

Ed Lynskey

The
Cashmere
Shroud

An Isabel and Alma Trumbo Mystery

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Chapter 1

Sammi Jo's mouth dropped open. She closed it. Disbelief set her face in hard planes like a flesh-tone marble statue as her jaws and mouth tightened. "Come again."

"Your father Ray Burl is dead," said Sheriff Fox. "He was murdered."

The twenty-something wheat blonde had been sitting at her office desk, moving her shoulders to the beat while listening to her music device, its ear buds pumping the noise into her ears. He had had to touch her shoulder to get her attention, and she flinched as a startled rabbit does.

"Get out of here. You're nuts." Her strained voice was a gate squeaking on its rusty hinges.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Sammi Jo."

She still didn't get it. "Is this your idea of a sick joke, Sheriff Fox?"

He was shortly taken aback. "Hardly. You see me dressed in my uniform, so you know it must be official. Ray Burl Garner lies in a morgue drawer wearing a toe tag."

As the truth struck home, she felt as if her insides had liquefied into mush. "Ray Burl is dead. Crazy." Murmuring it seemed to help reinforce her acceptance of it. "How so?" she asked, her tone a stronger timbre.

"He was found shot. Once. The slug penetrated his chest. It was a fatal hit."

She nodded. The blood roared between her ears. It coursed that intensely. *My father is dead*, she thought. "Are you sure?"

"Never more so in my life, I regret to say," replied Sheriff Fox.

"Ray Burl is dead. Crazy." Her still dry eyes blazed at the medium height and weight man with the prematurely balding iron gray hair. "Who did it?"

"At this early stage, I have got no suspects."

"Find the right one," she said. "Soon."

“My homicide investigation is already underway.”

“His killer can’t get away with it, and I deserve to see that justice is done.”

“Absolutely,” said Sheriff Fox. “Is there anybody I can call?” He slitted his eyes, beginning to regard her in an altogether different light. The killer was often a close family member. Did he deal with that situation here? “Should I call Isabel and Alma? Reynolds? You shouldn’t be alone at a bad time like this.”

“Huh?” Sammi Jo acted as if she hadn’t just heard Sheriff Fox.

He made a calculated decision. “Why don’t you close up the office? Your boss won’t mind, given the extreme circumstances. I’ll drive you over to Isabel and Alma’s place. Does that sound like a plan?”

Sammi Jo nodded again. “Yeah, sure, I’d like that, Sheriff. Thanks.”

“They’ll know what to do at a bad time like this,” he said.

While Isabel took Petey Samson, a part beagle and part terrier mutt she’d rescued from the SPCA animal shelter, on his call to nature, Alma and Sammi Jo settled in the comfortable living room. Ray Burl’s murder was the centerpiece of their conversation.

“I find it hard to believe this has happened to me.” She was rubbing her throbbing temples. “It feels surreal, as if I’m trapped in a nightmare, and I can’t shake myself awake, but it’s real as all get out.”

The normally gregarious Alma said nothing. She’d given Sammi Jo the box of tissues. Alma was alarmed over how the wheat-blonde younger woman’s face showed deeper crow’s feet, red-shot eyes, and mottled cheeks. Could she have any tears left in her to wring out?

The grief was shredding her up, and she acted far from her normal “moxie” self. Alma ached more than anything to console Sammi Jo, but no pearls of wisdom came to be imparted. Alma felt the best thing she could do was lend a sympathetic ear and quiet receptiveness to whatever Sammi Jo felt led to share.

“Daddy wasn’t a saint, but he never harmed or hurt anybody.”

Alma's shamus reaction was: *Or at least as far as we know about.* Ray Burl had been employed at Barclay's Turf Farm located three miles from Quiet Anchorage for so long the townies considered him a fixture out there. She'd a recollection he'd worked his way up to the foreman's position, but she'd no clear concept of what the foreman did. Tending to acres of sod, then cut and sold in slabs that were piled and banded on pallets, didn't strike her as too complicated. Then it was all she could do each week to keep their yard's swatch of grass looking presentable.

Sammi Jo made a furtive wipe at her moist eye corners.

Catching the motion, Alma pretended she hadn't. If Sammi Jo broke down, sobbing out her heart and wailing like a wounded banshee, that was okay by Alma. She'd coped with the agonizing loss from the deaths of loved ones. She gave Sammi Jo a little more time before proceeding.

"Did Ray Burl often work late?" asked Alma.

Sammi Jo summoned an unresponsive shrug. "Beats me. We seldom talked shop, just to say we stayed busy as church fans at a July camp meeting. He was the honcho in charge, so I guess he stuck around until the day's work got finished."

Alma saw the practical sense in that. "Did he have a run in with his boss or one of his crew members?"

"I don't have an inkling, Alma. He was content as could be expected of a working guy who grew and sold grass to put food on the table. It wasn't a glamorous or sexy job, but he appreciated how it gave him a steady paycheck."

