

“I won’t. But another staff member might recognize it. And we do have art lovers among the residents.”

“That’s why I don’t have guests.”

“But you can’t keep the entire staff out forever. Although, you do have everyone pretty well cowed. I’m the only one who will volunteer to come speak to you.” Her eyes continued to twinkle throughout this speech.

“What do you suggest?”

“Maybe hang it in your bedroom, out of sight.”

“What’s the point of having it, if it has to be out of sight?”

She sighed. “I guess you’re right. You want it here?”

“Yes, please.” I knew I was being stubborn, but I’ve gotten used to having the Hopper in the living room. It just fits. And the Demeri is perfect for the bedroom.

While we re-hung the paintings, an idea of a different kind, one that had been casually percolating, popped to the top of my thoughts.

“You know, there’s something else you can do for me, if you will. I need to buy a car. Maybe you can help me pick it out? That is, if you aren’t too busy?”

“Do you know what kind of car?”

“Not exactly. We could go to the auto mall and just look around.”

“Now, you mean?”

When I nodded, she smiled and agreed to the outing.

Chapter Eleven

Josephine

The afternoon of car shopping with Devi was the most fun I'd had in a while, and the most fun I'd ever had picking a new car. Thomas always decided what I would drive, and his picks were all boring sedans. Devi and I didn't even look at sedans, instead we took turns test-driving a mix of sporty offerings from Mazda, Subaru, and Lexus.

"Which would you buy, if money were no object," I asked her.

She pursed her lips. "Hmm. I do love how the Lexus looks and handles, but it isn't very practical, is it, with that tiny backseat? And winter's coming. I'd probably buy the Subaru."

"What color?"

"I like the neon green, don't you? But I'd probably buy the blue."

"Let's not get too practical. It's only a car, after all. Neon green, it is."

We returned to the Subaru dealer, and I filled out the paperwork. The car had to be located and delivered, and that could take anywhere from a week to a month. The computers were down, so the salesman couldn't check availability. But a week or a month made little difference to me since I still had a long list of things to do before I could think about moving to a place of my own choosing.

The car purchase completed, I proposed an early dinner. I let Devi choose, and her choice was a Mediterranean restaurant. As we ate, we had no difficulty coming up with things to talk about, and by the time we shared a baklava for dessert, she was calling me Josephine, and the forty years between us felt like no time at all.

~ ~ ~

"So," Myrtle said when I finished reporting that Devi couldn't help us with our Eddie problem. "If Devi won't speak to him, do you think we should talk to

Eddie ourselves?”

Although we had the cards and paper clips out, we’d left them sitting while we discussed our investigation of what I was calling the Eddie Diddle.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Didn’t Devi have *any* suggestions?” Myrtle said.

“To get more solid evidence.”

“Which we’ll try to get Thursday,” Lill said.

None of us was happy with that, but we had no other options.

~ ~ ~

On Thursday, we added four more people to the list of Eddie’s customers. This group presented a new wrinkle. In addition to one being shorted on her change, two of them had been charged for gift cards they’d neither ordered nor received—one for ten dollars, the second for fifteen.

And obviously, Eddie had failed to notice the romance of the century going on between Myrtle and Bertie, because Bertie’s receipt included a twenty-five-dollar gift card.

“But if we report Eddie, he’ll probably be fired,” Myrtle said when we met to discuss our findings. “And that would be too bad. After all, he’s so nice to us. And it is pleasant having someone so good-looking at our beck and call, don’t you think? I’m sure if we tell him what we know, he’ll stop cheating people, and that’ll take care of it.”

In my opinion, Myrtle was acting like she was back in junior high. “I think confronting him is a dreadful idea. I say let the police sort it out.” I knew the specific details of what we could prove since Edna and I had spent the afternoon getting affidavits from Bertie and the other customers who’d been charged for gift cards or given too little change. But I didn’t think fifty dollars in purloined gift cards and a few bucks of pocketed change was going to move the police to do anything useful. Still . . .

“I agree with Josephine,” Lill said. “I don’t think we should confront him on our own.” She paused, her expression changing.

“What is it?” I said.

“It’s just, well, I heard an interesting rumor. You know Glenn Bascombe, the man who died last week?”

“What does it have to do with Eddie?” Myrtle said.

“Well, let me finish.” Lill’s tone was as snippy as I’m sometimes accused of sounding.

It’s clear she’s spending too much time in my company.

“Glenn had a baseball card collection, you see. After he died, his son came to clean out his apartment, and he discovered Glenn’s most valuable card was missing.”

“So? How valuable can a baseball card be,” Myrtle asked.

“It’s Willie Mays’s rookie card,” Lill said. “Worth at least a couple of thousand but, if it’s in good condition, it could be a lot more.”

Edna gasped and sat back, blinking. “If that’s the case, why on earth didn’t his son make sure it was in a safe place?”

“It was Glenn’s to do with as he wished.”

“But he was going senile. His son should have made sure it didn’t get lost.”

I could well imagine what Edna would say about my painting.

“Maybe it isn’t lost,” I said.

“What do you mean?” Myrtle said.

“Maybe it was stolen.”

Edna scoffed, but Lill beamed at me as if I were a student who’d just mastered a difficult concept. “That’s certainly what the son suspects. But I doubt he’s going to be able to prove it since there’s no evidence Glenn had the card here at Brookside. Or that’s what Mr. Souter is claiming.”

“How do you know all this?” I said.

“I went to the funeral and I heard the family talking about it. And there’s something else. After Gladys Turpin was moved to the memory unit, her daughter claimed a gold necklace had disappeared. Said her dad gave it to her mom for their fiftieth anniversary, and it was worth several thousand dollars.”

We sat in silence for a moment, looking at each other.

“Maybe Gladys lost the necklace, or she put it somewhere and the daughter just can’t find it,” Edna said.

Lill tapped her lip with her finger. “I suppose that’s possible.”

“But you don’t think so.”

“It would be so easy to steal things in a place like this. And if the thief takes small items that the owner might not miss right away, well . . .”

“And you think Eddie’s responsible?”

“We already know he’s a thief.”

“But if he’s taking valuables worth thousands, why nickel and dime his grocery customers?” Myrtle said.

“Because he can?” Lill offered.

“Do you think either loss has been reported to the police?” Edna said.

Lill shook her head. “Mr. Souter’s working hard to keep it hush-hush. If it got out there’s a thief, it would certainly put a crimp in resident recruitment.”

“But there must be insurance to reimburse the families for the necklace and card,” I said.

“Since the card, at least, wasn’t declared on the property inventory when Glenn moved in, Brookside doesn’t have to pay a thing.”

“Property inventory?”

“Why, yes,” Myrtle said. “Don’t you remember, Josephine? It was that tedious form we had to fill out, listing anything worth more than \$250.”

“I’d forgotten that.” Actually, I hadn’t forgotten. I’d never seen the form. Jeff must have filled it out for me along with the other paperwork.

“You know what this means,” I said. “Anyone with access to the forms could easily see what valuables were listed by each resident and plan accordingly. Although that doesn’t explain how someone learned about Glenn’s baseball card if it wasn’t listed. Maybe stealing it was simply luck.”

“We can’t pin those losses on Eddie,” Myrtle said.

“But it does give us additional information to share with the police.”

“If you go to the police, Josephine, I will not be among his accusers,” Myrtle said. “And neither will Bertie.” She sat back with a humph, folded her arms— a neat trick, by the way— and gave me a satisfied look.

And it was perfectly clear. Myrtle and Bertie had been plotting. “What is it you, and Bertie, want to do, Myrtle?” I asked in my sweetest voice.

Lill kicked me under the table. I winced and rubbed my shin with my opposite foot as I glared at her. She looked serenely back.

“As I’ve already suggested,” Myrtle said, “we should talk to Eddie. Tell him we know what he’s been doing and let him know we’ll be watching him very carefully from now on.”

“Admit it, Josephine, that’s not a bad idea,” Edna said. Not a surprise. Edna usually sides with Myrtle.

“So that’s settled, then,” Myrtle said with a satisfied smile.

“Wait. That’s only two in favor.”

“I assumed when Lillian said nothing that she was in favor.” Myrtle gave Lill an arch look. “Doesn’t matter. Bertie’s in favor, so that’s three against two. We simply have to decide when and where to do it.”

I sat back and folded my considerably leaner arms.

Myrtle did that squirmy thing that usually means she either has to pee or has great cards. “Bertie and I think we should meet at my place. Tonight, if it can be arranged. After dinner.”

“I don’t think you can fit thirteen people in your living room.” I’d once caught a glimpse of Myrtle’s apartment when I was walking by and she was just coming out.

“Thirteen?”

“The four of us, Bertie, the other seven customers, and Eddie.”

“Bertie feels only he and I need to meet with Eddie. After all, I’m the one who noticed what was happening, which is the only reason you know about it.”

“But we’re the ones who did the investigating.” Really, the woman was insufferable.

“I agree with Josephine. I think all four of us should be included in the meeting,” Lill said.

Finally, a voice of reason, even if it was too late to alter the most egregious part of Myrtle’s plan.

“I suppose that’s all right. But I’ll have to check with Bertie.”

“Why?” I said.

“Well, because—”

“He’s a man?”

“Yes, I do think it’s important a man is present. And since Bertie lost the most, he is the logical choice to do the speaking.”

“How perfectly reasonable.” I smiled at Myrtle.

“Yes. Man to man. I think that’s best.”

“Of course you do.” I moved my leg before Lill could whack me again. “You’ll arrange with Eddie to be there, of course?”

“Of course,” Myrtle said.

“Now that’s settled, shall we play cards?”

~ ~ ~

“We asked you to meet with us,” Edna said, speaking out of turn, I might add, “because we need your advice.”

I thought it an uncomfortably bogus way to begin. We were gathered in Myrtle’s apartment, and there was barely space for the six of us to sit, what with the way the living room was stuffed with furniture and knickknacks. Clearly, if Myrtle had made any effort to downsize when she moved to Brookside, it wasn’t successful.

I was squashed between Lill and Edna on the sofa, and although that was preferable to sharing the other sofa with Bertie and Myrtle, it wasn’t comfortable. Eddie had pulled up a chair from the dining room table, and I envied him that solitary seat. I wished I’d thought to do that instead of sinking into the depths of Myrtle’s puffy couch.

Eddie cocked his head and smiled at Edna. “You know I’m always happy to help you guys.” He turned the grin, full of teeth, on the rest of us.

Deciding enough was enough, I squirmed to my feet, collected one of the dining table chairs, and seated myself. There, I could breathe again.

Everyone waited until I was settled, and then Bertie cleared his throat, thoroughly, as was his habit. “We called you here in order get to the bottom of some . . . uh, discrepancies we’ve happened to notice.”

“Discrepancies?”

“Yes. Well. I don’t suppose there’s any good way to say this.” He halted and cleared his throat again.

Really, the man needed an antihistamine.

“Recently, Myrtle noticed that you didn’t return the proper change when you did her grocery shopping.” Bertie pushed the words out quickly and then sat back, blinking at Eddie and looking, to my eyes, rather like a tortoise.

Eddie frowned and sat up straighter. “Yes. I remember that. A calculation error. I tried to correct it, but she refused to take the money.”

“Yes. Hmm.” Another round of throat clearing.

My normal level of tolerance is two throat clearings followed by two less-than-stimulating Bertie pronouncements, and that had now been officially exceeded.

“It so happens that last week my change was also shorted, and this week, I was charged for a gift card I didn’t order,” Bertie said.

“Oh shit. Did I mix that up? Sorry, man.”

Eddie's eyes swung to his left, something detective dramas claim is a sure sign the perp is lying. But I've heard it discussed by more competent experts on NPR, and they said the best way to spot a liar is by watching for micro facial expressions.

"That was supposed to be on Mary's bill."

Furtive. That was my diagnosis.

"No, no. Mary had a gift card on her bill as well. But it wasn't hers."

Eddie's face twitched, and although it was over in a fraction of a second, I saw guilt in that twitch. He sighed and looked left again. So maybe detective dramas have a point.

"Sounds like I screwed everything up."

He continued to look everywhere but at any of us. And that decided it for me. He was lying. No question.

"Guess I'd better go over my notes to see who the card belongs to. Thanks for letting me know." He stood.

"Just a moment, young man," Edna said. "I believe you better hear us out."

Eddie still held on to that cocky smile, but he slumped back on the chair.

Edna nodded at Bertie, no doubt urging him to continue, but I decided man-to-man just wasn't getting the job done.

"We did some checking this last week," I said. "Besides Bertie and Mary, we found two other customers who had gift cards on their bills they didn't order. And several residents can document you shorted the change you gave them. We consider that evidence you've been systematically stealing from residents. I suggest you stop with the lame excuses and tell us how you plan to repay those you stole from."

"Wow. I knew you didn't like me, Josephine, but to accuse me of something like this. It's just, well, it's mind-boggling."

"Ah, yes. The *best defense is a strong offense* defense. And if you please, don't Josephine me. I am Mrs. Bartlett."

Eddie looked around the group, beginning, I believe, to comprehend his dilemma.

"We have the receipts documenting the fraudulent transactions, and based on those, we've made some best-guess estimates of what you've likely embezzled over the past year. We believe the amount could be substantial."

"Embezzled is such an ugly word."

“What word would you use?” I said.

Eddie shook his head. “I . . . I did it for . . . S-sara.” His lip trembled and his eyes teared up, but the microexpression looked calculating to me. “She’s sick. That’s why I took this job. For the insurance. But it doesn’t pay well enough, and I’m desperate. I just want my baby girl to get better.”

I glanced around at the group, trying to gauge their reactions. Myrtle was dabbing at her eyes, and Edna was clearly softening, but Lill was tapping her lip, which meant she didn’t buy Eddie’s story any more than I did.

“What’s wrong with Sara?” I said.

“She has cancer.”

“Yes. What kind of cancer?”

“Something’s wrong with her blood.”

“Do you mean leukemia?”

“Yeah. Yeah, sure. Leukemia.” The man might look bright, but looks were clearly deceiving. He was, however, sly and clever. “She needs lots of medicine, and it makes her really, really sick.”

“You poor man,” Myrtle said. “I had no idea you had a sick daughter.”

“I don’t like to say much,” Eddie said. “I mean, everyone here has problems, haven’t they?” He shrugged. “I don’t want to burden you with my problems.”

“But maybe we can help you,” Myrtle said.

Bertie was nodding, whether from sleepiness or as a Pavlovian response to what Myrtle was saying, I had no way of knowing.

“Tell us what we can do to help,” Myrtle insisted.

I snorted; I couldn’t help myself. The meeting was turning into a shambles, and all because Myrtle let emotions rule rather than common sense.

“Now, Josephine,” Myrtle said. “I can’t allow us to do something here that would hurt a little girl.”

“Of course you can’t, Myrtle. But I’m not sure how he plans to pay medical expenses with a Cheesecake Factory gift card.”

“I . . . I just wanted to give her a treat. As soon as she feels like eating again.”

Eddie had his head down but he shot me a glance, and I could see he knew he’d won. This round, anyway.

“It would be devastating if I lost this job,” he continued, his voice cracking.

The man should try out for one of those reality television shows. *Biggest*

Liar, maybe.

“If I lost my insurance, Sara could die.”

I stood. I could not take another moment of the man’s duplicity and Myrtle and Bertie’s fawning stupidity. Lill stood as well. I thought to make a parting statement about what had transpired, but Lill got a firm grip on my arm and steered me out the door.

“Did you believe him?” I said as we walked away.

“Of course not. The man’s no good.”

“Then why—”

“Why didn’t I say so?”

“Yes.”

“Wouldn’t have done a lick of good. Myrtle was on a sympathy roll. No sense getting riled about something unstoppable like that. What we need to do is make sure those receipts and written statements are hidden away where Eddie can’t get his hands on them. Then we’re going to find out if he has a sick daughter, which I don’t believe he has. And once we do that, I’m ready to report him, but to someone with more authority than Mr. Souter.”

“Edna has the documentation.”

“She’s currently engaged. I propose we go collect it,” Lill said.

“But her door will be locked.”

“Of course it won’t. Nobody locks their doors, Josephine.”

“I do.”

“But what’s the point? All the staff have those key cards. They can walk in anytime, you know.”

“Of course I know. So, where do we hide the evidence?”

“In the mail.”

“What do you mean?”

“We put it in an envelope and address it to . . . well, we need to figure that out,” Lill said. “And then we mail it. While he’s looking for it, and trust me, he will look, it’ll be safely in the hands of the post office.”

“What do you mean, he’ll be looking?” I thought her post office idea was too complex, but I hesitated to say so.

“It’s his livelihood. Of course he’ll look.”

I had a sudden sharp pain in my abdomen at the thought of Eddie going through my things.

At that point, Lill and I arrived at Edna's apartment. Sure enough, the door was unlocked. Since I'd worked with Edna on the receipts, I knew where everything was. Lill found a plastic bag in a kitchen drawer, and I dumped the receipts and affidavits into it. I smoothed the bag and slipped it into the small tote I carry with me. The one with my keys.

We were in and out of Edna's in under a minute. But we still had the problem of what to do with the receipts. We needed to hide them in a place Eddie wouldn't think to look, which meant somewhere other than my apartment or Lill's.

"I have an idea what to do with these," I said. "How about we put them in Devi Subramanian's desk? She's hardly ever in her office. Besides, most people rarely look in the file drawer of their desk. I think it'll be safe there for the time being. What do you think?"

Lill agreed it was a brilliant idea, so we went to the front lobby and took seats at a table in the corner and waited for the woman at the front desk to go to the bathroom. I hoped that Eddie wouldn't walk through the lobby on his way out the door, although I believe most of the staff uses the back door.

Lill and I were on our second hand of Crazy Eights before the receptionist finally got up and disappeared into the restroom. I set my cards down, picked up my tote, and hustled into Devi's darkened office. The file drawer was locked, and in the dim light, I'd never find the key, so I opened the bottom drawer on the other side and slipped the bag of receipts under the papers in that drawer, closed it, and hustled back out.

"Good," Lill said. "You were so quick, there wasn't time for anyone to see you. Shall we finish this hand?"

I wanted to say, "Must we?" Instead, I smiled at Lill. "Of course, we'll finish."

Lill picked up her cards, glanced at them, then looked at me. "This was a good night's work, Josephine."

"Not if Eddie smothers one of us."

Lill sat back, blinking. "Oh. I do hope it doesn't come to that."

Having her share, instead of contest, my concern was certainly not reassuring. "Maybe we should prop chairs against our bedroom doors?"

"Yes. I believe that would be an excellent idea."

Chapter Twelve

Devi

Friday morning, when I opened my bottom desk drawer where I keep my purse, I noticed the drawer's disordered appearance. The poker ladies appropriating more paper clips, or someone else?

There wasn't anything of particular importance in the drawer, but I still didn't like the feeling it gave me to know that someone had been in my office, going through my things.

Then I noticed a plastic bag pushed beneath a few loose papers. I pulled it out to find it contained a bunch of supermarket receipts. In addition to the receipts were several sheets of paper that appeared to be affidavits. It didn't require much of a leap to conclude this was evidence of Eddie's activities.

I put everything back in the bag, but instead of returning it to the desk drawer, I took it out and locked it in my car. Then I returned to the lobby to gather the group I was accompanying on a mall outing. When I realized one of the people on the outing had also been listed in one of the affidavits, I caught up with her to have a private word.

"It's so nice to see you, Mrs. Griffiths. You aren't usually on my mall and grocery runs," I said.

"Yes, you're quite right, sweetie. I don't get around so good, you know." It was true. Mrs. Griffiths was bent over a walker, making slow progress down the interior walkway of the mall. "But I need new shoes, and Eddie can't buy those for me."

"Eddie?"

"He does most of my shopping. Although, I may have to make other arrangements, you know."

"Why is that?"

"Eddie took the money I gave him for my groceries and bought a gift card for himself and put it on my bill. Can you imagine that?"

“Have you reported it?”

“Oh, that’s being taken care of.”

“By?”

“Why, Josephine and her gang.”

“Her gang?”

“You know. Lillian and . . . well, I can’t remember the other two ladies’ names.”

“Would they be Myrtle and Edna?”

“Why, yes, sweetie. I believe they would.”

When we returned from the mall, I had a break until late afternoon when I was taking a group out for dinner. Since Josephine wasn’t present for the mall activity, and she wasn’t signed up for the dinner, I decided to visit and ask for an update on what she and “the gang” were doing about Eddie. I picked up a master keycard, just in case.

When there was no answer to my repeated knocks, I unlocked Josephine’s door and stuck my head around the jamb. “Josephine? It’s Devi.” I waited a moment and called out again, but there was still no response.

I slipped inside and closed the door. I had no business doing that. My agreement with Josephine did not include solo visits, and I knew it.

Taking a breath to settle my nerves, I walked over to the painting and, for a time, lost all sense of where I was. Then the sound of a door slamming nearby made me realize the risk I was running.

I opened the door and peered down the hall, breathing a sigh of relief to find it empty. Slipping out, I pulled the door shut as quietly as I could, fingers crossed that no one had heard me knocking earlier. In the activities center, I found the four poker ladies were in their usual spot and in the middle of a game.

I walked up to the table. “Josephine, I need to speak to you. When you finish this hand, perhaps?”

She shrugged. “I planned to fold. Might as well do it now.” She laid her cards down, got up, and followed me to my office.

I ushered her in and closed the door. “I found something in my desk drawer this morning, and I thought you might know how it got there?”

“If it was a bag of receipts and affidavits, I put it there.”

“Why?”

“I needed a hiding place that wasn’t my apartment.”

“This is about Eddie Colter. Right?”

Josephine nodded. “He admitted he’s taking the money, but he claims it’s because he needs it to pay for his daughter’s medical treatments.”

“You confronted him?” I considered it a terrible idea. Eddie is six three and nearly two hundred pounds, most of it muscle.

“I didn’t think it was wise,” Josephine said. “But Myrtle and Bertie insisted.”

“Does Eddie know you have the evidence?”

“He knows one of us has it. Lill thinks he’ll be searching for it. That’s why we hid it.”

“And he claims to have a sick daughter?”

“That’s what he said. But I have my doubts.”

“Did you know he’s Mr. Souter’s nephew?” Mr. Souter, the manager, was someone else I avoided.

“That explains a lot.”

“What’s that?” I said.

“Aside from the shopping, with its obvious opportunities, Eddie doesn’t seem to do much. And I’ve overheard the other aides complaining about it.” She chewed on her lip. “You know, the daughter question concerns me.”

That surprised me. I had Josephine pegged as unlikely to be swayed by emotional considerations. After all, she refused to speak with her own son.

“Is there any way we can check if he has a daughter?” Josephine said.

I thought about it. Then I remembered the list of names and addresses I’d been given since it was my responsibility to send out get-well, birthday, and Christmas cards. I turned on my computer, and after a search, pulled up the file.

“I’m checking the staff listings,” I told Josephine. “Eddie doesn’t claim either a spouse or any children.”

“You have his address there?”

“Yes.”

“We could take a little field trip, see where he lives?”

I thought about it. Although it probably wouldn’t answer the daughter question, I was curious to see where he lived. I wrote down the address, then brought up MapQuest.

Brookside is in a northern suburb of Cincinnati named Montgomery, and Eddie lived about five miles farther north in a town called Mason. I printed out the directions, then looked at Josephine who was sitting, waiting.

“I have a couple of hours free. Shall we?”

Josephine didn't hesitate. “Let's.”

We arranged to meet at the back door in five minutes. That gave Josephine time to tell the others she was going out and to pick up a jacket from her apartment.

I signed out, saying I was accompanying a resident to an appointment, and drove around to the back door to meet Josephine. I handed her the directions to keep us on track, but it was a simple matter to find Eddie's place.

And it took only a glance to know that, unless he had roommates or an undeclared domestic partner with a job that paid considerably more than a job at Brookside did, there was no way he could afford this place. I certainly couldn't.

“Did you see the sign?” Josephine said. “It says this is an adult community. I believe the translation is, ‘If you have kids, don't bother trying to live here.’”

“Are you sure?”

“There's the rental office,” Josephine said, pointing. “Why don't I find out?”

Before I could respond, Josephine was out of the car and walking briskly toward the designated unit. She returned after twenty minutes, looking quite pleased with herself.

“It's exactly as I thought,” she said, clicking her seatbelt. “Megan says they even frown on kids visiting overnight. She asked how I'd heard about the place, and I said that a friend of mine knew someone who lived here and told her how nice it was. Of course Megan asked me the resident's name, and I said I thought it was Eddie something. ‘Eddie Colter?’ she said, and I could tell she was smitten. She's a plain little thing. I doubt Eddie knows she exists. She knows all about him, though.”

Josephine handed me a brochure. I glanced at it to find I was correct in thinking I couldn't afford an apartment here.

“Eddie lives alone, but he has frequent female visitors, much to Megan's obvious distress. I said my friend mentioned something about him having a daughter who was very ill, and Megan said my friend must have confused Eddie with someone else, and I said that it was entirely possible I was the confused one, since I'd never met the man. Then I made my excuses, and here I am.”

We grinned at each other.

“So you're pretty well convinced there's no sick daughter,” I said.

“No, I don't believe there is.”

“And clearly Eddie is living beyond his means.”

“It appears so.”

“What do you want to do next?”

“I think we should go to the police,” Josephine said. She stopped and frowned. “I didn’t want to say anything, but when I went back to my apartment for my coat, I could tell someone had been inside. And the staff know not to come in when I’m not there.”

I cleared my throat, trying not to sound guilty. “How did you know?”

“Whoever it was, was neat about it. But my things had been moved.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. For a moment, I thought Josephine had some way of telling when her door was opened, like in spy novels. But I hadn’t moved anything. So . . .

Oh my God. Eddie? Perhaps searching for the receipts?

The thought of what could have happened if I’d walked in on Eddie in an empty apartment made me shiver.

“He might not be satisfied with searching, you know,” Josephine continued. “He knows I helped collect the evidence, and he also knows neither Lill nor I believed his story. He might want to stop us from talking to anybody else.”

“You think you could be in danger?”

“We’re both old ladies. Would anyone be very surprised if we died in our sleep?”

I considered Josephine too young to die in her sleep. But Lillian was old enough it might be plausible, so Josephine did have a point.

~ ~ ~

Although my interacting with the police was a very bad idea, I drove Josephine to the Montgomery Safety Center where the police station is located. I would have been happy to wait in the car, but Josephine insisted I go in with her. Reluctantly, I did so.

We entered through the public entrance to find ourselves in a small anteroom. A woman sitting behind glass, bulletproof no doubt, asked us our business. I let Josephine do the talking, although I was the one carrying the evidence.

“We’re here to report a crime,” Josephine said.

“What kind of crime?”

“A burglary. Or maybe it’s a robbery. At any rate, it’s a theft.”

The woman directed us to open the door to our left and take a seat, saying an officer would be with us shortly. A lock release buzzed, and I pulled the door open on a small conference room with a table and chairs, wishing I could usher Josephine and the bag of receipts inside and escape.

We sat down, and within a couple of minutes, a police officer came through the door carrying a notebook.

I concentrated on my breathing, trying to tamp down a feeling of irrational panic. I was safe and anonymous. I was simply the companion of the person here to make a report.

The officer introduced himself as Detective Darren McElroy, and we told him who we were. He took his time, shaking our hands and then sitting opposite us and opening a slightly battered notebook to a fresh page. That gave me time to calm down enough to notice the air of quiet authority he’d brought into the room with him. I had the fanciful thought that if I were in imminent danger, I would want this man protecting me.

Although that air of competence was unusual and made him immediately appealing, he wasn’t otherwise remarkable, except perhaps for the fact he had very short hair and was clean-shaven. Fortyish was my guess. I wondered if his friends called him Mac. He looked like a Mac.

He wrote our names, double-checking the spellings, along with the time and date, and we watched him do it in silence. Then he looked up and asked our business. I had a sense he was weighing and measuring us, and I sat up straighter and folded my hands in my lap so I wouldn’t be tempted to fidget.

I let Josephine do the talking, and she did a creditable job of laying everything out in a logical fashion with little embellishment. She also added to her report of Eddie’s thefts the fact that the son of a recently deceased resident and the daughter of a second resident who’d been moved to the memory unit had subsequently discovered valuable items missing. That was a surprise to me, since I’d heard nothing about either loss.

Occasionally, the officer interrupted Josephine’s account to check on a name or ask for more details. Throughout, he took careful notes. Although I was watching him do it upside down, I could see his handwriting was as neat and precise as his demeanor and grooming.

I wondered what his wife was like, and whether he had any children. I could easily picture a skinny towhead with hair as short as his, begging him to play catch. But then I noticed he wore no wedding ring. Did that mean he was single,

or did he simply not wear it at work?

I shook my head in confusion at the direction of my thoughts since I'd given up checking out guys some time ago.

"As far as you know, this Eddie," he stopped and looked at his notes, "Mr. Colter, never stole anything from you personally?"

Josephine nodded. "That's correct."

"And I take it that's true for you as well, Ms. Subramanian?" He looked at me with eyes that were more aware and probing than I preferred.

I also nodded.

"Then why are you two reporting this rather than one of the victims?"

"I'm not reporting. I'm just here to give Josephine . . . support." I'd almost said *a ride*, but decided that sounded too disengaged.

"The majority of the *victims*," Josephine said, "are elderly. They have difficulties getting around. Which is why Eddie does their shopping."

I shared a moment of amusement with Detective McElroy at Josephine's assertion that the victims were elderly. As if she wasn't. Then I recalled watching her put a standard-shift Mazda Miata through its paces on Sunday, and the intelligent and wide-ranging conversation we'd shared at dinner. Josephine might have enough gray hairs and birthdays to be classified as elderly, but the label clearly didn't fit.

"If I were to speak to these other ladies and this gentleman who were present for the confrontation with Mr. Colter, would they back up what you've told me?" the detective asked Josephine.

"I don't know," she said. "You see, Eddie told this cock-and-bull story about having a sick daughter, and I think Myrtle believed him. She was ready to give him more money, not take this accusation any further. And Bertie does whatever she tells him."

"What about the others you say he stole from?"

"They were all angry about it. But I don't know how they'll react if they believe Eddie was doing it for a sick child."

"You're certain he doesn't have a daughter?"

"He might, of course. But she doesn't live with him, nor does she visit, according to the rental agent at his apartment complex."

The detective blinked. "You went to his apartment?"

"Just to the complex. We wanted to see where he lived."

“I see.”

I was certain Detective McElroy was struggling not to smile about our amateur sleuthing.

“We discovered he’s living well beyond his means,” Josephine said.

“And you know that because?”

“Megan, that’s the lady who rents the apartments, she told me what they cost.”

“Maybe he has roommates.”

“No. Megan was certain he doesn’t. But he does have lots of visitors of the female persuasion.”

McElroy’s lips twitched.

“She has a crush on him, you see. And it’s too bad, because she seemed like a nice girl. Eddie is not nice, but he’s very good-looking, which I’m sure prevents many women from recognizing that he’s pond scum.”

“Yes. Well.” The officer cleared his throat and concentrated on his note-taking.

I was almost certain the words he’d just written were “pond scum.”

“And you, Ms. Subramanian? Is that your opinion as well?”

“I agree, Eddie Colter is definitely pond scum. Toxic pond scum.”

He looked across at me and blinked, and I clamped my lips shut. This was no place to put my Eddie prejudices on display.

“Besides,” Josephine said. “Having a sick daughter does not give him the right to help himself to other people’s money.”

That statement, which brought us back to the issue at hand, showed off Josephine’s tart side to good effect.

“Do you have any evidence?”

“Yes, we do,” Josephine said.

I handed over the bag, and Josephine and I watched as he went through it. He glanced at the receipts and then concentrated on the spreadsheet and the affidavits.

“What I get from this is that he overcharged eight people one time each by about \$10 on average.”

“That’s only what we can prove,” Josephine said. “But he’s been shopping for some of these people for over a year. And we discovered they never check their receipts and change, so it’s likely he’s stolen a good deal more.”

“But all you can document is roughly a hundred bucks’ worth.”

“Theft is theft.”

“Of course it is. But to get this department involved, I need stronger evidence that he’s stolen a lot more than this.”

“What about the baseball card? And the necklace? Don’t forget those.”

“Those are rumors. And you’re a third party.”

“So that’s it?” Josephine said. “You do nothing?”

“I can arrange for someone to speak to Mr. Colter. Likely that will put a stop to it.”

“Can you do it now?” I said.

“Why the rush?”

“Josephine feels insecure. You see, Eddie has access to a master keycard. And neither of us doubt he’s capable of more than a little petty larceny.”

McElroy sat back and rubbed his knuckles across his lips. “Okay. Where’s this Eddie likely to be right now?”

I glanced at the time. “He should still be at work. And I need to get back. I have an activity in twenty minutes.”

“Tell you what. You head on back, and I’ll follow along and talk to Eddie. Let him know we’re aware of the situation. That should stop him from harassing you.”

“Can’t you arrest him?” Josephine’s voice held a uncharacteristic plaintive note. Given my experiences with Eddie, I didn’t consider it an overreaction on her part.

Detective McElroy shook his head. “Doubt it would stick. You’d be better off reporting this to whoever’s in charge at Brookside so they can fire him.”

“The manager is his uncle,” I said.

“Like I said, I’ll talk to him. Let him know I’m keeping an eye on things and that if anything happens to either of you, I’ll be looking into it. Would that help?”

“Guess we have to hope it does,” Josephine said, sounding more like her usual self.

“I have a request,” I said. “Please don’t mention my name when you speak to Eddie.”

He cocked his head. “You have a history with Eddie?”

I knew what he was asking. Especially after Josephine said Eddie was good-

looking.

“He’s a bully. I try to avoid him whenever I can. But, well, once I didn’t quite manage it.”

He sat back, pursing his lips, giving me that aware look that made me feel he knew more about me than I would like him to know.

“And?” he said.

“He grabbed me and tried to kiss me.”

Josephine shifted. I glanced at her to find her lips set in a firm line.

“When was this?” the detective said.

“Two weeks ago. I’ve been avoiding him ever since.”

“I hope you can see, Officer, that something needs to be done,” Josephine said.

He nodded. “I see no reason to mention your name, Ms. Subramanian. After all, you weren’t involved in confronting him about the thefts. I would have advised against that, by the way.” He turned that piercing look on Josephine, who didn’t seem the least bit fazed.

“I quite agree with you, but Myrtle and Bertie were determined.”

“We’d better get back,” I said, standing. “Thank you for your help, Officer.”

“My pleasure. Here’s my card. If anything makes you uncomfortable, you can call me. Anytime.” He handed us each a card, then came around the table and opened the door for us.

I turned and glanced back at him as I held the second door for Josephine. He looked solid and reliable, and I was glad to know he was on our side.

“Do you think that did a bit of good,” Josephine asked as we got back in the car.

“I don’t know. But I do know I’m not comfortable leaving you alone until we see what happens when he talks to Eddie.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Come to dinner with the group tonight. We can squeeze in one more, and I’ll feel better knowing where you are.”

“I do think something needs to be done about that young man before someone gets hurt,” Josephine said, pursing her lips. “And I thought we were doing it today. But now, I guess we’ll have to wait and see.”

“So, you will come to dinner with us tonight?”

“I’ll still have to come back to my apartment afterward.”

“I could spend the night? On the couch. With my phone set to speed-dial Detective McElroy.” I’d looked at his card before putting it in my purse and realized we’d used the wrong form of address.

Much to my surprise, Josephine said, “Yes, I’d like that.”

Chapter Thirteen

Mac

Since the divorce was finalized, my brothers have been urging me to get out there. Meet someone new. My sister went even further. She posted a profile for me on MatchMadeinHeaven.com and then bugged me to get in touch with the women who responded. After one appalled look, I told her to delete the profile or I'd have her arrested.

She might have a point, though, given the highlight of my week, heck, my whole month, was a theft report by a senior citizen. Although if I'm honest, it was her companion who was the highlight. If Devi Subramanian had responded to that profile my sister posted—and if the last ten years hadn't happened—I would have been tempted to respond.

Except, I still haven't worked out how to ask a woman I've just met whether she wants kids. Lisa and I tried for seven of the ten years we were married, and it exhausted us emotionally, financially, and physically. I still feel tapped out whenever I remember that time.

Mostly I don't think about it. And I don't date. Not yet, at least. And maybe not until I'm old enough for women whose biological clocks have run out.

After I ushered the two women out, I returned to my office to finish up the report I'd been working on. Ten minutes later, I saved my work, picked up my keys, and told Doreen I was going to interview a suspect.

Approaching Brookside, I saw a shuttle bus was parked by the front door and Devi was assisting with the boarding. I drove past and did a circle of the neighborhood to give the bus time to load and take off. Then I returned and did a circuit of the facility before parking and going inside.

“Good afternoon, Officer,” the pretty young thing at the reception desk bubbled at me after I showed her my ID and asked to see Eddie Colter. “If you'd take a seat, I'll see if he's available.”

Instead of sitting, I walked over to the bulletin board. It was divided by day

and listed the activities for the month. There were a substantial number of them including trips to the mall, concerts, and this evening's dinner at Red Lobster.

I'd just finished doing a count when a loud squawk made me jump. That was followed by a whistle and a croaky, high-pitched voice saying, "Pretty boy, pretty boy."

I turned to see the speaker was a parrot whose cage was decorated with a prominent sign stating DON'T TOUCH ME, I BITE!

Following the parrot's announcement, the receptionist chimed in with, "Here's Mr. Colter, Officer."

I switched my gaze from the parrot, which, I realized in retrospect, had made no remarks about my arrival, and watched Colter walk toward me. Tall and muscular, he moved with an athlete's grace and the arrogance of someone who knew he was better looking than ninety-nine percent of the species. I wondered how the parrot knew that. Or had someone trained it?

It wasn't easy feeling dissed and dismissed by a parrot, a thought that had me stifling a grin as I greeted Colter. He stuck out a hand and squeezed mine far more firmly than necessary.

"Lucy said you wanted to speak to me?" He smiled at Lucy, who blushed and smiled back.

Clearly a fan. Unlike Devi Subramanian. Another thought that made me feel like smiling.

"Do you have an office, Mr. Colter?"

"We can use the manager's." He gestured to show the way.

In what was clearly a power play, he took the seat behind the desk. It's the sort of tactic that neither impresses nor intimidates me. I sat in the guest chair and took my time getting out my notebook and pen, and then making a note of the date, time, and place.

"What's this about, Officer?"

"Just a routine check, sir."

"Routine check? At five on a Friday afternoon? I doubt it."

I smiled at him. I've been told my smile is either reassuring or menacing, depending on whether it's aimed at an accused or an accuser. Colter didn't smile back.

"Completely routine, sir. Your name and address, please."

Colter sat for a moment, his jaw working before he spit out the information.

I got a phone number and the name of his supervisor. By that time, he was getting restless.

“And your job here at Brookside?”

“I’m the client liaison.” He leaned back and chewed on a hangnail. Not his best look. “In laymen’s terms, I’m here to keep the old biddies happy.”

“And how do you do that?”

“Pay them compliments. Spend time with them. Pretend their conversation is interesting. The old bats love it.” He gave me a satisfied look as if to say *Not everyone can manage such a tough assignment*.

I examined him—the relaxed posture, the arrogant glint in his eye—and thought about Josephine’s assessment that this man was capable of more than petty thievery. I didn’t disagree, although I suspected he mostly avoided physical confrontations. Wouldn’t want to take a chance on messing up that carefully moussed hair. That didn’t mean, however, that he couldn’t be both tough and dangerous.

“You still haven’t told me what this is about, Officer. Unless I know that, I’m afraid I can’t be much help.”

“Detective.” I only correct people about my title if I don’t like them. “We had an anonymous report that several Brookside residents have been missing valuable items. Small things that can be slipped into a pocket.”

As I spoke, he relaxed.

Good. I wanted him relaxed.

“If anyone is missing anything, they’re supposed to inform me as the client liaison.”

“I see. So that’s one of your responsibilities? Along with paying compliments?”

“We need to make sure none of our residents is taken advantage of.” The words were delivered in a singsong, like he was parroting an orientation packet.

“Can you check and see if you have any recent reports in your file? Our source did say there was an attempt to make management aware of the, um . . . thefts. But since there’s been no investigation, they came to our department.”

I’d rattled him with that. He shifted, then leaned forward with what he no doubt thought was an earnest look.

“We get these kinds of complaints occasionally, Off—uh, Detective. And we always investigate them thoroughly. But we’ve had no complaints for at least six months.”

“When you’ve investigated in the past, have you found the culprits?”

He chuckled. “The *culprit* is usually a memory lapse. Many of our residents have memory difficulties. Often the item they’re reporting as lost is something they gave away years ago to one of their kids. That’s why we do a thorough inventory when someone moves in.”

“That sounds like a difficult proposition.”

“We do whatever it takes to assure our residents, and their families, peace of mind.” There was that orientation blather again.

“Does anyone on the staff ever handle money for a resident?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“The resident gives the staff member money and asks that staff member to purchase something for them?”

“You think our residents use illegal drugs?”

That was certainly an interesting assumption. I sat back, pretending to make a note. Finally, I looked up.

“Not at all, Mr. Colter. I’m talking about legal purchases. Like groceries, perhaps. That sort of thing.”

“I do some shopping for residents.”

“I see. What’s odd is that in addition to reporting these rather substantial thefts, our anonymous source sent us some receipts. They didn’t make much sense to me.” I shrugged, giving him my best dumb-cop look. “They were grocery receipts, you see. Can you think why they would have been sent to us?”

He frowned, obviously trying to appear to give the question some thought. “Maybe they were sent by mistake. If I could see them, I might have a better idea.” He leaned forward, his expression much less self-satisfied, which pleased me no end.

I wrote another note—*cannot explain receipts*—then sat back. “I don’t think that’s possible. We might be able to make a copy for you. But they’re evidence. At least until we figure out their significance.”

“I don’t see how they can have any.”

“You’re probably right.” I shook my head as if in wonder at the vagaries of human nature and the oddities of anonymous informants. “As long as there aren’t any further developments, they’ll likely remain a mystery.”

“Further developments?”

“You know. Any unexpected injuries or deaths. Or we receive another report

of missing items or shorted change.” I closed my notebook and gave him my most serious look. “You’ve been very helpful, Mr. Colter. You might want to let the manager know about my visit since I may have to speak with him.”

I stood and avoided a second handshake by using both hands to put away the notebook and pen, then I nodded at Colter and turned to leave. At the door, I turned to face him.

“It’s good to know you have such a caring attitude, Mr. Colter. I have no doubt the *residents* love the attention you pay them.”

That erased the smile. *Good.*

Back in my vehicle, I checked the time and realized I was five minutes from the end of my shift. I called in to say I was going off duty. From my reading of the bulletin board, I knew where Devi and the group were having dinner. I drove there instead of home.

I’d given her and Mrs. Bartlett my number, but I’d neglected to get theirs. If I needed to contact them, I didn’t want to do it through the switchboard at Brookside and take a chance that might lead to Colter connecting them with my visit. Red Lobster presented an opportunity to obtain the numbers discreetly. Besides, I was hungry.

The Brookside party was large enough, they were easy to spot, and I asked the hostess to seat me nearby so I could catch Devi’s eye. The first time I did, she looked away. Then she looked back, and her eyes widened.

I tipped my head toward the exit. Then I set my glass down and walked out to the entrance. A couple of minutes later, Devi joined me.

“Let’s step outside, shall we?” I said.

She nodded and followed me out. What I’d neglected to consider when I made that suggestion was that it was chilly and Devi had left her coat in the restaurant. I took my jacket off and, after a brief hesitation, she let me drape it over her shoulders.

“I didn’t realize it was you at first,” she said.

“I noticed that.” We smiled at each other. “I also noticed you have Mrs. Bartlett with you.”

“Yes. I didn’t want her out of my sight until I knew Eddie was no danger to her. I’m planning to stay with her tonight.”

“She agreed to that?”

“Yes. Oddly enough. Most of the staff think she’s a bit difficult. For sure, she’s no sweet little old lady, at least on the outside, but inside, well, I like her. A

lot.”

“Yeah. I know someone like that. Tough as cement on the outside, gooey in the middle.” My grandmother. She died a couple of years ago, but I still miss her. “Mrs. Bartlett seemed upset over that story you told about Colter accosting you.”

“Which is strange,” Devi said. “Because I had to threat— Ah, that is, it took some convincing for her to accept my help.”

“That’s okay. You don’t have to tell me all your secrets right away.”

She glanced at me, blinking. Then she looked away. “Well, that’s a relief.” She hugged her arms around herself. It’s the kind of peculiar reaction that makes my cop instincts perk up. Then she caught my eye and smiled.

She has a great smile, pretty lips, and white, straight teeth. I’m a sucker for straight teeth. My sister once told me I should have been an orthodontist. But what I think I’m more of a sucker for in this case is Devi’s eyes. You know how you can know someone a long time and if you’re asked what color their eyes are, sometimes you have to think about it? Well, that wouldn’t be true if the person were Devi. Her eyes are a light gray encircled by a halo of darker gray, a combination that is both devastating and unforgettable. And then there’s her hair. My hands itch to slide over it, to see if it’s as silky as it looks.

“Did you talk to Eddie?” Devi said, jerking my attention back to the matter at hand.

“I did.” I gave her the highlights of that meeting, after which she thanked me and said she needed to get back to her group.

“Before you go, could you give me numbers where I can reach you and Mrs. Bartlett without talking to the Brookside receptionist?”

“I don’t know Josephine’s number, but I can call you with it later.” She dictated her own number, and I wrote it down. Then she gave me back my jacket and went inside. I waited another minute before walking back to my table.

I ordered a salad and a plate of grilled shrimp, and while I ate, I watched Devi interacting with the residents. I doubted she would ever refer to them as either biddies or bats.

Throughout the meal, I exchanged brief glances with Devi, something that made it a much more pleasant experience than eating solo in a restaurant usually was. Since Lisa and I split, I mostly do takeout.

Mrs. Bartlett also spotted me, and she gave me a quick nod. I finished before they did and, on a whim, drove out to Mason to check on Colter. After locating

his building, I walked around back where a large lawn surrounded a pool that was closed for the season.

It didn't take much effort to work out which apartment was Colter's. The lights were on, and as I stood there, a man moved in front of the light, his shadow appearing on the curtains. A woman joined the man, and he pulled her roughly into his arms.

I watched long enough to be certain the woman welcomed the attention, then I went back to my car and called the number Devi had given me. She answered on the third ring. I identified myself and asked if she was back from the restaurant.

"Yes. We just got here."

"And you're with Mrs. Bartlett?"

"Yes. I'd like to go home to pick up some things, but I'm not sure it's a good idea."

"Tell you what. I'm only a short distance away. I can come and stay with her until you get back." I really should have told Devi that Colter was home and busy entertaining, but that would negate the need for me to stop by, and I was feeling more at loose ends than usual.

"Thanks. I would like to pick up a change of clothes and a toothbrush." She offered to meet me at the back door, which I considered preferable to signing in at the front desk.

When I arrived, she opened the door and pointed out Mrs. Bartlett's apartment. "She's expecting you. I'll be back in a half hour."

She slipped past me and walked quickly over to a tired-looking Toyota. After she was safely in the car, I knocked on Mrs. Bartlett's door.

The apartment was a surprise. I was expecting overstuffed furniture, lots of family photos, and maybe a framed needlepoint or two, like my grandmother's house. Instead, Mrs. Bartlett's furnishings had the clean lines I'd pick if I were to bother with decorating, and in place of family photos and needlepoint, she had an interesting painting of a man and a woman sitting next to each other on a bench outside a beach house. The man looked remote, the woman sad. Although seated together, they were clearly separated from each other. In a modern painting, the two would be staring at their phones rather than the ocean.

Mrs. Bartlett took my coat. I knew she noticed my gun, but all she did was raise one eyebrow.

"Would you like a cup of tea, Detective?"

“You can call me Mac.”

“And you may call me Josephine. Tea, Mac?”

“Tea would be great.” Usually I stick to coffee, but never this late in the day, unless I was working a night shift.

She walked past me into the tiny kitchen, put a kettle on to heat, took four cups out of the cupboard, and measured two scoops of tea into a teapot. Not Lipton’s then. And four cups?

In response to a knock on the door, Josephine opened it and ushered in a very tall, very thin black woman.

“This is Lillian Fitzel,” she said. “And this is Detective McElroy, Lill.”

“Pleased to meet you, Detective.”

“Please, call me Mac.”

After greeting me, Lillian looked around as if she were seeing Josephine’s apartment for the first time.

“I invited Lill to join us to confirm what happened when we confronted Eddie.”

“I can certainly verify any less-than-complimentary remarks Josephine has made about that young man. Indeed, I can.”

“You heard him admit he was stealing?”

“Yes, I did. Claimed he has a sick daughter. Um-hmm.” Her tone was dismissive.

“You don’t believe that?”

“It’s possible, of course. But I truly doubt it.”

While Lillian spoke, Josephine busied herself with the teapot, pouring out cups of tea for the three of us.

“Detective . . . Mac, I do find this a rather curious situation,” Josephine said.

“In what way?”

“You’re off duty, am I right?”

I nodded.

“Well, I don’t understand why an off-duty officer would be taking so much interest in a case where the crime was so minor, he wouldn’t even consider making an arrest?” Josephine finished speaking, and both she and Lillian stared at me over their teacups.

“Ladies, you forget, I’ve now met Eddie Colter. And although the crime you’re accusing him of is a minor one, Ms. Subramanian’s report has elevated

my level of concern.”

“What report is that?” Lillian said.

“Eddie forced himself on her,” Josephine said.

Lillian’s eyes went wide. “He raped her?”

“No, no. But he did try to kiss her against her will.”

“Oh dear. And you still can’t arrest him?” she said, turning to me.

“Believe me, if I could, I would.”

“And you’re here to make sure we’re all right? That’s real nice of you.”

“My pleasure, ma’am.”

“Do you play poker, Mac?” Josephine said.

“Haven’t for a while. Why do you ask?”

“Lill and I enjoy a little five-card draw and Texas Hold’em. We could play a couple of hands. Just until Devi gets back?”

“Okay. Sure.”

She reached into a tote that hung on the back of the chair and pulled out a pack of cards and a box of paper clips that she handed to Lillian. “Be sure to save some for Devi. Maybe she’ll join us when she gets here.”

Grinning, Lillian doled out clips while Josephine shuffled the cards with quick, smooth movements.

We cut to see who would deal. Josephine won the cut along with the first two hands of five-card draw, after which she offered me a shot of Scotch in place of the tea. We were on the fifth hand, and I was on my second shot of Scotch, before Devi returned.

“Get yourself a cup of tea, dear,” Josephine said, barely glancing up from her cards when Devi walked in.

I found it difficult to keep my mind on my cards with Devi there. Like a ripple on a pond, her presence had a subtle effect on the atmosphere.

She poured herself a cup of tea and sat down across from me. Seeing the unassigned pile of paper clips and the whiskey bottle, she looked at Josephine and raised her eyebrows.

“Join us for a hand or two?” Josephine pushed a handful of clips into the center. “Call.”

I was certain I had the cards this time, but after I laid out my three tens, Josephine laid out an inside straight. Lillian had already folded. With a satisfied look, Josephine pulled the pot that included most of my remaining paper clips to

her side of the table.

I shook my head and relaxed into a fake drawl. “Miz Bartlett, I do believe you are way out of my league. I better quit now less’n I risk losing the ranch.”

With a grin, Devi pushed half her clips in my direction. “Be my guest.”

“Why that’s mighty nice of you, ma’am. Mighty nice.”

“Just a minute. We have a procedure for a situation like this,” Josephine said. “You may have more clips, but first you have to tell us a story.”

“We call it naked poker,” Lillian said with a chuckle of her own. She’d also had a shot of Scotch, and it was clear she was feeling its effects.

“Excuse me?” Devi said.

“We play for paper clips and stories,” Josephine clarified. “We didn’t think the staff would stand by if we started stripping. But Lill and I are getting mighty tired of Edna and Myrtle’s stories.”

Devi smiled that great smile. “So that’s what it’s about.” Then she turned to me. “How about it, Detective? You cashing out, or going for a new stake?”

“Since you offered me a stake, you can call me Mac.”

“And we don’t do none of that sweetness-and-light stuff, Mac,” Lillian said with a hiccup. “Got to be down and dirty. Otherwise, we can’t remember it.”

I shook my head and exchanged a look with Devi, who laughed in response, and it occurred to me this was turning out to be the best evening I’d had in a while. Not only was the company pleasant, the Scotch was excellent.

“A story. Hmm.” I cast about for an idea as the three women got their laughter under control. Then I took another sip of Scotch and began.

Chapter Fourteen

Devi

When I returned to Josephine's with my toothbrush and a change of clothes, I was initially discomfited by the presence of the detective—his friends do call him Mac. Remembering how it had felt like a warm hug when he'd draped his coat on my shoulders at the restaurant, I struggled to act as if we were back on the more restrained footing of our first meeting. But any discomfort was quickly dispelled by Mac's lighthearted interactions with Josephine and Lillian.

"A story, hmm?" He sat back. "For sure you ladies have one to tell about me now that you've wiped me out. And I am hoping I can convince you to keep the specifics of our . . . association this evening to yourselves. Otherwise, how's it going to look? A macho guy like me losing my grubstake playing five-card draw with senior citizens."

"Nice try, Mac," Josephine said, putting out a hand to intercept the clips I'd pushed in his direction. "But no cigar. You want to play, you pay."

I watched the interaction carefully, seeking any sign Mac was the slightest bit embarrassed or annoyed about losing. But all I saw were lips trying to look firm, but failing, and eyes filled with a humorous glint.

"Okay, let's see. How about this? I microwaved my sister's doll."

Josephine shrugged. "Depends on how old you were and what happened next."

"I was twelve. The doll's head exploded, and the body melted."

"What did she do?" Lillian asked.

"Before or after?"

"Both," Josephine said, clearly withholding full approval.

"She was ten. A real brat. Still is, as a matter of fact. What she did was make a commotion while I was sneaking out to be with my friends. One of the guys had liberated a bottle of vodka and a pack of cigarettes from his folks, and we

were intent on seeing what drinking and smoking were all about. Not only did she stop me from going, my friends were busted as well. We were all mad as wet cats. Except, well, I didn't admit it, of course, but I was secretly relieved. I expect I cooked the doll so nobody would suspect. As for what she did after that, well, suffice it to say she's never forgiven me. But then, it was her favorite doll."

That was all said with a humorous deprecation, and I couldn't help it, I liked this man. And obviously so did Josephine and Lillian.

Josephine cut her pile of clips in half and passed it to Mac. "I liked the exploding-head part," she said, clearly trying not to smile. "You need another round?" She pointed at Mac's glass.

"Don't tempt me. It's exceptional. Although I've never heard of Erdradour before."

"Not surprising. Compared to Dewar's, it's microscopic. It's the only distillery in Scotland that still does everything by hand. My husband brought back several bottles when he went to Saint Andrews to golf."

Mac picked up the bottle and looked at the label. "Hope he didn't have to take out a second mortgage."

"Why do you say that?" Josephine said.

"This Scotch is thirty years old. It must have set him back a pretty penny. Guess I should have passed on that second shot. Don't want you accused of bribing a police officer."

Josephine waved his words away. "Please, have some more."

He shook his head. "As it is, you're stuck with me until I clear what I've already drunk."

We settled down to play. Mac won a hand and so did I, but then Josephine wiped us all out with a series of masterful bluffs. At least, that's what I suspected when she refused to show her cards after forcing the rest of us to fold.

"That does it for me," Mac said, pushing back from the table.

I glanced at my watch and was shocked to discover it was after midnight.

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After everyone left, Josephine and I spent a short, peaceful night, but I didn't spend it on the couch.

"That couch may be comfortable for sitting, but not for sleeping," Josephine said, offering me the other side of the bed.

We braced the front door with one of the dining room chairs, but I thought it unlikely we had anything to worry about. If there was any danger, I was sure Mac would have arranged for Lillian to be guarded, and he would have spent the night on Josephine's couch himself. He seemed quite taken with both Josephine and Lillian. I doubted he'd chance anything happening to either of them.

I lay awake for a time, thinking about what Josephine and Lillian had discovered. Not only about Eddie and the grocery thefts, but the larger thefts, if that's what they were.

What worried me the most was that if there was someone making off with residents' valuables, then Josephine could become a target. Her painting was too large for someone to carry off surreptitiously, but I doubted that would stop a dedicated thief, not once they discovered the painting was worth millions.

Eventually, my thoughts drifted back to the evening just past, and smiling at the memory of Mac's exploding-doll story, I drifted off to sleep.

In the morning, I awakened to the smell of coffee. When I walked into the kitchen, I found Josephine chopping onions and Lillian sitting at the table, watching.

"My, you two are early birds."

"I hope we didn't disturb you, dear," Josephine said.

I blinked. Had Josephine really just called me dear? A slip of the tongue, no doubt.

"No. Not at all. I probably ought to go. I think you'll be fine as long as you stick together."

"And we do have our pull cords," Josephine said, referring to the emergency cords in each room that can be used to summon help. "But don't leave yet, dear. I'm making omelets. I have onions, mushroom, zucchini, and cheese. Your choice."

There was that "dear" again. Well, we had slept together, after all.

"All of the above would be delightful." I was too hungry to turn down Josephine's offer.

"That's what I thought," Lillian said. "Would you like coffee or tea?"

Lillian poured me a cup of coffee, which I needed to wake up properly. After a couple more minutes at the stove, Josephine set plates in front of us.

"I've been thinking," Josephine said, turning back to the stove for the third plate. "We have to do something about Eddie if we want to sleep at night. And you can't watch over me more than a night or two, Devi."

“I don’t mind, but it might cause problems if it got out I was spending nights here. I’m sure Mr. Souter would think something nefarious was going on.”

“Well, it is,” Lillian said. “I’m convinced someone is stealing from us. If we ask around, I expect we’ll find other things are missing.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I said. “If he’s responsible, Eddie might hear about it.”

“He may not be the thief, you know,” Lillian said. “It could be someone a lot smarter than Eddie. You see, I just heard a rumor about a missing stamp. Do either of you think Eddie would know anything about valuable stamps?”

“You mean, like a postage stamp?” Josephine said.

“Exactly.”

“And who’s missing it?”

“Dot Todhoffer.”

“Really?” Josephine said. “Dot’s a stamp collector? I thought she was almost blind.”

“She hasn’t always been almost blind. Besides, it was her husband who was the collector.”

“How does she know a stamp is missing?” I said.

“Dot’s daughter came for a visit with a grandson who wants to collect stamps. When Dot got out the collection, the grandson noticed the stamp was missing. He remembered his grandfather telling him it was the most valuable one. Something to do with an upside-down airplane. A Jenny. The boy has a sister named Jenny. That’s why he remembered it.”

“That makes three,” Josephine said. “One is bad luck, two may be carelessness. But three. Well, three, to my mind, is no coincidence.”

“Maybe we should call Mac,” Lillian said. “I expect three incidents would make him suspicious as well.”

“Someone will ask how he found out about it.”

“He told Eddie he got an anonymous tip about the other thefts,” I offered.

“Why don’t you call him, Devi?” Josephine said.

She was so transparent, it made me laugh. “Are you by any chance matchmaking, Mrs. Bartlett?”

Josephine shrugged. “You liked him, didn’t you?”

“As a matter of fact, I did.” Not that I intended to do anything about it.

“That’s settled then. Two birds, my dear. Always the way to go whenever

possible.”

Smiling at Josephine, I shook my head, amazed to think, that if Brookside had had a curmudgeon competition mere days ago, Josephine would have topped my candidate list.

Chapter Fifteen

Mac

The morning after the poker game, I woke up feeling good despite the two shots of Scotch. Perhaps because it was such excellent Scotch.

Out of curiosity, I googled Erdradour. I couldn't find an exact match to the bottle from last night, but I did find a thirty-year-old Erdradour Scotch that sold for \$500 a bottle.

And would I accept another sip if the occasion arose? More than likely.

I finished breakfast and my newspaper, but aside from laundry and raking leaves, the rest of my Saturday was free. I live in Blue Ash, the suburb next door to Montgomery, and I rent a small house that's targeted for a rebuild. Once the house sells, I'll have to move, but for the moment I like not living in an apartment.

I was sorting laundry when the phone rang. It was Devi, telling me that Lillian had uncovered yet another possible theft. Then why didn't Lillian call me? I'd given her my card last night.

The thought Devi might have seized the opportunity as an excuse to talk to me put a smile on my face. I went for broke, although that hadn't worked particularly well playing poker last night, and asked her to lunch, selling it as an opportunity to go over the details of the suspected thefts.

When she agreed, I hung up, grinning. Too restless to pass the time until lunch raking leaves, I went next door and offered to take Bruno and Teddy for a walk. Bruno is a nondescript hound, large and slobbery but sweet about it, and Teddy is a five-year-old with Down Syndrome who dotes on Bruno and loves to go for walks as much as Bruno does.

When we walk, Teddy usually wants to visit the memorial circle near downtown Blue Ash. He's fascinated by the bronze figures of soldiers that stand in a circle there, and Bruno is captivated by all the interesting smells.

Today, when I took them back, Kate, Teddy's mom, looked like maybe she'd

managed a short nap. She hugged me the way she always does and asked if I'd like a cup of coffee. Sometimes I say yes and we sit in her sunny kitchen, chatting for a while. Often Teddy takes a nap if the walk was long enough, and that gives Kate an additional break. She works nights at the hospital, and I suspect she rarely gets as much sleep as she needs.

Teddy's dad is out of the picture, but while I think Teddy is a cool kid, I know it's best if I don't add the complication of trying to juggle a relationship with his mother to the mix.

When I finished chatting with Kate, it was time to meet Devi, who arrived at the café five minutes after me. She had a tote with her and, after we decided what we'd eat, she pulled out several sheets of paper, handing them over after we ordered.

"Here are the details about the other three thefts Lillian's uncovered. I think if you want to know what's going on at Brookside, she's your girl."

"Not Josephine?"

"Josephine isn't very social."

"Really? I thought Josephine was quite social, at least while she was wiping me out at poker." I glanced at the information Devi had handed me. "It seems it's always a family member noticing what's missing?"

"Yes. Glenn Bascombe died, Gladys Turpin has been transferred into the memory unit, and Dot Todhoffer is nearly blind."

"So you're saying that whoever is doing this targets victims who are the least likely to notice the item is missing?" I looked up and thanked the waitress as she delivered my sandwich and Devi's salad.

"I think that's true," Devi agreed, smiling her thanks at the woman. "And I also think whoever it is chooses small items, the kind that might be easily misplaced. But while Josephine and Lillian accept that's possible, they think three such instances of valuables missing within a short time are more than a coincidence."

"I agree. It does seem suspicious."

"Can you look into it then?"

"I can't look into it at all unless we receive a credible report from one of the individuals directly involved."

She sat back and blinked. "Really? But Glenn and Gladys can't make reports."

"Glenn's heir or the executor for the estate should do it. And Gladys must

have a legal guardian who can file on her behalf.”

“And if you had that, you’d investigate?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Good.”

Throughout the exchange, Devi had held her fork suspended. After those final words, she finally lifted the fork to her mouth, took a bite, and chewed, her expression thoughtful.

I knew if I didn’t introduce more personal subjects, I might not get another chance. After all, Devi wasn’t directly involved in the purported thefts. So any investigating I might do would give me little reason to talk to her.

As she took another bite, I said, “How long have you been at Brookside?”

She blinked and set her fork down. “Oh, let’s see . . . five, six months, I guess.”

“You a Cincinnati girl?”

She shook her head. “I had a college roommate from here. She’s the one who convinced me Cincinnati was a great place to live.”

So many things were wrong with that answer. Where to begin? Which college? And how long ago did she graduate? Although she looked young, she conducted herself with more reserve than most recent college grads could muster.

And where was she from originally? And why come to Cincinnati to work for a retirement community? Yeah, I’d get it if she’d come for a job at Procter & Gamble, whose headquarters are here. But moving to Cincinnati to work at a place like Brookside? Nope. Didn’t compute.

“What about you?” she said before I could organize my next question. “Are you from this area?”

I had the distinct impression she’d asked as a way to shift the focus away from herself, and it occurred to me she could be one of the so-called dreamers, growing up thinking she was American, only to find out as an adult she wasn’t and could be deported at any time to a country she knew nothing about. That might account for the hesitation I sensed in her whenever she was in my presence. Although, we should have moved beyond that after playing poker.

“I’m from Toledo,” I told her. “Went to the University of Cincinnati, decided I liked it here, and stayed.” Because it seemed like a great place to raise the family Lisa and I planned to have. I shook my head, trying to dislodge that thought with its attached shreds of memories.

“Where did you go to college?” I said, trying to get back to the main point.

“Wisconsin. Then after I graduated, I worked in Minneapolis for a while. Hated it. One night I was talking to my Cincinnati friend, moaning about traffic and weather and . . . well, everything. She invited me to come for a visit. I did, liked what I saw, decided to stay.”

It seemed to me she was filling in blanks as quickly as she could. To cut off further questions? Maybe. The only question was why.

“Do you like being a police officer?” Once again, she’d preempted my questions with one of her own.

“Most of the time. Yeah. I do.”

“I’ve always thought it would be a hard job. Being constantly exposed to the worst side of people.”

“There is that.” I shrugged. “But we also come in contact with lots of people who are doing their best, for themselves and their neighbors.”

“I read somewhere that most policemen have savior complexes. You know, if you aren’t out saving lives, you feel your own life is useless.”

If she’d said those words with any hint of arrogance or accusation, I would have been deeply offended. As it was, I needed to take a deep breath before I answered.

“People choose police work for the same variety of reasons they choose any other profession. In my case, I want to live in an orderly, peaceful society, and I’m willing to accept a role in ensuring that order.”

“Not much happens in Montgomery, though. Do you ever get bored?”

“I do, sometimes.” Not an easy admission. Since I’ve been here, we’ve not had a single homicide, which is a good thing, of course. But boring if you happen to be a detective. Most of my investigations involve parties that get out of hand, underage drinking, shoplifting, domestic disputes, burglaries, drugs. The modern litany.

“Do you ever think about, oh, I don’t know. Working someplace bigger. Like Cincinnati?”

“Been there, done that.”

She cocked her head and examined me. “How old are you?”

“Thirty-five. And you?”

“Thirty-two.”

Okay, that surprised me. Although she seemed more mature than twenty-two,

I never would have guessed thirty-two. I bet she makes a killing doing the guess-my-age thing at amusement parks.

We sat for a moment, looking at each other, before she lowered her eyes and moved her fork at random on her plate.

“So is working in a retirement community your dream job?” I said.

“Not exactly. But it does let me hang out with cool people like Josephine and Lillian.”

“Is there a dream job you have in mind?”

She gazed out the window, her face going through a series of expressions I found both puzzling and interesting. Then she looked at her plate, shook her head, and sighed.

“Dream jobs are few and far between. What about you? Is Montgomery your dream job?”

“In the beginning, I thought it was.”

“What changed? You or the job?”

My turn to look out the window. I’d wanted to get into more personal issues with Devi, hadn’t I? And it didn’t get more personal than this.

“I took this job because my wife didn’t like living with the uncertainty of me working night shifts in inner-city neighborhoods. Said if we were going to have a family, I owed it to her and our future kids to do something that wasn’t so dangerous.”

I glanced up to find Devi examining me with a thoughtful look, and I knew I had a choice to make. Did I let her think I was married? It would certainly be one way to cool the attraction I sensed building between us. Or maybe I was fooling myself about there being any mutuality there.

Before I could make a decision one way or the other, the waiter came over to clear our plates. So I let it ride, the possibility there was a wife and potential children lurking in the background of my life.

Too soon. That’s how I justified it, although that excuse was wearing thin.

Chapter Sixteen

Devi

It should have been a huge relief, and it was—the discovery that Mac was married—given I felt more attracted to him than I was comfortable with. But discovering he was married, initially felt like someone threw a glass of ice water in my face. However, it settled in more comfortably as I thought about it.

It was better that he was unavailable. Much better.

Shortly after that revelation, I made an excuse about needing to get back to Brookside for an activity. Although Mac didn't question it, he did give me a thoughtful look before walking me to my car where we said good-bye. And that was that.

Thinking he might be suspicious if I didn't at least look like I was driving to Brookside, I took a left out of the parking lot. Then I decided, since I had nothing more pressing to do, I might as well go to Brookside and report to Josephine.

Unlike the first two times I'd visited, Josephine opened the door promptly and with a smile. Lillian was there as well, a good thing, since I needed to also tell her what I'd found out.

"I just had lunch with Mac," I said, realizing as their expressions turned hopeful that *lunch* sounded like a date.

I shook my head, hoping to diminish their obvious enthusiasm. "He's married."

"I don't think so, dear," Josephine said.

"He told me he was."

"No ifs, ands, or buts?" Josephine insisted.

"I'd say it was pretty direct." Although, thinking about it now, it did seem like the information had been ambiguous. But no matter. "That isn't the point. I need to tell you what he said about the robberies, or rather, suspected robberies."

When I finished relaying the information, Lillian cocked her head. “Sounds like we have work to do.”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?” Lillian said. “We need to contact the families to encourage them to file police reports.”

“Yes,” Josephine said. “I agree.”

Lillian turned to me. “We might need your help.”

“My help?”

“Yes. I don’t believe a phone call will be the most effective way to handle this. We’ll need to go see Glenn’s son and Gladys’s daughter.”

“Of course. I’m happy to help.” Well, what else could I say?

“Good. We’ll get started then,” Lillian said, rubbing her hands together with a gleeful look.

Josephine sat down at her computer, and Lillian told her the names she needed to look up.

Being extraneous to their efforts, I said good-bye and went home, feeling more down than I usually allow myself to feel, and not sure why.

Chapter Seventeen

Josephine

“I’ve talked to the people Eddie shops for about his sick daughter,” Myrtle said as I was dealing our first hand Wednesday afternoon. “And they all want to help.”

“You what?” A card flipped on to the floor. I leaned over to pick it up.

“You heard me, Josephine. Everybody is sympathetic, except maybe Pru Parker. They want me to tell him they won’t report him, and that they’d be happy to contribute something to help. In fact, several have already contributed.”

“But Eddie doesn’t have a daughter, sick or otherwise,” I said.

“Of course he does. He said so, didn’t he?”

“I’ve seen where he lives, and no children are allowed.”

“Maybe he’s divorced and his daughter lives with his ex-wife,” Myrtle said.

“How does Eddie pay alimony and child support while living at The Meadows?”

“What’s The Meadows?” Myrtle said.

The whole time we were talking, Edna and Lill watched the conversational ball go back and forth like they were at a tennis match.

“The Meadows is a brand-new apartment complex in Mason. It’s quite expensive.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Devi looked up his address and took me there. And I spoke to the rental agent. Eddie lives alone, and while lots of big girls visit him, for sure no little girl ever has.”

“Well, I never, Josephine. That was highly inappropriate.”

“What was? My checking on Eddie, or Eddie lying about having a daughter?”

While Myrtle huffed and puffed and jiggled, I finished dealing the cards.

“You’re saying,” Edna said, “that Eddie doesn’t have a daughter?”

“I certainly am. I think the man’s a menace. Can you believe, he even forced himself on Devi?”

“I very much doubt that. I don’t believe she’s Eddie’s type.”

“And what type might that be?”

“His daughter has blond hair and blue eyes.”

“He doesn’t have a daughter.”

“Says you.”

“And me,” Lill said, finally jumping into the conversation that had now gone full circle.

“And what would you know?” Myrtle said, arching her eyebrows at Lill in a most unbecoming way.

“I don’t trust that man further than I could throw a pig,” Lill said.

“Well, I’ve seen the pictures, and it’s the two of you who are delusional.” Myrtle sat back with another jiggly huff.

“Pictures? You’ve seen pictures? Well, I expect if Eddie could invent a daughter, pictures would be no problem.”

Myrtle pushed back her chair. “You know, I’m not at all sure I want to be associated with people who are so heartless.”

“Fine with me,” I said. “Since I prefer not to be associated with people who are so—” I felt a sharp kick under the table. Lill was also giving me one of her looks. “Fine with me,” I repeated, glaring at Lill.

“Come along, Edna.” Myrtle puffed, and with a heave, pushed herself to her feet.

Edna shrugged, as if to say, *What can I do?* before she stood and followed Myrtle.

I blew out a breath, and Lill and I looked at each other.

Chapter Eighteen

Devi

I stepped out the back door of Brookside, shrugging on my coat against the autumn chill. After my long day, I was tired.

“You little bitch.”

I turned to find Eddie in the shadows beside the back door. He moved, blocking the way back in. His expression, illuminated by the light spilling out of nearby windows, made me catch my breath, and my heart rate kicked up the way it always does when something triggers a memory of why I had to leave Chicago.

While he might be blond, Eddie was giving off a dark, menacing aura.

Pulling in a breath, I moved my feet so I was standing more solidly. I set my tote on the ground and slipped a hand in my pocket, closing it over my cell phone, feeling for the right keys to dial Mac’s number.

“Who do you think you are, to check on me?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

As he took a step toward me, I took a step back. It moved me further from the door, into a more open area within sight of several windows, including Josephine’s.

“I’m talking about you and that old bat coming to my apartment and then telling everyone about it.” Although his tone was angry, he was keeping his voice down. But how did he discover Josephine and I had visited his apartment complex?

“Old bat?” I raised my voice, although the chances of being overheard were slim. “Are you by chance referring to Josephine Bartlett?”

I’d read somewhere that we can hear our own name, even with the overlay of sound in a place like an airport terminal, so I thought it was worth trying to get Josephine’s attention, even though I doubted the sound would carry through the

double-paned windows.

Eddie put up his hands, ordering me to shush.

Raising my voice covered up the beep the phone made when I pushed the SEND button. I didn't know if I'd dialed Mac's number, but hoping I had gave me another reason to yell—if Mac answered, I wanted him to be able to hear me.

“Sorry. I don't agree with you. Josephine Bartlett's a terrific person. But who told you we checked on you, Eddie?” Even to my own ears, I sounded like a poorly rehearsed bit actor trying to project to the back of a drafty theater.

“Dammit, keep your voice down.”

Good, my strategy was rattling him. “If you're so concerned about something that involves me, Eddie, why accost me in the parking lot when you could have come to my office?”

Someone had to be on the other end of the phone.

A tapping sound interrupted us. Josephine stood at her window, her phone to her ear. When she saw Eddie looking at her, she gave him the finger.

He turned back to me. “This isn't finished, bitch. You stay out of my face and my business if you know what's good for you.”

I was no longer the only one sounding like a ham actor in a bad melodrama. “Gladly.” In the distance, I heard a siren approaching.

So did Eddie. He walked past me and aimed a kick at the tote. It landed in a muddy puddle, and that made me mad enough I was tempted to try a kick of my own.

Josephine tapped on the window a second time and gestured for me to come inside. I picked up the dripping tote and did just that.

I almost forgot about my phone, but as I walked into Josephine's apartment, I pulled it out and checked to see if the line was still open. It appeared to be, but no one was on the other end. I clicked my phone off.

Josephine walked back to the window to look out. “Very clever of you, dear.”

“What was?”

“Dialing my number and alerting me to what was going on.”

“Oh. And it was clever of you to figure it out so quickly.”

I pulled my phone back out and checked to see if I could figure out which buttons I'd pushed. Given Eddie's anger, it seemed prudent to move Mac to a more accessible number on my speed dial.

“It’s okay, Mac,” Josephine said into her phone. “Eddie’s gone, and Devi’s with me.”

After listening to whatever Mac had to say, she turned off the phone and smiled at me. “Mac says he needs to check with you about what happened, but I think he just wants an excuse to see you.”

“He’s married, remember.”

“No, I really don’t think so,” Josephine said. She glanced out the window. “He’s here. Can you let him in?”

Rolling my eyes, I went to open the back door for Mac.

“Thanks for coming.” After Eddie’s anger, it was a relief to have Mac there.

“What happened?” he said as soon as the door to Josephine’s apartment closed behind him. “Josephine said Eddie attacked you?” He seemed out of breath, but I figured it was because he’d rushed to get here.

“It was only a verbal confrontation.”

The three of us took seats at Josephine’s table, and Mac pulled out his notebook, signaling this visit was all business. I gave Josephine a *you see* look, but she ignored me.

I described what happened with Eddie while Mac took notes and Josephine listened.

“How do you think he knew you’d been to his apartment?” Mac asked.

I shook my head, but then Josephine spoke up. “I’m afraid that’s my fault. Lill and I were playing cards with Myrtle, and she was going on and on about organizing donations for Eddie’s sick daughter, and well, I told her you and I had checked, and there was no daughter. It made her angry, I’m afraid. I’m sorry, dear. It didn’t occur to me she’d tell Eddie. Guess I really put my foot in it.” Josephine pursed her lips, looking worried.

“Regardless, his response was inappropriate,” Mac said. He turned to me. “I hope you plan to report this to the manager or your supervisor.”

“I can’t. Eddie didn’t do anything, after all. He didn’t even touch me.”

“What about the time he tried to kiss you?” Mac’s expression was stern, his tone angry.

I shook my head. “No, I’m sorry. I can’t. The manager is his uncle.” I was being backed into a corner by both Mac and Eddie, and I didn’t like it.

“Is there someone here you trust to walk you to your car when you leave at night?” Mac said.

“She could always let me know, and I could watch until she’s safely in her car,” Josephine said.

“Will you agree to that?” Mac said.

“Of course.” I wondered if Eddie knew where I lived, a possibility that sent a shiver up my spine.

“I have some other news,” Josephine said, addressing Mac. But without telling him what it was, she went to the kitchen and ran water into the kettle.

Then she sat down while the water heated. “Lill and I have been in contact with Glenn Bascombe’s son and Gladys Turpin’s daughter. Both of them said Mr. Souter blew them off when they reported the baseball card and the necklace were missing. After we spoke with them, they both said they’ll be filing police reports.”

The kettle whistled and Josephine jumped up. I got up to help.

“More details would be helpful,” Mac said.

Josephine came back and picked up a pad of paper, tore off a sheet covered with writing, and handed it to him. “Those are the names of the people who will be filing the reports. We’ve also spoken to Dot Todhoffer, and she gave us her daughter’s number. We haven’t reached her yet, but when we do, I expect she’ll help Dot file a report. So that’s three. I hope that’s enough for you to look into it?”

“Three is more than enough. But I don’t want you doing any more investigating on your own.”

Josephine’s lips firmed. “I want to do whatever I can to help. And so does Lill.”

When Mac looked at me, I shrugged. I didn’t think he believed Josephine would stop any more than I did.

“I’m serious, Josephine. Let us take care of this.”

“What’s your plan?” Josephine said.

“I’ll interview whoever files the reports and get the details about the missing items.”

“And then?”

Mac shook his head and suppressed an eye roll. “We look for the items. And we interview the manager and the staff here.”

“What about Eddie?” Josephine said.

“What about him?”

“He’s a suspect, right? Can’t you do that thing where you pull his financial data and prove he’s living on ill-gotten gains?”

Mac struggled to suppress a smile. “Not without a warrant. And for a warrant, I need evidence. And you will leave that to me.”

“Of course.” Josephine tried to look innocent, but I was beginning to know her well enough to suspect she was crossing her fingers when she said it. That was what I did when I needed to tell a lie.

Although I was tempted to check Josephine’s hands, I didn’t want to make Mac any more suspicious of her than he already seemed to be.

Chapter Nineteen

Josephine

After Mac and Devi left—Mac insisted on walking Devi to her car—I called Lill to come over for a strategy session. She was as disturbed as I was when I told her about Eddie confronting Devi.

“As for the thefts, Mac will investigate as soon as the reports are filed. But if we continue trying to find out who the thief is, we can’t let him know we’re doing it,” I told her.

“Because?”

“Because he made a big deal out of it. Said it could be dangerous. But we’ve already pulled Eddie’s tail. How much more dangerous can it be?”

“What about Devi?”

“She’s okay. More angry than frightened. She left when Mac did, so I don’t know if she’ll help us or not.”

“They left together?”

“And went as far as her car. They didn’t even chat. He opened her door for her, then he got back in his car and they drove off.”

“Maybe he is married.”

If he was, I didn’t think it could be a very happy marriage, not with Mac going out to dinner by himself and then accepting an invitation to spend an evening playing poker with a couple of old ladies.

“What we need is a plan to figure out who the thief is,” I told Lill, getting back on topic.

“Well, there’s one thing we can do, and it’s as safe as going to church,” Lill said, folding her hands together, her expression smug.

“And that is?”

“I can analyze everyone’s handwriting.”

I sat staring at her. Possibly my mouth even hung open until I realized it was

and snapped it shut. Up to now, I'd thought Lill was an intelligent and worthy partner in our little endeavor. But this latest suggestion was just plain nutty. I searched for words that would counter her idea without being unkind.

Meanwhile, Lill sat there, her expression one of amusement. "I can see you don't know what I'm talking about, Josephine. It's an exact science, you know. It even has an impressive name: Graphoanalysis. I trained for a number of years before doing it professionally." She settled her shoulders, giving me a *so, there* look.

"You mean like those things you see in the newspaper? Copy this paragraph, and we'll tell you all your secrets?"

"That's mostly a parlor trick. I have worked with the police, you know."

I shook my head. "I didn't know."

"And I helped a large corporation pick its executives. As a result, their stock has done very well."

"Oh?"

"I could tell you which company, but then you might be accused of insider trading."

I suppressed a smile.

"I've already analyzed Eddie's handwriting, and he has very few good points. Still, I don't think he's intelligent enough, nor does he have the finesse, for these other thefts. I think we're looking for a smarter, more devious person."

"If you say so."

"I do. What we need to figure out is how to get handwriting samples from as many of the staff as possible. I need at least four or five lines of writing to do a valid analysis, so we can't just pass around a get-well card and ask everyone to sign it."

"I see the problem. But I don't have a solution."

"I can also do couples analysis."

"What's that?"

"You know. If I had samples of their writing, I could tell if Devi and Mac are compatible."

"We still don't know if he's married."

"Like you, I doubt that. But I bet you can find out for sure with your computer, Josephine."

Lill was correct. And it was annoying that she had to suggest it before I

thought to do it. But then, I'd never truly doubted he wasn't single.

Chapter Twenty

Lillian

I could see how skeptical Josephine was when I suggested handwriting analysis as a way to identify our thief. She obviously did some checking, though, because the next day she called me right after breakfast to come to her apartment, saying she had an idea and wanted my opinion.

“What I’m thinking,” Josephine said, after we were settled with cups of one of her delicious teas, “is we get Myrtle to propose a fund-raiser.”

“For?”

“Eddie’s daughter.”

“I thought you said he didn’t have one.”

“But he has pictures of a little girl, and he’s convinced a number of people she’s his daughter. So here’s the deal. We talk Myrtle into setting up a fund at Children’s Hospital, then we volunteer to put together a book of encouraging messages to go along with the money.”

“It won’t work, Josephine. You and Myrtle aren’t even speaking. Besides, she knows you don’t believe Eddie.”

“I bet you that if I go crawling to Myrtle, saying how awful I feel about doubting Eddie, she’ll go for it.”

The idea wasn’t perfect, but I didn’t have a better one, even though I’d asked the Heavenly Father to send me one. But perhaps he sent me Josephine instead.

~ ~ ~

After Josephine and I talked further about how to handle Myrtle, we decided the best approach would be for me to talk to her, since she wasn’t as angry with me as she was with Josephine.

After lunch I followed Myrtle back to her apartment, pleased that Bertie

wasn't with her, since he distracts her. When I knocked on her door, she opened it and gave me a suspicious look.

"May I speak with you, Myrtle?" I said using my meekest tone.

"About?"

At the unpleasant aggression in her voice, I leaned away from her. Then I remembered why I was there and said a quick prayer.

"May I come in?"

In response, she opened the door wider, but it was obvious she was withholding approval of the visit. I stepped inside and waited for her to take a seat on one of her sofas. I then sat on the second, facing her like a naughty child awaiting judgment for my transgressions.

"I'm here to apologize. The last time we talked, I made a dreadful mistake. You were being compassionate and caring, and Josephine and I were being . . ."

Myrtle frowned, then spoke firmly into the pause. "Not very nice."

Probably better if I avoided any further mention of Josephine. "Yes. Not very nice. But I hope you and I can make a fresh start?" I paused.

Josephine insists Myrtle lags a word or two behind, and I wanted to give her time to catch up. Besides, I needed a moment to gather myself before saying the next bit.

"You've been talking to people about the daughter, I believe. Trying to get donations to help with her expenses?"

Myrtle nodded. Sharply and begrudgingly.

"I think it's wonderful that you've taken that on. And I want you to know you can count on me to help."

"Really?"

"Really. And I'm wondering why you don't expand your efforts? Make it a project. You know, establish a fund in the daughter's name at Children's Hospital? That way everyone who donates will get a tax deduction." I stopped again to let her think about it.

Then the clincher. "And if you set up a fund, I know someone who's willing to donate a thousand dollars."

Myrtle gasped, which is what I did when Josephine proposed it. She said the promise of a large donation was the best way to keep Myrtle from figuring out she was being manipulated, although Josephine also thought there was little danger Myrtle would suspect. I agree. Myrtle is a sweet lady, but she isn't the sharpest knife in the drawer, as my Roger would say.

“Who?”

“An anonymous benefactor,” I said, avoiding the dreaded *J* word. “And since you’re the one who had the idea, you should get all the credit.” I waited. And prayed.

“I’ve talked to several people, but I’ve only been able to collect a couple hundred dollars so far. Do you really think . . . ?”

Ah, she was on the hook. As Josephine predicted.

“That’s amazing, and I think that proves if you give people the chance to write a check so they know where the money’s going . . . well, I think this could be huge.”

“You really think so?”

“I do. It’s so wonderful of you to do this. And I hope you’ll let me help.” I stopped, then snapped my fingers. “I know what I can do. While you take care of the donations, I’ll ask people to write messages of encouragement for Eddie’s daughter. Remind me, what’s her name?”

“Sara.”

“Sara, that’s so pretty, isn’t it? Well, as I was saying, I’ll ask the residents and staff to write inspirational messages. Even those who can’t afford to contribute money can write something. And then I’ll get help to turn it into a book. Yes, indeed. A book. For Sara.”

“My goodness. You’re taking my breath away,” Myrtle said, panting.

“You’ll be doing the hard work. And I’ll make sure everyone knows it’s your idea to do this.”

The two of us stared at each other.

Then Myrtle grinned. “You know, I did raise lots of money when I was younger.”

We stared some more.

“And you’ll help with the book and other things?”

“Of course,” I said. “I only want a chance to help.”

Hooked. I’d done it. I wanted to pump a fist in the air the way young people always do today, but refrained. I didn’t want Myrtle thinking too deeply about what I’d proposed.

I jumped to my feet. Time to go before Myrtle asked any probing questions, or before I slipped and mentioned Josephine.

Chapter Twenty-One

Josephine

A few days after the conversation with Myrtle, Lill and I had just taken our seats in the dining room when Myrtle bustled over to show Lill the chart Bertie had set up for her to track donations to the Sara Fund at Children's Hospital. I didn't realize Bertie had that much tech savvy in him.

"You were right," Myrtle told Lill, ignoring me. "When I returned the cash and told everyone I'd set up a fund at Children's Hospital instead, every one of them took out their checkbooks and wrote me a check for more than twice what they'd given before."