"There's no shame in doing honest work," said Alma.

"He wasn't a bad or evil man. You and Isabel liked him, right?"

"No question about it," replied Alma. "We always nodded and spoke if we passed him. He was a man of few words, so making chitchat presented a challenge." She was set to compare Ray Burl to Randolph Scott, but Sammi Jo wouldn't know who the laconic cowboy actor born right down the road in Orange County, Virginia, was. Alma's voice dropped into her angry note. "Nobody should be murdered like Ray Burl was."

Sammi Jo's face brightened when something dawned on her. She smiled although she could only coax out a scratch mark. "Are Isabel and you going to investigate his murder like you did for Megan and Jake? I'd be grateful if you'd consider doing it."

The old spark excited Alma over the thrill of the snoop while also doing a good turn for their young friend. "Absolutely count us in. Isabel will be raring to go."

"But you haven't discussed it with her," said Sammi Jo.

Alma waved off Sammi Jo's trepidation. "Isabel and I are in lockstep, and we're cool on pretty near everything." Alma was exaggerating, but she threw aside any caution. "Wipe any worries from your mind. I'll hold a powwow with sis when she returns with Petey Samson."

"She sure is nuts about that dog," said Sammi Jo. "Has she taught him how to play Scrabble?"

Alma was elated by Sammi Jo's sense of humor glimmering through for the first time since she'd arrived. "Not so far, but never say never. I've entered the room when Isabel in her armchair is making goo-goo baby talk at Petey Samson lying in her lap where he barks and licks her face."

Sammi Jo giggled. "I had no idea she has such a screwball side. She acts so prim and proper whenever I'm around her."

"Every once in a blue moon, she'll crack a joke, and it leaves me in stitches."

"Good for her." Sammi Jo stood up. "I should be going. Tell Isabel I said hi."

"She'll be sorry she missed you." Alma thought Isabel should take along her cell phone when she left the house. "I'll also get together with her and discuss this other matter. It's a piece of cake, so don't fret about it."

"I know it's a lot to ask of you, and I'm grateful."

"It's the least we can do." Alma pondered the right approach to twist Isabel's arm over the sisters putting back on their deerstalker hats. "Why don't you come to dinner if you're free later?"

"Thanks, I'd like that." Sammi Jo nodded as she rose. She was acting more like her normal moxie self.

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Chapter 2

“Ray Burl was the last gentleman I ever knew to wear cashmere.” Alma glanced over at Isabel. “How about you?”

After licking her thumb, Isabel flipped to the next page in the *Alaskan Outdoor*. The sisters occupied their favorite armchairs that expressed their individual tastes. Alma’s upholstery was an adventurous tartan plaid while Isabel was partial to the sedate lime green velveteen.

“Cashmere is a bit too expensive for anybody else I know,” replied Isabel.

Alma arched her ashy white eyebrows. “Is the detail he died in his cashmere dress suit a significant clue? It was his best suit.”

“How might you know it was his best dress suit?” Isabel’s hazel eyes were piercing as she gazed up from the magazine.

Alma shrugged. “Sammi Jo and I talked, and she told me all about him. It sort of flowed out once she got on a roll.”

“In other words, you pumped her for information. Honestly, Alma. You might’ve given her half a chance to catch her breath.”

“Anyway, you and I had better get cracking if we’re going to find the killer.” Alma spoke as if they were going to shop at the IGA.

“What?” At hearing that bombshell, Isabel scooted to the edge of her armchair, the *Alaskan Outdoor* sliding through her lap and landing on the floor. Her jaw dropped in disbelief. She refused to hook up her medieval hearing aid, so she hoped she had misunderstood Alma.

“Please tell me I didn’t hear you just say we’re going after the killer,” said Isabel.

Nodding her head in the affirmative before Isabel had finished speaking, Alma stuck to her convictions. “Absolutely it’s to be us. Who else would Sammi Jo depend on during a crisis like this?”

“Well, I might be ranging out on a limb by saying this, but what about Sheriff Fox? It is his job, after all.”

A peal of laughter was Alma's response. "You know that's a joke," she said. "Sheriff Fox doesn't have the right stuff to investigate and arrest a murderer."

"And we do?" The incredulous Isabel put up her flat hand as if stopping the traffic on Main Street in midtown Quiet Anchorage, Virginia, population 598, plus a slew of furry as well as a few scaly pets. "I'm not letting you drag us into this madcap fiasco. Not again, you won't."

A puzzled expression lined Alma's forehead. "But of course we'll step up. Give me one good reason why the two of us shouldn't."

"Because I'm just beginning to recover from the rigors of our last case," replied Isabel. "We cracked it, for the most part, through dumb luck, and I'll bet our personal library our dumb luck has petered out."

Alma unlimbered her big guns. "There's another important point to be considered here."

"Don't you dare bring that up, Alma. I forbid it."

She did anyway. "Sammi Jo is our dearest friend in town."

Dreading how she stood on less stable ground, Isabel said nothing.

"Sammi Jo asked me for our assistance," said Alma. "How can we say no to her?"

"Of course we can't." Isabel tilted her chin at Alma. "Checkmate, eh? You figure you've just cornered me into saying yes."

This time Alma said nothing, and Isabel thought Alma did her best to keep her triumphant smile at bay.

"The next time I'd like to be consulted beforehand since I have a big stake in the matter," said Isabel.

"You'd taken Petey Samson out for his constitutional," said Alma. "Sammi Jo acted like she wanted to get it off her chest. Was I supposed to ask her to cool her heels until you both traipsed back to the house?"

"We don't go that far, just the loop around the block." Isabel elevated from the armchair. "It takes us six-and-a-half minutes. On the windier, colder days, we move with a little more urgency in our step, and it goes faster."

“She confided in me, and I shared it with you.” Alma also stood up. “We’re obligated to do whatever good we can do for her.”

Neither of them said anything during the interval they used to process the magnitude of the new course they’d embarked on taking.

They’d quit celebrating their birthdays and had been correcting the townies on the delicate issue of their respective ages. Each sister hovered at “seventy-something *young*.” In addition, Alma quickly noted Isabel was the *older* of the Trumbo siblings. She tolerated Alma’s insistence only because as the *slightly* elder sister, Isabel had the last say on the major decisions since age brought its wisdom.

Her calmer demeanor and deliberative approach served as an effective counterbalance to Alma’s somewhat scrappy, opinionated nature. On the other hand, if anyone ran afoul of both Trumbo sisters, they’d better leave, or the fur would fly fast and furious. Sheriff Roscoe Fox could vouch for that from his experiences of tangling with them. He’d found himself in such a precarious crossfire during Jake Robbins’ murder case. After Sheriff Fox had arrested Jake’s fiancé and the sisters’ niece, Megan Connors, for Jake’s homicide, they had swung into action. They proved Megan’s innocence and beat Sheriff Fox.

That defeat still smarted with him even if Megan had since moved to live in the same distant city as did the third and youngest Trumbo sister, Louise. Sheriff Fox gave Isabel and Alma a wide berth whenever they appeared within sight of each other in public. His furtive behavior tickled them, in particular Isabel who kept a quirky sense of humor bubbling away under her quiet reserve.

Flaring her eyes, she sighed. “The Trumbo Sisters Detective Agency has reopened its doors after I assumed we’d retired it.”

“Speak for yourself.” Alma smiled at the sensational shamus memories she kept close. “Rooting out the right clues, eliminating the red herrings, and targeting in on the true solution all appeal to my taste for adventure.”

“It would. Who’s going to help us if things turn hairy like, say, the murderer takes a vengeful mind to come after us?”

“Sammi Jo is our muscle and brawn.”

The noticeable shiver traveled through the length of Isabel's slim frame. "This time even she might not be enough muscle and brawn for us."

Cupping a hand behind her ear, Alma canted her head for a sharper listen. She tapped Isabel on the forearm. "Is that Petey Samson I hear scratching at the door? I believe he's saying he's set to take off on his next safari."

"Already? Good grief." Isabel threw up her hands. "It seems like we just finished doing that."

"Quit your grousing since it only takes you a speedy six-and-a-half minutes."

"I fibbed by giving you the low side of the estimate. We're gone a bit longer, something along the lines of fifteen or twenty minutes. Petey Samson has to halt at each street sign and mailbox to—"

"Right, I get the picture. Unless you were both running like antelopes, I knew it took you longer."

Isabel laughed. "The last time I ran anywhere like an antelope came when the smoke alarm shrilled out in the middle of the night. Max and I still resided on the boulevard." She pronounced it as *bou-le-VARD*. "We sprang up from bed to see what the matter was."

"I remember your telling me that story," said Alma. "Master Cecil had tiptoed down to the basement to experiment with his new chemistry set. He played an apprentice wizard concocting a secret formula to drink and turn him invisible."

"He'd watched *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* and liked his chance at success. Afterward, the house reeked of rotten eggs for a week, and Max, as he always did, laughed it off. Boys will be boys was his philosophy."

"Did you confiscate Cecil's new chemistry set?"

"Indeed I did on the spot, though by then a new hobby had grabbed his fancy. Inventing a pair of tinfoil-and-bubblegum wings to leap and fly off the garage roof, if I'm not mistaken. But that's another story for another time."

Maybe he began sneaking smokes on the playground around then, thought Alma. She said, "Cecil was a devil like Max."

“And both devils, big and small, are now gone.” Isabel’s gaze drifted out the window. “You know what’s so untrue? Time doesn’t bind up and heal all wounds. It just never does because I miss them more than I ever did.”