The chart showed that donations had reached \$800.

"And with that check from the anonymous donor, we'll be well on our way to our goal."

"I'll get that to you this afternoon," Lill said, raising her eyebrows in question to me.

I nodded. I'd have Devi run me to the bank.

"How did you decide on a goal of five thousand?" Lill asked.

"That's what the lady at Children's suggested as a starting point. But I'm hoping we'll do much better than that. If we do, we'll be able to help other children as well as Sara."

Clearly Myrtle has no concept of the costs of modern medical care.

"I'll get started on the messages for Sara's book," Lill said, smiling at her. "And by the way, Josephine has agreed to help me."

That earned me a glance, a bosom heave, and a clatter from Myrtle's bracelets.

"I apologize for my earlier comments," I said, trying not to grit my teeth.

Myrtle looked down her nose at me, but after a suitable interval, she nodded.

"I think it might be best to keep what we're doing a secret from Eddie," Lill

said. “At least, for the time being.”

“Hmm yes, I think you’re right,” Myrtle said, glancing at me as if I were a spider and she wasn’t sure if I was dead or getting ready to jump on her. “Would you maybe . . . that is . . . perhaps we could play cards later?” Myrtle glanced in my direction, this time including me, but not yet completely thawed.

I smiled at her, unclenching my jaw to do it. This was one side effect of our collaboration that hadn’t occurred to me—that we’d be roped back into playing cards with Edna and Myrtle. To tell the truth, I’d been relieved when our association ended. So I needed to come up with a way to deflect her.

“How lovely,” Lill said, beaming, and I wanted to kick her. “But I don’t think we’ll have time for cards while we’re working on the inspiration book for Sara.”

“Yes, I suppose,” Myrtle said, her expression uncertain. “And I’ll be busy as well.”

“Oh, you will,” Lill said.

I forced my lips into another smile and followed Lill’s lead of killing with kindness. “This is a big project for you to take on. Huge. I think Lill’s right, that we won’t have time for cards until we reach our goal . . .” I let the words trail off, and we nodded at each other in a friendly fashion.

Finally, frowning, Myrtle turned and walked away.

“Good save,” I told Lill.

“Kind of boring to go back to playing with Myrtle and Edna after playing with Devi and Mac.”

Amen to that.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Devi

Saturday was an unseasonably warm, clear day, so I ran my errands on foot. Blue Ash, the suburb where I live in a small apartment complex, doesn't have much of a downtown, just a couple of strip malls and some office buildings. But there's an interesting memorial—a circle of bronze statues of soldiers from a variety of conflicts—that lies on my route between the bakery and the library.

I went to the bakery first and picked up cookies for Josephine to have with her tea, hoping I'd be invited to share. Next, I crossed the street and cut through a parking lot, heading toward the memorial circle, where I noticed a man and a small boy walking a dog.

The man seemed familiar, and my first thought was that perhaps I'd seen the trio walking here before. A few steps closer, and I realized the man was Mac. I stopped in the lee of the building I'd been passing and watched as he bent over to speak to the boy. Their conversation went on for a minute or so while the dog sniffed the nearest statue.

Then Mac straightened, and I got a good look at the boy. My throat clenched with sorrow. For Mac, his wife.

The child looked up at Mac, who smiled down at him and took the small hand in his. I turned and walked away, hoping Mac had been too occupied with his son to notice me.

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A few days after I'd seen Mac and his son walking their dog, I saw him again, arriving at Brookside. He and a second man, who I assumed was also a police detective, were going into Mr. Souter's office as I was gathering a group for one of the weekly shopping trips.

It distressed me the way my heart sped up when I saw Mac. Just as upsetting

was the urge to stick around in the hope I'd get a chance to speak to him. As to what we'd talk about, I had no idea.

Reminding myself of both his marital and police status, I walked out to the bus to check in the shoppers and was surprised to find Lillian and Josephine part of the group since they rarely go on outings.

When we arrived at the mall, I helped everyone off the bus and then followed them inside. While they shopped, I found a place to sit and read.

I'd been reading a half hour when Lillian and Josephine showed up, carrying a bag from Staples. They were walking briskly, grinning at each other as if one of them had just told a joke.

"What are you two up to?" I said, closing my book.

"We aren't always up to something," Josephine said.

"Maybe not always. But certainly sometimes."

"We have a plan," Lillian said.

This could mean only one thing. I gave Josephine a stern look. "I thought Mac told you to leave the investigating to him."

"Of course he did." Josephine shook her head. "And isn't that just like a man?"

"A man who is a police officer. He wants you to stay safe and not interfere."

"We have no intention of interfering, dear," Josephine said. "Our plan is to enhance."

"And how are you going to do that?"

"Safer for you not to know."

"So you admit you're doing something dangerous?"

They looked at each other and then at me with shocked expressions.

"Of course not," Lillian said.

"Okay. If it's not dangerous, why not tell me?"

"It isn't dangerous, but it is tricky," Josephine said.

"I believe I can handle tricky."

"But if you don't know anything and Mac asks you questions, you won't have to lie to him."

Sadly, I could think of no reason Mac would need to question me. "He was just going into Mr. Souter's office as we were leaving," I told them.

"Good," Josephine said. "He must have gotten the theft reports. When do we

get to go back?”

“Not for at least another thirty minutes.”

Josephine snorted, obviously impatient for the outing to be over, now that her shopping was done.

“You could always window shop,” I said.

“You do realize that ninety percent of what’s on display is aimed at people at least sixty years younger than we are?”

“I hadn’t thought of that, no. But now you mention it.”

“Indeed. Can you picture either Lill or me in one of those outfits?” Josephine pointed at the nearest shop window, where skinny store mannequins cavorted in brightly colored tights and halter tops that were wildly inappropriate for the season.

“I don’t know. I think you’d look quite fetching in that pink-striped one,” Lillian said.

“As would you in the green polka dots,” Josephine retorted.

The two laughed, pulling me in as well, successfully deflecting my attempt to find out what they were up to.

When we got back to Brookside, Mac’s car was no longer parked in the visitors’ area. Disappointed, I helped the group off the bus.

I was busy the rest of the morning, planning for future outings and the evenings’ entertainments, but in the afternoon, Candace showed up in my doorway. She and I rarely have any reason to talk to each other, so it surprised me when she slid in, closed the door, and sat in the visitor’s chair.

“I need to give you a heads-up, Devi. The police were here this morning. They spoke to Calvin and to me, and they’re planning to come back to talk to you.”

Calvin was Mr. Souter. And the news Mac was coming to speak to me lightened my mood.

“What’s it about?”

“They say they’ve received three reports from either residents or relatives of residents claiming something valuable has gone missing from here.”

“Oh? Why didn’t they report it to you or Mr. Souter first?”

Candace huffed. “Apparently he blew them off. I certainly never heard anything about it. But the items are worth thousands of dollars.”

I tried to think what I would ask if this were the first I was hearing about this.

“What’s missing?”

“A gold necklace, a rare stamp, and would you believe, a baseball card.”

“Baseball card?”

“Yep. Surprised me as well. Who knew they could be worth thousands of dollars? She shook her head.

“And a stamp, you said?”

I kept asking questions, getting answers I already knew. Throughout, I wondered if Candace was as clueless as she seemed to be, or was she playing a role, like I was?

“And did you hear all the talk about Myrtle Grabinowitz doing this fund-raiser thing?”

“Fund-raiser?” This time I didn’t have to pretend I had no idea what Candace was talking about.

“For kids with cancer, inspired by some kid Myrtle knows. And would you believe, Josephine Bartlett is aiding and abetting? She was just here, asking me to write something for an inspirational book she and Lillian are putting together for the kids. And she insisted I use the paper and pen she provided.”

I recalled the Staples shopping bag, and Josephine and Lillian’s unwillingness to tell me what they were planning. But a book of inspirational words for kids with cancer? It made no sense.

“That’s weird,” I said, meaning it.

“I’ll say. I consider Josephine our reigning witch. This tarnishes her image considerably. She keeps this up, you may not be the only one willing to deal with her.” Candace stood. “Anyway, that’s it. I just wanted you to be prepared if the police do come talk to you, although I told them it was unlikely you’d know anything useful.”

She smiled, and I struggled not to take offense at her casual assessment of what I knew or didn’t know.

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Shortly after Candace left, I got a phone call from a Detective Dillingham wanting to make an appointment to speak with me. I smothered my disappointment over meeting with someone other than Mac. It was better if I didn’t see him.

I agreed to be available at three. Then I went in search of Josephine and

Lillian.

Josephine wasn't home, but Lillian was. After asking who was there, it took another minute before she opened her door.

"I just had an interesting conversation with Candace," I said.

"Oh?" Lillian didn't invite me in, which was peculiar since she's usually welcoming.

"Something about a fund-raiser that Myrtle's running?"

"Oh, yes. She's collecting for a fund at Children's that pays medical expenses for children with cancer."

"Candace also said you and Josephine were helping?"

"It's a wonderful cause, don't you think? Several of us are helping out."

"But you and Josephine had a falling-out with Myrtle, didn't you?"

"Oh, that's been . . . we've apologized to each other, and it's fine." Lillian was usually composed and dignified. This was the first time I'd seen her flustered.

"And you're putting together a book?" I said.

She nodded. "We're asking everyone to write something inspirational."

"Are you going to ask me?"

"Of course." She stepped back from the door, and I followed her inside. She picked up several sheets of paper along with a ballpoint pen and handed them to me.

"We're asking for hopeful messages that children and their parents may find comforting. And if you have any trouble coming up with something, it's perfectly okay to pick a quotation. Then you write it out. The handwriting will make the book more interesting, don't you think?"

"Why the sudden interest in children with cancer?" Then I had an awful thought. "This doesn't have anything to do with Eddie, does it?"

"I think that's where Myrtle first got the idea," Lillian said. "But the money's going directly to Children's."

While I could understand Myrtle collecting money, I couldn't see why Lillian and Josephine had agreed to this bizarre idea for a handwritten book.

"Was there anything else you needed?" Lillian said.

I shook my head. As I did, I noticed a book on her table. I could read only parts of the title: *Grapho* and *riting*, before good manners required me to take my leave. I walked out, puzzling over both Lillian's manner and the book's title.

When I got back to my office, I wrote out the letters I'd seen, and worked on filling in the blanks.

I opened the Amazon site on my computer and searched the book category for "grapho." I scrolled through several screens before hitting on a possible match: *Graphoanalysis: The Art and Science of Handwriting Analysis*.

I read the book description and then sat back staring at the screen, shaking my head, both amused and appalled. No question, Josephine must have crossed her fingers when Mac asked her to refrain from any further investigations, because clearly that's what she and Lillian were doing. Investigating.

On the pretense of putting together an inspirational book, they were collecting handwriting samples to analyze. I wondered who would be doing the analyzing, and if either of them had any idea what they were doing.

There was a knock on the doorframe. I looked up to find Mac standing there, which made my heart do an absurd skippy thing. I closed my Internet browser, took a breath to steady myself, and smiled at him.

"Is this a good time for you?" he said.

"Yes, of course. It's fine. Please, have a seat."

He sat, turning his notebook in his hands. "We've been interviewing the senior staff, and it would have looked odd if we left you out."

"You're investigating the thefts, then?"

"Yes, although I'm afraid we haven't been able to make much progress. We have our IT guy searching the web, and we located the jeweler who designed the necklace. She provided us with a picture." He leaned forward and laid a photo on the desk. "I'm wondering if you ever saw Mrs. Turpin wearing this?"

The necklace was a thick braid of gold, and hanging from it was a heart-shaped pendant inset with five diamonds. "Oh yes. I have seen this. Gladys always wore it whenever she went out to dinner with the group."

"Good. At least, that's proof she had it with her here at Brookside." He reclaimed the photo, sat back, and opened his notebook.

"Wasn't it on her inventory list?"

"She listed jewelry with an overall value of \$5,000, but the necklace alone is worth seven. As for the stamp and the baseball card, they were also listed as part of collections, not as specific items. Souter did say the lists are manually entered into a computer program, and the original forms are then shredded. Maybe the specifics were lost at that point."

"I didn't know that," I said, thinking about the possibilities that opened up

for a potential thief.

“Do you have access to the forms?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Not the originals. And I doubt I have access to the computer forms either. At least, I don’t think I do. Do you want me to check the staff database?”

He nodded, and I turned to the computer and logged into the Brookside site. Since I use it so rarely, I had to look up my password.

Mac came around the desk and stood behind me as I scrolled through the various menu choices. His nearness made my fingers skip over the keys as I tried to type in a search term. I deleted the mistyped word and tried again, discovering I had limited access to information, something I’d never noticed before.

“I’ll have to check and see who does have access,” Mac said, sitting back down. “Would you have any ideas about that?”

“Aside from Mr. Souter and Candace, possibly their assistant. Did he tell you who transfers the data from the forms?”

“He says he does that. For security reasons.”

“And then he shreds the forms?”

“Now that’s the interesting thing. He doesn’t do it right away. He leaves the forms along with other papers to be shredded, and they’re picked up periodically by a shredding company.”

“That means anyone with access to his office could help themselves to the forms before they’re shredded.” I immediately thought of Eddie.

“We’re thinking one person is doing this, but it’s also possible it’s two people, one with access to the lists and a second with routine access to apartments.”

“That sounds plausible,” I said. “Eddie has both, you know. He’s frequently alone in Souter’s office, and he has access to the apartments as well.”

Mac made a final note and then put his notebook away, signaling the end of our meeting.

I debated whether to mention what Josephine and Lillian were up to, but since it was unlikely anyone would suspect an ulterior motive in their book project, it would be a shame to spoil their fun. I doubted they’d find out anything useful, though.

“What about my appointment with Detective Dillingham?” I said.

Mac frowned.

“He said he was coming at three to interview me?”

“I’ll let him know I took care of it.” He paused, looking down at his hands, then he gave me a direct look. “Any more trouble with Eddie?”

“No. I’ve followed your advice. I always call Josephine when I’m ready to leave, and she watches until I get in my car. I’ve also been leaving a little earlier so I can walk out with one of the aides.”

“Good. Glad to hear it. Be sure you keep doing that.”

“Yes, I will.”

He stood and reached out a hand. To shake, I realized after a moment. His hand was large and warm, and touching him, I felt once again the quiet force of his personality I’d noticed the first time I met him and every time I’d seen him since.

The temptation to ask him to stay so I could confess my secret and ask for his help was, briefly, overwhelming.

All in all a good thing then that he chose that moment to let go of my hand and walk out of my office.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Josephine

The inspirational messages and quotes were coming in quickly. As I delivered them to Lill, I divided them into two piles: residents and staff. Then I subdivided the staff pages into those who had ready access to residents' apartments and those who did not.

We discussed whose writing should be examined as a priority, and Lill suggested I find out who was assigned to clean the apartments that had missing items. Leaving her examining the writing sample from the head of housekeeping, I went to talk to Gladys and Glenn's neighbors and discovered, as they were in different wings, they had different housekeepers.

Last, I spoke to Dot Todhoffer, the woman missing the stamp. She added a third housekeeper to my list. Not surprising, but it was disappointing. Each analysis took a lot of time, so narrowing down possible suspects would be invaluable to Lill's efforts.

When I returned to her apartment, I found Lill bent over a portable writing desk, peering through a magnifying glass and brandishing a protractor.

"This is most interesting, Josephine," she said, glancing at me.

"Who are you analyzing now?" I asked.

"The handyman. You know, the one who replaces our light bulbs and unstops toilets, things like that."

"I've never met him."

"Of course you haven't," Lill said without looking up. "You probably unstop your own toilet."

"And I'll change my own light bulbs. I'm not doddering yet. But I haven't asked any of the maintenance staff for a handwriting sample yet." Then I noticed the paper Lill was examining wasn't one of the ones I'd been handing out. It appeared to be a work order, or something similar.

“Where did you get that?” I pointed at the paper.

“I’ve been collecting samples for some time. Just for fun, you know.”

“You mean I didn’t need to go around talking to everyone?” I was finding it a chore, to tell the truth.

“Not at all. I only have a few scraps. The samples you’re getting are so much better. Still, this one is most interesting.”

“In what way?”

“He has double-looped circle letters and curled-under arches. I wouldn’t be a bit surprised to discover Bob is having an affair.”

Most of what Lill said about the writing samples was in a code I’d yet to break. “But is he capable of theft?”

“I’d certainly consider him a suspect.” She paused and took off the glasses. “You know what would help?”

“What?”

“To know what Mac has found out. It might narrow things down. Otherwise, it may take weeks for me to get through all this.” Her hand swept over the piles of papers, and she sat back with a sigh.

“We could invite him for another evening of poker and Scotch.”

“You think he’ll come?”

“I suspect the Scotch will be more than enough temptation.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Mac

On a Friday in mid-October, I got a call from Josephine inviting me to come over that evening. Erdradour was mentioned, making my mouth water, and since I had nothing else planned, I accepted the invitation. My sister would say that my looking forward to spending an evening with two elderly women was proof positive I needed an intervention.

Despite that thought, I hung up, smiling. Of course it occurred to me the two might have an ulterior motive. In return for a shot of exceptional Scotch, I expected to have my brain picked on any progress Dillingham and I had made with the thefts.

Since we'd finished interviewing, I suspected rumors were flying among the staff, and I was equally sure Souter would be keeping residents in the dark, or trying to. But given what little we'd learned so far, talking to residents, especially these two, would fit nicely into the investigation. It meant I could sip Josephine's whiskey without feeling compromised.

When I arrived and discovered it would be only the three of us, I realized I'd also been pleased by the invitation because I thought Devi might be joining us. But if that's what I hoped, why wasn't I giving Devi a call myself? It was spineless for me to expect Josephine and Lillian to set me up. On the other hand, I had no business pursuing a relationship with a woman like Devi. She was young enough to want children, and she deserved better than me.

Josephine ushered me over to the sofa. The Erdradour bottle and three crystal glasses were sitting on the coffee table.

"If you'd do the honors?" She took a seat across from me. "But only a tiny drop for me, if you please."

I poured single fingers of Scotch into two of the glasses and a half finger in the third, and the three of us saluted each other and then lifted our glasses to our lips. While Lillian and I savored the Scotch, Josephine took only a sip, then set

her glass down with a click.

“Actually, we didn’t invite you here just for Scotch, Mac. I hope you don’t mind?”

“Fine by me.”

She smiled, then picked up her glass and peered at its contents, as if searching for words. “Lill and I have a confession, you see.”

I set my glass down and gave her my full attention.

“There are things we can do that might be more difficult for you.” She shook her head. “Sorry. That didn’t come out quite right.”

The Scotch in her glass sloshed, and I was tempted to reach out and take the glass out of her hand. It would be a terrible waste if any of it spilled.

“We think it will be difficult for anyone to find out who’s doing this,” Lillian said. “But it’s important to stop them.”

I took a sip of whiskey and left them dangling. This was the kind of poker I did know how to play.

“Lill is a Graphoanalyst.” Josephine sat back with a satisfied expression, as if everything should now make perfect sense. Which it did. Sort of.

“She’s worked with the police.”

I struggled not to smile.

“We’re collecting handwriting samples from the staff, and I’ve been analyzing them,” Lillian said. She stood and walked over to the table to pick up a pile of papers.

“Wait. How did you get people to cooperate?”

“We told them we’re putting together an inspirational book for children with cancer,” Josephine said, her tone offhand. “It’s part of a fund-raising effort another resident, Myrtle Grabinowitz, is doing.”

“You’re right,” I said. “That’s not an approach I could pull off.” It might even be illegal.

“We thought if we combined forces . . .” Josephine gestured with her glass before letting the words trail off. She gave me a hopeful look.

I reached over and eased the glass out of her hand. “How do you propose we do that?”

“We thought we’d tell you our conclusions, and you’d tell us who to look at next.” Lillian sat back down, the papers in one hand. “We have a number of possibilities.” She waved the pages. “If we can narrow it down, it would be a

huge help.”

I thought about it while taking another smoky mouthful of Scotch, and decided I couldn't see a downside to their plan. Especially since they'd offered to share what they knew first. I nodded at Lillian.

“We think it's unlikely Mr. Souter is involved,” she said, pulling a paper off the pile and setting it aside. “Neither is Candace. Or Bob, the maintenance man, or Margo, who's head of housekeeping.” As she spoke, she added sheets to the smaller pile. But that still left a lot of possibilities.

“They were your main suspects?” I said.

“They seemed the most obvious ones to rule out,” Josephine said.

“What about Eddie?” I said.

“I looked at his writing some time ago, and he's definitely a suspect. But I'm not convinced he's smart enough to have done this. At least, not on his own. So we're looking for a possible accomplice.”

“I see. So you put together a bogus fund-raiser as a cover for what you're really doing? That about right?”

Josephine shrugged.

“What happens to the money that's raised?”

“That's all taken care of. It goes to Children's Hospital.”

“And this book? Is it a scam?”

“Of course not,” Josephine said. “We'll take everything people write and make a book out of it. We're planning to make copies available at no charge through the hospital.”

“Admirable.”

“Would you write something for us, Mac?” Lillian said. “After all, there is going to be a book, and we'd like more contributions from men. It isn't only little girls who get cancer.”

Although it occurred to me they might analyze my writing, it didn't bother me since I have nothing to hide. “Sure. Why not?”

Lillian retrieved several sheets of paper and a pen, and handed them to me. She sat back down, and she and Josephine gave me identical probing looks.

“What?” I said, setting the paper and pen on the table by my glass.

“We showed you our cards, now it's time for you to show us yours,” Josephine said. She leaned over and poured the whiskey from her glass into mine, a blatant bribe.

While I didn't think they'd actually discover the thief from a handwriting sample, they might have other information that could prove useful. So first, I told them everything I knew about the inventory lists and how they were handled. Neither had anything to add to that. Then I told them about my conversation with Dot Todhoffer.

"Dot said after she and Herman moved here, he often showed other residents his stamps. Since he's now deceased, we can't ask him who he showed the stamps to, but Dot did say she thought it was mostly men."

"When he showed people his stamps, did he tell them about the one that's now missing?" Josephine said.

"Dot said since he loved sharing the story about how he acquired it with anyone who would listen, she assumed he did. We know for sure he told his grandson."

"I do vaguely remember Herman," Lillian said. "He died six months ago. You know, the stamp could have been missing since then."

"That's true. But at least we have confirmation from the grandson the stamp was here at Brookside before Todhoffer died. And Devi verified she'd seen Gladys Turpin wearing the necklace that's been reported missing. That means the only item we have no confirmation was ever here is Glenn Bascombe's baseball card."

"But if you know two of the items were here?" Josephine lifted her eyebrows.

"It makes it likely the card was here too," I finished for her. "Still, we need more proof before we investigate further."

"You mean, you'd just walk away?"

"We have only circumstantial evidence and zero suspects."

"And the suspect pool just got deeper with Herman showing the stamp to other residents," Josephine said.

Lillian sighed.

"I wish I could help you," Josephine told Lillian. "Is there something I can look for as a way to narrow down the pile?"

Lillian shook her head. "Everything is interrelated, and interpretation depends on those relationships. Something taken in isolation . . . well, if we try that, we might miss the thief. No, I'm going to have to keep analyzing."

"If there is a thief, they won't be too happy if they find out you two are looking for them."

“You’re the only one who knows what we’re doing,” Josephine said. “I think that means we’re safe.”

“Okay. But promise me something. If you come up with a reasonable suspect, you’ll call me. Don’t go asking them if they did it.”

“We solemnly swear,” Josephine said.

I took the last sip of Scotch and stood, and Josephine jumped to her feet and made sure I took the paper and pen with me.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Lillian

In early November, when Myrtle asked when we'd have the book ready to present to Eddie along with the ceremonial check, Josephine said ten days. I nudged her, but she ignored me.

Myrtle pulled a calendar out of her purse and flipped its pages. "How about the twelfth? That way, we'll still be ahead of the holidays."

"Sounds good," Josephine said.

I didn't bother to react this time.

"I'll let Devi know so she can arrange the refreshments. And I'll talk to my contact at Children's about printing up a presentation check." With that, Myrtle, ever the busy person she is, bustled off.

"Why did you agree to that, Josephine?" I knew I sounded desperate, but that's how I was feeling.

"Don't worry, Lill. While you've been analyzing, I've been researching publication options. There's something called POD where you can get books printed as you need them. And I can get that arranged while you continue to analyze."

We went back to her apartment then so she could show me what the book looked like on the computer.

"How clever of you, Josephine." I sighed, exhausted. "I better get back to work."

"Not until you drink a cup of tea. I have just the thing to perk you up." She stepped into the kitchen to heat the water, but while she was in there, I fell asleep.

~ ~ ~

I no longer bother to check whose handwriting I'm analyzing. Loops and swirls dance behind my eyes the whole time I'm awake, as well as during that suspended time as I drift off to sleep. If it wasn't for Josephine, I'd have stopped by now.

"You know, these are fascinating," she said, picking up one of the sheets on which I'd written my findings. "The more I read through these, the more impressed I am. Who would guess you can tell so much from the way the writing is slanted? And this stuff about club strokes and how people cross their *t*'s, amazing."

"But we don't seem to be any closer to finding out who the guilty person is, and I'm exhausted."

"You need to take time off, Lill. At least until after the party."

"I'm afraid if I stop, I won't be able to get started again." The only thing I'd stopped for in recent days was for meals and to go to church.

"But if you're exhausted, you might miss something important."

Josephine was correct, of course, as she usually was.

She went off to sign us up for the next shopping trip, just to give us a change of scenery, while I organized the mass of papers on my table.

She returned a few minutes later with the news that her new car was ready to be picked up. I didn't realize she'd bought a car. Either she'd never mentioned it, or I was too tired to remember. She already had her coat on, and she insisted I put mine on and come along. Devi was waiting to drive us to the dealership.

When we arrived, I was surprised, to say the least, by the car Josephine had chosen. A lime-green Subaru Cross-something-or-other. Devi and I examined it while Josephine completed the paperwork. The car was sporty and the color eye-catching.

I walked back over to the table where Josephine was completing the transaction in time to hear the salesman tell her the amount owed. I stood there blinking in surprise while Josephine wrote that number into the space on a check, and then signed it and handed it over.

The salesman picked up the keys and escorted Josephine to the car. He had her sit in the driver's seat, and she insisted I sit in the passenger seat. Devi had to leave by that time. The salesman opened the door for me with a flourish before returning to Josephine's side of the car.

He leaned in and pushed buttons on the steering wheel, providing a steady commentary about what was what. Even Josephine was overwhelmed by all the

options. She finally asked the man to set the small screen to show the number of miles remaining on her tank of gas and thanked him one last time, and we were free to leave.

“What do you think?” she said as we pulled out of the lot.

“I like the color.”

“That’s the main reason I picked it.”

“You won’t ever have to worry about losing it.”

She grinned at me, and I grinned back.

“No more Brookside shuttle buses,” she said, obviously pleased with herself. “Now we can go anywhere we want, anytime we want.”

I did think that sounded nice.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Devi

I'd arranged for the cake and other refreshments for the surprise party for Eddie the way I always do when there's a party. After making sure everything was in readiness, I went to check on Josephine.

Since I'd seen her and Lillian only rarely during the past week, I wanted to be sure they were okay, although I figured they had to be since Josephine's bright green car was often missing from its spot. Clearly she was busy enjoying her newfound independence.

At Josephine's, I found Lillian asleep on the couch.

"She's worn out," Josephine whispered, a finger to her lips. She stepped into the hall to continue the conversation.

"Have you figured out who may be doing it yet?"

I'd confronted Lillian about the handwriting analysis book I'd seen, and Lillian had spilled every one of the beans, including the fact she was convinced if Eddie was the culprit, he had an accomplice. Lillian also told me Mac knew what they were doing, which was a relief.

"We have a few possibilities, but Lill's too tired to figure it out right now."

"Are you coming to the party?"

"I'm not sure," Josephine said. "If Lill's still sleeping, I may not wake her."

"But you're presenting the book to Eddie, aren't you?"

"Absolutely not. Myrtle's doing that." Josephine patted my arm. "You don't have to worry, you know. Eddie won't have any idea this isn't all Myrtle's idea. And nobody knows the real reason we collected their handwriting."

"If you miss the party, I'll come and give you a full report."

"Good. In that case, maybe I will give it a pass."

~ ~ ~

As soon as most of the residents had arrived for the party, Myrtle fetched Eddie and had him stand next to her in the front of the room. He looked around as if trying to figure out what was going on, and I realized everyone had managed to keep the project a secret.

He said something to Myrtle. She grinned at him and continued to grip his arm.

“Okay, everyone. Well, here we are, gathered to hear wonderful, amazing news.” Myrtle let go of Eddie and clasped her hands together like a silent-film ingénue.

Eddie shifted his feet, and his Adam’s apple bobbed. As more boisterous residents began calling, “Speech, speech,” he took a half step away from Myrtle.

Myrtle waved her arms, shushing them. “As I was saying, we are here today to announce the results of the project you’ve all contributed to.”

Eddie cocked his head. I could tell he just wanted her to get on with it. As did we all.

Myrtle turned to face Eddie. “After you told me about your daughter, I thought and thought how to help with Sara’s medical expenses. And then it came to me. Set up a fund at Children’s Hospital in her name.” She flung her hands out in a *ta-da* motion and Eddie flinched, his expression segueing from incomprehension to anger to panic.

He cleared his throat. “A fund, you say?”

“Yes. We’ve established a fund that will not only pay any expenses for Sara not covered by your insurance, but it can also be used for other children. Everyone here has contributed to it.” She gazed at Eddie with a satisfied smile.

“Other children?” Eddie cleared his throat again, his expression that of a man who’d just received very bad news. Which he had, of course, since there was no Sara.

“We’ve raised \$5,000. What do you say to that?”

Myrtle held up a large presentation check that she swung from side to side. She gestured to Eddie to take one end and Barry, our resident photography guy, jumped to his feet and started snapping pictures.

“Um, that’s . . . wow. I hardly know what to say.”

“We just want you to know, Eddie, that we’re here to help so you won’t have to worry so much.”

“I’m, ah, I’m blown away. This is amazing.”

I could see Eddie was beginning to catch his balance.

“Thank you all. So much.” Eddie choked up on the last word and reached for a napkin to dab at his eyes, which I was certain were perfectly dry. It was, all in all, quite a performance.

“That’s okay, Eddie,” Myrtle said in a soothing tone of voice. “We know how relieved you must be. As for us, we feel so privileged to be able to help you. And Sara.”

There was exuberant clapping and more demands that Eddie give a speech. Myrtle took charge of the check and laid it aside, and then she told everyone to shush and supplemented that order with another vigorous waving of hands and clanking of bracelets. Someone finally picked up a fork and tapped it against a glass, and the room quieted.

“Yes, well, thank you, thank you all.” He took a step away, and Myrtle reached out and snagged his arm.

“Just a minute, young man. We have something else for you. Something all of us also contributed to.”

Barry lowered his camera long enough to hand her the book, which she held out to Eddie.

“We’ve all written words of encouragement, and we’ve put them together in this book that we hope will comfort Sara, and you, as she undergoes her treatments.”

She held the book out to Eddie, whose expression had such a desperate quality, I felt briefly sorry for him. Then I reminded myself there was no Sara.

One of the deafer residents shouted at Eddie to read something from the book. His jaw clenching, Eddie suggested he pass it around instead.

“That won’t be necessary,” Myrtle chirped. “We have more copies we’ll be giving the hospital. We can pass those around.” She walked over to one of the tables, which was when I noticed a pile of the books.

After more muttering of thank-yous and attempts to step out of the limelight, Eddie finally escaped, and Myrtle brought the formal proceedings to a close. One of the kitchen staff cut the cake, and slices were passed around. Mr. Souter arrived at that point and came over to where I was sitting.

“Is this the book Josephine Bartlett’s been putting together?” he said as Myrtle walked over with a copy.

Myrtle handed him the book, and he paged through it.

Smiling, he handed it to me. “I see we both made contributions.”

It occurred to me that he would have known the whole project was bogus since Eddie is his nephew. So, what story did they tell him?

“We’re hoping this will raise Sara’s spirits,” I said, attempting to find out. He gave me a blank look. “Sara? Who’s Sara?”

I switched tactics. “Just a child Myrtle knows who has cancer.”

“Ah,” he said. “Josephine did a nice job with this.” He pointed at the book and then stood, giving those nearby what I’ve heard Josephine call his pope smile-and-wave, although he did at least walk up to Myrtle to shake her hand before he left.

It’s as much as he ever does when we have a party. At our birthday parties, he greets the people who have birthdays that month, but I’ve never seen him share a piece of cake or conversation with anyone.

It occurred to me it could have been quite interesting if he’d arrived a few minutes earlier to this party, when Eddie was still shifting from foot to foot at the front of the room and Myrtle was prattling on about Souter’s nonexistent grandniece.

~ ~ ~

Shortly after I returned to my office from the party, Candace stuck her head in.

“We have a potential new resident taking a look at an apartment, and the family has questions about our social programs. I thought since there’s nothing on your schedule at the moment, you could speak to them? They’re waiting for you in 145 LarkTulip.”

“Of course. I’m happy to do that,” I said, although strictly speaking, the care and feeding of potential residents was one of the few things that seemed to be in Candace’s purview.

“As soon as possible would be good,” Candace said, waving her fingers before withdrawing both them and her head from my doorway.

My plan had been to leave work early today since I’d had a couple of late nights this week. Sighing, because meetings with potential new residents could sometimes drag on, I made my way to the Meadowlark-Tulip wing. When I knocked on the door of 145, it swung open abruptly and someone grabbed me by the arm and pulled me inside. The door slammed shut behind me.

“I want to know whose idea that was,” Eddie said, his voice shaking with fury.

“What idea?” I tried to free my arm, but that made him tighten his grip.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about. A damn fund for kids with cancer and a fricking book?”

Saliva speckled my face. My heart was racing, and my mind was a black whirl of terror. Abruptly, he let go of my arm and shoved me. I stumbled back against the wall, banging my head hard enough to see stars.

“I’m waiting, bitch.”

He stood over me, and I resisted the impulse to curl into a protective ball, knowing it never works. Not with someone as angry as Eddie. Besides, didn’t I spend the last ten years becoming proficient in tae kwon do to prepare for just such an eventuality as this? Although, every time I went to a practice session, I hoped I’d never have to use it that way.

Eddie began to pace, muttering curses. Slowly, I pushed myself into a standing position. He whirled, and his arm shot out. Without conscious thought, I blocked the blow and smashed the heel of my hand into his face. He backed away, holding his hand up to his nose, which was spurting blood.

Then with a roar, he launched himself at me. I sidestepped, twisting and aiming a side kick at his groin. It connected with a satisfying thunk, and he fell to his knees, grabbing for me. I skipped away, preparing for his next blow.

It didn’t come. He remained hunched over, moaning.

I reached for a nearby emergency cord and tugged it. Then I circled Eddie, making my way to the front door, staying out of reach. I opened the door and then stood in the doorway, ready to run if he made any sudden moves.

When the aide arrived, I commandeered her phone and called Mac.

While I talked to Mac, the aide rushed to Eddie’s side, no doubt thinking he was having some sort of seizure.

He pushed her away, lumbered to his feet, and stood glaring at me. “Good thing you called the police, bitch. I’m going to see you’re charged with assault. You can kiss my ass and your job good-bye.”

I was already shaking, and Eddie’s words made my tremors worse. He was, after all, the one with blood on his face, and bruises, albeit in places not on display. While I had . . . I glanced at my arm to find it looked fine except for a couple of indentations. The back of my head throbbed, but it wasn’t bleeding. And all the aide saw when she arrived on the scene was Eddie rolling on the floor, moaning. She didn’t see him pulling me into the apartment and attacking me.

It was, for the second time in my life, the perfect *he says, she says* situation. The symmetry of that staggered me.

All I could hope was that this time the police would believe me and not the man.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Mac

The investigation into the items reported missing from Brookside apartments hadn't turned up much. The department's IT guy did find a recent sale of an inverted Jenny, but it was handled by a lawyer in Indianapolis. Although the lawyer wouldn't say who had offered the stamp for sale, he assured Dillingham it was a client of long standing whose family had owned the stamp for years.

As for the baseball card, there were a lot of possibilities to investigate. The necklace was a better bet, since it was unique. But so far, there was no sign of it on any of the Internet auction sites or in local pawnshops.

So dead ends all around.

~ ~ ~

When Devi called, I was checking out surveillance videos, trying to identify a suspect in a smash-and-grab at a local shopping center. Montgomery is generally free from this type of problem, and we're aggressive in addressing it when it does happen.

But Devi's assault report took immediate precedence. When I arrived at Brookside, I ordered the receptionist to take me to apartment 145 in the LarkTulip wing, the first I knew the wings had names.

When my guide and I turned the final corner, I saw Devi slumped against the wall opposite an open door, her breath coming in gasps as if she'd just run a marathon. I suppressed the nearly overwhelming urge to go to her and take her in my arms.

A woman I didn't know was standing in the open doorway. She stepped aside and Eddie Colter lurched into view. He had blood on his face, and one eye was beginning to swell.

"Good you're here. Officer, arrest this woman." He pointed at Devi. "She

assaulted me.”

I nodded at Devi, then turned to Eddie and the other woman, pulling out my notebook. I gestured for the woman to step into the hall and got her name. When I asked what happened, she glanced at Devi and Eddie with a troubled look.

“All I know is I responded to an emergency alert from this apartment she said she’d sent.” She pointed her chin toward Devi. “When I got here, I found Eddie on the floor, in obvious distress. He said she attacked him.” Again the chin pointed toward Devi.

I looked at Eddie, who was holding a blood-soaked handful of tissues to his nose. “Why don’t you get that nose looked at, Mr. Colter, while I get Ms. Subramanian’s statement.” I kept my tone formal, but I hoped Devi could tell I was doing it only for effect. I turned to her. “Miss, if you’d come with me?”

She stepped toward me, and I gestured for her to walk ahead of me to her office. We did that without speaking. When we got there, we took the two visitors’ chairs partly facing each other, and I pulled out my recorder.

I wanted to reassure her, but first I needed to do my job. Although I had few doubts that whatever she’d done to Eddie was in self-defense, I’m a cop, and I have to give everyone, including the Eddie Colters of the world, the benefit of the doubt.

With my recorder on, I noted the date, time, location, and our names. Then I asked her to tell me what happened. I suspect my blood pressure shot up when she described Eddie pulling her into the empty apartment and shoving her against the wall.

I asked her to show me her arm and found it was encircled with a developing bruise that looked all too familiar. It was the kind of injury we often see on a domestic violence call. I took a photograph as documentation. Then she turned her head and pointed at the spot that hurt. Although I couldn’t see any obvious injury, I didn’t doubt her version of events.

When she told me what she’d done to protect herself, I wanted to cheer. But close on the heels of that feeling was one of rage, something I would have to get under control before I talked to Colter.

I turned off the recorder. “I have to interview Colter now,” I told her.

“I know.”

“Why don’t you go and be with Josephine while I do that?”

“Okay.”

Her tone was listless, and she sat hugging herself, rocking slightly and not

looking at me. I'd seen that before too. She was coming down off an adrenaline high and beginning to crash.

Ditching my cop persona, I reached for one of her hands and held it firmly for a moment before letting go.

"It's going to be all right, Devi."

"You don't know that," she said. "No one else was there. It's my word against his."

"That's all I need," I said. "I still have those receipts, you know. I think I can assure you, Colter won't be pressing charges. In fact, if you want to charge him, I'd be happy to file the report."

She shook her head. "Do you know what today was? It was the party where Eddie was the guest of honor. Over half the people living at Brookside donated money to help the daughter with cancer they believe he has. If he claims I was the aggressor and got nasty and hit and kicked him when he rejected me, most of those people, who are women, by the way, will believe him."

"Because he's hot, you mean? I think you cooled him off just a bit."

Devi didn't smile, but she looked better than when we first sat down.

"Come on. You go see Josephine, and I'll talk to Colter."

~ ~ ~

Devi pointed me toward the nurses' room, where I found Colter lying on an exam table with his nose packed with gauze, holding an ice pack to one eye but needing a second ice pack for the other eye. He was such a sorry sight, it cooled my desire to add to his injuries.

I asked the nurse to give us privacy, and I sat in the chair she vacated. I was tempted to say something about Colter needing to pick on someone his own size, but that would be as immature as microwaving my sister's doll had been. Still, the temptation was there.

I turned on the recorder and stated the time, date, location, and our names.

"Okay, Mr. Colter, why don't you go ahead and tell me what happened."

"That Devi bitch is psycho. I hope you've locked her up. She's scary, man."

"You're claiming she attacked you?"

"She sure did."

"Do you know why?"

“She hit on me, but she’s not my type. When I tried to tell her that, she went bonkers.”

“You’re saying she attacked you because you resisted her unwanted advances.”

“Yeah, man. That’s what I’m saying.”

“How did you happen to encounter her?”

“Encounter her? She works here. It’s hard not to encounter her. What’s hard is avoiding her.”

“Can you tell me why you were in the LarkTulip wing this afternoon?”

“I was . . .” He groaned. “Man, my fricking balls ache. She kicked me, you know.”

It was a good thing Colter’s gaze was aimed at the ceiling. I suppressed a grin and waited for him to answer the question.

“I, ah, was escorting Delores Hamilton back to her apartment.”

“Which apartment does Delores live in?”

“One forty-seven.”

“But the altercation with Ms. Subramanian occurred in 145, did it not?”

“Yes. I’d just said good-bye to Delores and closed her door when the door to 145 popped open, and Devi stuck her head out and asked to speak to me. I stepped inside and she closed the door, then she threw herself at me.”

As the story progressed, Colter had picked up speed. He obviously thought he was on a roll.

“Who lives in 145?”

“It’s vacant.”

“How did Devi get into the apartment?”

“I expect she used one of the master keycards. We have to be able to access people’s apartments in case of emergency, and Devi knows where the masters are kept.”

“And you do as well?”

“Of course.” He shifted the ice pack to the other eye and groaned.

“I understand there was a party in your honor this afternoon.”

“Yeah. That stupid cow Myrtle got it in her head to raise money for kids with cancer.”

“I heard that the main recipient is your daughter?”

“Isn’t that rich?” He snorted, then winced. “I only told the old bat I had a daughter with cancer to get her off my ass.”

“So you don’t have a daughter?”

“Not one I know about.”

“I’m glad we got that cleared up.”

“What do you mean?”

“Since you don’t have a daughter, I expect that means the people you took money from during your shopping forays might be tempted to press charges of theft.”

Colter popped up. It was clearly a mistake. His face contorted with agony, and he sat panting for a time before he could speak.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Detective McElroy. We’ve met before. When I came to investigate the items missing from residents’ apartments. And since then, you know what? I figured out what those grocery receipts and affidavits that someone sent us anonymously are about. You’ve been stealing from the people you shop for. That also makes you my chief suspect for the larger thefts.”

“No! I didn’t have nothing to do with that. Okay, okay, I did skim a couple of bucks here and there, but that’s it. I swear it is.”

“Just like you’re now swearing that Devi Subramanian attacked you without provocation?”

“I only wanted to ask her whose idea the party was. She overreacted, man. I mean, look at me, and there’s not a mark on her.”

“Actually, she has a nasty bruise on her arm. In my book, that gave her a clear right to defend herself.”

“Can I help it if she bruises easy? Look what she did to me, man.”

“Yeah. I hear you. Sounds like she’s definitely someone you don’t want to piss off.”

“Exactly. You got it.”

“Even if she is half your size.” I simply couldn’t resist.

“Oh, man. You’re cruel.”

“Tell me again about the thefts.”

I led him laboriously through the details of his grocery-shopping scam. From there we segued into the thefts of the stamp, baseball card, and necklace that Eddie continued to deny involvement with.

“Okay. Let’s get back to what happened today. Since you’ve admitted you initiated the interaction and acted aggressively toward Ms. Subramanian, I’ll be speaking with her to see if she wishes to press charges.”