“Petey Samson is clawing down the door.” Alma tried to rescue Isabel from drowning in her pensive moment.

Isabel had recently added Petey to his name because she thought two names, as in Petey Sampson, had more dignified ring. Alma also knew Petey was the name Max had given his first sedan, a melon bright sports coupé he tooled up in to court the young Isabel. Alma would never give her car a name except a bad one cursed on the mornings its cranky engine didn’t start up for her.

“I can hear the pooch is hurting,” said Isabel. “We’re off again.”

“I’ll have your refilled glass of iced tea waiting for you when you get back,” said Alma.

Chapter 3

To say little happened in the single traffic light hamlet of Quiet Anchorage would be a gross inaccuracy. It had surrendered the “quiet” component to its double-word name. Within the past year, a brace of murders—Jake Robbins and now Ray Burl Garner—had rocked the township, and murder wasn’t supposed to upset such rural pockets of tranquility. Long ago, Isabel and Alma had left Quiet Anchorage, but only because not everybody living there could find a good job at the bank, post office, or public schools. Isabel debated if their return after their retirements had been a mistake. They’d sought a lazier, slower lifestyle after their long decades toiling in the northern Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C.

Quiet Anchorage was once a vital depot with a 50,000-gallon water tank to replenish the thirsty steam engines. The Coronet River meandered by Quiet Anchorage’s southern flank. The summer-long drought had depleted the river’s flow to the point where it trickled over the exposed red sandbars, black volcanic rocks, and deadfall trees.

The young folks picnicked and skinny dipped, if the mercury climbed into the three-figure digits as it had on more than one August afternoon. Canoeists and kayakers liked to traverse the Coronet River designated as one of Virginia’s scenic byways. However due to the drought making the water shallow, the sportsmen floating in their personal crafts dragged river bottom, so they had to substitute other leisure pursuits.

A historic steel truss railroad bridge erected during the first decade of the twentieth century spanned the Coronet River. Last year, the town council had voted to hire a local contractor (i.e., the mayor’s nephew) to repaint the bridge a silverish gray shade. Its industrial look pleased Alma while Isabel judged it as just shy of abominable. The sandy banks under the bridge offered a clean, shady spot where Sammi Jo liked to retreat, chill out while sitting on the driftwood log big as a sofa, and do her deepest thinking.

Toward sevenish o'clock, she relaxed on the log, dabbling her toes in the refreshing pool of water. As a rule of thumb, she preferred solitude when she was mulling over issues. For this visit, however, she had company. She didn't mind it. Isabel perched on a nearby flat rock a couple steps behind Sammi Jo while Alma remained standing between the other two ladies.

She stayed busy skimming the fragments of slate across the widest pools shaded by the overhanging willows and sycamores. So far, she'd refined her throws to make the slate fragments skip along four leaps over the water's surface. It was a juvenile pastime to occupy her. She felt too antsy to sit still with Sammi Jo and Isabel.

The older ladies clung to their pocketbooks large enough to carry their paperbacks inside, and Isabel toted along a 3X magnifying glass. Sammi Jo made do without a purse, a bigger nuisance, she thought, than wearing pantyhose in August. Distracted, she watched a pair of electric blue and orange dragonflies dance a jittery tango over the sandbars. She had a lot weighing on her new deliberations.

The sisters didn't protest or chafe over the delay. They'd spent three-quarters of a century practicing the art of patience.

With a swat, Isabel took out a bloodthirsty mosquito attacking her elbow. Then Alma scratched a bite left on the side of her neck. The citronella oil they'd put on before prior to leaving the house to repel the mosquitoes had lost its potency. Neither sister interrupted the meditative silence reigning since they'd halted under the railroad bridge.

Sammi Jo had said she was headed there after they washed the dinner dishes, and Isabel opined she oughtn't to go alone. Alma agreed, so they accompanied Sammi Jo. The older ladies didn't see much worth gained by their riverbank loitering, but if Sammi Jo took any solace from it, they were glad to be with her. Meantime they'd turned off their cell phones and fended off the mosquitoes.

Tonight marked the first time all three ladies had met since Ray Burl Garner had turned up shot dead at Barclay's Turf Farm. All wasn't glum, however. Isabel was eyeing a still warm sandbar that was the perfect spot to spread a picnic blanket, break out the game board, and play Scrabble. To say she was addicted to the wordplay

board game wouldn't stretch the truth. It was a proven remedy to ease the troubled mind like Sammi Jo's was right now. Isabel hadn't gotten in a game for three days, and she was getting cranky like a coffee drinker who'd been denied their morning cups. She wondered if she could cajole Alma into a nightcap round while sipping their tall glasses of iced tea and nibbling on Godiva Chocolate Truffles. Chocolate was Isabel's sleep aid.

Leave it to the rambunctious Alma to speak up first. "Getting darker makes it a little spookier under the bridge."

Sammi Jo, breaking off her thinking, smiled. "Are you a superstitious gal, Alma? Do you put stock in Aunt Phyllis' favorite yarn of the headless Confederate officer astride his horse glowing like pale green fire in the soupy fog?"

Phyllis Garner, Sammi Jo's theatrical aunt and the sisters' friend, lived in a townhouse on the next corner over from them.

"Me? *Pffft*. Her stories are silly old wives' tales," said Alma.

Isabel was grateful for the diversion. "You swallowed Willie's outrageous claim he spotted UFOs playing tag over the piney woods. What do you call that?"

"I agreed to spare hurting his feelings," said Alma. "I'm not a true believer in that nonsense."

"Patronizing him won't be any nicer after he sees through you," said Isabel.

"Willie and I remain good friends," said Alma.

Sammi Jo inhaled a gulp of air and filled her chest. "Smell that?" She glanced at Alma, then Isabel. "I love the one-of-a-kind aroma given off from the creosote rail ties on a hot summer evening. A perfumery should bottle it because I know it'd give the pricey Chanel No. 5 or Shalimar a run for its money."

Alma canted her nose and sniffed at the riverside air. "Creosote. Here? I don't smell it."

"Can't you though?" Sammi Jo sounded incredulous.

"Our olfactory sense isn't as sharp as it once was." Isabel couldn't imagine working at the office while smelling like a telephone pole. "Getting back to our earlier discussion. The bottom

line is you have to pull up your bootstraps, Sammi Jo, and get on with it.”

“That’s a mean thing to tell her,” said Alma. “She just lost her father.”

Isabel levitated from the driftwood log and used her palm to brush the red sand off the seat of her pleated trousers. “Abrupt, yes. Mean, never. It’s all well and good for us to skim pebbles, lick our wounds, and hold a group cry. However, we’re finished with doing all that, and this is the time to get the ball rolling. Any more dallying around is counterproductive.”

Gauging her sister’s flinty voice, Alma startled a little. “I’ve never seen you get so worked up like this. I’m usually the one who’s blunt.”

“Do you disagree with me?” asked Isabel. “Can we afford to wait any longer?”

Sammi Jo was also up and putting back on her sandals. “I’ve been sulking on you gals. I’m bummed, it’s true, but I can’t let Daddy’s murder investigation lag and fall into the cold case bin.”

“I couldn’t agree more with you, ladies.” A new voice, baritone and gruff, came from behind the ladies on the riverside path.

They spun around to identify the mystery speaker, but they didn’t run off.

He stood there, arms folded on chest, as if he were the boss under the railroad bridge. He was huffing out of breath from his exertions to reach them.

“No, it simply can’t be,” he went on. “The long arm of the law will not allow the killer to get away with murder. Not on my watch.”

Chapter 4

Alma shifted her pocketbook's double straps to ride on her other forearm. She recovered her poise and squinted at the intruder. "Well, well. Get a load of this sight. Roscoe Fox, the good sheriff of Quiet Anchorage, is stalking its innocent citizens and eavesdropping on their private conversations."

"I'm performing my sworn duties of office," he said, annoyed by her sarcasm. "New developments in the Ray Burl Garner homicide have led me here to find you."

Alma looked from Sheriff Fox to Isabel, to Sammi Jo, and back to him. "Do you see a bloodthirsty killer standing in our midst?"

"Alma, please," said Isabel. "Roscoe hasn't stated his reason for bumbling along the riverside path to see us, but it must be important whatever it is."

Sheriff Fox couldn't make up his mind whether Isabel was also being facetious at his expense. He had a sharp memory of his spirited clashes with the elderly sisters. He chafed at how more times than not he'd gotten the short end of the stick. His prematurely balding, iron gray hair with his rugged face put him in his early middle age. He wasn't a short man, or a tall man, but he was of average height to go with his average weight. Willie, a member of the Three Musketeers, said Sheriff Fox wore elevated shoes.

He'd broken into law enforcement while an Army military cop, a solid credential he was fond of trumpeting, never more vociferously than when election time grew close. His track record as the local sheriff was mixed although the munificent Isabel gave him more credit than the crusty Alma ever would. His right knee showed a damp, sandy patch where he'd slipped and fallen down while fumbling along the riverside path.

"Willie Moccasin told me where Sammi Jo likes to hang out." Sheriff Fox rolled his weight forward on the balls of his feet. "That

accounts for how I'm under the railroad bridge with you, not that I owe you any explanation."

Alma muttered just loud enough to be heard. "We'll be sure to give Willie our thanks."

"What's the big attraction down here?" asked Sheriff Fox.

"Daddy used to bring me here when I wore pigtails," replied Sammi Jo. "He pretended to fish for bass and bluegill while he napped after his long work week. Meanwhile I played building sand castles, grappling for crawdads in the feeder creeks, and floating on a tractor's inner tube."