“Wait. No, you can’t do that. Look at me. She attacked me, man.”

“We’ve already been through all that.”

He sank back and stared at the ceiling.

“This completes the interview with Eddie Colter.” I added the time, shut off the recorder, and put it and my notebook away.

“Wait. You recorded this?”

I wondered if the pain was dulling Colter’s mind or whether Colter wasn’t very bright to begin with. Likely a combination.

“It’s standard procedure.”

I stood, and Colter turned his head to glare at me.

“We’re done for the moment, Mr. Colter, but I suggest you stay away from Ms. Subramanian.”

I returned to Brookside’s main office complex and asked to see the manager. Our interaction was brief and to the point, with him saying he would speak to both Colter and Devi about the incident. I next went to the station to file my report and download the recordings of the two interviews. Then I called Josephine.

She invited me to dinner. “That is, if you wouldn’t mind picking up takeout, Mac?”

“Sure, happy to do it.”

She named a restaurant, said she’d put in an order, and for me to come as soon as I could.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Josephine

When Devi knocked on my door the day of the party for Eddie, I assumed she'd come to give us a report. Lill was finally awake, and we'd been waiting for Devi. But it wasn't the party she wanted to talk about. It was her latest run-in with Eddie, including the report that she'd managed to kick Eddie in the groin hard enough to make him double over in pain.

“Well, if there was ever a man who deserved to have his nifkin whacked, that man is Eddie.”

Devi looked puzzled, but after a moment Lill remembered what the word referred to and chortled. Devi smiled, but only briefly, when I explained.

After that moment of levity, Devi once again looked so stressed, I was ready to march down to Mr. Souter's office and demand that he fire Eddie forthwith, as they're always saying on that one cop show on television—as in, “we need backup, forthwith.” Devi managed to stop me, but only because by then it was after five, and Mr. Souter always leaves by five.

Mac called shortly after that, and I invited him for dinner. I placed an order with the Mediterranean restaurant that I knew Devi liked, paying with a credit card, one Jeff doesn't know about.

Mac showed up forty-five minutes later with enough hummus, ezme, Greek salad, zucchini pancakes, and kebabs for at least three more people. He also brought a quart of Graeter's black raspberry chocolate chip ice cream. I considered that pretty intuitive for a man; to think that we might need more comfort than hummus and kebabs could provide.

But then, he'd already talked to Devi and knew what Eddie did to her.

“What did Eddie have to say?” I asked as soon as Mac was in the door. He proceeded to unpack the food without answering.

“Well?” I said once we were all sitting around the table with full plates in front of us.

“He was in pretty bad shape,” Mac said, but he had a twinkle in his eye.

“Good,” I said. “He’s not going to press charges, is he?”

“Not easy to do once he admitted he was the one who initiated the interaction.”

Devi sighed with obvious relief.

“He tried to slant it the other way, though,” Mac said, looking at Devi. “Just like you thought he might. Said you were the one who invited him into the empty apartment and then threw yourself at him. That when he rejected you, you went ballistic and beat him up.”

“You didn’t believe that for a second, did you?” I said.

“Of course not.”

“What happens next?”

“I’ve already spoken to Souter about the incident. He said he’ll speak to Colter, hopefully to tell him his services are no longer required. I also got Colter to admit he was stealing from his grocery customers.”

“How did you get him to do that?” I said.

“Good police work,” Mac said with a smug expression.

“What about the other thefts?” Lill said. “Did you ask him about those?”

“I did. He denies any involvement. And the funny thing is, I tend to believe him.”

“Why?”

“I think he’s okay with the little stuff, but I don’t think he has the nerve for something more complex. Heck, don’t forget the man threw in the towel after only two hits from a woman half his size.”

“Yes, I could see that in his handwriting,” Lill said. “Like many bullies, he’s a coward. I agree with you that it’s unlikely he’s our big thief.”

“Have you found any of the missing items?” I asked Mac.

He shook his head. “There was an inverted Jenny stamp sold a couple of months ago, but it traced back to a lawyer in Indianapolis who claimed the owner was a long-time client and Indianapolis resident.”

“Since none of the items have surfaced, that could mean our thief is both smart and patient,” Lill said in a thoughtful tone. “That doesn’t match Eddie’s profile either. It’s clear from the far forward slant of his handwriting that he has impulse-control issues. I think our thief is someone who is very analytical and disciplined.”

“Have you found anyone like that?” Mac said.

Lill frowned. “You know, I think I do remember one profile . . .” She shook her head. “I’ll have to look through them all to find it. That last batch I did are a blur.”

“The other thing you’ll be glad to know is that Colter confirmed he doesn’t have a daughter.”

“He did look very uncomfortable today while Myrtle was making the presentations,” Devi said. “But I still worried, just a little, that it could be true.”

“Yes, so did I,” I said. “It’s a good thing we talked Myrtle into setting up a general fund.”

“Myrtle’s not going to be happy to hear there’s no Sara,” Devi said.

“There are other Saras. And Myrtle needs to get over herself,” Lill said.

That was more like something I would say, and I think it startled everyone, including Lill, but then we all chuckled.

We finished eating, and Devi and Mac cleared the table while Lill fetched her analyses for us to look through. I did like the easy way Devi and Mac worked together on the dishes. I considered it a good sign.

Lill first divided all her reports into two piles. “Here are the people with the easiest access, and these are lesser suspects. I did a more thorough review for these than I did for these,” she said pointing to each pile in turn.

I huffed. “So, what we’re looking for is someone who’s smart, analytical, and patient. That’s not much to go on. Besides, that pretty much describes you and me,” I told Lill.

“Honey, I wouldn’t say patience is your strong suit,” Lill said.

I could tell Devi and Mac were both trying not to smile. “Well, yes,” I agreed. “You’re probably right.”

“Another thing to consider,” Lill said, “while everyone lies and even steals under the proper circumstances, the person doing this is likely more bent than the average.”

“And that’s something you would have noted?” I said.

“Absolutely,” Lill said.

“Okay, well, no time like the present to start. Or maybe we should have just a wee dram first?”

“Why don’t we save the wee dram for when we find something,” Mac said.

That was fine with me. I never have understood what all the fuss over elderly

Scotch is about. Tea is my tippie. But I knew Mac liked it, so it was a good way to say thank-you for what he'd done for Devi today.

I helped myself to the top page from one of the piles, and the others grabbed pages of their own. Then we all took seats at either the dining table or in the living room.

Lill had attached the original handwriting sample to her analysis, so I looked at that first, although I didn't have any idea what to look for. The one I'd picked looked quite elegant and very feminine. Lill claims she can't tell gender from a writing sample, but I found that hard to believe after I looked at the signature and saw this was a sample of Candace's writing.

I read through Lill's comments, looking for the characteristics we'd discussed. Candace, according to Lill, has poor organizational skills but only a minor tendency to dishonesty, which I thought odd, given her inattention to her job. Her writing also hinted at an impatient nature.

I made notes of my findings on a Post-It note that I appended to Lill's commentary, then I picked up another analysis. It turned out to be a sample of Bertie's writing, which was as tottery as the man himself. Bottom line, he was patient, not overly bright, and had no dishonest tendencies. No surprises there.

"Here's an interesting one," Mac said after we'd all been reading silently for some time. "This person is smart and has a logical approach to problems. There's some possibility of an impulse-control issue, but overriding that is the ability to delay gratification."

"Who is it?" I said.

"An Edna Prisant."

I sat back and realized I was blinking in surprise.

Interesting that neither Lill nor I immediately said anything approaching *It couldn't possibly be Edna*, because the more the idea settled in, I decided it very well could be Edna.

"Oh," Devi said thoughtfully, also not saying *Of course it can't be Edna*.

Mac looked from one to the other of us. "So Edna is a possibility?"

"Where did you say the stamp was sold?" Lill asked.

"Indianapolis," Mac said.

Lill smiled. "Edna has a son who lives in Indianapolis. His name is Baxter. Baxter Prisant."

That made us all laugh.

"We know the woman's ruthless," I said after I managed to stop laughing.

“Remember her naked poker story?”

“Indeed I do.” Lill turned to Mac and Devi who were sitting on the couch, almost together, but not quite. “She seduced her sister’s fiancé as payback for her sister hurting her dog. But she waited years to do it. Now, doesn’t that sound like someone who might plan a series of thefts?”

“What’s her motivation?” Mac said.

“Maybe Herman Todhoffer didn’t make a pass at her?” I said. “No, that would be Myrtle, wouldn’t it. Who knows. We’ll just have to ask her.”

“No, you don’t. Let me handle this,” Mac said in his most commanding way.

I do wish he would use that tone on Devi and command her to go to dinner with him, or . . . well, I just wish Devi could see what a terrific guy Mac is. And not married. Divorced. I checked. I fear Eddie has soured her on the entire gender.

“Josephine?” Mac said. “You will let me handle this.”

I nodded. But I also crossed my fingers.

~ ~ ~

So it appears our likely Brookside villains are Eddie and Edna either separately or as partners. And, yes, I did both notice and comment on the synchronicity of those two names.

Our little handwriting party broke up shortly after that. Mac was going to follow Devi to make sure she got home safely, and Lill, despite her long nap, pleaded exhaustion, leaving when they did.

Their departures left me keyed up, so I did what I usually do when I’m feeling that way. I spent time going over my portfolio and checking out additional places to invest my money.

While I was doing that, the phone rang. I glanced at caller ID to discover Jeff was calling. Since he was the last person I felt like talking to, I ignored the call.

There was no message.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Edna

In a recent disappointing development, not only has Myrtle reconciled with Josephine and Lillian, something I never expected to see in this lifetime, the three of them are now as thick as thieves. They're all working on a fund-raising project for Eddie's daughter, the same daughter, I might add, who Josephine professes not to believe in. It does make a body wonder what they're up to.

When they asked me to write something for this peculiar book they're putting together, I was going to say no. But I'd already heard from several people how excited they were about being included, and I didn't want to be conspicuous by my absence, did I? Not when every other person I've encountered the last few days has mentioned they were thinking about what to write and asked if I'd decided yet myself.

There was even a scuffle, one evening before a concert when two people discovered they'd picked the same quotation. Even though I personally think the whole project is weird, I don't dare say so. I'm afraid people might attack me with their canes and walkers; the fools are that excited about the whole thing.

But it's not just the book I've been asked to contribute to. Myrtle also wants money for some cancer fund. When she came to ask me for a donation, I said I would write a check and get it to her shortly. But I have no intention of doing any such thing. Any pennies I have to spare go to my granddaughter, Amanda, who I'm determined to see attend a good college without worrying about money.

Maybe I'll write an inspirational message. Or maybe I won't. But I definitely won't be writing a check.

~ ~ ~

My son, Baxter, who visits me more frequently than Josephine's son visits her, even though Baxter lives in Indianapolis and Josephine's son lives in Cincinnati,

recently brought me some wonderful news. With my help, he's just added \$39,000 to Amanda's college fund.

A year ago, his news was not so wonderful. "The market downturn has hit me and the firm hard. Unless she gets a scholarship, Amanda won't be able to go away to college," Baxter told me that day, which I now remember as being overcast and dreary.

I knew from conversations with Amanda that she dreams of going to a top university as an undergraduate, and then on to graduate school. She's as bright and beautiful as anyone could wish for, and she deserves a chance to follow that dream.

"You know you can count on me to help," I told Baxter the day he said money was tight.

"I do know that, but I'm afraid you can't afford it."

"What do you mean, I can't afford it? Of course I can."

"No, Mom, you can't. In fact, it's lucky you moved into Brookside when you did. If we were facing the initial buy-in now, there's no way we could afford it."

"I thought that money came from the estate."

"Some of it did, about half. I paid the rest, and since then I've had to supplement what you're getting from Social Security to pay the monthly fees."

Although I'm excellent with figures, everyday budgets and expenses have never interested me. When Charles died, I was more than happy for Baxter to step in and take over where his father left off, but it meant I had no clue anything was amiss.

"You should have told me."

"I didn't want you to worry."

Of course he didn't. Baxter is a loving son. He wasn't born until I was nearly forty and had given up all hope of having a child. I'd thought more than once that it was my penance for lying to get Charles to marry me, so when I discovered I was pregnant at last, I was nearly dizzy with excitement. This financial news left me dizzy as well, but not in a good way.

I insisted Baxter send me all the information on my accounts and expenses. When that arrived, I went through everything and found what he'd told me was true. I am a drain on his resources. Every month I live, I further stifle Amanda's chances.

I immediately economized. A simple measure was to cancel my cable and my meal plan. I miss the cable, but since the food wasn't all that good, I don't

feel too deprived, although I miss having company at meals.

Beyond those steps, it occurred to me that one solution would be to kill myself. I'd have to be subtle about it, of course. I wouldn't want Baxter or Amanda to know that's what I'd done. I figured I could easily manage that, though. We average a death a week here, and if I took pills, I doubt anyone would question I hadn't died from natural causes.

I asked my doctor for a prescription for something to calm my nerves. When he refused, I began collecting pills from my friends' medicine cabinets. Well, not friends exactly, but people I doubted would miss a pill or two.

A couple of Ambien here, a Vicodan there, but it was taking time to accumulate enough. And in the meantime, I discovered I wasn't sure I'd have the guts to go through with it. It's one thing to know you're so old you probably have less than five years to live; it's a cat of a different color contemplating doing something to hasten your demise.

The day I decided that not only would I be unable to take the pills after all, but that it wasn't the only solution to my problem, was the day I was visiting the Todhoffers, and Herman showed me his stamp collection. That visit changed my perspective and my thinking 180 degrees. You see, I discovered I didn't need to die to free up resources. There were resources going to waste sitting right under my nose in the apartments of other residents.

On the fateful day when Herman invited me into his study to see his stamps, I almost said I wasn't interested. But Dot insisted I go with him. We left her watching, well, not watching, listening to something on the television.

The star of Herman's collection was a stamp with an old-fashioned airplane on it. What made it valuable was that the airplane had been printed upside down. An inverted Jenny, I think he called it. He claimed it was worth \$40,000. I didn't believe him, but when I checked on it using the computer in the community room, I discovered he was right.

When he died suddenly a couple of weeks later, I visited Dot and helped myself to the stamp. I simply asked to use her bathroom and then took a quick detour into the study where Herman kept his stamps, right there in a drawer that he didn't even bother to lock.

I slipped it between the pages of the book I'd brought for that express purpose, then I made sure I wiped my fingerprints off the desk, just in case. But I really wasn't expecting Dot to miss the stamp anytime soon, if ever. She's nearly blind, you see, and Herman told me she'd always found his stamps boring.

I waited several months to see if it would be missed, but it seemed I'd got

clean away. Until recently, that is, when it came to light the stamp was missing. By then I'd given it to Baxter to sell. I told him the stamp originally belonged to his grandfather and that it was only by chance I'd checked and discovered it was worth a good deal of money. I requested he sell it anonymously because I didn't want to deal with any publicity.

The fact it's now known to be missing is a bit concerning, although I do think I've covered my tracks.

I have several more items I plan to give Baxter to sell. I'll tell him the baseball card belonged to his father and the necklace belonged to my mother, since Baxter might remember that Charles never gave me presents.

I do think it's best that I wait, though, until the current fuss with the police dies down.

Chapter Thirty

Mac

The day after Eddie attacked Devi, our dispatcher had news for me when I arrived at the station mid-morning. I'd been delayed on the way in by a shoplifting incident at Kroger.

"You know that suspect you talked to yesterday?" she said.

"You don't mean Eddie Colter, do you?"

"I do indeed. Mr. Colter is alleging entrapment, and he's filed a complaint against you. He's also filed one against someone named . . ." she looked down, obviously checking her notes, "Devi Subramanian for assaulting him."

"I hope you're kidding me."

"Nope. Paperwork's on your desk, and the chief wants to talk to you."

The chief, who's been in that position for over twenty years, takes citizen complaints very seriously. Feeling uneasy, I knocked on his door and was invited to come in and sit down—a good sign. Anyone not offered a seat knows they're in serious difficulty.

"Just wanted to check on a couple of things about this kerfuffle at Brookside yesterday," the chief said. "I had an Eddie Colter and his attorney in here first thing this morning, complaining. Saying you didn't tell him you were recording the session, and you didn't Mirandize him. He also claims you took advantage of him when he was in great pain from the attack and didn't know what he was saying."

"I didn't Mirandize him since I wasn't arresting him. I was simply trying to clarify his complaint."

"I know. I've listened to the interviews, read the report. And I've seen the man. Frankly, I'm surprised he's willing to admit that a woman managed to do that much damage." He sighed. "I don't think Judge Judy would give him ten seconds, but he's got a lawyer, so we'll have to be careful how we follow this up."

“If you’ve listened to the recording, you know he has no basis for pressing charges against Ms. Subramanian.” I wasn’t worried about the other complaint since in Ohio it’s legal to record a conversation as long as one of the parties knows it’s being recorded.

Besides, not only did I inform Eddie I was recording, as an officer of the law, it’s standard procedure for me to record interactions with citizens. But the complaint against Devi could cause problems—for her.

“He’s the one who initiated their interaction by grabbing her and then shoving her.”

“That may well be,” the chief said, “but he’s alleging an overreaction on her part, and I have the impression he plans to push this thing all the way, although I expect him to drop the complaint against the department. I think that tactic was merely an attempt to get the recording thrown out. But even if his case is weak, he can force Ms. Subramanian into court, and that could cost her a considerable amount.”

“The man is delusional. She was defending herself.”

“Sure of that, are you?”

“I am.”

The chief sat back and gave me a long look. Then he sighed again. “You’re a good detective, Mac. And I happen to agree with your assessment of how this went down. But I’m not the judge here. You better let her know she needs to hire an attorney.”

While I was glad to have another excuse to see Devi, I was also frustrated, on her behalf, that Colter wouldn’t just quietly accept defeat and go away.

~ ~ ~

I called Devi, and she agreed to a meeting at a café near Brookside. When she arrived, the sight of her made my heart lift, and the otherwise dull day seemed suddenly brighter.

Despite my determination to avoid a relationship with her, I was beginning to wonder if the universe might have other ideas, the way we kept being forced into each other’s company.

Once we had cups of coffee and tea respectively, we chose a table in the corner by the window.

“How’s your arm?”

She pushed up her sleeve. A bracelet of dark finger marks on her upper arm was turning shades of purple, green, and yellow.

“Sore?”

She nodded.

“And your head?”

“It hurts, and I have a headache.”

I sighed, knowing I’d be making the headache worse. “Colter has decided to press charges of assault against you.”

She set her tea down and swallowed, then she bent her head. I reached out and tipped her face up. She wasn’t crying, but I judged it a near thing. Had Colter walked in at that moment, it would have been a struggle not to throttle the man.

I took my hand back. “The good news is that I recorded him admitting he’d shorted people on their change. He’s also on the record saying he initiated the interaction with you, contradicting his first version.”

“Why is he doing this?”

“Revenge, I expect. You made him look weak. He’s also going to claim I recorded him without his knowledge in an attempt to get my recording thrown out. It’s unlikely to be successful, but if it is . . . well, he did look a lot worse for the encounter than you did.”

“What am I going to do?”

“You need to hire a good lawyer.”

She shook her head. “I can’t afford it.”

“You can’t afford not to.” I wanted to add that I’d help, but that was so highly inappropriate, I clamped my mouth shut.

Her hands restlessly pleated her napkin. Without thinking, I took those hands between mine, hoping to provide warmth and comfort. Wishing it could be more.

But I was involved with her case as the investigating officer. Holding hands in a public place like this was not a good idea.

I let go.

Chapter Thirty-One

Devi

After telling me Eddie was planning to sue me, Mac walked me to my car. I drove back to Brookside and knocked on Josephine's door.

Josephine opened the door wide, gesturing for me to come in. "I'm so glad you've come directly here, dear. Mac just called and told me what's going on with Eddie. We need to talk about finding you an attorney. Do you prefer a man or a woman? My treat, of course."

"It's sweet of you to offer, Josephine. But I can't possibly accept."

"Why not? You've been falsely accused. And the incident happened here, where I'm living. I consider it my duty as a resident to see that justice is done. Besides, you do realize I have an awful lot of money and not many places to spend it. Please don't deny me this opportunity to ensure that Eddie Colter gets everything he so richly deserves."

I glanced at the Hopper on Josephine's wall. "An awful lot of money" barely scratched the surface of Josephine's resources.

"As your friend, Devi? Please let me do this."

Although I wasn't entirely comfortable with it, I agreed, relieved to know I would have competent legal help with which to face Eddie's accusations.

~ ~ ~

I had barely gotten back to my office after talking to Mac and then Josephine when Candace came marching in. "I want to know what's going on with you and Eddie, and I want a straight answer, right now."

"Eddie, umm."

"He's claiming you attacked him, and it sure looks like someone did. And he's suing you? What's it all about? Come on, I'm waiting."

I pulled in a breath, waiting for Candace to stop ranting so I could speak. “You know yesterday, when you sent me to LarkTulip to answer a potential resident’s questions?”

“Yes, yes. Go on.”

“Was it Eddie who called to ask you to send me?”

Candace was fidgeting and pacing, and that stopped both. “Eddie? I . . . I. Why? What difference does it make?”

“Because he says I was there waiting for him. But you were the one who told me to go there.”

“But you hit him.” Her tone was flat and unfriendly.

“Only after he grabbed me and bounced me off the wall.”

“Prove it.”

I pulled up my sleeve.

“You do know he’s claiming you made a pass and he rejected you, and then you hit him.”

“Yes, I know.”

“This is a fine mess. You say one thing; he says another. Hard to know who’s telling the truth here.” Candace narrowed her eyes and glared, and it suddenly occurred to me that maybe there was something else going on here. Did she, like most of Brookside’s residents, have a crush on Eddie?

“Calvin says I’m to tell you to stay strictly away from Eddie until this thing is settled.”

I lifted my chin. “I’d like nothing better than to never have anything to do with Eddie Colter again for the rest of my life.”

Candace scoffed. “Just see that you stay away from him here at Brookside.” She turned and marched out.

Funny, I thought I knew Candace. Although she’d never been warm, she’d always been pleasant. It made me shiver to know she wouldn’t accept my version of what happened.

~ ~ ~

The lawyer Josephine found for me, one Abigail Nathouser, “call me Abby,” was a tall, angular woman with sharp features and intelligent eyes. Frankly, I couldn’t imagine ever calling her Abby, but then, I never expected to call Josephine

anything other than Mrs. Bartlett.

Abigail's graying hair was pulled back and settled into an efficient bun at the nape of her neck, and her clothing, a severely styled gray suit and a plain white blouse, perfectly matched the hairstyle and demeanor.

She shook my hand firmly, eyeing me from head to toe. When men do that, it makes me squirm, but Abigail's assessment, if anything, reassured me since she has the same aura of competence and of knowing her place in the world that Mac has.

"Well then," Abigail said, gesturing for me to take a seat at the small table in her office. "Why don't you go ahead and tell me what brings you here."

Knowing that Josephine was going to be billed several hundred dollars an hour for the time I spent with Abigail, I'd organized my story accordingly, and I went through it quickly. Abigail recorded the interview, but she also took notes.

"This man who is suing you is over six feet tall and weighs nearly two hundred pounds. And you're what? A hundred and ten pounds soaking wet? How did you manage to do so much damage?"

"I'm trained in tae kwon do."

Abigail's eyebrows shot up. "What level?"

"Black belt. But he didn't know that. I don't think he was expecting me to counterattack."

"We're not going to use that word," Abigail said. "Counterattack. It's much too aggressive for our purposes. Say instead he didn't expect you to defend yourself."

"Yes. Okay."

Abigail then asked a series of specific questions about previous interactions with Eddie, and whether I had ever reported being harassed by him to my employer. She frowned when I said I hadn't, but she was obviously pleased when I said a police officer did interview me about two of the incidents.

"It's a good thing we'll have police reports. And we'll use Candace Bodman's testimony she sent you to the apartment. That will undermine his claim you were lying in wait. All good."

I also told Abigail about Josephine and Lillian discovering that Eddie had been stealing from residents, and that he'd lied about having a daughter with cancer.

"Hmm. Interesting. I may be able to use some of that, but likely most of it will be inadmissible."

Abigail then went into my personal history, asking about relationships, where I'd lived, gone to college, worked. That made me want to squirm. I was honest, but I truncated the information to the bare minimum, which earned another frown.

"I think I have enough to go on for the moment," Abigail said finally, much to my relief. "From what you've told me, this should be straightforward, but we'll still need to be prepared."

She stood, shook my hand, and escorted me to the door.

In the elevator, I glanced at my watch. Although it had felt like a long appointment, it had taken only forty minutes. That was good, since I'd been forced to fit this visit to downtown into a two-hour break from work.

Luckily traffic was light in both directions, and I managed to be back in my office at Brookside a full ten minutes before I was due to take a group out for a luncheon.

~ ~ ~

"I like to know as much as possible about my clients," Abigail told me at our second meeting, four days after the first. "So I always order a thorough background check. That way I'm less likely to be blindsided in court."

She gave me a stern look that reminded me of a teacher I still remember vividly because she'd been so unpleasant.

"And you, my dear, Suranna Devi Subramanian, appear to have a number of secrets that I wouldn't want our opponents to know about. If they were to discover, for example, that another man was injured so severely in an encounter with you that he later died, it would certainly strengthen their case."

My heart sank even lower than it had when Mac told me Eddie was suing me. So low, I simply sat staring at Abigail.

"You do understand about attorney-client privilege, Suranna?"

I nodded, still not sure my voice would work. Not even to tell Abigail I'd become accustomed to being called by my middle name and now preferred it.

"It's possible, you know, that I may be able to help you with both situations." Abigail stopped speaking, obviously waiting for a response.

I cleared my throat. "I . . ." Did I dare tell the truth?

Then I remembered a story I'd read recently about two lawyers who had kept secret the fact one of their clients admitted to a crime another man was serving a

prison term for. The innocent man was released only after the guilty man died twenty years later, and his lawyers were able to come forward.

Abigail might very well be the only person I did dare tell the truth.

~ ~ ~

The shape and trajectory of my life changed forever the day I met William Garrison, although I didn't know that until later, of course.

William was handsome, charming, intelligent, and he shared my passion for art. In fact, we met at an art institute fund-raiser. True, I was there as an employee while he was there as one of our major patrons—a man who at thirty-three had already made more money from an app he'd designed than he would ever need.

He quite literally swept me off my feet with expensive dinners in elegant settings; weekend trips to Reno, Aspen, or New York; and spontaneous purchases at Tiffany's and Nordstrom. Caught up in the dizzying round of being William's girlfriend, I was certain all my dreams were coming true.

"I want to wake up every morning to find you there," William said on a flight back from Reno in the corporate jet on Valentine's Day.

He'd pulled a small box out of his pocket, but there was nothing small about the diamond it contained. Although uncertain, I'd let him slip the ring on my finger.

"Take all the time you need to plan the wedding, but I want you to move in with me. Tomorrow would be good."

"Umm . . . I'd rather wait."

He'd reared back and looked at me as if I'd suddenly sprouted a horn in the middle of my forehead.

"For what?"

"U-until we're married."

"Why?"

"Because it would hurt my father. He's a traditional man."

"Who married a white woman. Besides, he's in Kansas. He won't even know."

My thoughts stuttered over that phrase "white woman." I looked down at our intertwined hands, noticing for the first time how much darker mine were than

William's, even though he was tanned year-round from skiing and swimming.

"You already sleep with me. And now you're my fiancée, so I don't get it."

I didn't know why I felt so certain that moving into William's apartment on Lakeshore Drive before I married him was a bad idea, but it just didn't feel right.

"Can we . . . I don't know. Move a bit slower, maybe? This has all happened so fast."

"Are you kidding me? It's been six months."

The memory of a recent conversation with William's brother popped into my mind. "Well, well," Harry had said to me. "So you're the girl who's managed to keep William on a leash for four months. Good luck with the next one. I don't think anyone's made it past five before."

The words had puzzled me, as had the nasty way he'd said them. But maybe those words had connected with some tiny whisper of doubt in the back of my mind, leading me now to hesitate over William's proposal. And Harry's comment wasn't the only source of doubt.

William always seemed to need to be moving. In the six months I'd known him, we'd not had a single weekend where we simply lazed around reading the Sunday papers, eating a late breakfast, and going for a walk. No, the minute a chunk of time opened up, William ordered the corporate jet, and we were off. And I was exhausted.

"I, ah." I kept my gaze on our hands and that enormous diamond. "I think I just need some time to . . . to adjust to the idea."

"Next week, then."

"No, I mean, I think I'll need at least a month."

He'd let go of my hands abruptly, leaned his seat back, and closed his eyes. His mouth had taken on a petulant shape I'd not seen before, and it wasn't flattering. For a time, I thought he was faking being asleep, but then he started to snore.

I moved to a seat across the aisle, but I'd been unable to fall sleep. Instead, I sat clenching my hands, feeling the uncomfortable bulge of the diamond against my palm.

When we arrived in Chicago after midnight, he'd put me in a cab with only a kiss on the cheek. Usually, he had me driven home in the limo. It couldn't have been more clear. I was being punished.

As I got ready for bed that night, I took the diamond off. I didn't want it to distract me from thinking clearly about my uncertainties.

I didn't see William for three days, but then he showed up at the art institute to take me to dinner as if nothing had happened, either his proposal or his subsequent snit. But, for me, everything had altered.

In the strange time that followed, I often felt like I was standing to one side, watching myself with William. Weighing and measuring each of our interactions as if they were happening to someone else. Looking for deeper meanings, but deciding eventually that with William what I saw was what I got.

And what I got was a sulky boy rather than a mature man. Slowly, our relationship frayed like a piece of ancient silk that hadn't been handled carefully enough.

During that time, I was in charge of mounting a major exhibit of twentieth-century American artists at the Winterford Art Institute, where I was a curator. As the opening date approached, it provided me with opportunities to pull away from William. Often I had to work late during the week, and I began turning down at least half of William's weekend invitations. When we did spend time together, he was irritable and snide.

The magic had departed, and I'd landed back on solid ground with a painful thump.

My refusing to move in with him had another effect. It put off any official announcements of our engagement, something I was grateful for as I worked out the best way to end the relationship.

The night I planned to give William his ring back, I was delayed at work because two paintings for the exhibit due that day hadn't yet arrived. I left William a message, canceling our dinner date.

While I knew he was becoming increasingly upset in the weeks since he'd proposed, what I didn't anticipate was that my staying late that night would push him over an edge I didn't see approaching.

Arriving home that evening, I found him waiting in my apartment. His smile had been an unpleasant one.

"How did you get in?" I asked.

"I don't know a super alive who'll turn down a Ben Franklin to open a tenant's door. And just where have you been anyway?"

"I told you. I had to wait for two paintings to arrive."

"At nine o'clock at night?"

"They arrived by special delivery."

He glared at me. "I don't believe you."

Nervous, I pushed a strand of hair out of my eyes.

“Hey. Where’s my ring?”

“I don’t wear it at work.” In fact, the only times I’d had it on recently were when William and I had a date.

His smile turned nasty and his eyes narrowed. “Have you even told anyone you’re engaged to me?”

“Have you?”

“Answer the question, *my love*. Or are you perhaps someone else’s love. Playing me, are you? Getting what you can out of me?”

“Stop it.”

“No, you stop it. Right here, right now. I want to know. Why won’t you move in with me? Is there someone else? Is that it? You’ve been out with him. That’s why you’re late, why you’re never available to see me lately.”

Then more words came gushing out, awful words, terrible accusations. His hand went into his pocket and when it emerged, it was holding a gun. He pointed it at me, saying his anger was my fault.

Time stopped.

I have no clear memory of what happened in the next moments. I know those hours practicing tae kwon do shaped my moves as I struck out at him to kick the gun away. When I was once again fully aware, William was lying on my kitchen floor. Blood spurted from his nose and seeped from the back of his head. I called 911. Paramedics came, and then the police.

As I stood watching, William rallied and whispered in one of the EMTs ears words I couldn’t hear, but they made the man send me a piercing look. Then William lapsed into unconsciousness.

He had a broken nose and he’d fallen, hitting his head on the edge of my kitchen counter. When the police interviewed me, I learned that William had told the EMT I’d attacked him when he asked me to give him back his ring.

He was in a coma for a week, and then he died. His brother, Harry, accused me of assault, and when William died, of murder, and he threatened to kill me in revenge for William. Remembering how William had morphed before my eyes from my lover into a man with a gun in his hand and the clear intent to use it, I had no doubt Harry was capable of a similar transformation.

Although the police told me not to leave town until they finished their investigation, I emptied my bank account, and with a single suitcase, climbed aboard the first Megabus that came along.

It was going, it turned out, to Cincinnati.

~ ~ ~

While I told Abigail about William Garrison, she sat without moving, her pen held against her lips. I stopped speaking, and Abigail pulled in a deep breath and sat blinking for a time.

“Yes. Well. You never told me why you decided to learn tae kwon do.”

I thought it was an odd segue, but then remembering my reason, I realized it was the right question after all.

“I had a roommate in college. She was assaulted. She said she never wanted to feel so helpless again. We took the classes together. It helped her heal.”

I realized I’d spoken in short staccato bursts, as if I were having trouble catching my breath. Which I supposed in a way I was. Because those memories also meant recalling a time when I let fear take over my life.

“Were the police planning to charge you in William’s death?”

“I don’t know. They called me a person of interest. I think they were investigating about the gun before they decided what to do. All I know is, the last time I spoke with them, they said not to leave town.”

Although I tried to minimize it for Abigail, I was almost as terrified of the police as I was of Harry. William was wealthy and influential. Why wouldn’t they believe he was breaking up with me rather than the other way around? Although, if they had decided to arrest me, it would have been easy, once I started working at Brookside, for them to find me. Accepting employment had been both a necessary and a calculated risk on my part. After all, Chicago has so many murders, I was counting on being able to fall through the cracks.

“Yet you left.”

“I was convinced Harry intended to hurt me, possibly kill me. I thought it was safer if I disappeared for the time being. That it would give him time to calm down . . .”

“Do you plan eventually to go back to Chicago?”

“I’d need to know whether the police . . . well, whether they’ve ruled William’s death an accident. But I’d still worry about Harry.”

“I think we’d better move carefully, then. But if you want, we should be able to find out if the police have filed any charges against you.”

I shivered. Then I nodded.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Josephine

Saturday morning, I got up late and pattered around before finally deciding I didn't feel like going to the dining room for breakfast. I'd just sat down to eat a bowl of cereal when there was a knock on the door.

I opened it to find Jeff standing there. "You really need to answer your phone occasionally, Mother."

"Oh, did you call?"

"I did. Several times, as a matter of fact."

I was blocking the way into the apartment, but I really had no choice but to let him in. Since I was still wearing my robe, I couldn't very well suggest we go to the lobby to talk.

He walked in shedding his coat, which he threw on the couch.

"I was just eating breakfast," I said. "Would you like something?"

"No. I've eaten."

"At least sit down." He had started to pace, and it made me cross.

He stomped over to the table and pulled out a chair.

"You say you've called? About something in particular?"

"Yes, something very particular. The money Dad left is about to run out."

I sat staring at him. It just wasn't possible.

"Mother, are you okay?"

I blinked and shook my head to clear it. The news had momentarily blocked my ability to think.

"Of course I'm okay." More okay than I wanted him to know.

"I'm sorry to be the bearer of such bad news. It means you're going to have to move out of Brookside. Before January first. I'm afraid I can't afford the monthly fees to keep you here."

“And where do you propose to put me?”

“You’ll have to live with Lynn and me.”

The phrase *over my dead body* came immediately to mind. “How can all the money be gone?” I said instead.

“There never was as much as you seemed to think there was. Dad bought a lot of speculative stuff that could have paid off big, but didn’t. Junk bonds, that sort of thing. After Dad died, I tried to stem the losses, get you reinvested in something more solid. But, well, one of the investments, a sure thing if there ever was one . . . it tanked.”

“Like Enron?” I said.

His jaw clenched. “Something like that.”

“I see. So the estate is kaput.”

“Yes. That’s the perfect word for it. The remaining stocks aren’t worth what it would cost to recycle the paper they’re printed on. I’m sorry. I did try to fix it.”

“I’m not coming to live with you,” I said.

“You can’t stay here.”

I thought about what I would do if Thomas’s money were the only source of income I had, but the thought was simply too dire to contemplate. Instead, I needed to work out how to convince Jeff to let me figure things out on my own without revealing the extent of the resources I had at my disposal.

“You say I have until January?”

“Which means we need to start planning immediately.”

“And I will.” I decided maybe a partial truth would work. “I have a small inheritance I never told you about, and since your last visit, I’ve been economizing. I’ve found I can be quite comfortable on what I’m receiving from Social Security.”

“But this place costs six thousand a month. No matter how you slice it, you don’t have that kind of money.”

“I think I have enough to live here a while longer, at least.”

“But after January, you won’t be eligible for a refund on your buy-in.” He jumped to his feet and paced, head down.

Then his head came up, and he came to an abrupt halt in front of the Hopper painting. Before I could distract him, he stepped closer. “Wait a minute,” he said. “This painting wasn’t here last time.” He leaned forward, squinting at the tiny line of printing in the lower right-hand corner. “Edward Hopper. I think I’ve

heard of him.”

Before I could stop him, he’d clicked my laptop awake and was obviously doing a search. After a couple of minutes, he looked at me.

“Do you think I’m an idiot, Mother? You have a small inheritance, do you? And it was what? An Edward Hopper painting worth millions.”

He was furious, although I didn’t see why he should be. I purchased the painting back in the 1970s because I liked it and I had enough money to indulge that liking. It was none of Thomas’s business then, nor was it Jeff’s business now.

“You didn’t think to mention this, for example, when I came to you, worried to death, and told you money was running low? In fact, you still weren’t going to tell me, were you?”

I debated briefly whether to try to convince him the painting was merely an excellent copy, but decided it was too late for that.

“I want you to leave, T— Jeff.” It shook me to realize I’d almost called him Thomas. But right then he looked and sounded exactly like his father. “I absolve you of all financial obligations for my upkeep and welfare,” I continued. “Just leave me alone to live my life, and I’ll leave you alone to live yours.”

“Does the management of this place know you have a painting worth millions of dollars hanging on your wall?”

It was an echo of one of my first conversations with Devi. Devi, who was now dearer to me than . . .

With a start, I refocused on Jeff. His face had turned an unhealthy-looking red and he was breathing in short gasps. With him that angry, I didn’t know what he might be capable of.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, they are aware.” It wasn’t a lie. After all, Devi was part of management, and she did know about the painting.

Jeff and I stared at each other for a time. Gradually, his color returned to normal.

“Fine. Okay then. I’ll be notifying the business office that the payment responsibility has shifted to you. As of today.”

He stared at the painting for another thirty seconds, then he grabbed his coat and left.

~ ~ ~

I did some pacing before I got dressed and went to see Lill.

She took one look at me and opened her door wide.

“My son came to see me this morning,” I told her.

“Oh my. Not a good visit?”

“No, it wasn’t. He knows about the painting.”

“Oh?” Lill said, and I realized that although she’d seen it, she might not know what it is.

“The one in my living room,” I said.

“The Hopper, you mean.”

“You know?”

“I thought it looked . . .” She shrugged. “It reminded me of something I saw in a museum once. But I just thought it was a copy. I take it it’s an original, which makes it quite valuable.”

“Quite.”

“And you didn’t want your son to know about it?”

“I have resources my son knows nothing about. If he did, I have no doubt he would have me declared incompetent so he could take them over.”

“Oh dear. That doesn’t sound at all good. Although, I expect there are ways to protect those resources, and yourself?”

“I’ve taken some of them. But if Jeff mentions the painting to Mr. Souter, well, it could be disastrous.”

Lill made us both cups of tea using commercial tea bags. It was difficult to drink it, but I sipped steadily since I didn’t want to hurt her feelings. As a distraction, between sips, I brought up for discussion our suspicions that Edna might be our thief. But we came to no conclusions about how we might prove it.

“We could search her place,” I said. “Sometime when we know she’s out.”

“But if we did find something, it wouldn’t be admissible.”

I sighed and finally gave up on the tea. I’d managed only half, but that was still more than I wanted. I carried my cup over to the sink, dumped the tea, and rinsed the cup. Then I told Lill I’d see her at lunch and returned to my apartment.

When I opened the door, I found Mr. Souter and Jeff sitting in my living room.

“Get out!” I couldn’t remember the last time I was so furious or so frightened. Maybe the day I was forced to sign over my stocks to Thomas.

“Umm, yes, well, Josephine, we can’t do that until we speak with you.” Mr.

Souter had stood and now he shifted his feet, refusing to meet my eyes.

“Mrs. Bartlett,” I snapped.

“Yes, umm, Mrs. Bartlett. You see, it appears you have violated one of the terms of your lease.” Mr. Souter’s tone had the sickening quality of too-sweet syrup.

“And that is?”

He pointed at the painting. “As one of the conditions of your living here, you had to disclose any items of jewelry, collectibles, or paintings worth more than \$250.”

“What? So you could arrange for them to be stolen?”

When he gave me a startled look, I pressed my advantage. “I know all about what’s going on here. People put things on their lists, and then you decide what you’re going to help yourself to later.” I was so angry I completely forgot that all the signs of guilt pointed to Edna.

“Wow, I have no idea where you got a bizarre idea like that.”

I was practically panting with fury. “I want you both out of my apartment, right this minute.”

“Your car is also in violation,” Mr. Souter said.

“What car?” Jeff said.

“Why, that one.” Mr. Souter pointed out the window. “I only recently discovered she had a car. She should have reported it and paid the parking fee.”

“Do you mean that green one?” Jeff said, peering in the direction Mr. Souter was pointing.

“Yes. Hard to miss, isn’t it.”

“Have you completely lost your mind, Mother?” Jeff said, turning to face me.

“I most certainly have not. And if the two of you do not remove yourselves from my apartment this instant, I’ll call the police.”

“And tell them what?” Jeff said.

“That you’re trespassing.”

I knew, though, even if I managed to get them to leave today, that wouldn’t be the end of it. The Hopper would have to leave as well. I wanted to howl at the thought, but I was determined not to give my son and Mr. Souter that satisfaction.

As we stood glaring at each other, I picked up my phone and dialed Mac.

“I need your help, right now, Mac. There are people in my apartment, and they won’t leave.”

He said he’d come immediately.

“Who’s Mac?” Jeff asked.

I refused to answer him. Instead I turned my back on them and called Lill, who agreed to stand by and open the back door for Mac.

The next fifteen minutes were some of the longest of my life since they were passed in silence. When Mac arrived, he was dressed in jeans and a parka, and he had a young boy and a dog with him.

I gestured for them to come in.

“Sorry, Josephine, I had to bring Teddy. His mother’s at the store. And this,” he pointed to the dog, “is Bruno.”

With a solemn expression, the boy extended a hand. When I shook it, he grinned at me. It was such an infectious and totally joyous grin, I grinned back. I looked up from greeting the boy to see Lill standing behind Mac with a questioning expression. I gestured for her to come in as well.

“Mac, Lill, I don’t believe you know my son, Jeffrey. Jeff, this is Lillian Fitzel and Detective Darren McElroy of the Montgomery police force.”

Jeff stepped forward and, with a wary look, shook Mac’s hand but not Lill’s. Mr. Souter looked on, obviously uncomfortable.

“I understand Josephine asked you to leave, but you refused?” Mac said.

“Josephine,” Mr. Souter said, making me clench my jaw, “knows we have every right to enter the apartments of our residents if we have cause to believe something is amiss.”

“Oh, is that what you’re calling it?” I said. “Something amiss?”

Mr. Souter shrugged at Mac as if to say, *You can see, can’t you, how unreasonable she is?* But his actual words were, “We’re here because Josephine’s son just reported to us that she owns a painting worth millions of dollars that was not included on her inventory list. That’s not only a violation of her resident agreement, it’s a security nightmare.”