"Speaking of whom, I have a few more questions to ask you. Obviously, I'm not deposing you while I'm fending off the pythons, skeeters, and varmints. I conduct my official business within the civilized confines of the station house. Shall we go there now?"

Sammi Jo barked out a derisive bray of laughter. "If you didn't bring an arrest warrant, Sheriff Fox, there's no way in a month of Sundays I'm marching into your station house. I still seethe over how Megan got double-crossed when she played nice and cooperated. Before you can say Jack Sprat, she was locked up in one of your jail cells. This smart cookie knows better than to fall for that old ruse."

"Apples and oranges," said Sheriff Fox. "Megan was regarded as a murder suspect, mistakenly as it turned out. But you're the decedent's next-of-kin."

Sammi Jo swiped the hair out of her face and jutted her chin. "Whatever you need to ask me, spill it here, or you can forget about it."

Turning, Sheriff Fox petitioned Isabel, the only sensible lady he felt he had left to approach. "Can you translate how I'm the sheriff to the headstrong young lady?"

"Sammi Jo keeps her own convictions, and I have to go along with her on this one," said Isabel. "Just do your interview. Nobody is close enough to overhear you. Alma and I can hike back to the bridge if that puts you at better ease."

Sammi Jo placed her hands on her hips. "That dog don't hunt. Isabel and Alma can also stick around if they like."

“Of course we’ll be here,” said Alma. “We’re her only family who’s now left.”

Raking his fingers through his thinning hair, Sheriff Fox gazed back with longing up the riverside path to the highway bridge. He’d left his cruiser parked there behind their sedan. He begrudged how the elderly Trumbos cowed him, but they’d be quick to point out they’d changed his diapers if he dared to stand his ground. Why that personal fact intimidated him, he didn’t understand, but it did, and he didn’t like it.

Arguing with an older person who’d powdered your tuckus as a baby was intimidating. During her emergencies, his mother had leaned on the sisters to pinch hit for babysitters when they were back visiting. Folks trusted and helped folks. They just did that in Quiet Anchorage. Or they had before the two murders had struck and turned everything topsy-turvy.

He realized he could finish his canvass with Sammi Jo and then go on home, ending his taxing day. He’d sink his tired bones into the Barcalounger, swig icy cold PBR, and veg out in front of his big screen TV watching Jay Leno he’d recorded.

Sheriff Fox scratched his forearm. *Blasted mosquitoes*, he fumed. He cleared his throat and assumed his bassy cop voice.

“Did Ray Burl—your father—ever mention any beefs he’d had with an employee at Barclay’s?”

“No, Sheriff. Daddy and I only covered the general stuff in our conversations.”

Perplexed, Sheriff Fox frowned. “‘General stuff’ is pretty wide open. What sort of general stuff do you mean?”

“Oh, the weather, NASCAR, and fishing. Do I have to draw you a picture? He never liked to bring the day job home.”

“Was he always so closed-mouth and guarded?”

“Believe it or not, he had a life if that’s what you’re getting at.” Sammi Jo noticed Alma behind Sheriff Fox yawning and stifled doing the same thing.

“Can you make this go any snappier, Roscoe?” asked Alma. “The mosquitoes are making us into their main course and dessert.”

“If Sammi Jo fields my questions without any interruptions, I can cover more ground. Now, Ray Burl was the foreman out there. He must’ve had some smarts to impress Old Man Barclay.”

“Daddy busted his hump working sixty to seventy hour weeks and never once complained about it. Nothing was given to him on a silver platter. He earned his stripes through the good, old-fashioned sweat of his brow.”

“I’m not calling his work ethic or loyalty into question,” said Sheriff Fox. “But I have to delve into why he was so nose-to-the-grindstone all the time. Everybody comes up for a breath of air at some point, but from what I’ve gleaned, he was a working fool. You say he had a life outside the job. If he did, then it couldn’t have amounted to much of one.”

“Where are you going with this line of inquiry, Roscoe?” asked Alma. “An industrious man doesn’t have oodles of spare time to get into any trouble. Ray Burl fits that category. Accept that as fact and move on.”

“You’re running on the same track as I am,” said Sheriff Roscoe. “I’m pursuing the angle he clashed with the troublemakers while he was on the job.”

“Troublemakers like whom?” asked Sammi Jo.

Sheriff Fox shrugged a shoulder. “He was your father. You can tell me.”

“He never told me if he did such a thing,” said Sammi Jo.

“You must have a suspect in mind to tramp all the way out here,” said Alma.

“Nobody in particular, Alma. I’ve just got different theories. Suppose Ray Burl had a side action going. Suppose a dispute broke out between him and a disgruntled customer. He dug in, claiming he’d been honest, only the customer didn’t agree with him.