Mac stood blinking in obvious surprise, and I wished I’d told him about the painting, but the subject never came up.

“I didn’t neglect to include the painting on the inventory. My son insisted on taking care of all the paperwork for me. I had no idea I was supposed to report it.”

“You told me management knew about the painting,” Jeff said.

My heart sank. There was no way I was telling Mr. Souter that Devi had known about the painting and not informed him. He'd likely fire her.

While we were talking, Teddy and the dog walked carefully around the room, looking at everything. Now Teddy came and stood in front of me.

"May I have a drink, please?" The words were thick and not completely clear, but he'd spoken so slowly, I was able to understand, and I could have kissed him for taking everyone's attention away from what Jeff had just said.

Mac moved toward the boy, but I raised a hand to ward him off.

"Of course you may," I told Teddy, taking him by the hand and leaving the room. The dog, Bruno, followed us into the kitchen.

All I had to offer was either orange juice or grape juice. After careful consideration, Teddy chose the grape juice, and I poured him half a glass. I also filled a bowl with water that Bruno lapped up, slopping most of it on the floor. Oh well, it was time I mopped anyway. While I was in the kitchen, I listened as Mac dealt with my unwelcome visitors.

By the time Teddy, Bruno, and I returned to the living room, Mr. Souter was being escorted to the door by Mac, who promised to come speak to him shortly. Lill sat primly on the couch, and Jeff stood, arms folded, next to the painting.

"Okay," Mac said to Jeff, once the door closed. "Can you explain why you felt the need to bring this matter up to Mr. Souter?"

"I'm her son. And it's not safe for my mother to have a painting worth millions just hanging here where anyone can help themselves."

"You don't contest the fact that she owns it?"

"No." He looked away, and his tone was sulky when he continued. "I'm just concerned for her safety."

"Seems to me, you're the one who compromised her safety by announcing to the world the painting is here."

"I don't understand. How is it my mother knows you?"

"Your mother and I are friends," Mac said.

I wanted to kiss him. Instead, I went over and sat next to Teddy, who'd taken a seat next to Lill and was carefully sipping his grape juice. Bruno flopped at my feet, dribbling a bit of spit on my shoe. I found I didn't mind a bit.

"And I don't intend to stand by and watch anyone bully her," Mac added with one of those commanding looks I'm partial to.

The power of that was obviously not lost on Jeff, who shuffled his feet and cleared his throat. I wanted to give him a *see, I have friends* look, but I didn't

dare. Instead, Lill and I exchanged a conspiratorial glance.

Jeff finally stopped fidgeting and glared at Mac, and Mac looked back with that serene look I also find so attractive. The one that should melt Devi's heart.

"Jeff doesn't need to worry about me or my upkeep anymore," I told Mac. "I accept that I am fully responsible for myself from now on."

"Responsible? You think it's responsible to have a painting like this on your wall? And what was all that you said to Souter? About him helping himself? You think he's a thief and yet you take a chance like this?"

"I wasn't taking a chance until you told him." I kept my tone even so I didn't upset Teddy. Or Bruno, who nevertheless raised his head, looking mournful, and letting out a brief, odd woof.

I glanced at Mac, who was giving me a piercing look, but when he spoke, his words were addressed to Jeff.

"Your mother has stated in front of witnesses that she accepts all responsibility for herself and for her belongings. Given that she's of sound mind, I think you need to honor her request that you leave her alone."

I thought there was little chance of that, now that Jeff knew about the painting and suspected I had even more in reserve, which I did.

"Good-bye, Jeff," I said, stepping around Bruno and going to the door and opening it.

Jeff gave me a *this isn't over* look before stepping through the door. I closed it behind him, took a deep breath, and walked over to sit down, my legs suddenly wobbly.

"Thank you, Mac." My voice wobbled as much as my legs.

"You accused Souter of being the thief?" His tone was stern.

"He made me angry, insisting I should have listed the painting on lists that he controls. And just look what good that's done other people."

Mac shook his head. "It would have been better if you hadn't said anything about that."

"Sorry. Yes, you're right, of course. But what right did he have to come in here and tell me I can't have something valuable in my apartment?"

Teddy shifted next to me. I'd forgotten for the moment he was there.

He held out his glass to me. "May I have more?"

"Of course."

"I'll see to that," Lill said, getting up and taking Teddy by the hand. Bruno

lumbered to his feet and followed the two.

“Is he your son?” I asked, nodding toward Teddy. It occurred to me that if Teddy was Mac’s son, one thing Mac would never have to worry about was the boy having him declared incompetent.

Mac shook his head, appearing distracted. “He’s my neighbor, and exactly how valuable are we talking?”

“Based on the last time a Hopper sold at auction, somewhere in the neighborhood of twenty-five to thirty-five million.”

Mac cleared his throat. “Dollars?”

When I nodded, he stepped over to the painting and examined it.

“I see,” he said.

I had no idea what it was he saw, but just then Lill, Teddy, and Bruno trooped out of the kitchen and back to their seats on the sofa.

“He’s going to try to take it all away from me,” I said.

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” Mac said. “But right now, I need to speak to Souter. Could Teddy stay here with you while I do that?”

“Of course,” I said.

After Mac left, Lill, who has grandchildren, offered to get some books and toys for Teddy. When she gave Teddy his choice of what to do, he wanted us to read to him. So we did, using funny voices that made Teddy giggle.

By the time Mac returned, we’d finished all three books Lill had brought.

“How did it go with Mr. Souter?” I said.

“He agreed that he had no business harassing you, but now that he knows, he doesn’t want the responsibility for having the painting in this facility. We can talk about all that later, though. Okay?” He nodded toward Teddy, who was looking sleepily through the book we’d just finished reading. “Let me take them home. Then we’ll talk.”

He gathered up the boy and dog, and left Lill and me sitting there in a bit of a daze. I finally pulled myself together and made us tea.

“What are you going to do, Josephine,” Lill asked after an interval of quiet contemplation of our tea cups.

“The painting will have to go, of course.”

“Yes. I expect that’s what Mac will advise you to do.”

We continued to sip in silence for several minutes.

Finally, Lill set her cup down. “You know, this situation does offer definite

possibilities.”

“What do you mean?”

“If Edna is our thief and she found out about the painting, she’d probably try to steal it. And we could catch her in the act.”

“She sure couldn’t tuck it in her pocket.”

“No, but for millions, I bet she’d find a way. My guess? She’d probably ask Eddie to help.”

“Two birds,” I said.

“Exactly. I doubt Eddie would know a Hopper from a hula hoop. Is there something you can hang in its place?”

“That’s what I did the last time Jeff came to visit. Of course, that time I had a bit more warning than I did this morning.”

Lill settled back, her expression smug. “So there we are, Josephine. You take steps to protect the Hopper. And I’ll make sure Edna finds out you have a painting worth millions.”

“How will you manage that?”

“I’ll tell Myrtle, of course.”

“We’d better not tell Mac,” I said.

“No. I expect he’d make us promise to do no such thing. Oh my, he would.”

“Do you think we should ask Devi to help?”

Lill frowned, then shook her head. “I believe the less she knows, the better off she’ll be.”

I debated whether to tell Lill that Devi already knew about the painting, but then I decided it no longer mattered very much.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Mac

After taking Teddy home, I returned to discuss Josephine's situation with her as both a police officer and a friend.

She agreed that the painting would have to be removed from her apartment, and asked me to help with that. And so later, while most of the residents were at dinner, I returned to Brookside, loaded the painting into the back of my SUV, and with Josephine providing directions, drove to a climate-controlled storage facility.

"You know, it's odd," she told me as we drove. "For some reason, I never got around to canceling the unit. Maybe I always knew I wouldn't be able to keep the painting with me." She sighed, and I could tell she was upset.

I, on the other hand, was relieved to know the painting was somewhere other than Josephine's apartment. After we dropped it off and made sure the storage unit was secure, Josephine asked me to take her to dinner.

"You will let Souter know, immediately, that the painting's been removed?" I said, cutting into my steak. She had chosen one of the nicer restaurants in Montgomery, and the food was exceptional.

She made a humming noise, not answering my question, but that was something I considered par for the course with Josephine.

"Devi is under the impression you're married," she said, effectively pulling my attention away from my perfectly cooked meal. "But you're not, are you?"

"No. I'm divorced."

"Why let her think you're a married man? Are you involved with someone? Teddy's mother?"

It was the most direct Josephine had ever been with me, and I didn't like it. When I didn't respond right away, she sighed.

"Lill looked at your handwriting and Devi's. She said you two are an almost

perfect match. You do realize you don't get many chances like that?"

I sat blinking at Josephine, remembering how unconcerned, self-satisfied really, I'd been about turning over a sample of my handwriting to her.

The waiter stopped by and asked how we were doing, and that gave me the chance to shift topics, but Josephine was having none of it.

"Lill said your handwriting does have caution strokes. And that means you're probably overcompensating for a past mistake and it could be keeping you from committing your heart. But if you take the leap, you and Devi would have a better chance of making a go of it than eighty percent of couples."

Lillian's analysis about me being cautious hit the nail on the head more squarely than I'd like to admit. "So you're saying there's a twenty percent chance we'd fail. That doesn't seem like very good odds to me."

That obviously annoyed Josephine, but frankly, I was annoyed with myself for defending a position I wasn't all that interested in defending. They'd all gotten to me—Josephine, Lillian, Devi. Devi most of all. I'd let down my guard and opened my heart, despite my determination not to.

But right now I couldn't ask Devi out, regardless, because Colter's suit made a personal relationship between us a conflict of interest. When I told Josephine that, her lips tightened. Shortly after that, she said she was ready to go back.

When I signaled for the bill, the waiter came over. "That's been taken care of, sir," he said.

"I arranged payment when I went to freshen up." Josephine looked quite pleased with herself as she accepted the card and receipt the waiter now handed her.

I shook my head. "Not only do you beat me at poker . . ."

"You can pay me back by taking Devi out. Just keep in mind, she eats mostly vegetarian, so this might not be the best choice."

And on that note, I drove Josephine back to Brookside.

As I helped her out of the vehicle, she took one last parting shot. "Don't let stupid male pride get in your way, Mac. I'm quite certain you're courageous enough to overcome something that's no longer doing you a bit of good."

Driving home, I wondered if I really was the man Josephine believed me to be. Especially since I'd been unwilling to admit up to now, even to myself, that my decision not to get involved with Devi had been driven by cowardice.

Still, it was a relief I didn't have to make a decision about any of that until the suit was settled.

And that could take months.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Lillian

“I have the most delicious bit of gossip for you,” I told Myrtle when I encountered her on the way in to lunch on Sunday. I pointed to a table for two, and we walked over and took those seats.

She leaned toward me. “Is it about Eddie?” Her tone was eager, and the question about Eddie threw me off for a moment.

“Well, are you going to tell me your news or not?” Myrtle said, jerking me abruptly back on course.

“It’s not about Eddie. It’s about Josephine. But you mustn’t tell anybody.”

“I won’t,” Myrtle said, pinching her lips together with her fingers.

“Good. Well, it seems that Josephine’s investing career didn’t end when her husband took over her stocks. She figured out a way to hide her activities after that, and she did amazingly well. As a matter of fact, she used some of the money she made investing to buy a painting. And now that painting, which has been hanging right here in her Brookside living room, is worth millions.”

I took great care in the way I said that last bit. I wanted to give the impression the painting was still there, while not exactly saying that it was.

Myrtle’s eyes had widened as I spoke, and her hand came up to cover the O her mouth was forming.

“Mr. Souter was absolutely livid when he discovered she hadn’t reported it,” I added.

“That is delicious. Who’s the painter?”

“Someone named Edward Hopper.”

“Never heard of him.”

“You’ve heard of Monet, though?”

“Water lilies, right?”

“Right. It seems that in art circles, this Hopper’s as famous as Monet.”

“Hopper, you say.” She was obviously working to commit the name to memory. “Have you seen the painting?”

“When Josephine and I were working on the inspiration book. But I had no idea it was worth so much.”

“Do you think she’d let me see it?”

I shook my head, trying for a rueful expression. “I think Josephine feels very protective of the painting. And now that the word is out about it, well, you know she doesn’t like visitors, even in the best of times.”

Myrtle’s lips pooched out briefly, but then she looked around the room, obviously trying to pick who to tell first.

I decided a small nudge might be in order since she wasn’t going to spot Edna, who didn’t come to meals.

“Can you imagine how Edna’s going to take the news?” I stopped and put a hand over my mouth. “Oh, but you can’t tell her.”

“Of course not,” Myrtle said. “Mum’s the word.”

Our lunch plates were delivered then and I tucked into mine, feeling the satisfaction of a job well done.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Devi

I had barely gotten my coat off Monday morning when Candace came sailing into my office. “You will not believe what happened Saturday.”

It was the first time we’d spoken since that unpleasant conversation about Eddie, but Candace, acting as if that never happened, launched into a tale about Josephine’s son discovering she had a painting worth millions that he’d then reported to Mr. Souter.

“I had no idea who Edward Hopper was until I looked him up. The last painting of his sold at auction went for forty million. Can you imagine?”

I couldn’t very well say that I knew about the painting. So I sat, letting my mouth hang open in apparent astonishment as Candace went on and on about Josephine calling in that policeman, Mac somebody, who showed up with a little boy and a dog and told Josephine’s son and Calvin to leave Josephine alone.

What I felt was left out of the action.

“Shouldn’t you keep this a secret?” I said when Candace finally finished telling me everything. “I doubt it’s safe to have too many people know about the painting.”

“You’re probably right about that. Right now, Calvin and I are the only ones who know,” she said, apparently forgetting she’d just told me. “He’s fit to be tied, as you might imagine.”

“What is he going to do about it?”

“There’s not much he can do. But I doubt the son is going to let this go.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Calvin said he’d come to tell his mother all the money for her fees had run out, and she had to move back home with him. When he discovered she was sitting on millions, he was furious. He made Lucy call Calvin and insist he come in, and Calvin wasn’t very happy about being disturbed on a weekend. I can tell

you that.”

It worried me that Josephine’s son and Mr. Souter knew about the painting, but it was even more worrying that Candace knew, because she obviously couldn’t keep her mouth shut. And, clearly, the more she spread the word about the painting, the less secure it—and Josephine—would be.

It was a big enough worry that it even took my mind off my own troubles for a time.

~ ~ ~

As soon as I had a few minutes free, I went to visit Josephine. I looked for the painting as I stepped into the apartment, but there was no sign of it. Instead, the Demeri watercolor was hanging in its place.

“Candace told me what happened,” I said. “I’m so sorry. The Hopper? It’s safe, isn’t it?”

“Not to worry,” Josephine said. “Mac helped me. He also had to help me evict my son and Mr. Souter. And yes, we had quite an interesting time on Saturday.”

“Candace mentioned a Mac somebody was called in. And that he brought his little boy and a dog with him?”

“Mac somebody, indeed. He was babysitting for his neighbor’s little boy, so he brought him along. And the dog, of course.”

“Oh?”

“You do know Mac isn’t married. And he isn’t a father.”

“How can you be sure of that?”

“I asked him. Flat out. He’s divorced. I also asked him why he let you think he was married.”

“Oh, Josephine, you didn’t.”

“I did.”

“So? How did he explain it?” As long as she’d asked, I might as well know the answer.

“I think that’s something you’re going to have to ask him.”

“Why would I? All I am to him is a . . . a citizen. He obviously wants nothing to do with me.” And I needed to remember it was for the best not to have anything to do with him.

“Devi, Devi.” Josephine shook her head.

“What?”

“Lill did a couples analysis for you and Mac. You’re made for each other. At least, that’s how we used to put it. Now I guess you’d say he was your soul mate. And you don’t get many of those. I should know.”

“What do you mean, Lill did a couples analysis? We aren’t a couple.”

“But you should be.”

“You’re saying I should be part of a couple with a man who told me he was married in order to avoid a relationship with me. Do you know how nutty that sounds?”

“Lill thinks Mac failed at love. That not only does he not want to get hurt again, he’s afraid to hurt someone who cares about him.”

“Bit egotistical of him, don’t you think? Assuming I care about him?”

“Don’t you?”

I fumed for a moment. “Okay. Yes, I care about him.”

Or it would be a very small step from where I now stood to caring for him. But really, I knew so little about him. It was more likely what I felt was just physical attraction.

All right, yes, it feels like more than that.

But what did I know about him besides superficial stuff? That he’s a graceful loser, at least at cards, and that he’s kind to small children and dogs. And he isn’t afraid to confront society at its worst. All admirable characteristics.

And I do like the way he looks. And seeing him makes me feel like dancing.

But admitting that made me distinctly uneasy. After all, I’d once told another man I barely knew I would marry him, although I did come to know William better before going through with the ceremony. In particular, I’d learned that he was a very, very sore loser.

I shook my head, trying to dislodge the memory of a man who had wanted to hold on too tight. But Mac, he was pushing me away instead of holding me close. And it made me . . . sad.

Still, it was for the best. Because if there was ever going to be anything between Mac and me, I’d have to tell him about Chicago. And he’s a cop, after all. He’d have no choice but to turn me in. My only hope was that Abigail might be able to find out my status without giving me away. I felt a quiver of hope, followed quickly by panic.

Some questions are, after all, better left unanswered.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Edna

When Myrtle told me Josephine had a painting worth millions of dollars just hanging on her living room wall, I simply didn't believe it at first.

"That's the reason she locks her door and never invites anyone in."

"How do you know she locks her door?" I said.

Myrtle wiggled a bit, obviously uncomfortable. Then she shrugged.

"Because I checked. I thought if her door was unlocked, well, that someone should be told."

Myrtle is a grade-A snoop. No question about it. Too bad she's also honest.

"Who's the painter?"

"Someone named Edward Hooper or maybe Hocker. Something like that."

I didn't consider that very helpful. But regardless of the painter's name, if the painting was worth what Myrtle said it was, well, it would cover all Amanda's expenses from freshman year through any graduate program she might choose. There would even be enough to pay for me to stay at Brookside with no worries about using up resources Amanda might need.

Best of all, it minimized my risk to a single big score with no need for me to sell any of the other items I'd removed from residents' apartments. Items the police were now on the lookout for.

"How did you find out about this?" I asked Myrtle.

"Lillian told me. She's even seen the painting. She did ask me not to tell anyone, and I haven't. But I thought it was okay to tell you. After all, you used to be Josephine's friend."

I was in a lather to get away from Myrtle and do some thinking, but she kept on talking. It was quite tedious. Myrtle is usually tedious, although she is one of the few people who seeks out my company. I don't understand it, but I've always had difficulty making friends.

When I was finally able to get away from her with the excuse it was time to take my medication and I'd forgotten to bring it with me, I first went back to my apartment to think about things, and then I went to the community room to use the computer.

I'd learned some of the basics about how to "surf the Internet," as Amanda calls it, from the program Devi arranged. That's also how I found out what the stamp was worth.

This time, after a short perusal of the screen options to jog my memory, I typed EDWARD HOOPER, PAINTER in the Google search box. A message came up asking if I meant EDWARD HOPPER. I clicked YES and that brought up information about Edward Hopper, an early twentieth-century American painter.

He had to be the one. His paintings were worth, I blinked in astonishment. *Oh, my.* The last one sold for forty million.

When Myrtle said millions, I thought she meant a couple of million. That would be nothing to sneeze at, of course. But forty million? My goodness. This was going to take some thought.

And one quick one was that Mr. Souter was not going to want the responsibility for the painting. He'd no doubt insist that Josephine move it someplace more secure. Perhaps she already had, a possibility that made my stomach clench. But Lill should know about that, and she'd talked, according to Myrtle, as if the painting was still here.

I wondered how large it was, but I didn't know how to make the computer give me an answer to that question. Besides, I didn't know which painting Josephine had. But I did know how to get to it. All I needed was a cooperative staff member with access to a master keycard.

The obvious choice was Eddie. If he was willing to steal small amounts, he could likely be convinced to go for a much larger prize. The tricky part would be trying to find a buyer for the painting.

My fingers itched to type in UNSCRUPULOUS ART DEALER to see what would come up, but it seemed to me that the crime dramas always show the detectives looking at suspects' computers and being able to see everything they'd ever looked at. The thought unsettled me. Although this was a community computer, I figured there might be ways of knowing who used it.

I couldn't remember how to close the program, or how to blank out my search, so I turned off the computer, something we're not supposed to do.

Then I sat thinking about it. How would an ordinary person sell a stolen painting possibly worth forty million dollars? After a minute or two, I had it. The

perfect plan.

I went to the office to ask if anyone knew where Eddie was.

“Haven’t seen him,” Candace said. “Perhaps he’s left already.” She was putting on her coat, obviously planning to do the same.

It was most unsatisfactory. I was pretty sure he was the only one who could help me. And we needed to move fast.

~ ~ ~

Eventually, after doing a full circle of Eddie’s haunts, I returned to the office area and found him there, skulking in the manager’s office. Whenever Mr. Souter is out, Eddie acts like the office belongs to him.

He glanced up at me when I knocked on the door frame, but after that quick glance, he looked back at his phone. I took a seat in front of him and waited for him to put his phone down and pay attention to me.

He finally looked up. “What can I do for you, Edna?”

“No, Eddie, that’s entirely the wrong question. The real question is, what can I do for you.”

“And that is?”

“Have you heard the news about Josephine’s painting?”

“Yeah. Uncle Cal filled me in.” He frowned. “But he said only key staff members knew.”

“Actually, I think quite a few people know.”

“What’s it to you?”

“I have a proposition for you.”

“Spit it out then.”

“I think you and I should steal the painting.”

He sat blinking at me. Then, as if he couldn’t quite believe what I’d said, he shook his head in a sharp movement.

I smiled at him. “I know you like to steal things. And I have it all worked out, you see. I just need a bit of help. A partner. After all, the painting is probably too large for me to handle. Besides, you can get into Josephine’s apartment, and I can’t.”

“Yeah? What is it I need you for?” Sharp as broken glass, that’s our Eddie.

“What will you do with a forty-million-dollar painting? Where will you hide

it? How will you keep everyone from knowing you're the one who took it?"

"F-forty million?"

"Yes, what did you think?"

"Not forty million. That could lead to serious prison time. "

"Only if we're caught." And I had no intention of letting that happen.

Eddie frowned. "I don't think it's a good idea, Edna. It's way too risky. Besides, I'm busy right now . . . with stuff."

"You haven't even heard my plan."

Eddie rolled his eyes in a most hideous fashion. His bruises have faded—the rumor is he got them from a woman—but it still looks like he's wearing eye shadow, and it's most unattractive. I waited for him to stop the eye rolling and pay attention.

"It would be difficult to sell a painting like that unless we had contacts," I said.

"Yeah. I get that."

"I think what we need to do instead is kidnap it. We hide the painting, and then we demand a ransom." I'd seen enough kidnapping stories on television I had no doubts I could pull it off. I knew all about dye packets and tracking devices.

Besides, my plan would be simpler than the usual kidnap plot since we wouldn't even steal the painting. All we needed to do was hide it in Josephine's apartment. Under her bed was the most obvious choice. Then we would use prepaid cell phones for the ransom calls, because that's what smart criminals use.

Once we had the money, we would tell Josephine where the painting was, and we'd be all set. It's a brilliant plan, if I do say so myself.

When I tried to explain all that to Eddie, he was quite negative about it. "What if it's too big to fit under the bed, and what if Josephine wakes up while I'm in her apartment?"

"I'm sure it'll fit." I wasn't, but there was no way to check on that ahead of time. We'd simply have to trust fate. But his second objection did send my brain into overdrive. "Hmm, as for Josephine waking up, that's easy. I have some drugs we can slip into her dessert at dinner. That is, you can slip them in."

"And how am I going to know it's her dessert?"

"You could take her a special one."

"Why would I do that?"

“Because she did all the work on the inspiration book. And you want to thank her.”

“What inspiration book?”

“The one for your daughter. You know, the party, the check? That book.”

“I thought Myrtle did all that.”

“Myrtle raised the money and took all the credit, but Josephine and Lillian helped with the book.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Well, I don’t know, do I? Nobody consulted me.” And that was an annoyance I tried to avoid thinking about. “Anyway, it gives us the excuse we need for a thank-you. Here are the drugs.”

I fished the container out of my purse with all the purloined pills. The Ambiens were tiny. I figured four ought to do it. One would likely be enough, but just in case Josephine didn’t eat the whole dessert, four was safer.

“You could charm the cook into baking one of those small cakes, like they do for the birthday parties. Then you present it to her.”

“How do I get the drugs into it, though?”

Annoyed at his lack of initiative, I slipped the Ambiens back in the container. “I have a better idea. You go to Servatii’s and buy a couple of cream puffs. One for Josephine and one for Lillian. Then you bring them to me. I’ll add the drugs, and you do the presentation. Tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“The sooner the better, don’t you think?”

“Then you’re going to demand a ransom?”

“Yes. In a few days. You better pick up a couple of those prepaid cell phone thingies.”

“What for?”

I sighed. “For the ransom calls, of course.” Really, the man was as dense as a fruitcake.

“Where are you going to have them drop off the money?”

“Don’t you worry about that. I have just the place. You get the painting stowed under Josephine’s bed, and I’ll take care of the rest. And Eddie?”

“Yeah?”

“Be sure you wear gloves.”

I sailed out, quite pleased with myself.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Devi

“Things are going well,” Abigail said at my third appointment with her. “I’ve been provided copies of the recordings that Detective McElroy made shortly after the incident, and I’m certain they’ll be admissible, and that means we should have very little difficulty winning the case. Still, as I said, it’s good to be prepared. So I had my investigator check into Mr. Colter’s background, and he discovered some very interesting information.”

“What’s that?”

“Although his salary is roughly five thousand a month, my investigator estimates his lifestyle requires a great deal more. And that supposition is born out by his credit score and maxed-out credit cards.”

For a moment, my mind was engaged with the math. Five thousand a month meant Eddie made over \$60,000 a year. Sixty thousand? Really? My salary was \$45,000 with a one-year wait for health-care benefits.

“Suranna?”

“Please, I’m used to Devi now.”

“Yes, of course. Devi. About Eddie, there’s more.”

As she outlined the “more,” I considered how scary it was that a person could find out so many details of another person’s life so quickly and easily. Shuddering at the thought of how much Josephine was going to be billed, I struggled to focus.

“Is all this really necessary?”

Abigail shrugged. “Maybe not. But I need a counter strategy in the event Colter’s attorney should happen to get hold of the information about William Garrison. And I now know that the only reason Eddie can afford to bring this suit is because his attorney is his cousin. Certainly no one else would take something like this on contingency. It’s likely Eddie’s suing you both for the nuisance value as well as in hopes of easing his disastrous financial situation.”

If that was supposed to make me feel more confident of ultimate victory, it failed completely.

Never underestimate the wile and viciousness of a cornered dog was one of my Indiana grandmother's admonitions. Clearly, that's what Eddie was, and Abigail was correct. We needed to take him very seriously.

Along with Harry and the Chicago authorities.

"What about . . . Did you find out if the Chicago police—"

"Nothing yet. But don't worry. I'm sure we can get that sorted out."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Edna

My plan worked even better than I'd hoped.

After a bit of debate, I did cut back to three Ambien tablets, which I crushed and mixed with a tiny bit of honey flavored with lemon. I planted most of that mix in the middle of the cream puff for Josephine and a smaller amount in Lillian's puff, just enough to make her feel tired so she'd be ready to go back to her own apartment after dinner.

Then I'd watched from my vantage point in the lobby as both Josephine and Lillian ate every bite of their puffs. When they walked out, I detained Lillian briefly, long enough to send Josephine on her way by herself.

I then excused myself and followed Josephine back to her room. She was already tottering by the time she reached her door. I thought I was going to have to help her, but she finally managed to unlock the door and step inside.

When the door didn't close all the way behind her, I almost danced with glee. After waiting a minute, I stepped closer and pulled the door open. Slowly, I stuck my head in and looked around.

Josephine wasn't in the living room, but the painting was, hanging right there in plain sight, on the wall. Too bad it was too large for me to handle by myself.

I must say, for forty million, the painting didn't show me much. Neither did the rest of Josephine's furnishings, all that modern Scandinavian stuff that I simply can't abide. Give me a nice dark walnut or mahogany any day.

The whole time I was halfway leaning through Josephine's doorway, I heard no sounds of her moving around. Smiling to myself, I stepped back and carefully settled the door near the latch, but not too near. Then I went to tell Eddie there would be no need for him to get hold of a keycard. Josephine's door being unlatched made our little painting caper even easier.

I could tell Eddie was pleased when I told him that. It meant it wouldn't be until we collected the ransom that we'd be on the hook for any sort of criminal

charge. I hurried back to my apartment, smiling with anticipation of the next steps.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Josephine

At Monday evening's dinner, something very peculiar happened. At the end of the meal, Eddie came to our table and presented Lill and me each with a cream puff, and he thanked us for all our hard work putting together the inspiration book.

I've never liked the man, and I was briefly tempted to mash the cream puff in his face. After all, he attacked Devi and now he's suing her. *And there is no Sara.*

I think Lill sensed my reaction. She gave me one of her looks and then thanked him for the treats.

"I quite agree with you, Josephine," she said after Eddie walked away. "That man is no good. But, oh my, I do love cream puffs."

She took a bite and moaned in pleasure. It was a very un-Lill-like thing for her to do.

"If you don't want to eat that, Josephine, you can give it to me."

"Oh no, you don't." I picked up the puff and took a large bite.

Lill was right. It was delicious, with an unusual lemony tang to the filling, and my intention to take only a bite or two was quickly overcome. I ate the whole thing.

Cream puffs duly dispatched, Lill and I left the dining room a few minutes later. I opened my mouth to invite Lill over, but a yawn prevented me from speaking.

As we entered the lobby, Edna came over and asked Lill a question. Feeling sleepy, I said good night and left them visiting as I walked back to my apartment.

The next thing I knew, I was opening my eyes to bright light, and Devi and Lill were bending over me with worried expressions.

I struggled to sit up and discovered I was lying on my bed, although I had no memory of how I got there. I was fully dressed and even had shoes on, and I was

on top of the covers. Exactly as if I had passed out. It was most disconcerting.

“Thank goodness,” Lill said. “It’s one thing for you not to answer your phone, Josephine, but when you weren’t at lunch and then you ignored my knock, I was really worried.”

“Lunch? What time . . . um . . . day is it?” I asked, trying to bring their faces into focus.

“One thirty in the afternoon on Tuesday,” Devi said.

That meant I’d been asleep . . . nineteen hours?

“You didn’t have a stroke, did you?” Lill said. “Smile at me.”

“No, I did not have a stroke.”

But for sure, something had happened to me, and from the fuzziness in my head, it had to be something to do with a drug.

“Is the painting still there?”

“Let me check,” Lill said.

She left the room but returned immediately. “It worked. It’s missing.”

“Good,” I said.

“Good?” Devi said. “What are you two up to now?”

“Nothing. We aren’t up to anything.”

“But a painting is missing? That doesn’t sound like nothing.” She took a turn looking in the other room. “Do you know where it is?” She was giving us both the stink-eye.

“We have no idea, do we, Lill?”

“No,” Lill agreed.

“But we have a pretty good idea who does know,” I told Devi.

She narrowed her eyes. “You set a trap.”

“Such a smart girl,” I said to Lill.

“Much smarter than that Eddie creature,” she agreed.

“Although that Eddie creature did manage to seduce me with a cream puff.” And I did feel just a bit annoyed about that, despite the long, rather lovely sleep.

Since Jeff’s visit and the subsequent setting of our trap, I’d been propping a chair against my bedroom door and keeping an emergency cord handy. Although that had made me feel reasonably safe, my sleep had still been restless.

“You think you’ve been drugged?” Devi said, sticking to the main point.

“Highly likely.” I sat up, but that made black dots dance in front of my eyes.

“Maybe I better just lie here for a while. Would you give Mac a call, Devi?”

“If you’ve been drugged, don’t you think the nurse ought to take a look at you?” Devi said.

“And what do you expect her to do? I’m fine now. Just a bit muzzy in the head. But it’s obviously wearing off, whatever it was.”

“Please. Just let her take a look.”

“I’m fine. But if it will make you feel better—”

“It will.” She picked up my phone and spoke briefly with whoever answered. Then she dialed again. “Mac? It’s Devi. We have a bit of a situation. Can you come?”

There was a pause. “Yes, as soon as possible. At Josephine’s. I’ll open the back door for you.”

“Maybe a glass of water?” I said.

Devi went to get that, and then she left again, and I heard sounds that indicated she was making tea. Lill went to the window to watch for Mac. I lay back down after taking a drink of water, because that felt better than sitting up.

The nurse arrived and took my blood pressure. Then she listened to my heart and shined a light in my eyes.

While she was doing that, Mac arrived. He stood in the doorway, watching the nurse repack her bag, obviously waiting until the woman left to speak to me.

“Okay. Let’s see if I have this right. You and Lillian put out the word about the painting in order to entice the thief to steal it. That about right?”

When I tried to speak, he held up a hand to silence me.

“And now your painting is missing, and you suspect you were drugged so you wouldn’t notice the thief breaking in. All that correct so far?”

His expression was so stern, it made me feel even fainter.

“Well,” I said, but again, he held up a hand.

“Devi, would you take a look in the cupboard? We’ll need a clean glass jar with a tight lid.”

“What for?” I said.

“A urine sample.”

“I think not.”

He sighed. “Josephine, proving you’ve been drugged would go a long way toward accomplishing what you’re trying so hard to do here.”

Devi showed up beside him with a jam jar.

“Can you manage, or do you need my help?” Mac said.

I could see there was no way I was getting out of it, so I might as well do it on my terms. “Devi can help me.”

I sat up, but I had to wait until my head stopped spinning before I attempted to stand. Devi steadied me and walked me to the bathroom, but there I drew the line. This whole situation had taken a distinctly undignified turn.

“I can manage.” I took the jar from her hands and closed the door in her face.

For the first time since moving to Brookside, I used the grab bar by the toilet to steady myself. I did have to pee. It had been, after all, over nineteen hours.

When I returned to the other room, Mac was ready with a paper bag and a marker pen that he used to label the jar and the bag. It was completely mortifying, and I was relieved when the jar disappeared out of sight into the bag.

We sat at the table. Devi served the tea she’d made as Mac grilled Lill and me about every aspect of our plan to catch the thief.

“We’re convinced it’s Edna in cahoots with Eddie,” I summarized. “And the drugged cream puff is just further proof.”

Mac shook his head. “We can prove you were drugged and with what drug, but we won’t be able to prove the drug was in the cream puff. However, it is highly suggestive circumstantial evidence.”

“Are you going to get a search warrant?”

“I can probably get one for Eddie’s place, but it will be impossible to justify searching Edna’s apartment.”

We’d just see about that. Edna never locked her door, at least, she didn’t used to. It meant Lill and I could easily find a time when she was out to take a look. The painting was large enough; there were only a few places it could be. I didn’t tell Mac what I was thinking, of course.

“Do not even think about it, Josephine,” Mac said.

“Think about what?” I said, trying not to look guilty.

He narrowed his eyes. “You are thinking about it. Listen to me. You set one foot in Edna’s apartment and I find out about it, I’ll charge you with breaking and entering.”

“No. Of course, I won’t,” I said. But I had a hard time meeting his gaze.

“We should have the test results by tomorrow, and then we’ll see what comes next.” He was taking my urine to the hospital for testing, since the crime laboratory was notoriously slow.

“Meanwhile, get something to eat and take it easy. And no more of your *trying to catch the thief* antics.”

After he left, Lill cooked me an omelet, and then she and Devi watched me eat it.

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Mac called to tell me that zolpidem had been found in my urine.

“What’s that?”

“Same as Ambien. It’s a sleeping med.”

“Yes, I know what that is. So Eddie drugged me. That means he must be involved in the theft of the painting.”

“I don’t know if I can convince a judge of that, but I’ll try.”

A few hours later, he called to say the judge had felt the evidence was too weak to justify her issuing a search warrant.

So far, the only people who knew about the theft of my decoy painting and my being drugged were Lill, Devi, Mac, and the thief or thieves. The nurse had been told I’d had a dizzy spell.

After Mac said he couldn’t get a search warrant for Eddie’s place, I tried to talk Lill into going with me to be a lookout while I searched Edna’s apartment, but once again she refused.

“I don’t want Mac mad at me, Josephine. And you know he would be. You’ll just have to accept the fact our trap didn’t work.”

I wasn’t ready to accept any such thing, but I was at a loss of how to proceed.

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When I returned from dinner the following day, I found a message from the thief on my phone. She, and I use the term advisedly, wasn’t going to sell the painting to some unsuspecting collector. She was demanding I pay to get it back. I was certain the caller was Edna, although she did disguise her voice.

She demanded a payment of \$100,000 in twenty- and fifty-dollar bills. It struck me as odd she didn’t ask for more, but perhaps she thought more than that would be too heavy for her to handle. However, when I checked currency

weights on the Internet, I discovered the \$100,000 would weigh only seven pounds.

Listening to her instructions was like being transported on to the set of a television cop drama: random serial numbers, placed in a dark green backpack, no tracking devices, no dye markers. And all of it ready to go by Thanksgiving Day when I would receive my final instructions.

I called Mac, and when he arrived at the end of his shift, I played the message for him.

“But the missing painting is only worth two thousand, so you are—”

“Not planning to pay the ransom. But I can pretend. After all, I would like the painting back. And I expect you want to catch the thief?”

“Of course.”

“This means you’ll have to spend Thanksgiving here.”

“Yep.”

“How about I invite Devi and Lill? We can have dinner together while we wait for the ransom call.”

“My neighbor’s invited me to dinner. You know, Teddy’s mom? I’d hate to disappoint them.”

“Invite them here. No reason why we can’t have a party while we’re waiting, is there?”

Mac shook his head. It meant we had a plan.

Chapter Forty

Devi

I arrived at Josephine's on Thanksgiving morning to find her already cooking. She'd told Lillian and me she would be preparing the dinner from scratch since, as she put it, "the Brookside chef will no doubt serve pressed turkey breast. And if there's one food that can be mistaken for cardboard, that's the one. No. We're having a real turkey with all the trimmings."

Lillian was in her own kitchen preparing her assigned dishes since Josephine's kitchen could barely accommodate the two of us. But as soon as Lillian finished putting together her sweet potato casserole, her grandmother's stuffing, and a chopped salad, she joined us.

I knew Mac was coming to dinner in order to be present when the ransom call came through. I also knew his neighbor and her son were joining us, and that, originally, he'd planned to have dinner with that neighbor.

I was nervous about seeing him with another woman, although Josephine insisted he wasn't "with" her. But I very much doubted that when they arrived. The neighbor, Kate, was attractive, and the two were comfortable together. Something Mac and I no longer seemed to be. It was also clear Mac was fond of Teddy.

Kate's assignment had been dessert, and she arrived with both pumpkin and cherry pies. Mac's contribution was also stuffing because, according to Josephine, who was directing the meal preparation like an army general on campaign, "you can never have too much stuffing."

Along with assisting Josephine, I'd contributed a vegetable casserole that was a Subramanian traditional dish—a mix of vegetables in a tomato cream sauce seasoned with curry and a dozen spices I'd had to buy, since I rarely cook anything very complicated anymore.

When we were seated in the places assigned by Josephine, she asked us to join hands. I was sitting between Mac and Lillian, and as Mac took my hand in

his, I thought how lovely it was to touch him. I had only one of Mac's hands, though, since Kate was holding the other one.

Josephine suggested that we each think of something we were especially grateful for and to share that.

Kate said, "good neighbors," and smiled at Mac. Teddy, after prompting and an explanation from Kate, said, "taking walks with Mac and Bruno." Josephine said, "finding new friends," and smiled at Lillian, Mac, and me. Lillian echoed Josephine's "finding new friends," and then it was my turn.

"I'm especially grateful, Josephine and Lillian, for the gift of your friendship. And, Mac, thank you for being there when I needed your help."

When I said that last bit, he squeezed my hand. It was a light squeeze, and I wondered if he'd done the same thing to Kate when she'd said she was thankful for him. Probably. It was the nice thing to do.

Mac was the last to speak. "I'm thankful for everyone around this table and for what you add to my life. In no particular order: Erdradour Scotch, naked poker, a dog to walk, and Teddy."

Teddy gave Mac one of his incandescent grins. Then we let go of each other's hands and started passing dishes around the table.

Mac had seconds of my casserole, but that provided only a tiny measure of satisfaction in a day that should have been filled with gratitude but was instead shaded by an imminent sense of loss. For once Mac apprehended the thief, there'd be no reason for his continuing presence in our lives.

Chapter Forty-One

Edna

My granddaughter, Amanda, called two days before Thanksgiving to say she and her dad were coming for the day. Normally, that would be wonderful news, but this year it added an unexpected complexity to my planning for the ransom pickup.

I'd decided to have the money delivered to the Kenwood Mall on Thanksgiving afternoon, after the big Christmas shopping rush kicked off. Eddie wanted to wait until Friday, and although there was merit to his suggestion, I thought Thanksgiving Day was the better bet.

Since he's so tall, using Eddie to pick up the ransom is my thorniest problem. Not only will it be difficult for him to blend in, but I believe he's a suspect in the other thefts that are being actively investigated. There's one police officer, in particular, I've seen visit Brookside repeatedly.

Then I had a thought. Since I was doing this for Amanda, perhaps it was time for her to pitch in and help. But what story could I tell her that would make sense of something so peculiar as her picking up a backpack that didn't belong to her and then escaping with it from the mall?

I went to bed puzzling it through and woke up with the perfect plan. I'd tell her a local radio station was sponsoring a scavenger hunt, and I'd worked out when and where they planned to hide the backpack that would win me the first prize. Not wanting her to be too nervous, I told her the prize was \$1,000.

"It's going to be placed at the mall this afternoon," I told her. "And I don't think I'm agile enough. You see, you have to get the backpack safely out of the mall with nobody spotting you, because other people will also work out where it is, and they may try to take it away from you."

Her eyes began to shine. Clearly, she was hooked. And so after Thanksgiving dinner, which I'd arranged for us to eat in the dining room, we left Baxter to watch the football game in the library while Amanda and I drove to the mall.

Mall traffic is always terrible this time of year, but I directed her in a back way, and we found an ideal parking spot. I led her inside and showed her exactly where the bag was to be dropped off—in a planter under an overhang adjacent to the food court.

We were early, so I sent her off to shop while I called Josephine with the final instructions to drop off the ransom at five o'clock.

Amanda returned, shortly before five, carrying a large Nordstrom bag with handles. "I thought I could stick the backpack in here. That will hide it. And I have another idea. When the backpack arrives, why don't you create a diversion while I pick it up? Maybe fake a heart attack or something."

Both beautiful and bright. "I think that's a brilliant idea."

We grinned at each other.

The drop-off was late. At five twenty, there was still no sign of Josephine. But perhaps she was stuck in traffic. Amanda was restless, and so was I. I'd earlier picked out a family at a nearby table for the diversion Amanda suggested, but they'd now finished their food and left.

Another glance at the drop-off and then back at the tables. Good. A family had just sat down. A husband, wife, and little boy who had Down Syndrome and was eating a bowl of ice cream.

At five thirty, I saw the Brookside associate activities director walking past the drop-off. I thought that was an interesting coincidence until Amanda tapped my arm and pointed. The backpack was there. She squeezed my hand, then jumped up and hustled over to the backpack, carrying her Nordstrom bag.

I stood as well and approached the family I'd picked out, clutching my chest and gasping. They turned toward me, and I almost had a heart attack for real. The man, who'd been facing away, looked exactly like that police officer who's been nosing around Brookside.

I had no choice but to go through with the plan. I slumped to the floor, pulling on the woman's coat. From my position on the floor, I saw Amanda with her Nordstrom bag disappearing into the crowd that had turned to look in my direction when the woman yelled for help.

I struggled back to my feet. The man I suspected was a police officer assisted me with a strong grip on my arm.

"Are you all right? Ah, it's Mrs. Prisant, isn't it?" he said, removing the last vestiges of hope I was mistaken about who he was, although I did wonder how he knew who I was.

“I’m perfectly fine. I just slipped.”

“And perfectly timed it was.” He grinned at me.

That was when I saw Amanda being escorted toward us by a man who was using one hand to grip her by her arm and the other to hold the Nordstrom bag.

“I’m so sorry, Grandma,” she said.

But I was the one who was sorry.

Chapter Forty-Two

Mac

It was a good thing Dillingham had agreed to come to the mall and help me keep an eye on things, since he was the one who spotted the granddaughter while I was dealing with Edna Prisant's fake heart attack. I had thought it wise to know what Edna looked like in case she picked up the ransom instead of Eddie, and recognizing her from the description Josephine and Lillian had given me was a snap.

My plan, once we knew the drop-off location, had been to pick a spot from which to take pictures of whoever picked up the backpack. Kate was the one who suggested she and Teddy could provide the perfect cover for me to hang around the food court. Since I didn't intend to approach Eddie, I'd judged it safe for them to be there.

It didn't take us long after Dillingham apprehended the granddaughter to determine she was an innocent bystander roped in by her grandmother's bizarre, but believable, story about a scavenger hunt.

Neither of us considered Edna a flight risk, but sending her back to her apartment risked her disposing of evidence. Therefore, Dillingham escorted her and the granddaughter back to the station for questioning while I dropped my gang of helpers off at Brookside.

By the time I made it to the station, Dillingham had gotten a full confession from Edna. We then accompanied her to her apartment where we recovered the baseball card, necklace, and several other items she admitted to stealing. She also told us where to find the painting.

"It went well?" Josephine said when I got back to her place two hours later.

I nodded.

"What did she do with the painting?"

"It's under your bed."

Josephine blinked, then led the way to her bedroom to check. I slid the

painting out for her, carried it into the other room, and re-hung it.

She stood looking at it. "I'm glad it's safe," she said. "Did she tell you why she did it?"

"She was trying to raise money for her granddaughter's college fund."

"I see. Are you charging her?"

"Well, she didn't actually steal the painting, and since there was no money in the backpack Amanda picked up—"

"You have no evidence against her," she said.

"Not exactly. While we can't charge her with stealing the painting, you can press charges for her trying to extort a payment from you and for drugging you. And she's also on the hook for the other thefts."

"She confessed?"

"Yes. And she's turned over a stash of items, including the necklace and baseball card."

"What about the stamp?"

"She conned her son into selling it."

"All to send her granddaughter to college."

"So she says."

"And what about Eddie?" Lillian said.

"Edna said he was the one who removed the painting. But it was at her suggestion, and she claims he didn't even break in, since the door was open."

"Does that mean you have less on Eddie than you have on her?"

"Looks that way."

As we talked, Teddy curled up on the floor and fell asleep. I carried him into Josephine's bedroom and laid him on the bed, and she got an afghan out of the closet and tucked him in.

Back in the living room, Kate's pies were served. Then Josephine got out the Erdradour, glasses, and a deck of cards. I was off duty by then, so I poured Scotch in the glasses for those who wanted it while Josephine and Lillian took turns explaining the rules for naked poker to Kate, who was enthusiastic about playing.

Devi had been quiet all day, and several times when I glanced at her, I saw her examining Kate with a thoughtful look. It made my heart sore watching Devi, knowing what she was probably thinking.

"Mac, your turn to come back from the clouds and ante up," Josephine said.

She picked up her Scotch, and with a wink, poured it into my glass.

I shook my head to clear it, added two paper clips to the pot, and asked for three cards.

“There was no sign of Eddie anywhere near the pickup?” she asked, dealing me the cards.

“Not a whiff that we could see, but Edna admits she added pills to both the cream puffs, then she had Colter give them to you. Lillian’s had a much smaller dose, by the way.”

“Did seem like I slept real good that night,” Lillian said.

“Did Eddie know they contained drugs when he gave them to us?”

“She says he did.”

“Hmm,” Josephine said, looking at Devi. “Maybe that’s the leverage your lawyer needs to make Eddie drop his suit.”

I looked across the table and caught Devi’s eye. She blinked and glanced away. It occurred to me that, given the way Josephine was nudging me about Devi, she was very likely nudging Devi about me. With that whirling through my head, I wasn’t paying enough attention to my cards.

Kate, on the other hand, caught on quickly. She won a hand, and then Josephine and Lillian won the next two, but Devi and I were both playing poorly, and if I lost less than Devi, she would have to tell a story. But it seemed ungallant to do that to her. Besides, I wanted to hear Devi’s stories because she wanted to tell me, not because she’d been coerced by a card game.

Over the next few hands, I steadily reduced my stake.

“A person would almost think you like to lose, Mac,” Josephine said.

“Nobody likes to lose.” I accompanied the words with my best inscrutable smile. “I take it it’s about time for a story?”

“It is.”

I’d already been thinking about it once I decided to lose more clips than Devi.

“And no exploding dolls this time,” Josephine said. “You lost big. We want something juicy.”

“Okay. Juicy it is.” I stopped, took a sip of Scotch, and began. “This happened when I was on the Cincinnati police force. My partner and I got a call to investigate a missing girl. Trudy was five and had gone missing during the night.

“The mom looked too old to have a five-year-old, and that was our first clue this might not be what we thought it was. But in that neighborhood, many of the women called Mom were grandmothers, so we began to question her. She was distraught, barely coherent at times. We asked her to describe Trudy, and she said Trudy was black. That part we expected, but the next part, about Trudy having a white ruff, we didn’t expect. We asked to see a picture and, sure enough, Trudy was a cat.

“My partner was getting up to leave, but the woman pulled on my sleeve, saying she knew where Trudy was—trapped in a neighbor’s storage shed.

“I asked why she didn’t just ask the neighbor to open the shed, and she said she was afraid of him. I asked her to show me where the shed was.

“She led the way out her back door into an alley and pointed at a tin shed a short distance away. As I approached, the door flew open and a man came stumbling out. A black cat—with a white ruff—was perched on the man’s head, howling.

“The cat was stuck in the man’s Afro, and was it ever mad. I knew cats could be loud, but I’d never heard anything like that. It howled and hissed, and the man yelled and ran around in circles, trying to bat the cat off his head. If we’d recorded it, I bet it would have gone viral.

“Turns out both the cat and the man were higher than kites on the methamphetamine stash we found in the shed. Getting the two of them separated and sedated was one of the trickiest operations I’ve been involved with. I still have scars. Turns out it was one of the biggest drug busts of the year, so I got a commendation. I also got ragged unmercifully about being wounded in the line of duty by a cat.”

“Good one, Mac,” Josephine said, sitting back and grinning at me.

Even Devi smiled at the images I’d conjured. Since she’d been so solemn most of the day, I was glad to see it.

The perfect ending for the day would have been me driving Devi home . . . a realization that forced me to finally face the fact that chance encounters weren’t enough. I wanted more. And I didn’t even care whether or not she wanted kids.

Chapter Forty-Three

Josephine

Before I made a decision about pressing charges against Edna, I wanted to speak to her, and so two days after Thanksgiving, I knocked on her door.

The woman who answered the door was a different Edna from the one I'd known across the poker table. The bluster was missing, and she appeared to sag, as if part of her had previously been blown up but now the air had escaped.

When she saw me, she stood straighter. It didn't help.

"Come to gloat, have you, Josephine?"

"May I come in?"

She shrugged. "Why not?" She moved away from the door, leaving me to step into her living room behind her.

"Why don't we sit down?" I said.

She shrugged again and took a seat.

It hadn't hit me before how few possessions Edna has. The last time I'd been in her apartment, I'd simply thought it less cluttered than Myrtle's. But now I realized it was bare, despite being one of Brookside's small units.

She sat across from me, obviously making an effort to sit straight, her hands clutched in her lap, perhaps to keep from fidgeting.

"I'm sorry for your trouble," I said.

It wasn't the way I'd thought to begin. But seeing how distressed she was, I decided it was a better opening than the one I'd planned, an unadorned question about why she'd done it. I know Mac said it was for her granddaughter, but I had my doubts.

"Yes. Well, I brought it on myself. Would you like tea? Or I have sherry."

"Perhaps we should stick with tea."

"You're probably right. It's a very cheap sherry."

I waited while she heated water and took tea bags out of one of the two

cupboards in the tiny kitchen tucked into one corner of her living room. It occurred to me it couldn't be easy storing food and preparing meals in such a small space.

She handed me a spoon and a mug with a tea bag of questionable pedigree floating in it. I removed the tea bag and placed it and the spoon on the saucer she'd set between us. Sipping hot water was preferable to trying to drink an inferior brew.

"You'll be glad to see the last of me, I expect," she said, stirring sugar into her own tea. "I'm leaving in a few days, you know. What I don't know yet is whether I'll be going to prison or moving in with my son."

It wasn't a surprise she was leaving. I'm sure once Mr. Souter learned she was stealing, he'd insisted on it.

"He can't afford for me to stay here. My son. There's no money, you see."

I shook my head to bring my focus back to what she was saying.

"Do you mean you'd stay if you could?"

"This does feel like home now, but I doubt anyone will want me around after what I did. I returned everything, you know. And Baxter is arranging for Dot to receive the money he got for the stamp. She was quite pleased about it. Still . . ."

"Is that why you did it? So you could afford to stay here?" That made more sense than the tuition story.

"Of course not. I wanted to help my granddaughter, Amanda, go to a good college. But when Baxter said I had no money, and he couldn't afford to send her, I . . ."

"You stole so you could add to her college fund?"

"I did think about killing myself first."

She said it so matter-of-factly, it both chilled me and convinced me she really had thought about killing herself.

"I discovered I couldn't do it. And I know what I did instead sounds stupid now, but have you ever noticed how often families just have a person from one of those estate-sale places come in and clear everything out? Valuables get scooped up along with furniture and clothing, and I thought, well, it wouldn't hurt anybody except maybe the estate liquidator if I took some things. I never expected anyone to miss what I took."

"But how did you know about the stamp and Glenn Bascombe's baseball card?" I figured she'd probably seen Gladys wearing the necklace.

"Herman showed me the stamp, and I knew Dot had no interest in his

collection, so I figured she would never know it was gone. As for the card, I'm a baseball fan. So was Glenn. We watched the games together. When he showed me his card collection, it didn't take a degree in rocket science to know that Willie Mays's rookie card ought to be worth something."

"Probably more than the painting."

"But I thought, that is, Myrtle said it was worth millions."

"The Hopper is worth millions. But the painting on my wall that evening wasn't a Hopper."

"I don't understand."

"It was a trap, Edna. To catch you in the act."

"You knew it was me?"

"We were almost positive."

"But how?"

"Lill analyzed your handwriting. You're intelligent and patient but you also have a wide streak of larceny."

"Yes, I suppose I do. But didn't you suspect Eddie?"

"Of course. But he's just your ordinary, everyday petty thief who isn't very bright. It was much too clever a plan for Eddie."

"Not so clever, it turns out," she said with a sigh. "There's no proof Eddie was even involved since Amanda picked up the ransom."

"We do have evidence he drugged me."

"That was my doing as well. I'm sorry about that, Josephine, but we wanted to make sure you slept soundly while Eddie was moving the painting. We didn't want to frighten you."

I sat staring at her in surprise. Her tone seemed sincere and apologetic. Definitely not the Edna I thought I knew.

"Are you sorry for what you did?" I found I wanted to understand what made her tick.

She chewed on her lip, and her eyes filled with tears that she swiped at impatiently. "These last few days, I've seen myself through Baxter and Amanda's eyes, and I discovered I don't like myself very much. I used to think I was a person who righted wrongs, like punishing my sister for hurting Jonquil. But since this happened." She stopped speaking and shook her head.

Although I'd been ready to disbelieve whatever she said, I saw nothing sly or calculating in her expression. She had trouble looking me in the eye, but that

seemed to be more from embarrassment than because she was trying to mislead me. If it was an act, it was a darn good one.

“I’ve hurt people, you see. And that’s made me a not very nice person. Or a happy one. What I did to my sister and Charles . . . he never loved me, you know. Not that I expected him to. But I didn’t realize how hard . . .” She shook her head sharply. “Baxter and Amanda made up for some of that. I love my son. And I love Amanda dearly.” She looked away, obviously struggling for composure.

Again, I considered the possibility it was all an act. But if it was, she’d missed her calling. No, I was positive what I was seeing was sincere regret.

“Was Amanda angry with you?”

Edna shook her head. “Worse. She was disappointed. So was Baxter.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I deserve it, you see. Here I am, eighty-three years old, and I’ve only now been able to admit I don’t like myself. Do you have any idea how awful that feels? I’ve been stupid and arrogant and self-righteous. I always thought I knew the right thing to do about what I considered the wrongs others committed. But taking your painting, that was over the line. It wasn’t righting a wrong. There’s no way I can justify it. Not even to help Amanda.”

She stopped speaking, her head shaking from side to side. “Worst of all, I have no idea if I can be a better person.” She paused and took a shuddery breath. “That scares me more than . . . dying.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

She sat for a moment, staring at her tea. “That’s the difficult part, isn’t it? Easy to confess my sins, not so easy doing the penance. But I’ve already apologized to Amanda and Baxter. And I want to apologize to you as well, Josephine.” She glanced up at me. “I’m sorry I viewed you as an impediment and a way to get something, and not as a person whose friendship I should have valued.”

I examined Edna, seeking any sign she was calibrating her answers to please me. I didn’t see any. While I knew Edna could steal, I didn’t think she was a liar, although there was that whopper she’d told Charles.

“You do realize, I can refuse to press charges against you. At least, about my part in this. You’d still be charged in the other thefts.”

There was a flare of hope in her eyes, but then it died. “No, I think you should press charges. It probably doesn’t matter anyway, since the police already

have my confession. Accepting my punishment without feeling sorry for myself—if I do that, then maybe I’ll be able to earn Amanda and Baxter’s respect. Besides, it’s time I suffered the consequences for my actions.”

“I believe you already have.”

“Not everything I deserve.”

“Maybe not. But what good will it do if you spend your remaining time on the planet wallowing in guilt?”

She looked up, eyes wide.

“You’ve been given a gift, Edna. One not many receive. That of seeing yourself clearly. Don’t waste it.”

Like I did, I could have added. For were her sins any blacker than my own? I’d been dishonest as well. I hadn’t loved Thomas, but I’d been unwilling to divorce him and live a more authentic life. And I’d let Thomas come between Jeff and me, and made few attempts to put it right.

I sighed, set my cup down with a decisive click, and left Edna ruminating on her sins.

~ ~ ~

I took the rest of the weekend to think about it, then I went to see Mr. Souter first thing Monday morning.

“Good morning, Mrs. Bartlett. What can I do you for?”

I find many modern expressions vacuous and none more than the one he’d just used, although he got points for using the proper form of address.

“I have something to tell you. And I have some questions,” I said.

“Shoot.”

Another modern expression that needs to be . . . well, shot.

“I wanted to let you know, I won’t be pressing charges against Edna about either the ransom demand or the drugging.”

“I see. Why not?”

“There are extenuating circumstances.”

“And those are?”

“She was doing it to help with her granddaughter’s college expenses. It was an unselfish act, you see.”

“That doesn’t make it right.”

“Of course not. But she’s made a full confession and accepted complete responsibility.”

“I suppose that’s a start. Although if it were up to me, I’d prosecute her to the fullest extent possible. She did, after all, damage Brookside’s reputation.”

“I doubt that. If word gets out, and it might, of course, you can say the items were taken by a resident who suffers from kleptomania, but that she has agreed to let you check her apartment whenever something is reported missing.”

“But she hasn’t. Agreed, that is. And she won’t need to since she’s leaving. By the end of the week.”

“Yes, I want to speak with you about that. You see, since she’s already returned the items she stole or made restitution, it’s likely she’ll receive a suspended sentence. And if she does, I intend to pay her expenses so she can stay here.”

“What? Why would you do that?”

“Because I want to.” And I’ve been prevented most of my life from doing what I want to do and I’m tired of it. “I’ll need your cooperation since I don’t want Edna to know I’m paying.”

“But what do I tell her?”

“Tell her that Brookside has just received a bequest to establish, um, you can call it the Babbling Brook Perpetuity Fund. It’s purpose is to provide financial assistance to residents who can no longer afford to live here.”

“But we have more deserving recipients of such assistance than Edna.”

“People who are facing eviction, you mean?”

“We hate to do it, but sometimes . . .”

“Is there anyone else at risk right now, besides Edna?”

“One or two, I believe.”

“Get me the details, and I’ll consider expanding the fund. Now, about Edna. I want you to inform her that her fees, including meals, will be paid from this point on by the Babbling Brook Perpetuity Fund.” I rather liked the way the name rolled off my tongue.

He sat back, resting his hand against his chin. Then he shook his head. “This is most irregular.”

“It is, isn’t it? I rather like that aspect of it.” I sat back as well. “Now for another pressing matter. Eddie Colter. Have you fired him yet?”

“What? No, of course not. Why would I?”

“Because he knowingly and with intent gave me a drugged cream puff. And he entered my apartment without my permission and removed my painting from the wall, making it appear it was stolen.”

“Do you have any proof of either of those allegations?”

“I have a full confession from his accomplice.”

“Yes. Edna Prisant. For all I know, she implicated Eddie to lessen her own punishment.”

“You don’t intend to fire him?”

“Without proof of any wrongdoing . . .” He shrugged.

I snapped my mouth shut and shook my head. “You do know that Eddie’s been stealing from his grocery customers? And when confronted about it, he claimed to have a daughter who has leukemia.”

His expression was so shocked, I knew he had no idea what had been going on right under his nose.

“I have affidavits from the people Eddie stole from. There’s your proof. And let’s not forget he assaulted Ms. Subramanian.”

“As to that, it’s being litigated. I can’t take any action until the matter is resolved by the courts.”

“There are still the affidavits.”

“I haven’t seen them, have I? Besides, we have policies and procedures to follow before we can fire someone.”

His attitude boggled my mind. But only briefly. “How about this for a procedure? Either you fire Eddie, or he resigns today and drops his suit against Ms. Subramanian, or I will call the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. I expect this is exactly the kind of juicy story one of their reporters would love to sink their teeth into.”

I’d never seen someone blanch that way before. I confess it was most impressive.

~ ~ ~

As we used to say, there’s more than one way to skin a cat. That has to be a very messy activity, not unlike what I was attempting.

I left Mr. Souter’s office, still uncertain whether he would get rid of his nephew, and went searching for Eddie myself. I found him using the community computer.

Entering the room, I closed the door and took a seat across from him. “I’m here to talk to you about the plot you and Edna hatched to steal my painting. I’d like you to explain your part in it.”

He chewed on his lip for a time as if gauging my mood. Then he cleared his throat.

“I . . . I’m very sorry for what happened, Mrs. Bartlett.”

“And that was?” I said, prompting him as if he were a six-year-old just learning about apologies.

“I’m sorry, for, uh, moving the painting. And the, uh, the other thing.”

“Other thing?”

“My lawyer told me not to talk about it.”

“Yes. That’s usually excellent advice. However, right now what you need to do is convince me you’re sincerely sorry. Otherwise, I intend to press charges to the fullest extent possible.” Mac had told me any case against Eddie would be circumstantial, even with Edna’s testimony and mine, but I wasn’t letting uncertainty about specific details affect my ultimatum.

He cocked his head, blinking. “You’re saying you might not press charges?”

“I know Edna put the drugs in the cream puff. But you gave it to me, knowing it contained those drugs.”

After a pause, he nodded. “We wanted to make sure you didn’t wake up. She told me the drug she was using was basically harmless.”

“It’s rarely harmless to give someone a substance that renders them unconscious.”

“Yes, ma’am. You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry you did it, or sorry you were caught?”

“Both, I guess.”

“Hmm. Honesty. An interesting strategy for you. But I’m more concerned about your treatment of Ms. Subramanian than I am by what you did to me.”

I gave him a moment to contemplate that before I said the rest.

“I propose a trade. You drop the suit, resign your position here, apologize to those you’ve hurt, and I won’t press charges against you.”

He chewed on his lip while I sat and watched.

I stood. “Well, that’s that. I’ll be speaking with Detective McElroy about appropriate charges. And I will also be testifying in your suit. I doubt the jury will be swayed in your favor after learning you drugged me so you could steal

my painting.”

“But I didn’t steal your painting.”

“Eddie, Eddie, this is not the time to contradict me on minor details.” I turned to leave.

“Okay. Okay. I’ll resign.”

“And drop the suit?”

He nodded.

“And apologize sincerely and comprehensively?”

His Adam’s apple bobbed. He sighed. Then he nodded.

Chapter Forty-Four

Devi

The week after Thanksgiving was filled with surprises. The first was the discovery that Josephine was not pressing charges against Edna and that, further, Edna would soon sign a plea deal for the other thefts in return for a suspended sentence and community service.

But the biggest surprise was that Edna qualified for an income-assistance plan and would continue to live at Brookside. Something I learned about from Candace.

“I must say, it’s extremely odd. I had no idea we had a Babbling Brook Perpetuity Fund. But Calvin did say it was the result of a very recent bequest. Although, why it would go to Edna, of all people. Why, the woman’s a thief.”

“Why does she need income assistance?”

“Her son can’t afford the fees. He was all set to move her out when this other stuff happened. And I bet you haven’t heard the latest on Eddie, have you?” Candace continued.

“No, I don’t believe so.”

“He resigned this morning.”

“Did he say why?”

Candace cleared her throat and shifted her gaze away from mine. “Umm, yes. I believe he said he’d behaved badly toward several people.”

“Big of him.”

I wondered how Candace could be oblivious to the fact she’d acted badly toward me. Or maybe she wasn’t completely oblivious. She did unclench her lips and start to speak. However, all that came out was a nearly inaudible mutter about having an appointment before she departed abruptly. Since there was little to be gained from confronting her, I let her go.

Shortly after that, Josephine called and asked me to come to the community

room. I arrived there to find Josephine along with Lillian, Myrtle, Mac, Mr. Souter, and Eddie.

The sight of Eddie made me hesitate until Josephine came over, took me by the hand, and whispered, "It's all right. After all, I'm here, and so are Lill and Mac."

After we sat down, Josephine nodded at Eddie, who stood and cleared his throat before turning to me and delivering an apology, not only for the times he'd accosted me but also for suing me. Then he turned to Josephine and apologized for drugging her and for removing her picture. Finally, he apologized to Lill for also drugging her. He topped off the apologies by saying he intended to do better.

As Eddie spoke, I glanced at Mac and Myrtle. Myrtle was chewing on her lip with an avid expression while Mac leaned against the wall, arms folded, looking thoughtful.

"You still owe Myrtle an apology," Josephine said when Eddie started to sit down.

His expression turned to one of puzzlement.

"She worked very hard raising money for Sara."

Incomprehension morphed into sheepishness. "I made it all up about Sara. I'm sorry."

"Well," Myrtle said. "I must say I am most disappointed, young man, with what I've heard here this morning."

Eddie swallowed but said nothing.

Mr. Souter cleared his throat. "I've accepted Eddie's resignation. Effective immediately."

Throughout these exchanges, I no longer detected any of the arrogance Eddie had displayed in the past. Instead, I was certain if he'd had a tail, it would have been tucked firmly between his legs.

But still I wondered. Was he truly sorry and did he intend to reform, or would he revert to his old ways as soon as he left the room? Of course, since he'd resigned, it would no longer matter to me personally.

I let out a breath, relieved that my Eddie nightmare had come to an end.

Mr. Souter stood and gestured for Eddie to follow him. With a last glance around, Eddie nodded, and the two left the room.

"That's certainly a relief," Josephine said. "And now, Myrtle, Lill, I have another matter to discuss with you both."

The three walked out, leaving Mac and me looking uneasily at each other.

He pushed away from the wall and cleared his throat. “Congratulations on getting the suit dropped.”

“Yes, that is good news, isn’t it? Well, I . . . ah . . . need to get going. I have a group ready to go to the mall.”

I followed up on those words by walking out without looking back, even though I knew with all the Brookside matters settled so satisfactorily, it might be the last time I would see Mac.

But it was the safest way forward, even if it made my heart hurt.

Chapter Forty-Five

Mac

As Devi walked out, I sighed. I'd once again proven to myself that although I might look mature, fast approaching middle age even, inside I was still a quivering mass of adolescent jelly.

Josephine had set up the perfect opportunity for Devi and me to talk, free of any conflict of interest, and what did we do? We mumbled a few inane platitudes at each other and went our separate ways. For the last time. Unless one of us managed a breakthrough and reached out to the other.

I no longer doubted there was something between us. An attraction, a pull, and yet Devi seemed even more determined than I was to avoid responding to it. And that was a puzzle. I knew my own reasons for resisting, even though I'd finally admitted the having-a-child issue was bogus, but I was curious about hers.

I wondered, as I had previously, if she could be here illegally. I'd learned from her presence at Josephine's table at Thanksgiving that, like me, she didn't have family nearby. Were they as distant as India, then?

My own family is scattered around northern Ohio, not all that distant. If I hadn't needed to stick around for the ransom call, and dinner with Kate and Teddy, I could have easily made the drive to Toledo for Thanksgiving dinner with my parents and sibs.

Devi had never mentioned her family. In fact, whenever our conversations turned to personal histories, the information she offered appeared to be carefully edited.

For the first time in my career, I was tempted to run a background check on someone for personal reasons. An urge I intended to try very hard to resist.

~ ~ ~

The days that followed my letting my last chance with Devi slip through my fingers seemed to crawl by. On Friday, there was a serious accident on the interstate with one fatality. A young woman. Dillingham and I did the notification later that evening. A husband and three kids.

I hadn't done a notification since my days on the Cincinnati police force, and I'd forgotten how emotionally draining it was. How it always left me wanting nothing more than to go home to someone I cared about and give them a hug.

Saturday morning, I was still feeling that family's pain, like a bad hangover aspirin couldn't touch. To counteract it, I went next door and offered to take Teddy and Bruno for a walk.

Kate squeezed my arm, thanking me. While I put the leash on Bruno and stuffed plastic bags in my coat pocket, she got Teddy into his winter gear. I helped her finish up with the mittens, a neat trick since Teddy was dancing with anticipation.

As usual, we headed for the memorial, walking briskly. Once there, we did the full circle, encountering only one other person, a woman in a navy sweat suit who jogged past us, head down. People living in the Cincinnati area are friendly and most of the time will greet each other under these circumstances, although it isn't unheard of for someone to give this basic courtesy a pass. Usually a new arrival.

"Why didn't she say hello?" Teddy loves everyone and doesn't understand when they don't reciprocate. For that matter, I don't understand it either.

When Bruno lurched toward the woman to take a sniff, she picked up her pace, moving away, her arms pumping, her breath escaping in white puffs.

We were experiencing intermittent skiffs of snow, and the temperature was in the twenties, cold enough to turn Teddy's nose red. After another circuit of the memorial park, I hustled us across the street to the shopping center, where there's a bakery. Teddy is partial to doughnuts and hot chocolate, and I had Kate's permission to treat him occasionally.

The bakery didn't allow Bruno inside, but there was a short post by their door where I hooked his leash. Although he could easily nudge the leash free of the post, Bruno seemed to understand that he needed to stay put.

Inside, I got Teddy's coat and mittens off and placed our order. Then while Teddy carefully ate around the edges of his doughnut, I sipped coffee and watched the action in the parking lot. There wasn't much. Only a half dozen widely spaced cars, employees probably, since it was still too early for most of the stores to be open.

A Toyota, similar to Devi's, pulled into a spot in front of the bakery, and I felt a flash of hope that was fulfilled when Devi climbed out.

I was watching her, so I didn't immediately notice that a car had pulled in behind hers, blocking her in. A man jumped out, his hand fumbling for something in his pocket. Clearly he'd startled Devi because she whirled around to face him, then she backed away.

Bruno had spotted Devi as well and, although he'd never met her, was clearly interested in an introduction. He pushed between her and the man, and then he did something I'd never seen him do before. He lunged at Devi, knocking her to the ground.

I'd seen something in the way Devi reacted to the man that had pulled me to my feet. Now I began running for the door, yelling at the woman behind the counter to call 911 and keep an eye on Teddy.

I shoved the door open. The man was kicking at Bruno, who was lying on top of Devi. The hand that had been in his pocket now brandished a gun.

As I cleared the door, the man's foot swung toward Bruno yet again, connecting with a solid thunk, and then the arm with the gun at the end of it came up. The thunderous sound of two nearly simultaneous gunshots left my ears ringing.

Although I'd aimed at the man's middle mass, the bullet punched him in the upper thigh, and he fell to his knees clutching his leg. I kicked his gun away and turned to Devi and Bruno.

There was blood, lots of blood, and neither of them was moving.

I reached a finger to Devi's neck, feeling for a pulse, my ears still ringing from the gunshots and then ringing even more as patrol cars and EMT units pulled into the parking lot, sirens going and lights flashing.

I set aside my gun and showed my hands to the officer who had leaped out of the nearest car and was now pointing his weapon at me.

"I'm Detective Darren McElroy, Montgomery police. He shot her, and I shot him." I nodded toward the man in the gray jacket who was now lying on the ground, moaning.

"ID?"

"Not necessary." It was one of the EMTs speaking. "I know Detective McElroy. May I check the victims, Officer?"

The Blue Ash officer put his weapon away and nodded. I continued to kneel beside Devi, taking her hand in mine, a mantra filling my mind.

Please, God. Please, God. Please, God.

The EMT came and helped me lift Bruno off Devi. He was bleeding from a wound in his side and he whimpered when we moved him. I considered that a good sign, but Devi didn't move or make a sound, and there was so damn much blood. The EMT bent her legs toward her torso and pressed on her abdomen, which was pulsing blood.

Another EMT joined us and elbowed me gently out of the way, and the two worked quickly to get Devi lifted on to a stretcher.

Within a half minute, they had her loaded and were heading out. The hospital was less than ten minutes away and had an excellent emergency room. If Devi made it there.

Please, God. Please, God.

A Blue Ash cop was kneeling next to the man I'd shot, and his partner came over to check on Bruno, who continued to whimper.

"If she lives, it will be because of him," I told the officer.

I'd had enough time to figure out that without Bruno's interference, the man would have had a clear killing shot before I'd even moved out of my chair.

As I tried to comfort Bruno, another EMT unit pulled in.

"Let's see if we can't get this fellow taken care of," the cop said, standing. He walked over to the EMTs gathering around as the man I'd shot was loaded into a second ambulance. I didn't know what the officer told them, but two EMTs came over and lifted Bruno on to a stretcher.

With all the wounded on their way to receive medical treatment, I shut off panicked thoughts of Devi and turned my attention to Teddy, who I found in the bakery's kitchen being shown how doughnuts are made.

I could have kissed the clerk. She'd not only had the presence of mind to call 911, she'd also made sure Teddy was safe, and she kept him from seeing most of what had happened.

I called Kate to come get Teddy, and the clerk agreed to watch him until she arrived. Throughout I was managing to act calm, but I suspected that calm was a result of shock. Or perhaps it was my training kicking in. Although I'd never shot anyone, I had been involved in shooting scenes during my time on the Cincinnati police force. Just not one where someone I knew and cared about had been shot.

Another patrol unit arrived on the scene, and they offered me a ride to the hospital, and I accepted. Arriving there, we found the ambulance that had

transported Devi was parked in front of the emergency entrance with the back door open. There was no sign of the second ambulance.

I stepped into the waiting room, wanting to bypass the woman at the desk and go directly into the treatment area. But the doors would be locked, and since I wasn't wearing a uniform, I'd get nowhere without speaking to her.

I slowed, took a breath, and pulled my ID from my pocket. "The young woman who was just brought in, the gunshot victim, I need to talk to her."

"I'm sorry, Officer. I believe she was taken directly into surgery."

"Is there someone I can speak to?"

"Certainly. Right through there."

She pointed, the lock release buzzed, and I was in. The central nursing station was ominously quiet, with no personnel loitering about.

"Can I help you, sir?"

I turned to find either a doctor or a nurse standing there. These days it's tough to tell as they all wear scrubs and white coats. I showed her my badge.

"I expect you're here to ask about the shooting victims?"

"Yes."

"The man was stable enough, we sent him on to University Hospital. But the woman was too critical to transport. She's lost a lot of blood. It'll be touch and go. Good that she got here so quickly. Well within the golden hour."

I knew she was referring to what emergency types call those precious early minutes after someone is grievously wounded, but I doubted she would have spoken as candidly if she'd known I had a personal connection to Devi.

She must have seen evidence of that in my expression, however, because she stopped speaking abruptly.

"Are you all right, Officer?"

"I . . . I was there. When she got shot."

"Here, take a seat."

She had a strong grip on my arm and was rolling a chair toward me with her leg. I sat because I could no longer stand. She pushed my head down, and after a minute or so, the darkness blanking my vision receded.

"You're not injured, are you?"

That was the first I noticed my jacket was bloody, as were my jeans. Bruno's blood, and maybe Devi's as well.

"No. No, I'm fine. Sorry. Must be a delayed reaction. I had to shoot the

assailant.”

Peculiar it would hit me like that, but in all my time on the Cincinnati force, I’d drawn my weapon only once, and I’d never discharged it toward a living target.

“Let’s just give you a quick check, shall we?”

She helped me remove my jacket, and someone else stepped forward and placed it in a plastic bag that was set by my feet.

The woman who’d helped with my jacket wheeled a portable blood-pressure unit over. I submitted to their ministrations, knowing I might as well. With Devi in surgery, any distraction was welcome.

Someone must have notified my department about what had happened because by the time I’d been checked, Dillingham had arrived, accompanied by a Blue Ash detective. The three of us were shown to a small office where we could talk privately, but only after I’d secured the promise from one of the nurses to let me know if Devi’s status changed.

And by status, the nurse and I both knew that meant she’d let me know if Devi died on the operating table, a possibility my mind still refused to accept.

With Dillingham sitting in, I went over the events of the morning. Although it was still morning, it felt like it had been hours since I’d sat idly watching the parking lot while Teddy licked frosting off his fingers.

“Do you know who I shot?”

“Yeah. According to his driver’s license, he’s a Harry Garrison. From Chicago. Car was a rental, so we think he flew in. We’re checking on that now.”

The Blue Ash officer took me through my story again, and I wondered if it sounded as bizarre to him as it did to me. Why would someone from Chicago come here to shoot an activities director for a retirement community?

The Blue Ash cop suggested Garrison might be an ex-boyfriend. I shook my head. I had no idea if that were the case.

As the Blue Ash guy was finishing up, his phone rang. It was his dispatcher with a message that Garrison was out of surgery and could be interviewed shortly, and that Bruno had been taken to a nearby veterinary hospital and was expected to recover. The detective passed along the vet’s name and address, and after wishing me well, he left, presumably to interview Harry Garrison.

Dillingham and I stared at each other.

“This doesn’t have anything to do with what’s been going on at Brookside, does it?”

“I doubt it. But it’d probably be worthwhile to check for any connection between Harry Garrison of Chicago and Eddie Colter of Cincinnati.”

“I’ll get on that.”

When we stepped out of the office, the nurse who had promised me updates on Devi came toward us. The look on her face made my stomach bottom out.

“I was just coming to tell you, Detective, Ms. Subramanian is still hanging in there. But another surgeon has been called in to assist, and they expect it will be several hours yet before anything more is known about her condition.”

Dillingham had walked up behind me, and he placed a hand on my shoulder. “Thanks, ma’am,” he told the nurse. Then he steered me outside.

When the cold air hit, I realized I no longer had my coat. No matter. I’d never wear it again anyway.

“C’mon, I’ll take you home,” Dillingham said.

Which was fine since I needed to change clothes and check on Bruno, but then I was coming back to the hospital.

“I’ll let the chief know what’s happening. And I’ll run a check on Garrison,” Dillingham said, pulling into my driveway.

I thanked him and headed inside. As I finished changing clothes, the doorbell rang. It was Kate.

“Are you all right?” she said.

I nodded. “Is Teddy okay?”

She nodded. “He saw some of it, but he doesn’t really understand. He said he saw Devi?”

“She’s the one who was shot.” How odd to be able to say that so calmly.

“Oh my God, I didn’t realize.”

“It’s touch and go, but if she makes it, it will be thanks to Bruno.”

“I don’t understand.”

“He knocked her over and then put himself between her and the gun. How would he know to do that?”

She shook her head. “I have no idea. He was a rescue dog . . .”

“Maybe in more ways than one.”

“The clerk at the bakery said one of the EMT units took him somewhere.”

“Yeah. A vet hospital. I’m going there now to check on him. I’ll let you know what I find out.”

“Thanks. I need to get back to Teddy.” She paused, and then she stepped closer and hugged me. “I’m so glad you’re okay. I’ll be praying for Devi.”

~ ~ ~

At the vet’s, I was escorted to a back room to see Bruno. His middle was tightly wrapped and he was sedated, but I could see he was breathing.

“He’s got a collapsed lung and a cracked rib. But the bullet passed through.”

And hit Devi. Although Bruno had tried his best to prevent that.

“He’s a very lucky dog.”

“And a very brave one.”

If only Devi had been as lucky. I told the vet how Bruno had been wounded, then asked about the bill, which I intended to pay.

“It’s on the house. Least I can do after what this fellow did.”

From the vet’s to the hospital was a ten-minute drive. I parked my car and once again went in the emergency entrance. The same woman was at the desk, and she recognized me and buzzed me into the unit, where the nurse who’d promised to keep me updated told me Devi was still in surgery.

“Why don’t you get a cup of coffee, something to eat? Just give me your cell phone number and I’ll call you when she’s out.”

I considered that a slightly more optimistic statement than her last one. And it unclenched my stomach enough I could at least consider food.

She pointed me toward the cafeteria, where I managed a cup of coffee and most of a bowl of soup. Then I sat staring out the window while around me visitors and hospital staff taking breaks came and went.

The light was fading from the day before my phone buzzed, and I realized I’d been sitting there several hours, my mind blank, as the remains of the soup and coffee cooled.

“She made it out of surgery, Detective. But she’s still sedated.”

“Is it possible . . .” I stopped to clear my throat. “Could I sit with her, do you think?”

“I think that might be arranged. Let me check and call you back.”

She called back after five minutes and gave me directions to the surgical intensive care unit.

I spent the next forty-three hours there.

Chapter Forty-Six

Josephine

Lill and I didn't learn that Devi had been shot and almost died, was still in danger of dying, until Sunday evening. She was supposed to come to dinner, and when she didn't show, I called her. There was no answer, so I called Mac.

Lill and I made it to the hospital in under fifteen minutes. Mac, unshaven and rumpled, met us outside the intensive care unit.

"How is she?" Lill and I spoke simultaneously.

"Still critical. She lost a lot of blood." His voice sounded firm, but I could see from the tension in his eyes and the stiff way he was holding himself he wasn't as calm as he was trying to appear.

I reached out, put my arms around him, and held on tightly. Holding him, I could feel him trembling as if he were freezing, and that scared me more than his initial announcement. Lill stepped close and gripped Mac's shoulder.

The three of us stood like that until Mac straightened; then we stepped away from each other.

"Did Eddie shoot her?" I said.

Mac shook his head.

"Then who?"

"A Harry Garrison from Chicago. It's a long story," he said.

"Can we see her?"

"I'll take you to her."

He buzzed for admittance, and when the lock sounded, he pushed the door open and led us inside. I had a quick impression of a nursing station encircled by roomy cubicles, all containing beds, some with patients, others empty. Mac led us to one of the occupied beds.

Devi lay there motionless, as if she were simply sleeping, but that impression was negated by the tangle of tubing leading from several bags of fluids on an IV

pole to Devi's arm, and the wires emerging from the blanket covering her that were attached to a monitor. Colored lines marched across the screen. I knew from medical dramas that flat lines were bad, and bumpy, spiky lines good. Devi's lines were bumping and spiking along, thank God.

It all seemed so remarkably peaceful, the three of us standing there while the machines took their measurements and the IV continued to drip. Then I noticed Lill was crying, and realized my eyes had filled as well.

Mac pulled up chairs, and Lill and I sat down. He walked around and stood on the other side of the bed, his eyes never leaving Devi's face, his hand going out to touch hers. I wondered if he was finally realizing how much he cared for her. I suspected he was.

"Here's what we know so far," he said, his voice weary but calm. "Devi was engaged to Harry Garrison's brother, William. Something happened between William and Devi, and William . . . had an accident. He fell and later died. Harry claimed Devi murdered William, but before the issue could be resolved to the satisfaction of the Chicago police, Devi disappeared."

"And Harry came after her," I said. "And then he shot her. An eye for an eye?"

"Yeah, that's what it looks like."

"Has he been arrested?"

"He's in custody at University Hospital. I shot him. He's going to be okay, though." Mac pulled in a ragged breath and rubbed his eyes.

"If he hurt Devi, he deserved to be shot."

There was still that one worrisome bit in what he'd said though—the part about the matter of William Garrison's death not being resolved to the satisfaction of the Chicago police. Did that mean Devi was a suspect? But if she were, wouldn't the police have located her before Harry did, and extradited her? And what did Mac think about all this?

"Do the police plan to charge Devi in William's death?" I said, hoping the answer would be a definitive no.

Instead, Mac rubbed his head, obviously distressed. "I don't know. Dillingham's the one checking on that. I expect they'll want to talk to her."

"Didn't they do that already? After William was injured?"

He sucked in a breath and spoke as if it hurt. "I'm sure they did, but their inquiries were still ongoing when she disappeared."

"And Devi's disappearance didn't help clarify matters," I said.

“Sounds like another *he said/she said* situation,” Lill murmured. “Poor Devi.”

“Well, there isn’t a doubt in my mind that either William attacked her like Eddie did, or it was an accident,” I said.

“I agree,” Lill said.

But Mac said nothing. Still, he continued to touch Devi’s hand, as if his connection to her was as important to keeping her alive as the medical apparatus.

“Have you contacted Devi’s family?” I said.

He nodded. “The department tracked down her parents through Devi’s colleagues at the Winterford Art Institute. They’re both professors at the University of Kansas. They’ll arrive in the morning.”

There was one particularly interesting bit of information in what Mac had just said, the part about Devi having colleagues at the Winterford Art Institute. It helped explain how she recognized my Hopper painting.

Getting to know Mac and Devi has been like painting by numbers—fill in some background blue here, a bit of life-drama red there. And as I filled in those bits, my own heart had opened. If I were picking a family, I would want them, and Lill, to be part of it.

Lill suggested we join hands, with Devi as part of our circle, and then she said a prayer. I don’t do much praying, but Lill does.

I just hoped the Almighty was listening.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Mac

The first night I spent in the SICU with Devi, I discovered that if I gripped her middle finger, I could feel her heart beating. Over the next hours, that steady rhythm eventually lulled me into a light doze.

When Devi regained consciousness in the early hours of Monday morning, I felt her fingers move against mine for the first time. The dim glow from the nursing station shed enough light for me to see her eyes were open and her expression was morphing from puzzled to panicked.

I stood so she could see me. “Devi, you’re okay. You’re in the hospital, but you’re going to be okay.” As I spoke, I realized I finally had faith in those words being true.

“What happened?”

If I hadn’t been standing so close, I wouldn’t have been able to hear her, her voice was so soft and raspy.

“You don’t remember?”

She shook her head, her eyes never leaving mine.

“Harry Garrison shot you.”

She frowned. “Harry’s here?”

“You know him?” I was testing. Habit, I guess.

She nodded.

“Do you know why he tried to kill you?”

“Have you arrested him?”

“Yes. Why did he want to kill you?”