“Angry barbs were exchanged, leading to male tempers on short fuses exploding. Hollered threats weren’t enough, and one whipped out a handgun, and that only goes down Homicide Street. Ray Burl got hit, and the perpetrator fled the scene, and yours truly is left with this gory mess.”

“You got one part wrong because Daddy was a mellow, laid back dude,” said Sammi Jo. “He didn’t have a short fuse, and he didn’t use a hair-trigger temper. As for the side business, he made a few sticks of furniture, but nothing that major came of it.”

“Did he ever break the law?” asked Alma.

“Not even once,” replied Sammi Jo.

“Does he have a criminal record, Sheriff?” asked Alma.

“Any rap sheet question automatically falls under proprietary information,” replied the haughty Sheriff Fox.

“Uh-huh. In other words, Ray Burl was never arrested and had a clean record. He was the same law-abiding citizen as you or me. Sounds like a dead end.”

Sheriff Fox couldn’t bite off his chagrin any further. “Alma, you and Isabel had just better cool your granny jets. Murder is a serious business. Stand back and give us skilled pros the room to perform our duties free of your Pinkertons-in-petticoats meddling. Am I making myself crystal clear?”

Before Alma gave her retort, a familiar toot bleated off in the near distance, followed by a longer whistle. Alma compared it to the firehouse’s whistle or a jumbo-sized leaf blower on steroids. Her heartbeats stepped up their pulsing throbs. She’d been a train lover since girlhood, especially of the now extinct steam engines.

The onrushing clatter to the fleet steel wheels rumbled over the twin ribbons of metallic rails. The four recognized the early evening freight train was approaching to zoom by above them on the steel truss bridge and clamber on through the metropolis of Quiet Anchorage and all points beyond. If he were checking his cell phone for any new text messages, the locomotive engineer would zip right by and miss seeing Quiet Anchorage.

The freight train, throttling off the fuel, slowed before entering the steel truss bridge, but the check in speed didn’t lessen the hybrid diesel engine’s clamor, which engulfed them in their position a few yards under the bridge and the freight train’s mammoth underside. The train’s steel wheels grinding over the steel track created the red sparks.

Again, the engine whistle shrilled, and the din's shockwaves grew louder to their ears. Every townie was familiar with the various freight, and with lesser frequency, the faster moving Amtrak passenger trains clickety-clacking by their burg. The four had no fear of the thunderous mechanical leviathan rumbling so close to them. Nobody pressed their hands to cover their ears. Suddenly a girl again, Alma cracked a wry smile at Sammi Jo who was pumping her fist, celebrating the freight train's crossing.

No doubt she'd done this cheer before when she'd sought refuge here, and the rolling big hardware chugged by her. Sheriff Fox wasn't nearly as amused, watching the irrepressible Sammi Jo and wondering about her behavior. He stroked his stubbly chin.

She didn't convey the image of the inconsolable grieving daughter to his way of thinking. He gave her a second once-over. Did she harbor an angry or greedy motive to bump off her father Ray Burl? Families were the prime suspects to crack murder cases. Sheriff Fox needed a prime suspect in custody like yesterday.

He pondered how much static he'd draw from the sisters if he effected Sammi Jo's arrest here. They'd goose their shyster – Dwight Holden could be a pain, too – to get to work before they stirred up half the townies to wield their torches and pitchforks and swarm after Sheriff Fox. The sisters would also get an assist from the trio of geezers collecting splinters along with any loose talk on the wooden bench. He'd give a week's salary to arrest them for loitering and put a crimp in the sisters' meddling ways.

If only the sheriff's office wasn't an elected position, or he'd formulated a Plan B for his next job, he could do a lot of things differently than he did.

Plus Isabel and Alma were old compadres with Judge Helen Redfern. He shivered. Nobody with any sense dared to cross her. He'd take his time and not arrest Sammi Jo prematurely as he'd done with Megan. Sammi Jo wouldn't beat the murder rap after he got finished putting together an airtight case against her. He'd also outsmart the Trumbo sisters, something he relished doing very much.

He smiled. *You just wait*, he thought.

The freight train completed spanning the steel truss bridge. The caboose, red as Sheriff Fox's face often turned, became a dot, and the engine's racket dimmed.

"What have you deciphered so far, Sheriff?" asked Sammi Jo. "I reckon I have a right to know since the murder victim was my father."

"Rest assured I'm giving his case my topmost priority," replied Sheriff Fox. "But as you would expect, I can't divulge any developments to an ongoing police investigation."

He knows about as much as we do – barely a thing, thought Alma.

"Have you contacted Tulip's Funeral Home and started that end of things?" he asked.

Isabel disposed of that question. "That's in the works for the next day or so. Nothing can be done until you've released the body after the autopsy. When has it been scheduled?"