I thought it was surreal the way the two of us were talking so calmly. For my part, I knew this might be my only chance to get the story from her, as a friend, not as an officer of the law. And as a friend, I wanted, needed, to know what had happened.

“His brother, William, we were . . . engaged. I tried t-to break up with him. He . . . had a gun.”

She stopped speaking to catch her breath, and I wanted to say that it was okay, that she didn’t have to do this now. But I needed her to do it—before her parents and the police and the rest of the world pushed their way into this room. So I waited.

“I knocked the gun away, and I . . . I must have shoved him. Anyway, he fell, hit his head. When he died a week later, Harry said I’d killed William and now he’d kill me. I believed him. I ran away.”

Dillingham hadn’t mentioned a gun being involved, but then with the weekend, he’d not been able to speak with the investigating officer yet. If there was a gun, that changed the basic equation we’d been given so far.

Devi closed her eyes briefly and then looked back at me, her eyes clear, her words calm.

“Do you believe me, Mac?”

“I do.”

“Will you help me?”

I thought about what helping her might entail. A leave of absence. Questions from colleagues. A trip to Chicago. Maybe a trial. And when that was all worked through, maybe Devi and I . . .

But it was too soon to plan further than that.

“Yes,” I said.

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I caught a reflection of myself in a pane of glass as I was leaving the hospital after Devi’s parents arrived. I could easily be mistaken for someone homeless. Unshaven, rumpled clothes, tired eyes, all outward manifestations of the bone weariness I was feeling. I stepped into the weak winter sunshine but even that was a shock, making me blink and my eyes water after so long spent in semi-darkness.

I hated leaving Devi, but with her parents here, I no longer had an excuse not to take a break. I’d held her hand for most of the past two days, convinced on some deep, irrational level that if I let go, she’d die.

But in the last eight hours, she’d made steady progress. Waking up. Finally over her need for additional blood transfusions. Almost past the window for

developing an infection that had been another worry.

She was still fragile, but she was going to survive.

Thank God.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Josephine

Monday, Lill and I spent most of the day at the hospital, although since her parents were with her, we saw Devi for only a few minutes. Before the call from the police, Devi's parents thought she was still living in Chicago. They were distraught, not only because she was so badly injured, but also because she hadn't shared with them what she was going through.

"She thought . . . she didn't want us to worry," her father told us. He'd seen us in the waiting room when he'd left the unit to get something to eat, and he came over to speak to us. "Can you imagine? Our darling girl going through all that and not telling us, just so we wouldn't worry."

He shook his head and then lowered it into his hands, and his shoulders trembled. Lill and I moved next to him, and we each put an arm around him.

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Devi's improvement was so rapid after her parents' arrival, they felt comfortable leaving her in our care and returning to Lawrence to finish out the semester. But they planned to return to Cincinnati to spend the Christmas break with Devi.

I'd just returned from driving them to the airport when there was a knock on my door. I was expecting it to be Lill since we had a date to go visit Devi. Instead, I opened the door to find Jeff and a man I didn't know standing there.

I blocked my doorway, staring at them, waiting for an explanation for their presence.

"Mother," Jeff said, stepping toward me and kissing me on the cheek. "I'd like you to meet Dr. Anderson."

"Hello, Mrs. Bartlett." The man extended a hand, which I ignored.

"We need to come in," Jeff said.

“No, I don’t believe you do.”

I fumbled in my pocket for my phone. Then I remembered. Mac wasn’t available. With Devi’s parents gone, he was back at his post by Devi’s side. The thought that I couldn’t count on Mac’s help flustered me for a moment, but then I remembered Lill.

I clicked her number but before it could ring, Jeff reached out and took the phone from my hand. As he moved toward me, I backed away, and that allowed the two of them to step into my apartment and close the door.

Feeling a wave of anxiety that I attempted to hide, I moved over to stand by the window. Jeff and the other man stood in the middle of my living room, staring at me.

“Mother, the reason we’re here is because I’ve become quite concerned about your health and your state of mind. I asked Dr. Anderson if he would examine you, and he agreed.”

I didn’t believe Jeff was one bit concerned about my health. No, this visit had to do with my wealth, and it was what I’d feared would happen if Jeff were to learn I had substantial assets. He’d obviously convinced this doctor, I’d already forgotten his name, that I might be incompetent. And now he’d set out to prove it.

“Are you a psychiatrist?” I asked the doctor.

“Why, yes, yes, I am.”

“And my son told you what? That I’m losing my mind because I bought a new car?”

“A car was mentioned.”

“Perhaps he also mentioned a painting worth a great deal of money?”

Jeff looked at the Demeri painting and then back at me.

His eyes narrowed. “Where’s the Hopper, Mother?”

“As I believe you so aptly pointed out the last time you were here, it wasn’t safe for me to keep it here at Brookside.”

“That doesn’t answer the question.”

“Sorry, I don’t remember.”

Jeff turned red, but the doctor cocked his head, his eyes bright and probing. “How interesting.” Then he turned to Jeff. “Inability to remember recent major events is one sign of possible incompetence. I agree that this requires more investigation. My suggestion is that we get her admitted to Hopesprings for a comprehensive evaluation.”

At the mention of Hopesprings, my heart started a dull, heavy pounding. It's a resident treatment center, hospital if you like, for the mentally ill. And it would have privacy rules. When Lill or Mac eventually figured out I was missing, it was unlikely they'd think to look for me in such a place.

I wanted to resist, but I worried that if I did, the doctor would drug me, since he had a medical bag with him. Either he was in cahoots with Jeff, or Jeff really had managed to convince him I was mentally fragile.

"Do I get a phone call?"

"I don't understand."

"I believe you do. It's what all prisoners are allowed, is it not? One phone call. You are planning to incarcerate me, after all. In a hospital, but with HIPAA rules being so strict, you should have no difficulty keeping me hidden away while you take control of my assets."

"Now, Mother. You won't be incarcerated. I'm only trying to make sure you're all right. You've made some very peculiar decisions lately. This Babbling Brook Perpet . . . um, Fund for one."

"Perpetuity."

"Perpetuity."

"What?"

"The Babbling Brook Perpetuity Fund." So Mr. Souter had been reporting on me to my son, had he?

"And you're planning to pay the expenses of a woman known to be a thief?"

I shrugged.

"See," Jeff said to the doctor.

"Yes, indeed I do. Seniors are extremely vulnerable to scams. It's yet another reason they may need someone to assist with their financial affairs."

"Interesting, isn't it," I said. "That the senior here actually has sufficient *affairs* to make a takeover attempt worthwhile. While the younger person has squandered millions. I think that shows I should be handling his affairs, not the other way around."

"You're delusional, Mother. You need my help."

"There's a major flaw in your plan," I said.

"But I don't have a plan, do I? I just want what's best for you. What Dad would want me to do."

"Of course. By all means, bring your father into the discussion."

“Mother, please. I’m not your enemy.”

I cocked my head and gave him a look, and he had the grace to blush.

“I need to be assured you’re all right. Humor me, okay? I’ve been worried.”

“Of course you have. But I know what you’re mostly worried about is the painting. So let me assure you it’s now safely part of a trust. And the trustee is well aware that one of my concerns was this very scenario.”

Although I tried to appear confident, I was still nervous. The painting wasn’t completely safe. Not yet; the paperwork was still being drawn up.

“First things first, don’t you think? We get you checked out, then we’ll worry about the painting.”

“Can I get your coat for you, Mrs. Bartlett?” the doctor said.

I again debated whether to make a fuss, but decided it was better to pretend to go along quietly, for the moment. Surely there would be a sympathetic nurse who would call Mac for me. And even if Mac didn’t want to leave Devi’s side, he could take five minutes to dispatch someone to help me.

Chapter Forty-Nine

Mac

Lillian called me at the hospital Wednesday morning to say Josephine was missing, and she was worried. I figured Lillian was being alarmist, but she insisted she and Josephine had made a date to come to the hospital to visit Devi, and that Josephine would have let her know if there was a change in that plan.

After I hung up, Devi asked me what was going on, and I told her.

She frowned. "It's not like Josephine to disappear. She's been afraid her son might try to get his hands on her money . . . I think you need to find her." Her voice was getting stronger, but she winced in pain on the last word.

"I don't want to leave you."

"I'll worry until I know she's okay. Please, Mac."

I called Dillingham and asked him to meet me at Brookside. When I arrived, we walked into Souter's office together.

"Gentlemen, what can I do you for this morning?" Souter said, rubbing his hands together.

"We're here to check on the whereabouts of Josephine Bartlett."

Souter blinked. "Is she missing?"

"Lillian Fitzel was supposed to meet her, but when she went to Josephine's apartment, Josephine wasn't there."

"I thought the police didn't check on missing adults until at least twenty-four hours has passed." He sat back, looking from Dillingham to me.

"This is more of an unofficial check. By a friend, if you will. Do you know where she is?"

He cleared his throat. "I'm afraid I can't say. Privacy rules, you know."

I thought about that for a moment. "You mean Brookside privacy rules?"

Souter shook his head. "Patient privacy rules."

"You're saying she was taken ill and removed by ambulance?"

“No, no. She’s fine. I can vouch for that. You don’t need to worry about her. She’s with her son.”

“With her son where?” I said.

“He didn’t say. But he’s been worried about her. Felt she needed to have a medical evaluation. Can’t say I disagree.”

“And where did he take her for this evaluation,” I said, putting the full force of my official authority into the words.

But Souter refused to say anything further.

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As we left Souter’s office, we encountered Edna Prisant, who looked surprised to see me, but then gestured for us to move away from Souter’s door.

“Maybe you can help me,” she said. “I was just coming to speak to Mr. Souter, but it may be better if I speak with you. It’s about Josephine. I’m worried about her.”

“Why is that?”

“I saw two men taking her away, and I don’t think she wanted to go.”

“What makes you say that?”

She looked away, her cheek twitching. “Well, it’s just that I happened to hear them talking about Josephine as they walked down the hall toward her apartment. I was curious. So I followed to see what was going on. When she answered the door, Josephine obviously recognized the men, but it didn’t look to me like she wanted to let them in. They kind of pushed her aside. So I waited. After five minutes or so, they came back out. One of the men had hold of Josephine’s arm, and the other man said he’d take his own car and meet them at Hopesprings.”

“And you’re telling us this because?”

She shrugged. “Josephine has treated me decently. If I can return the favor, well, I’d like to do that.”

“As it happens, we’re here because Lillian asked us to check on Josephine.”

“Then you better check.”

I gave Dillingham a questioning look.

“Happy to come along,” he said.

We both knew calling Hopesprings to ask if Josephine was there would be

useless. HIPAA privacy rules would prevent the hospital from giving out that information. We once had a frantic mother come in, claiming her son-in-law had murdered her daughter, only to find out the daughter, who was manic depressive, was in the hospital. Since the hospital refused to tell the mother that, she'd assumed the worst. I've sometimes thought HIPAA makes hospitals more effective at anonymous incarceration than jails.

Dillingham got into my car, and we drove to Hopesprings.

"I'm here to visit Josephine Bartlett," I told the woman at the reception desk. While I knew they wouldn't tell me if Josephine was there, they would respond with room information if asked about a specific person.

She tapped on her keyboard, then looked up. "I'm sorry. Mrs. Bartlett is not receiving visitors. Are you family?"

"Grandson," I said, knowing I might look too old for the role if I were standing next to Josephine, but since I wasn't, I should be able to get away with it.

"I'm afraid you're not on the list of approved visitors."

"I bet that's a short list, am I right?" Must be, since she didn't ask my name.

"Only Mrs. Bartlett's son," she said with a sweet smile.

"Of course. Dad. He didn't know I was coming."

"I'll have to clear a visit with him," she said.

"Could you do that?"

While the woman and I talked, Dillingham had sidled around until he had the correct angle to look at her computer screen. She picked up the phone, and Dillingham nodded to let me know he had the room number. Meanwhile, the woman finished speaking and hung up the phone.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Bartlett. Your grandmother has received medication and is sleeping."

"Okay. Guess I'll come back later. Thanks for your help. Could you direct me to the cafeteria?"

"Certainly."

As we walked away from the desk, Dillingham said, "They've got her in a locked wing."

I trusted Dillingham to know that since he's accompanied more than one agitated Montgomery resident here instead of jail.

"Not sure how we're going to get at her. Pull a fire alarm, maybe?"

“We need to figure out a way. And fast. Medicated, locked wing? Doesn’t compute. I’ve met few people as sane and sensible as Josephine.” Then I had an idea. Not pulling a fire alarm, but close.

I made a call, and then Dillingham and I returned to the front lobby to wait. Within minutes, the EMT unit I requested was there, and after their explanation they’d been called for a medical emergency, they rushed down the hall toward the locked wing. In the confusion, Dillingham and I moved in behind them.

A nurse opened the door to the unit and tried to stop all of us from entering, claiming she had no idea who could have called. That there was no emergency.

“A Mr. Bartlett called, ma’am. Said his mother wasn’t breathing.”

While they talked, Dillingham and I slipped by the nurse and located Josephine’s room. She was lying in bed, and the information that she’d been medicated was correct.

Dillingham signaled the EMTs, who came and quickly transferred Josephine to their stretcher. Then we all rushed back out, and Josephine was loaded into the ambulance, which took off with Dillingham and me right behind it.

Feeling caught up in a Groundhog Day loop, I followed the ambulance to the same hospital where Devi was a patient, and parked in the emergency lot. Then Dillingham and I went inside. The woman at the reception desk recognized us and hit the door release. We didn’t even need to break stride. Inside the unit, we found Josephine had been wheeled into a cubicle, and there were three people hooking her up to monitors and checking her over.

The one with the stethoscope looked up. “Do you know this patient?” She removed the stethoscope from her ears and draped it around her neck.

“Yes. We broke her out of Hopesprings. They obviously sedated her.”

“Do you know what drug they used?”

“No idea.”

“Okay. Well, her blood pressure and oxygenation are good so we’ll just keep an eye on her until she sleeps it off.”

A registrar wheeled her computer over and took what information I could give her about Josephine.

“Be sure to note she’s not allowed any visitors I don’t personally approve, and that includes her son.”

It was a stretch, my assuming control like that, but over the last several days I’d become well-known to hospital personnel, and the registrar didn’t question my right to restrict Josephine’s visitors.

Dillingham said he'd arrange for someone to give him a lift back to his car at Brookside, and I gave Josephine's nurse my cell number and told her where I'd be. Then I returned to Devi's bedside, where I found Lillian had arrived and taken my place.

"Did you find Josephine?" Lillian asked as soon as I stuck my head into Devi's cubicle.

"We did. Her son had her admitted to Hopesprings, and they sedated her, so I haven't been able to talk to her yet."

"I don't think you should leave her there, Mac," Lillian said.

"We didn't. She's here. In the ER, being treated."

"It's her money, isn't it," Lillian said. "That's why he did this. Oh my, what a terrible thing."

I walked past Lillian up to Devi's bed. She was already less pale than the last time I saw her merely an hour ago.

"She's really all right?" Devi said.

"Yes. Or will be once she clears the drug. And you know what's weird? Edna Prisant was the one who told us where to find her."

Chapter Fifty

Josephine

I awakened feeling muzzy and disoriented to discover I'd been drugged. Again. Only this time, I was in a hospital.

"How did I get here?" I asked the nurse who was checking on me. The last thing I could remember clearly was Jeff wheeling me into Hopesprings.

"EMTs brought you in. And then that cute detective told us who you are."

"You mean Detective McElroy?" I would never use the word cute to describe Mac. He's much too solid for such a frivolous word, but he had to be who she was talking about.

"Yeah. The one who's been at the bedside of the woman who got shot?"

"Yes. Mac. And what about my son?"

"Sorry, but Mac's left orders he can't see you. You must have some story to tell."

I smiled at the woman but didn't offer her any explanation, and after a bit more fussing with my IV, she left me in peace.

Since there was nothing to do, I dozed. I awakened to find Mac sitting in a chair next to the bed.

"How are you feeling?" he said.

"Really well rested."

He smiled at my little joke, but it was a tired smile.

"What about Devi?" I asked him. "Don't you need to be with her?"

"Lillian's with her. They sent me to make sure you're okay."

"I'm disappointed. Sad. But otherwise, I'm fine."

"Good that you're okay." He got up to go, but there was more I needed to say to him. Things I might not manage to say later.

"Mac?"

He turned to face me. “What is it, Josephine?”

“Thank you for rescuing me.” I raised a hand to stop him before he could object. “Please. You know you saved me from all sorts of . . . difficulties. But there’s something else I need to say. Please don’t wait too long to tell Devi you love her.”

“What?” Abruptly he paced toward the doorway.

I thought he was leaving, but instead he swung around to look at me, rubbing his head.

I spoke quickly. “You know when all this mess with the Garrisons is cleared up, there will be no reason Devi can’t return to Chicago, to her old life and her job at that art institute. I’m being selfish here. I want you to make sure she doesn’t leave us. I would miss her terribly.”

“If that job in Chicago is her dream, I won’t ask her to give it up. I took a job that my wife wanted for me. And look how that turned out.”

With that, he flung himself through the door.

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I think I slept for another while after Mac left. Then an orderly showed up and told me I was being admitted for observation, and he was taking me to my room.

Shortly after that, another bed was wheeled into the room and parked beside me. I looked over to discover my roommate was Devi, and then Lill and Mac walked in.

“Well,” I said. “I did plan on visiting, Devi, not on being hospitalized with you.”

She smiled at me. She was still pale, but her eyes looked alert and focused, and I was so relieved by that, I wanted to climb out of bed and give her a hug. But I had tubing attached to my arm, and I was wearing one of those gowns that gaps everywhere. Besides, I’m really not much of a hugger.

Lill came over and squeezed my hand. “Oh my, Josephine. I was so worried about you.”

“And rightly so. I have a few blanks, I’m afraid.”

I’d put together bits and pieces from things people had said as they treated me, although the Hopesprings bits were in grays with accompanying voices that sounded muffled and far away.

“Maybe I can fill those in,” Mac said.

As he told the story, and I added in what I remembered, Lill looked appalled. And I had to agree. The whole thing was appalling and surprising—a son valuing a painting and money over his mother, a woman who wasn't a friend saving me by telling Mac where to find me.

Eventually, the nurse came in and chased everyone out. That gave Devi and me the first chance since she was shot to talk privately.

“Has Mac told you he loves you yet?” After all that's happened, I'm done with beating around bushes.

Devi gasped and then winced.

“Sorry. That hurt, didn't it?”

“Just a bit.”

“He does, you know?”

“I don't know. And I don't know why you're saying it.”

“Because it's true. See, I've figured Mac out. He's a man who's great at showing how he feels, but dreadful at putting it into words.”

“What's so difficult about 'I'm not married, Devi, and I'd like to take you to dinner'?”

“Do you know he didn't leave your bedside from Saturday until your parents arrived on Monday? One nurse told me he held your hand the whole time. And once your parents left, he was back with you until he had to leave to rescue me.”

She swallowed and turned her head to look at me.

“If you care for him, dear, you're going to have to be the one to do the talking. So do it. Don't make the mistake I made.”

“What do you mean?”

“You asked me once if I'd tell you the story behind the painting.”

“What does that have to do with Mac?”

“Just about everything.” I was happy to see she had her teeth into the subject of Mac. “I've never told it to anyone before. But I'd like to tell you.”

“Okay. Sure. I'd love to hear the story.”

“I'm afraid it doesn't have a happy ending.”

“I'd still like to hear it.”

I took a breath before I began, but once I started speaking, I found the words coming more easily than I expected. “My husband used to go on extended business trips and on golf outings with a group of friends. I was never invited, and although it was a relief to have him away, it left me . . .” Swallowing, I tried

to push away the visceral memory of how useless Thomas had always made me feel.

“Because I was desperate for something . . . exciting, or even just different, one year while he was away, I went to New York.”

I stopped to take a breath. Devi didn't speak, nor did she move. Her eyes were closed, so she might even be asleep, but I'd started my story, and now I wanted to finish it.

“I checked into my hotel and went for a walk. The sidewalks were packed with people rushing about without looking at me, or each other for that matter. It made me feel more alone than I'd felt at home, and I was sorry I'd come. Then someone crashed into me. It was his fault, but he swore at me and gave me such a fierce, angry look, it gave me the shakes.

“I pushed my way on to a side street and leaned against a building. When I looked around, I saw I was across from an art gallery. It was chilly, barely spring, and the street where I was standing served as a funnel for a cold wind that swirled around me. I walked across the street and pulled on the gallery's door. It was locked, but then a lock release sounded, and I stepped inside.

“A man came walking toward me, smiling. And I had the absurd feeling that I knew him, although I also knew that wasn't possible. I now think that sometimes, when we first meet someone who's going to be important to us, we're given a glimpse . . .” My words trailed off, and it was a minute or so before I could continue.

“You know, I felt the same way, the first time I met you.” Turning my head, I looked at Devi. She opened her eyes and looked back at me, and we smiled at each other.

“The man, his name was Daniel, asked if I were looking for anything in particular. I said what I was seeking, I was unlikely to find. He smiled and said I might surprise myself, and then he gestured toward the painting on the wall in front of us. For a time, the two of us looked at the painting without speaking. It was *Sea Watchers*, of course. When Daniel spoke, it was to say he thought Hopper's genius was that he so perfectly captured the feeling of solitude embedded in each of us, even when we're with others.”

It occurred to me that Devi and I at this moment were worthy Edward Hopper subjects, with the two of us lying in separate beds and tinted with shadows cast by the bars on the sides of our beds and the IV poles.

For a moment, I wondered if I was going to be able to tell Devi the rest. But it was really the next bit that was the point, after all.

“I bought the painting. And Daniel and I . . .” No, I couldn’t say it. But maybe I didn’t need to.

“After that, I visited New York whenever I could, although I didn’t manage it as often as I wanted to. One time, Daniel and I were in Central Park, watching a group of children playing with boats in the reflecting pool. I turned to look at him and discovered he had tears in his eyes. I asked him what was wrong. He shook his head and said, ‘Nothing, except you’re going home tomorrow.’ I think that was the closest he ever came to telling me he loved me and wanted more. But he showed me, in so many ways, if only I’d been willing to see.”

Again, I stopped to gather my thoughts. A tear slid down my cheek. I ignored it, letting it soak into the pillow.

“Do you still meet Daniel?”

“He died. Fifteen years ago.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“I did warn you it wasn’t a happy story.”

“Did you want more?”

“Oh yes. But Daniel never asked for more, and so I thought what we had was enough for him. And I was so afraid to lose that. I lived for the time we were able to spend with each other. They were my birthday, Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas all rolled into one. It seems so silly now, but back then, the man was supposed to make the first move. The friend who called to tell me Daniel had died said that Daniel didn’t want me to feel pressured to leave my marriage. He thought if I’d been willing to do that, I would have said so. It was so incredibly stupid, the two of us letting happiness slip away without making a grab for it.”

Telling Devi about Daniel hurt more than I expected, and it left my head aching from trying to hold back tears. A nurse came in to do her checks and gave Devi a pain shot, something I could have used as well.

As I lay there after Devi and I said good night to each other, both my head and my heart ached. But although it had been difficult and painful to talk about Daniel, I wasn’t sorry I’d told Devi the story. Now, all I could do was hope it would do some good.

Chapter Fifty-One

Devi

The day Mac drove me home from the hospital, I'd had five days to think about Josephine's story, and I'd decided to take her advice and end the stupid (Josephine's word) impasse between Mac and me. I'd just been shown how tenuous life could be, and I didn't intend to waste another minute.

Mac still looked tired, although he'd had a few days to catch up on the sleep he missed while he held on to me. I remember a feeling during that time, like sliding into space and then floating. There was no bright light, but I wasn't afraid, and I quite liked the floaty sensation. Then I heard Mac's voice and there was a jerk, and I was no longer airborne but solidly back inside myself. And there was pain. Blotting out everything until it all went mercifully black.

When I finally came to, my hand was in Mac's, and I knew. Knew he'd been there all along. That I'd been aware of his touch, although I hadn't known what it was.

In some cultures, if you save a life, you become responsible for that life. I didn't want to lay a burden like that on Mac, but I did want him to share the life he'd saved.

A life I was now free to live without fear of my past. While I was still in the hospital, word came that the Chicago police had completed their inquiries a month ago, and William's death had been labeled accidental. In his plea deal, Harry admitted that was what pushed him to come after me. Up to then, he'd expected me to pay for his brother's death by being charged with at least manslaughter.

Mac brought me the news, and I'd known, without him saying it, that he was expecting me to return to Chicago to pick up the life I had there. But the past can't be picked up like a piece of knitting. And even if it could, I can't ignore the stitches added in the past year.

The truth is, I don't want to go back. If I did that, I might end up like

Josephine, living with regrets. That's why Josephine told me the story, of course. And I know that if I don't let Mac know how I feel about him, it will be my biggest regret.

Mac won't ask me to stay, just like Daniel never asked Josephine. But there's nothing preventing me from saying something. This is the twenty-first century, after all.

Mac pulled into the parking lot of my apartment building and came to open my door. I was still moving carefully, although everything is healing well. Sometimes, instead of hurting, I itch so badly it makes me gasp. The doctor told me that's a sign my nerves are reconnecting. I'll be very glad once they've managed it.

I stepped out of the vehicle and then nearly doubled over as one of those not-quite-reconnected nerves sent a bolt of pain through my midsection.

"Devi. Are you okay?" Mac grabbed me, sounding panicked, and as far as I know, Mac never panics.

I took a breath and straightened, but instead of stepping away from him, I stepped closer and leaned into him with a sigh of relief.

"It's just a cramp. If I can stand here for a moment . . ."

Mac encircled me with his arms and continued to support me, and I laid my head on his shoulder and put my arms around him. I caught my breath, although this time, it wasn't because of a pain.

"Devi?" he said.

"Shut up, Mac, and kiss me."

He did.

There was a wolf whistle from somewhere. And a voice yelled, "Get a room."

I rarely see my neighbors, so I had no idea where they'd suddenly popped up from. I ignored them and so did Mac, but I could feel that we were both smiling.

"Devi," he said, his lips still touching mine. "What are we doing?"

"Getting better acquainted, and I must say, it's about time."

"Could we do that inside? It's freezing out here."

"You do know my parents are waiting for us, along with Josephine and Lillian?"

He pulled his head back, looked at me, and sighed.

"So," I said. "It will take some ingenuity to continue this . . . umm . . ."

conversation.”

Shaking his head, he pulled me closer, but he did it carefully. “I believe when a situation calls for it, I can be ingenious.” His breath tickled my ear.

Smiling, I kissed his cheek, then took his hand, and together we walked inside to face the people who loved us.

Chapter Fifty-Two

Josephine

I left the hospital several days ahead of Devi, but Lill and I visited her every day. Often, Mac was there. I didn't know if he was taking leave, or whether he simply stopped at the hospital whenever he could take a break from apprehending shoplifters and the like.

On one visit, Mac told us Harry Garrison had been released from University Hospital into the custody of the Hamilton County sheriff, and since he was considered a flight risk, was denied bail. Mac also told us Dillingham had traced Harry's movements and found he'd been scoping out the area for two days, waiting for an opportunity to attack Devi.

When Devi went to the bakery, apparently Harry decided the early hour and nearly empty parking lot presented the perfect opportunity to shoot her and then get away, since the bakery is less than a mile from the interstate.

If Mac hadn't been there that morning, very likely Harry would have succeeded—a thought that still makes me shudder.

Mac's partner, Detective Dillingham, was the one who clarified Devi's status with the Chicago police. Yes, they had wanted to interview her again. But even without that, they'd determined that the presence of a gun registered to William proved Devi had acted in self-defense. Mac did pass on a reprimand to Devi for her precipitate departure from Chicago, but he also said the investigating officer had admitted that her leaving was a reasonable reaction to Harry's threat.

When the director of the Winterford Art Institute learned about all the circumstances leading to Devi's abrupt departure, he called and offered to reinstate her. But she told me she can't go back. Too many bad memories there; too many good ones here. And let me be the first to admit, that was a huge relief.

I'm also relieved I don't have to worry that Devi is going to make the same mistake with Mac that I made with Daniel. The two of them are forging a solid friendship. If it hasn't already blossomed into love, it soon will. I see how they

look at each other when they think the other one isn't looking.

As for me, I've decided to stay at Brookside, at least for the time being. For one thing, Lill is here. For another, Mr. Souter is gone, and the new manager is a lovely woman we've all warmed to immediately.

One of the first things the manager did was bring in a new chef, and the food is vastly improved. That might be the deciding factor in my staying here, since I've never enjoyed cooking for myself.

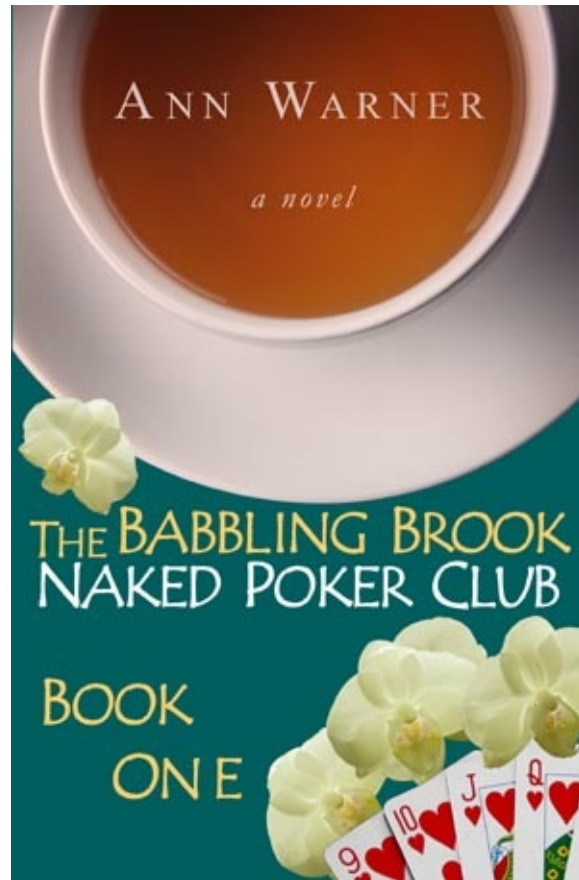
There was only one loose end dangling when I was released from the hospital, but it was a biggie. My son, Jeff.

He and I met, and he finally gave me the details of what happened to the estate. He'd made a risky investment that left him desperate and ashamed. He apologized for his actions in admitting me to Hopesprings, but like Eddie, I don't know if he's sorry enough to attempt to improve his character. I can only hope so.

But while I question his true contrition, I don't question that at least some of what he did was an attempt to follow what he thought were his father's wishes. I don't condone that, but I do understand it, and I forgive him, or I will eventually. Because, you see, I am not without fault in the fracturing of our relationship. Besides, I find that I owe him an enormous debt of gratitude.

If he hadn't moved me into Brookside, I would never have met Lill and Devi and Mac, and my life would not be nearly as rich as it has now become.

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The novel's [Amazon page](#).

About the Author



The books Ann loved most as a child were those about horses. After reading Mary O’Hara’s Wyoming ranch stories, she decided she would one day marry a rancher and own a racehorse—although not necessarily in that order.

Since it was clear to Ann, after reading *My Friend Flicka* and *Green Grass of Wyoming*, that money could be a sore point between ranchers and their wives, not to mention racehorses don’t come cheap, she decided appropriate planning was needed. Thus she appended a “rich” to the rancher requirement.

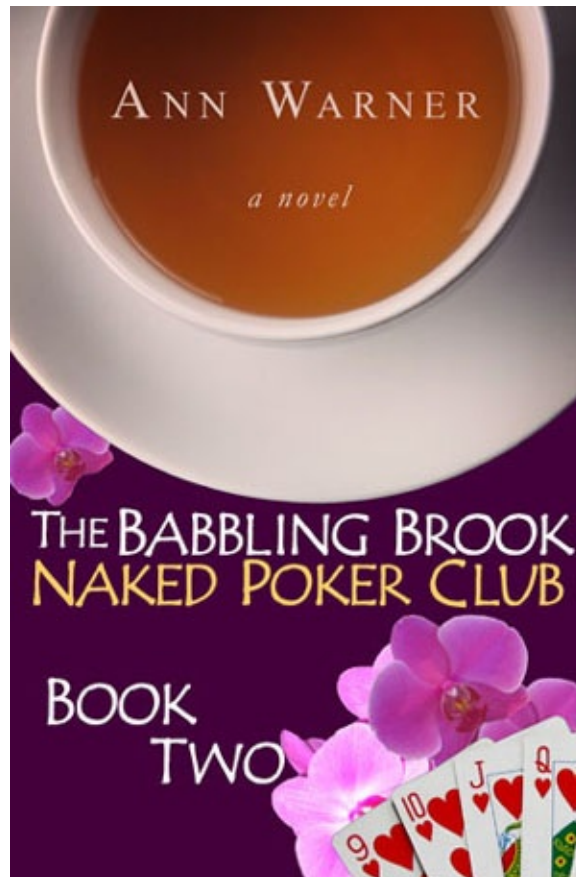
But when she started dating, there were no ranchers in the offing, rich or otherwise. Instead, Ann fell in love with a fellow graduate student at the University of Kansas. Not only does her husband not share her love of horses, he doesn’t even particularly like them, given that one stepped on him with deliberate intent when he was ten.

After years in academia, Ann took a turn down another road and began writing

fiction. Her first novel, *Dreams for Stones*, was published by Samhain Publishing on Christmas Day 2007, and has now been re-released in electronic and print formats. The protagonist is both a university professor and part-time rancher—proof perhaps that dreams never truly go away, but continue to exert their influence in unexpected ways.

Those unexpected influences have continued to play a role in Ann's succeeding books, including this one.

Excerpts
[Book Two](#)



[Available in electronic, print, large print and audio editions](#)

Josephine, Devi, and Mac's story continues. Devi and Mac are falling in love, but a complication comes along in the form of Mac's pregnant ex-wife. As for Josephine, with the excitement of unmasking the Brookside thief and Devi's being shot behind her, she's finding Brookside Retirement Community (aka Babbling Brook) as dull as she initially expected it to be. Until, that is, she gets involved with a man who suspects her of being a criminal mastermind. Finding love is something Josephine never expected as her Edward Hopper painting plays matchmaker.

Chapter One

Devi

Although I'm much improved since I was shot, I still tire easily, and a trip to the Cincinnati airport to drop off my parents exhausted me. They came to stay when I was released from the hospital, but they're both professors at the University of Kansas and they needed to get back for the start of the new semester. Mom said the only reason she felt okay about leaving me was that she knew I had Mac to watch over me.

I took a nap in the afternoon, but I was still feeling draggy when Mac arrived from work, carrying take-out and a bottle of champagne. It was as much New Year's Eve celebrating as either of us thought I could manage.

He set the bag and bottle on the counter then hugged me carefully. "Did you get any rest today?"

"A little. I doubt I'll make it to midnight though."

"That's okay. The only new years I seem to usher in anymore are when I have to work a late shift."

"Good. I'm glad to know you aren't rigid in your holiday observances."

Mac's full name is Darren McElroy, and he's a detective on the Montgomery, Ohio police force. There's a lot we don't yet know about each other, but we're working on it.

We ate the food he brought, and then I moved to the couch and continued to sip my one glass of champagne while he washed dishes. When he finished, he came to sit beside me. His arm curved around me, and I leaned my head on his shoulder.

"I've been wanting to ask you something," he said.

"You've been asking me lots of things lately." I yawned from the effects of the champagne on top of the trip to the airport.

"I know I have. But there's something we haven't talked about yet. And it's maybe premature to bring this up. But . . ."

"What is it?"

I felt him pull in a deep breath then release it. "Kids," he said.

My own breath stuttered. I'd been dreading the kids question, although I knew it was coming. Had to come. And it was better to face it sooner rather than later, although it was already too late for me not to have my heart broken if it was a deal-breaker for Mac.

I swallowed. "What about them?"

"How do you feel about them? Do you want any?"

Closing my eyes, I shuddered. "I'm sorry, Mac. I should have told you . . ."

He shifted until he could look at me. But I couldn't face him. I buried my head more deeply in his shoulder.

"I . . . I can't have children. The bullet . . . it did too much damage, and I . . ."

His arm tightened around me, and I held my breath waiting for his response, struggling to focus on the steady beating of his heart.

"I'm so sorry, Devi. I expect you wanted them, didn't you."

The tears I was trying to hold back slid down my cheek. No matter how grateful I am to be alive or how happy I am that Mac and I found each other, everything hurts when I remember the surgeon delivering a full accounting of my injuries. He said I'd eventually be as good as new, except for residual twinges that might last for months, and, oh, by the way, I would never have a child.

Every time I let myself think about that, I picture Mac with his neighbor Teddy. Teddy is five and has Down Syndrome, and Mac clearly loves him. From the first time I saw them together, I could tell Mac would be an exceptional father.

He kissed the top of my head. "It's okay, love. I only asked because . . ." He stopped, and I waited. "You see my wife and I . . . ex-wife. She wanted kids so badly, that when it didn't happen . . . she . . ." He heaved in a breath. "And I wasn't sure I could deal with that again. But if you wanted . . . Anyway, you need to know, it's okay. Not having any."

I pushed myself upright and stared at him. This was the first time he'd said anything that sounded real about why his marriage failed. When I'd asked, he'd said only that Lisa had a hard time being a cop's wife, and it caused them to grow apart. But this . . . this had to be the real reason. And it was huge.

"If you both wanted kids so much, why didn't you adopt?"

"Lisa didn't want to adopt."

"What about you? How do you feel about adoption?"

“Lisa was so set against it, I didn’t give it much thought.”

I settled back against his shoulder, shaken at the bleak look I’d seen on his face.

“I’m so sorry,” I said. And what an odd reversal that was . . . this conversation ending with me consoling him, instead of him consoling me.

His arm tightened around me, and we didn’t talk at all for a while. Eventually I asked him what his favorite color was. He said purple. And when he asked me in turn, I replied that mine was turquoise. We continued to talk about mundane things for a while, although every few minutes, we’d stop talking and kiss instead. Somewhere in the middle of either talking or kissing, I fell asleep.

I awakened deep in the night to find Mac’s arm still around me and Mac himself sound asleep.

Feeling safe and cherished, I fell back to sleep myself.

Chapter Two

Josephine

Devi and Mac arrived for dinner New Year’s Day, both of them with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, either from the bitter cold or from inner warmth, and I’d put my money on the latter.

They weren’t making any announcements yet, but Lill and I had no doubts they would be soon. Clearly, they were in love, and it did my heart good to see it.

After we were seated and passing food around, Devi turned to me. “Hey, Lillian tells me the man who’s filling in for me is single. And attractive.” Devi is the associate activities director here at Brookside Retirement Community. But while she’s recovering from being shot, a temporary replacement has been hired. “And an art lover. You two should have a lot in common.”

I glared at Lill who looked serenely back. “Now that you and Mac are settled,” I told Devi, “Lill’s got time on her hands, and she’s using it to interfere in my life.”

Devi looked startled, but Mac grinned.

“Well,” Lill said. “I say Josephine better get on the stick and sign up for an

activity or two before Myrtle stakes a claim. You know that Myrtle. She's been in a dreadful tizzy since Norman showed up. Heard the hussy say she thinks he's as dreamy as Harrison Ford."

"Hmmp." In my opinion, the words dreamy and Harrison Ford did belong in the same sentence. "Myrtle can stake all she wants. I'm not interested. Anymore than you'd be if someone *dreamy* like Denzel Washington took over planning our activities."

"Don't know about that. Mm mm. If someone who looked like Denzel was doing the planning, I do believe I'd be doing the activyng." Lill, who turned sideways would nearly disappear, treated us to that deep rich chuckle of hers.

"Oh, let Myrtle have her fun."

"Myrtle and Norman . . . has a nice ring to it, don't you think?" Lill said, winking at Devi. "I suspect Bertie will be back on the market soon."

That made me snort, and it's a good thing I wasn't sipping wine; I could have aspirated. "What a shame, Bertie being the catch he is." Bertie has been the target of Myrtle's romantic attentions up to now, and I'm tired of hearing about it even if Lill isn't.

Lill giggled, sounding for a moment seventy years younger than her eighty-two years. And I may be twelve years younger, but I have to work to keep up with her.

"You do realize, Josephine. If Myrtle turns Norman into her toy boy, we'll never hear the end of it."

Toy boy? I didn't know Lill even knew the term. "Oh, well. My loss. I have no interest in meeting another . . . art lover. Hasn't art gotten us all into enough trouble?"

"That wasn't art's fault," Mac said. He and Devi had been watching the volleys between Lill and me with increasing mirth.

"No, of course not," I said. "You know, speaking of art . . . I've had a thought."

"That's dangerous territory for you, Josephine," Mac said. "Or if not for you, for the rest of us. Leads to all sorts of mayhem. Not to mention extra paperwork for me."

"But you have to admit, Darren McElroy, without Lill and me, you never would have caught the Brookside thief." Which was rather a highfalutin way of referring to Edna Prisant.

"I'm willing to concede that," Mac said. "As long as you and Lillian agree to

retire from crime fighting.”

I sighed. “I don’t think we have much choice. Nothing else is happening. It’s dreadfully boring.”

“Which is precisely why you need something . . . or someone to spice up your life,” Lill said. “And I believe Norman’s just the ticket. Besides, he’s interested in you.”

“What I want to know is why on earth someone named Neumann would saddle their child with a name like Norman?”

“No accounting for white folks,” Lill said with an arch look. “Present company excepted.” Lill likes to tease that she and I are Brookside Retirement Community’s yin and yang. Or, as she dubs it, The Babbling Brook Retirement Community in honor of the missing brook and some of the present annoying residents. I retort that instead of the black and the white, we’re the black and the gray, and that always makes her laugh.

“You know, Josephine, as improved as Devi’s looking, you need to get moving before Norman leaves.”

Devi leaned her chin on her hand and stared at Lill. “What makes you think Norman might be interested in Josephine?”

“Because he’s come up to me several times to chat.”

“Well that’s certainly a dead give-away,” I said.

“He’s noticed we’re friends, and since you’ve been avoiding him, he figures on getting to you through me.”

“Really, Lill? That’s what you think? Here’s what I think. He’s heard the rumors about my painting, and he’s looking for a sugar mamma.”

Lill hooted. “Oh, honey. That’s a good one. I’ll have to ask Norman about that and see what he says.”

“Don’t you dare. Really, Lill, this entire conversation is most undignified.”

“And to think it started with you having a thought,” Mac said, his lips twitching.

“Oh, yes. That. Well, here it is. But don’t say anything right now, Devi. Just think about it, and we’ll talk later.”

“What is it?” she said.

“I’m thinking about loaning *Sea Watchers* out to museums, and I need someone to coordinate the visits and make all the arrangements.” Devi was a curator at the Winterford Art Institute in Chicago before she came to Cincinnati and she’ll know exactly what to do.

She cocked her head and looked like she was thinking, then she straightened and opened her mouth.

“No, don’t say anything yet. I know you’ll need to think about it. After all, you may prefer to return to your job here at Brookside and I’m okay with—.”

“What if it’s yes, I’d love to do that? And, just tell me when I start.”

“Hmm, okay. Let’s get together this week and work out the details.”

Devi and I smiled at each other.

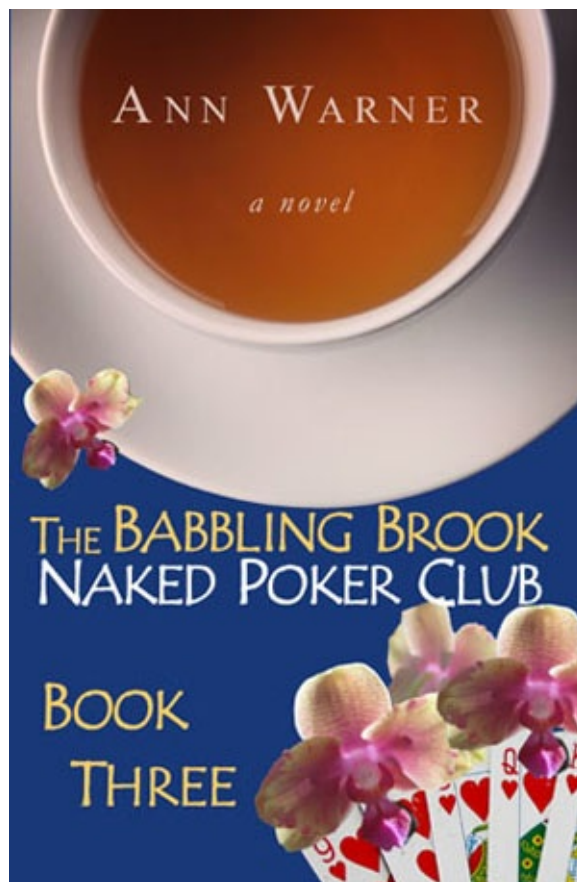
“I like it,” Lill said, beaming. “If Devi isn’t coming back it means Norman will have to hang around a while longer.”

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Book Three



[Available in electronic, print, and large print editions](#)

Josephine Bartlett is back, joined by her partner in mystery-solving, Lill Fitzel, flamboyant ex-beauty queen, Myrtle Grabinowitz, former attorney/current novelist, Philippa Scott Williamson, Brookside's thief, Edna Prisant, good friends Devi and Mac McElroy, and last, but not least, love-interest Norman Neumann.

When new resident, Lottie Watson, loses at Naked Poker, she tells a bizarre story about how years ago her husband disappeared in the LA airport. Josephine and Lill, intrigued enough to investigate, discover there may be more ominous goings-on than a simple disappearance...or are there? Meanwhile, Josephine struggles with the mysteries of her own heart.

Chapter One

Josephine

Lill and I were sitting by the fireplace enjoying its warmth when Myrtle Grabinowitz, former beauty queen and now the self-styled belle of Brookside Retirement Community came up to us.

“We have a new resident,” Myrtle announced, plopping onto the sofa next to Lill and bouncing her a good foot in the air. Lill grabbed for the armrest as Myrtle settled herself and her garments came to a rest around her.

“Oh yes, we know,” Lill said, tentatively loosening her hold on the armrest. “I expect everyone knows.” She sounded uncharacteristically snippy, but I think that’s just because the men in charge of the new resident’s household goods had been traipsing back and forth past Lill’s window for the better part of the day.

“Not one of those men moved five feet without yelling at one of the others about where to stick whatever it was they were carrying,” Lill had told me when I’d stopped by to pick her up for dinner. “I had an idea or two about where they could stick it, I’ll tell you that.”

“I hear she’s very attractive,” Myrtle said, adjusting her bracelets with a mix of cha-chings.

“I swear there were ten wardrobe boxes,” Lill said. “Three-man jobs, they were. The woman has enough clothes, she could change twice a day for a year and still not get through it all. And then there were four huge paintings, and a dining set that looked like it should be in a palace somewhere. I can’t imagine how they fitted it all in. Don’t we have fire codes?”

“Oh my. I didn’t see all that,” Myrtle said, her hand on her heart as if to keep it from jumping from her chest.

“I would have preferred not to see it,” Lill said. “It was terribly annoying.”

“Did you see her?” Myrtle asked.

“No, I didn’t.”

“I expect she’ll be at dinner, don’t you think?” Myrtle said.

“Possibly.” But after Lill’s report, I had little interest in meeting the new person.

The gong sounded, and the three of us walked to the dining room together.

Thankfully, once there, Myrtle left us to join other friends, leaving Lill and me free to choose a two-person table.

As I was telling the server my entrée preference, a stir passed through the room. I paused and looked around. A woman was posing—there was no other word for it—in the entryway. I nudged Lill and moved my head to point her out.

“Wow,” Lill said.

The woman’s hair, arranged into a blond upsweep, appeared to have had the attention of a professional in the last five minutes, and if she had any gray hairs, they’d been effectively dealt with. As for her makeup, which included fake eyelashes, mascara, and crimson lipstick, it was fit to walk all by itself on the red carpet at an awards ceremony. Her outfit was coordinated in shades of blue, and she was wearing shoes with heels. I don’t believe I’ve worn heels since the first Bush presidency.

Our manager, Mrs. Gowan, stood at the woman’s side and glanced around the room, obviously deciding which table would have the privilege of the first introduction. I turned my head so Mrs. Gowan couldn’t catch my eye. Lill did the same, and we both breathed a sigh of relief when the two headed toward one of the larger tables across the room. Shortly, we heard happy exclamations of welcome.

Lill shook her head. “I suspect that’s someone we’re going to want to avoid whenever we can.”

“Why do you say that?” I knew I wasn’t interested in meeting someone who was that focused on their appearance. In my experience, such people are often dull companions, since that amount of upkeep means they have little time to take an interest in the world around them. But I was interested in Lill’s opinion.

“I expect I’m just feeling unenthusiastic because of spending the day dealing with all her stuff. I’m sure she’s a lovely person.”

“Yes, I’m sure you’re right. Lovely.”

~ ~ ~

“I think the least you can do is play with us occasionally, Josephine.”

Uh-oh. On my own and trapped by Myrtle. A nightmare scenario.

“After all, you invented the game. But then you ran off. To Australia with that Norman person.” Her tone was jocular. “Not very thoughtful!” She punched me lightly on the arm.

I moved out of reach and gave her a fake smile. “But you’ve already heard all my stories.” Even more important, I’d heard all hers. More than once.

“I’m proposing this game to welcome our newest resident. Surely, you can’t want anyone else thinking you’re not very friendly?”

This is precisely the reason I try to avoid Myrtle. The woman is relentless and she plays dirty, and I’m not talking just poker. Besides, after my sighting of the new resident, I’m not all that eager to meet her.

“How about you invite Norman, and I’ll give Lillian a call,” Myrtle continued, clearly unfazed by my lack of enthusiasm.

“Norman’s busy and so am—”

“Goodie,” said Lill. I hadn’t noticed her arriving on the scene, but she’d obviously heard most of Myrtle’s proposal.

“No ‘goodie’ for me, thank you.” I gave Lill a squelching look that she ignored. “I have errands to run.”

“You can run your errands tomorrow,” Lill said. “A game will be good for you. Help keep those brain cells turning over.” It’s clear she’s fully recovered from the trauma of the new resident’s arrival.

“My brain cells are turning over perfectly well.”

“Can’t be too sure of that,” Myrtle said, stepping closer to Lill, making it two to one.

“Oh, all right. What time?”

“Two o’clock?”

“Fine,” I said with a humph.

“And don’t forget to ask Norman to join us,” Myrtle said with a titter before going on her way.

I scowled at Lill. “Norman’s working. And you know I have no patience for Myrtle’s beauty-pageant stories.”

“Which means we just have to make sure someone else loses more than she does.”

“I could find another friend.”

Lill chortled. “Doubt it. Your reputation precedes you. Besides, I’m irreplaceable.” And irrepressible. At eighty-something, Lill has a zest for life that I continue to envy.

“I thought you weren’t interested in meeting the woman?”

“Changed my mind. I find I’m rather intrigued by someone who manages to

look that put together all the time.”

I sighed. “If we don’t want Myrtle to be the biggest loser, we better get our signals straight.”

“Just bluff her into a big pot a couple of times, then fold, no matter what cards you’re holding.”

“But that might mean I’d have to tell a story. And I really don’t want to.”

“Oh, Josephine, for Pete’s sake, make something up.”

“Against the rules.”

“Your rules, your problem.”

~ ~ ~

The new resident’s name is Charlotte “you can call me Lottie” Watson. Today she’s dressed in a black-and-white outfit with touches of red that match her lips, fingernails, and shoes.

“My goodness,” Lill said, shaking Lottie’s hand. “You can’t possibly be old enough to live here.”

That was my thought as well, but I sure wasn’t going to say it out loud. And it wasn’t the sort of thing Lill usually said either.

“How did you talk them into letting you in?” Lill continued.

“Forged birth certificate.” Lottie’s smug look was at odds with the otherwise careful way she was presenting herself.

“I’m Josephine Bartlett.”

“Oh yes, Myrt here has told me all about you. It’s such a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“Likewise.” The thought of what Myrtle—Myrt?—might have told Lottie had me suppressing a shudder.

“So, Lottie, why did you choose Brookside?” Lill asked as we took our seats at the table.

“It was either this or a first-class cabin on the Queen Mary II.”

“Oh,” Myrtle said, her eyes going wide. “If that had been my choice, I think I might have chosen the Queen Mary.”

Lottie shrugged. “I worried I might get seasick, so that made this the better choice.”

“And has it been?” I asked.

“What’s not to like? My meals are all prepared and served to me, my apartment is cleaned regularly, and if I need anything, even a light bulb changed, all I have to do is pick up the phone.” She paused, but I didn’t think she was finished yet. “There’s been only one downside so far.”

“And that is?” Myrtle said.

“The weekly Things to Do bulletin. Do they really need to put the funeral announcements on the front page?”

“I suppose not,” Myrtle said with a thoughtful look.

“Where did you live before this?” I asked in an attempt to move the conversation along.

“I had a lovely house in Indian Hill. It sold for over five million.” Her hand came up and smoothed her hair. Preening was the word that came to mind.

“If you had such a fabulous house, why sell it?” Myrtle said.

“Because it was getting to be such a pain. It always seemed to need some sort of maintenance or repair. And let me tell you, finding a good handyman isn’t easy, no matter how much money you have. But the final straw was when my cook left and I couldn’t find a replacement. Even an illegal, if you can believe that, and I hate to cook. I finally decided enough was enough and told myself, ‘Lottie, my girl, you owe it to yourself to live in a place where you don’t have to worry about all that piddly stuff.’”

“I hate to cook too,” Myrtle said. “And may I just say, I’m so glad you chose to move here.”

Lottie looked pleased. “Why, so am I.”

“Shall we get started?” I said.

We cut for the deal, and Myrtle won that. The beginning of a streak, I sincerely hoped. I passed out the paper clips we use to bet with as Myrtle told Lottie the rules.

“We call it naked poker because the biggest loser of the day has to tell a down-and-dirty story about herself.”

Lottie looked startled. “I thought we were playing for money.” And it appeared that would definitely be her preference.

“Oh no.” Myrtle dealt the cards. “We find we much prefer paper clips.”

Since I was sitting across from Lottie, I watched her intently as she picked up her cards. Her lips firmed, but whether that meant the cards were very good or very bad, I didn’t yet know.

I filed the tell away and switched my attention to Myrtle. She was beaming

at her cards. Honestly, she's one of the luckiest people I know with getting good cards, but also the worst at capitalizing on them, because anyone playing with her for five minutes knows whether she has a winning hand or not. Although it must be acknowledged she has managed to fake me out a time or two.

Lill's an excellent player who never gives away what she's holding with even a flicker of an unmascaraed eyelash.

"Which wing do you live in, Lottie?" I asked.

The various wings in Brookside's main building are designated by flower/bird name combinations that then are shortened for convenience. Lill and I are in the Morning Glory/Mourning Dove wing known as GloryDove, and Myrtle lives in the Snapdragon/Titmouse wing known more familiarly as SnapTit.

"Meadow Lark something," Lottie said, shaking her head and focusing on her cards.

"Meadowlark Lemon." Lill chortled. "Love that name. LarkLemon was my choice when I moved here, but there were no vacancies."

"Why was that your choice?" Lottie said, frowning.

"Because of Meadowlark Lemon, of course."

Lottie looked blank. And let me just go on the record here that anyone too young to remember the Globetrotters' star player is too young for Brookside. In my humble opinion.

As this chitchat was proceeding, so was the game, with each of us anteing up and then asking for additional cards, or holding on to what we'd gotten in the first place. As usual, I didn't have anything worth even a halfhearted bluff.

I folded early, which gave me a chance to observe the others.

Lottie was clearly a knowledgeable player, and the first hand boiled down to her and Myrtle as the last women standing. Myrtle finally called, and Lottie fanned out her cards to reveal an inside straight. But then Myrtle laid down a royal flush.

Maybe I wouldn't have to lose a hand or two to Myrtle after all.

Lottie lost half her clips on that first hand, and it went downhill for her from there. Each of us won subsequent pots until Lottie, who tended to bet extravagantly, was left blinking with surprise at her remaining two clips.

"My goodness. You're all terrific players. Good thing we didn't play for money or you could have wiped me out."

"We don't want anybody walking away from this table with less than they

came with," Myrtle said in her most self-important voice. "We're your friends. And we intend to stay that way."

I raised an eyebrow at Lill, whose lips firmed in an obvious attempt not to laugh.

At the sound of a snapping finger and a hiss from a passing staff member, we all looked up, and the one man in the room hunkered down behind his newspaper.

"Uh-oh," Myrtle said. "I do believe that was a Prudence Parker alert."

"What's that?" Lottie asked.

Myrtle raised a shushing hand. "Just wait and see."

Soon, a scooter and its driver appeared in the doorway. The scooter driver's head swiveled and locked in on the man behind the paper.

"Penis! Don't think I don't see you there. Penis!"

"What in the world?" Lottie's eyes widened in obvious shock.

"That's Pru Parker," Lill said. "And you don't have to worry, you're safe. Unless you plan to cut your hair short and wear slacks. Pru doesn't see so good."

While Lottie was being clued in, Pru maneuvered her scooter over in front of the man. He jumped to his feet and made a hasty retreat, leaving pages of newspaper floating in his wake.

"Shouldn't she be in a secure unit?" Lottie said.

"Why?" I said. "Just because she scoots around pointing out men?"

"In a very loud, aggressive tone of voice."

"Lots of people here talk in loud voices," I said. "It's rather common, actually."

"But she could be violent."

"Admittedly, Pru is one of our more eccentric residents. But she's basically harmless."

Lottie's mouth fell open.

"Trying to catch a fly?" I'm convinced Pru on her scooter could outmaneuver race-car driver Mario Andretti. While I'd been talking, she'd rolled up behind our table and was examining us closely, I assume to ensure there were no stray penises hiding amongst us.

"Humph. We don't have to take it, you know. It's our turn now." Then she whipped the scooter into a turn and whirred away.

"What does she mean?" Lottie said.

“We think she’s referring to the fact many of Brookside’s residents are women who have outlived their husbands, so we should no longer have to put up with men,” I said.

“Does she do that to all the men?”

“Yep,” Lill said. “Gotten so they scatter like they’ve just robbed a bank whenever there’s a sighting. I say it’s good for them. Gets them to exercise more.”

Myrtle gathered up the cards, bracelets clattering. Show me a picture of just the hands of the women sitting around this table, and I’d be able to match them to the woman they belong to with no difficulty. Myrtle’s are plump, and she wears two rings on each hand that were clearly put in place when her fingers were considerably thinner. Lill’s hands, the only black ones, are as narrow and spare as she is. Lottie has unattractive hands with stubby fingers, but she’s attempted to overcome that deficit with elongated fingernails that are painted crimson. Her right hand is weighted down, literally, by an enormous diamond that could also serve as a weapon.

My own hands are ringless and my nails are short and unpolished. My distinguishing feature is the slightly bent third finger on my right hand. I injured it years ago, and lately it’s begun to look even more bent, although luckily, despite the fact it looks like it might hurt, it doesn’t. And there you have the four of us. It would make for an interesting picture, come to think of it.

Myrtle clucked her tongue. “Okay, moving right along here, folks. Time for that story, Lottie.”

“This story. It has to be personal?”

Myrtle tapped the cards into place. “The very first time we played naked poker, the woman who lost told us she seduced her sister’s fiancé and then told him she was pregnant so he had to marry her instead. And, of course, I’ve shared my humiliation as a finalist in the Miss Ohio pageant.” She sniffed, but I happen to know she loves sharing her so-called humiliation at the Miss Ohio pageant. After all, it’s the perfect way to let everyone know she was in the pageant. Something, I have no doubt, that was the highlight of her life.

“I see.” Lottie folded her hands on top of the table without the jangling that accompanies every move Myrtle makes. “Okay, let me think for a minute.”

While she thought, I collected the paper clips from everyone and returned them to their box, which I handed to Myrtle. I used to be the group’s treasurer, until I found turning that duty over to Myrtle was the best way to avoid being constantly roped into games.

“Okay, I’ve got it,” Lottie said. “How’s this? A number of years ago, my husband and I took—or, that is, we were supposed to take—a trip to Hawaii. A second honeymoon of sorts. There we were in the LA airport, figuring out which terminal we needed and all that sort of thing. Clare, my husband, well, that’s what I called him. Much better than Clarence, don’t you think? All our friends thought it was hilarious that I called him that.” She gave us a satisfied look. “The point is, he left me sitting at the gate, saying he was going to buy a book to read on the flight. Then he walked off, and that was the last I ever saw of him.”

“You mean he had a heart attack and died?” Myrtle said.

“No, I mean he walked off and never came back.”

“What did you do?” Myrtle said.

“I kept expecting him to return. He’d taken his ticket with him, you see. When they started boarding the flight,” she shrugged, “I got on and went to Hawaii.”

“Without Clarence?” Lill said.

“It was all paid for. Nonrefundable. And I didn’t want to miss out because he had one of his snits and didn’t come back from the bookstore. I just thought he was playing a trick on me. He was a dreadful joker.”

“What kind of tricks did he play?” Myrtle said.

“One time he said he was going out for milk and he didn’t come back for three days. My mother said I should let that be a warning, but I never did understand what she meant. After all, Clare was crazy about me.” She smoothed a hand over her hair and touched the diamond pendant she was wearing.

“Did you report him missing to the police?” Lill said.

“I told everyone Clare fell in love with Hawaii and didn’t want to leave. Come to think of it, that could be true.”

I had the distinct impression Lottie was enjoying herself. Which seemed at odds with the peculiar story she was telling.

“You had children?” Myrtle has five, so this is one of her go-to questions.

“I’m afraid not. Although I did want them. Badly. But Clare thought they would be a bother.”

Myrtle frowned. “But how did you manage?”

“Clare may have walked off, but he didn’t take the money. I was just fine.”

“You had money?” Myrtle’s eyes opened so wide, she resembled a carp.

“Certainly. You see, Clare invented some thingamabob that went into a jet

engine. Meant he never had to work again. After he disappeared, I still got the . . . I forget what they called it. Royalty, maybe? Anyway, some kind of payments. It meant I've never had any money worries." She sounded so satisfied, it made me blink.

"And nobody thought it was strange they didn't see Clarence again?" I said.

"Most of his coworkers couldn't understand why Clare would want to keep working, given all the money we had. Made perfect sense he'd just up and walk away."

"Weren't you curious about what happened to him?" Lill said.

"No, not really."

Lill looked across at me, giving her head a small shake.

"Well," I said. "Just look at the time. This has been fascinating, but I've an appointment in a few minutes."

"I was hoping we could adjourn to my place," Lottie said. "So we can visit some more."

Lill got to her feet. "Sorry. My daughter's due for a visit."

"Nice to meet you, Lottie," I said, although I wasn't entirely certain it was. "I hope you enjoy living here." Then Lill and I made a break for it.

"My goodness. Wasn't that . . . interesting?" Lill said.

"Rather. Perhaps another story idea for Philippa?" Philippa is a novelist. And I'd really like to know how she avoided being roped into the game today.

"You have to admit, it's an intriguing premise." Lill sounded thoughtful. "At least, I suppose it is. But it might be hard to make readers like a character who doesn't raise holy hell when her husband disappears in an airport."

"True. Philippa might need to write about the husband."

"Of course, to do either, she'd need to get to know Lottie," Lill said. "I'll bet Myrtle would be happy to organize another game."

"Don't you dare suggest it. What I want to know is, what's with Lottie? She looked like she was ready to be presented at the White House, not play a game of cards with a bunch of senior citizens."

"Speak for yourself," Lill said. "I'll admit to the years, but I'm still young at heart. As for Lottie, all those clothes deserve an occasional outing, don't you think?"

"I wonder if Myrtle realizes she's being upstaged."

"Doubt it. If there's one thing you can say about our Myrtle, it's that she's

the star of her world.”

“But if Lottie attracts male attention, that might shake Myrtle up,” I said.

“I for one have no doubt she’ll attract attention,” Lill said. “Besides, it’s clear she wants to. I wonder how many husbands she’s gone through.”

“We could ask her,” I said.

“Where’s the fun in that?” Lill responded.

<<<>>>

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A Note to Readers

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for the gift of your time in reading *The Babbling Brook Naked Poker Club – Book One*. I hope you enjoyed it. If you would be so kind as to take a moment to tell a friend about the book or to leave a review on Amazon or elsewhere, I would be very grateful. Reviews and word-of-mouth are vital to my success.

Here's a link to the book's [Amazon page](#).

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LOVE the newsletter. Keep them coming... — J. Close

It was lovely to read about how you wrote the Peruvian parts of Counterpointe.

— J. Townsend

Great newsletter—great idea and very nicely done. — R. Collins

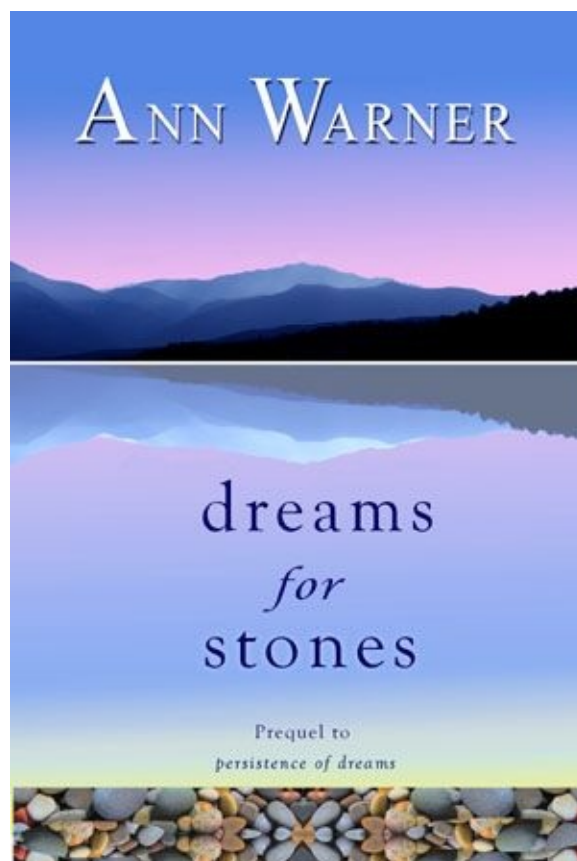
One more thing before you go...

I love hearing from readers.

You can contact me through my [website](#) or [Facebook](#) page

Also by Ann Warner

Book One of the Dreams Trilogy



Dreams for Stones

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Indie Next Generation Book Award Finalist

A man holding fast to grief and a woman who lets go of love too easily. It will take all the magic of old diaries and a children's story to heal these two. Caught in grief and guilt over his wife's death, English professor Alan Francini is determined never to feel that much pain again. He avoids new relationships and keeps even his best friend at arms' length. His major solace is his family's ranch south of Denver.

Children's book editor Kathy Jamison has learned through a lifetime of separations and a broken engagement that letting go is easier than hanging on. Then she meets Alan, and for once, begins to believe a lasting relationship is possible. But Alan panics and pushes her away into the arms of his best friend. Now the emotions of three people are at stake as they struggle to find a way to transform their broken dreams into a foundation for a more hopeful future.

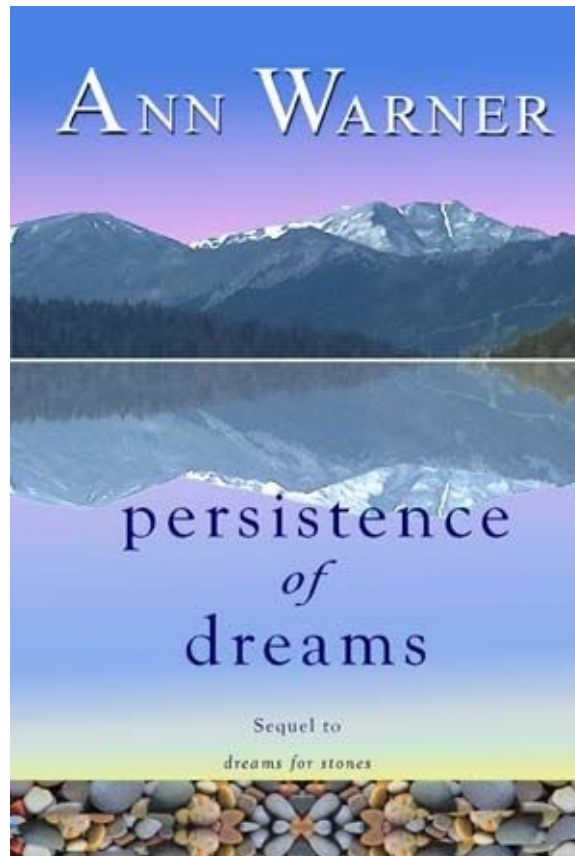
Readers' Comments

. . . incredibly vivid and emotional tale of love and loyalty, friendship, loss, and faith. —Booklist

. . . a lovely story about life changes and love lost and found. —Romantic Times Book Review

*Stunning! —Juli Townsend, Author of *Absent Children**

Book Two of the Dreams Trilogy



Persistence of Dreams

Lost memories and surprising twists of mystery. Alan, Kathy, and Charles's story continues. The ending of his love affair with Kathy and an arsonist seeking revenge are the catalysts that alter the shape and direction of Charles's life. Forced to find both a new place to live and a way to ease his heartache, Charles finds much more as he reaches out to help his neighbor Luz Montalvo. Helping Luz forces Charles to come to grips with his fractured friendships and the fragmented memories of his childhood.

Luz Montalvo was a carefree college student until her parents died in a car crash. Frantic not to lose her younger siblings to foster care, Luz took them on the run. After nearly a year scraping by as an apartment manager, she's just beginning to feel safe when she discovers her newest tenant is her worst nightmare. Charles Larimore, a Denver district attorney, has been shaped by losses that left him

wary of everyone and everything. Including love.

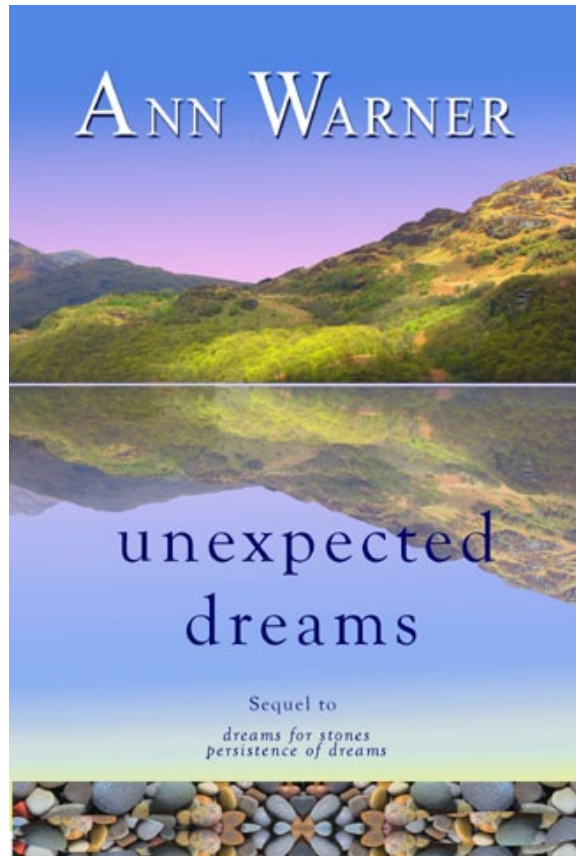
Readers' Comments

A compelling page turner. Warner's portrayal of a life on the run is realistic . . . her heroine one readers will root for . . . a true sense of time and place . . . real secondary characters who do more than take up space. —Karen Sweeny-Justice, Romantic Times.

Warner's smooth writing style charms the reader . . . enthralling—a story to be enjoyed more than once. —Camellia, *The Long and Short of It Reviews*.

Excellent characters and dialogue drive the romance and suspense . . . great reading. —*Romance Studio*

The final chapter in the Dreams Trilogy



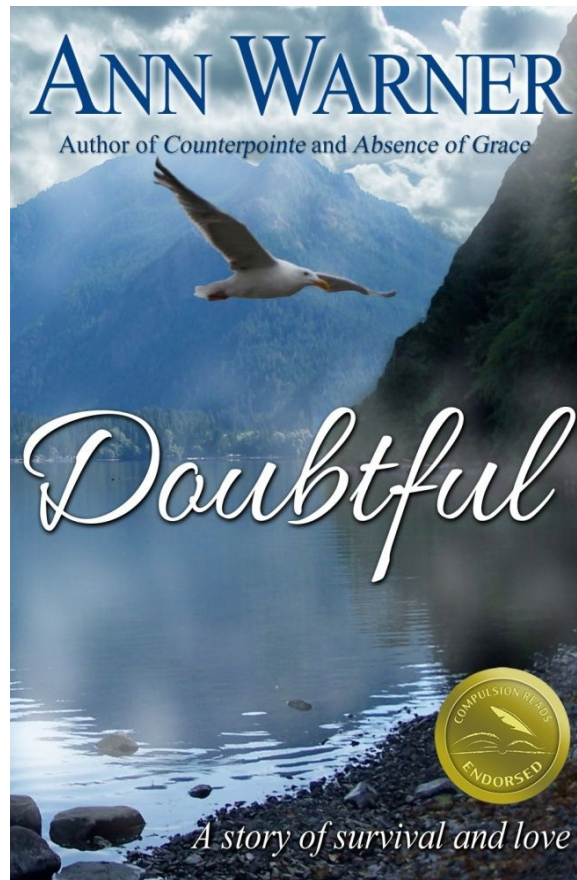
Unexpected Dreams

Murder made to look like an accident, family secrets, interfering mothers, lovers in conflict, horses. All combine in a satisfying mix in this contemporary romantic mystery.

Phoebe Whitney-Tolliver has just ended a long-term relationship and begun a new position as the Chief Accident Investigator for the City and County of Denver. She has also fulfilled a lifelong dream—that of owning a horse. All are changes that bring Phoebe into contact with horse owner and attorney Sam

Talbot and Luz and Charles Larimore.

Phoebe helps Charles, a district attorney, and Luz, his wife, in determining whether a traffic accident was actually murder, while Sam locates information about Luz's Chilean family. Eventually the four of them come up against Luz's murderous uncle, a man determined to maintain control of the family's large estancia in Chile. The uncle is a formidable foe, one who will require all the wiles and skill Phoebe, Sam, Charles, and Luz possess to overcome. A further complication is that Phoebe and Sam are falling in love, although they don't do it easily or without difficulties.



Doubtful

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Red Ribbon Award - Wishing Shelf Independent Book Awards

Doubtful Sound, New Zealand: For Dr. Van Peters, Doubtful is a retreat after a false accusation all but ends her scientific career. For David Christianson, Doubtful is a place of respite after a personal tragedy is followed by an unwelcome notoriety.

Neither is looking for love or even friendship. Each wants only to make it through another day. But when violence comes to Doubtful, Van and David's only chance of survival will be each other.

Readers' Comments

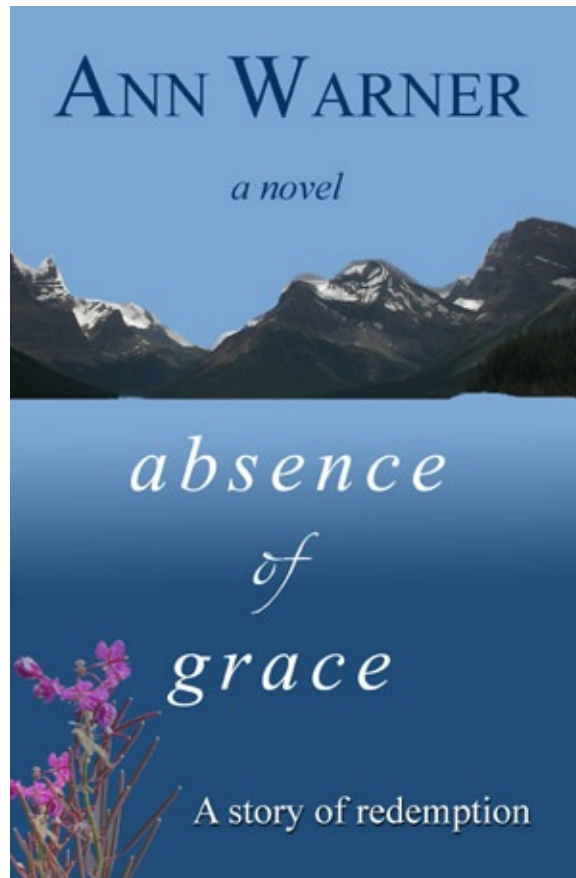
...a wonderfully written story with well-rounded and real characters in a setting

that Ann evokes with such detail and sensibility you are instantly transported to this remote New Zealand coast. I love Ann's writing style—intelligent and unsentimental—with characters you are rooting for to the very end. —Jayne Close

|

*If you like exciting books set in interesting locations, this one is for you. Warner has created characters we really care about, then she proceeds to present them with some really tough challenges. —Margaret Johnson, author of *The Goddess Workshop**

*This book has the lot—mystery, suspense, romance and something extra I enjoyed as an Australian reader—I found myself lingering over Warner's vivid descriptions of places I've never seen but would love to visit in Australia and New Zealand. —Juli Townsend, author of *Absent Children*.*



Absence of Grace

Available as a [free download](#) in multiple formats

The memory of an act committed when she was nineteen weaves a dark thread through Clen McClendon's life. It is a darkness Clen ignores until the discovery of her husband's infidelity propels her on a quest for her own redemption and forgiveness. At first, her journeying provides few answers and peace remains elusive. Then Clen makes a decision that is both desperate and random to go to Wrangell, Alaska. There she will meet Gerrum Kirsey and learn that choices are never truly random, and they always have consequences.

Readers' Comments

Absence of Grace is a riveting read of personal struggle, very much recommended reading. —The Midwest Book Review

The writing is perfect. Absolutely smooth and divine. Like the best bar of chocolate in the world. — Fran Macilvey, author of Trapped



[Counterpoint](#)

Endorsed by Compulsion Reads

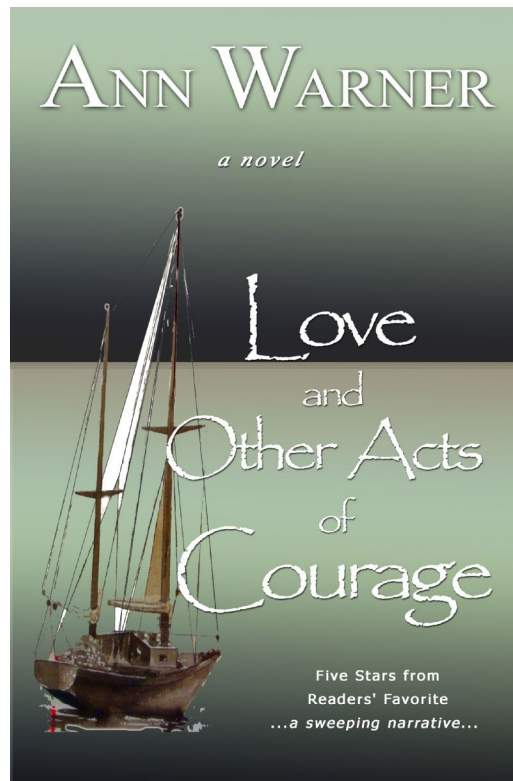
Art, science, love, and ambition collide as a dancer on the verge of achieving her dreams is badly injured. Afterward, Clare Eliason rushes into a marriage with Rob Chapin, a scientist. The marriage falters, propelling Clare and Rob on journeys of self-discovery. Rob joins a scientific expedition to Peru, where he discovers how easy it is to die. Clare's journey, which takes her only a few blocks from the Boston apartment she shared with Rob, is no less profound. During their time apart, each will have a chance to save a life. One will succeed, one will not. Finally, they will face the most difficult quest of all, navigating the space that lies between them.

Readers' Comments

Counterpointe is not your traditional love story, just as Ann Warner is not your typical author. Ann's brilliant, well-thought-out prose lifts her stories to a higher literary level than most of today's fare. If you're looking for a...thoroughly satisfying journey that takes your imagination from tragedy to self-discovery, with all of the tears and joys along the way, you should pick up Counterpointe and prepare to be impressed. — Pam Berehulke, Bulletproof Editing

The chemistry between Clare and Rob is crackling. LOVE IT! — Kate Moretti, NY Times bestselling author of Thought I Knew You

Reading your work is like coming home to a good friend I know I can trust... there is nothing I don't like here...you wrote another brilliant story. Thank you. — Fran McIlvey, author of Trapped



[Love and Other Acts of Courage](#)

Wishing Shelf Independent Book Awards Finalist

A freighter collides with a yacht and abandons the survivors. A couple is left behind by a dive boat.

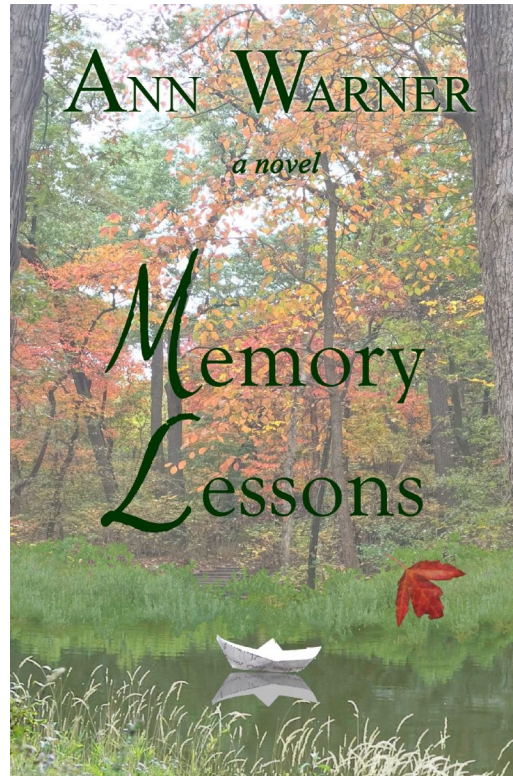
These are the dramatic events that force changes in maritime attorney Max Gildea's carefully organized life, where, win, lose, or settle out of court, he gets paid and paid handsomely. As he represents the only survivor of the yacht sinking and gets involved in the search for the couple missing from a dive trip, his reawakening emotions catapult him into the chaos of sorrow and joy that are the necessary ingredients of a life lived fully.

Readers' Comments

Love and Other Acts of Courage is...beautiful. The plot is engaging and it focused on the development of the characters...and the ending (is) very satisfying. — Lorena Sanqui for *Readers' Favorite*

Love and Other Acts of Courage is a love story woven within an engaging mystery with twists and turns, believable villains, and enough tension to keep you turning pages. — Dete Meserve, author of Good Sam

...the characterization of Max, Jake, and Sophie is done so delicately, so perfectly, that each alone would be worthy of a separate story. In short, Love and Other Acts of Courage is so much more than a love story. — Kate Moretti, NY Times Bestselling author of Binds that Tie



[Memory Lessons](#)

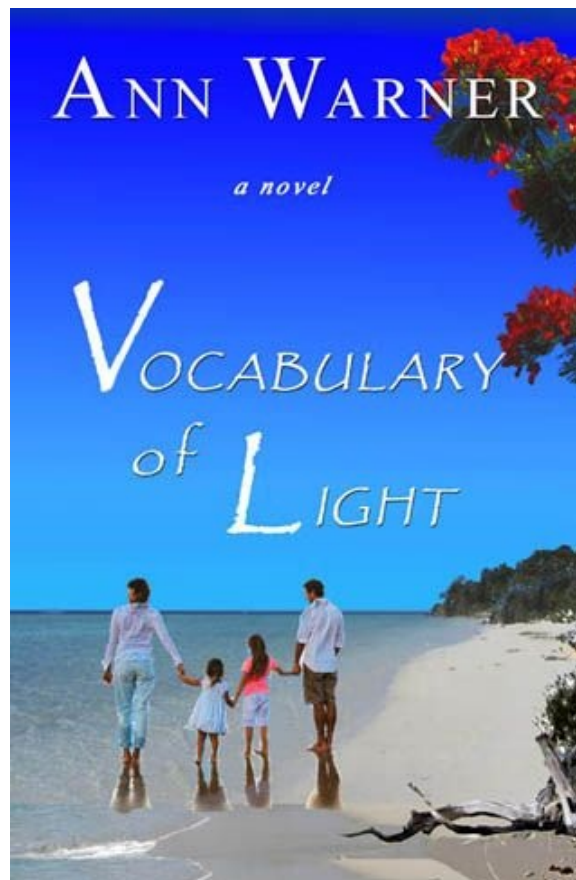
Glenna Girard has passed through the agony and utter darkness of an unimaginable loss. It is only in planning her escape, from her marriage and her current circumstances, that she manages to start moving again, toward a place where she can live in anonymity and atone for the unforgivable mistake she has made.

As she takes tentative steps into the new life she is so carefully shaping, she has no desire to connect with other people. But fate has other ideas, bringing her a family who can benefit from her help if only she will give it. And a man, Jack Ralston, who is everything she needs to live fully again, if Glenna will just let herself see it.

Readers' Comments

...you don't want to miss this inspirational story. — David Johnson, author of *The Tucker Series*

A lovely and compelling story. — Michelle Lam, author of *The Accidental Prophetess*



Vocabulary of Light

Living in Puerto Rico might sound like a dream to some people, but for Maggie Chase it's more of a challenge than she's looking for. Maggie, who has a PhD in biochemistry, agreed to put her husband's career first after the birth of their daughters, and that has now led to Mike accepting the position of CEO of the Lillith Pharmaceuticals plant in San Juan. Struggling to fit into the bilingual, Latin culture of Puerto Rico in the late 1980s, Maggie's adjustment is aided by the friendships she develops. Friendships that bring both dark and light into her life, and eventually demand of her an inner strength and resilience she didn't know she was capable of.

Readers' Comments

...vivid insight into a new place and a gripping, and yet heartwarming story.—

Juli Townsend, author of *Absent Children*.

I love Ann Warner's books, and in this new offering she makes us live and breathe Puerto Rico in the 1990s . The dilemmas of Maggie and her new friends are emotionally engaging, and as always, her characters are brought vividly to life. Margaret Johnson, author of *The Goddess Workshop*

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Acknowledgments

Although writing a novel requires solitude, no book gets published in isolation. Of the many people who have contributed to the process for this novel, I'm especially thankful to the following:

Delores Warner, who provided invaluable expertise to ensure the Graphoanalysis details in this novel are correct. Any errors in interpretation are mine. Thank you so much, Delores.

Pam Berehulke, who ensures that my grammar, punctuation, and timelines are perfect, although since I have a tendency to tinker, errors may have tiptoed their way in after Pam gave the book her imprimatur. If you should find an error in this novel, be assured I introduced it. Mea culpa, Pam.

All my early readers/ reviewers, who have helped in the final polishing of this novel: Christopher Foreman, Juli Townsend, Margaret Johnson, Judy Carpenter, and the members of the Women's Fiction Critique Group on Writeon.com: Gail Cleare, Poppy Gillespie, Katie O'Rourke, DJ Dalasio, Kate Murdoch, Jennie Ensor, Caroline Fraser, Muriel Canfield, and Karin Davies.

And to all those who have written to comment on my stories, especially those of you who have told me my novels have been a source of comfort or distraction during tough times, thank you!

My gratitude as well to all those who have posted reviews. Your kindness helps me to make others aware of my novels.

And above all, thanks to my husband who lights up my life and makes it possible for me to be a full-time writer.