Sheriff Fox swatted a palm at a lightning bug's spark fluttering under his chin. Every inch of his skin itched and prickled to get out of the buggy cauldron and into the velour-cushioned, air-conditioned luxury of his cruiser. "This soon after the homicide, we've arranged no set time for the autopsy, but I'll be sure to keep you in the loop."

"I should only hope so," said Alma.

Before Sheriff Fox could censure Alma's sarcasm, Isabel pointed out the more immediate dilemma confronting them. "It's getting almost too dark to negotiate our way along the riverside path. We should be going and take up any more talk at the house over tall glasses of iced tea."

"PBR?" asked Sheriff Fox, already panting.

"It's our parlor, Sheriff, not a beer joint or sports bar," replied Alma.

"Just asking," said Sheriff Fox. "It never hurts, you know."

Alma fluttered her eyes at Isabel who contained her smile.

"Guess I'll be heading on home then, ladies," said Sheriff Fox.

"Better watch your step while returning," said Sammi Jo. "Lots of things can trip you up along the way."

“For your information, I didn’t trip,” said Sheriff Fox. “I knelt down on one knee to inspect a critter’s track left in the sand.”

“Uh-huh.” She shepherded them off walking in single file over the rising and dipping riverside path back to the highway bridge.

On this trip Sheriff Fox made it with no further mishaps.

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Chapter 5

Saturday morning touched down on the burnt orange brick rambler with the dusty blue sedan parked in the short graveled driveway. The place on Church Street was known to the townies as the Trumbo Sisters' Residence. It was bought and paid for, always a leg up for seniors. So was their sedan, which they liked to take turns at driving whenever going places together.

The early morning temperature already flirted with ninety degrees, while a heavy dew had settled on all, including Old Glory smartly displayed on their concrete front stoop. Since 9/11, they flew the stars-and-stripes every summer day it didn't rain.

A gently curved walkway of even-spaced flagstone steppers in the crushed granite chips bed tracked by a pair of kidney-shaped flowerbeds. Fuchsia, impatiens, and marigolds burst out in their blooms. Alma had pushed for adding a turquoise gazing globe, but Isabel enforced her anti-tacky rule, so the gazing globe remained on Alma's wish list.

The smell of fresh cut grass indicated Camilo and his lawn crew had been at work mowing the previous afternoon. The sisters, however, weren't nearly as on top of the other yard chores. The ceramic birdbath needed topping off, and its clay pedestal showed a jagged crack running down the middle. Alma kept meaning to patch the crack with a smooth bead of caulk. She sometimes went a little nutso with the caulking gun, so Isabel had stashed it under her bed amid the dust bunnies and shoeboxes.

Each sister slept in her own bedroom, one located on each end of the brick rambler. Both ladies also owned cell phones they kept handy stuffed under their pillows. Since neither sister was an early riser, morning often found them grumpy, an off-putting trait Sammi Jo had pointed out to them, to little avail.

They were a pair of old gray mares set in their ways, not about to change for the sake of cordiality, although Isabel had made an effort to act nicer before ten a.m. At the moment, Alma had awakened, and

she deplored thinking it, but her falling back asleep was about as probable as her scoring the Virginia Lotto jackpot.

She hopped on her cell phone and buzzed Isabel's number. She was also still in bed, and Alma wasn't too worried if Isabel was asleep since she was an insomniac who refused to take any sleep aids other than the Godiva Chocolate Truffles.

Isabel caught Alma's ring and greeted her with a raspy "hello."

"Do you hear Petey Samson scratching at the front door?" asked Alma. "I believe he's pinching to take his first romp of the day around the block."

"At the time we took in Petey Samson from the SPCA animal shelter, I distinctly remember he was going to be your pet, too. But lately it seems I'm the only one who gets tasked with taking him for his walk. Why is that?"

Alma laughed. "Being as you are the older sister, I figured you'd benefit more from getting the exercise."

"My health is holding its own quite nicely, thanks, so I want to share the beneficial exercise. Our taking different turns, starting with yours this morning, is the healthy way to handle this. What do you say to that idea?"

"Okay, I'll take over half of the walking duties. But Petey Samson can hold out for a little while longer. Let's snap on our thinking caps and brainstorm Ray Burl's murder."

Isabel paused, trying to visualize whether a "thinking cap" resembled more of an Easter bonnet or Chiquita Banana's fruit hat, but she couldn't decide. Nevertheless she had a sense of how trifling it was to chat over the cell phones instead of in the same room. She remained lounging on the pillow she'd plumped up and leaned against the headboard.

"I'll give you my scariest suspicion," she said. "Sheriff Fox has set his beady eyes on Sammi Jo as his leading suspect. Did you notice how intently he watched her last night?"

"I never miss where his beady eyes are looking," replied Alma before a sigh. "I'd hoped it was just me, but now that you also bring it up, I have to believe it. This will be shades of Megan all over again if we're not careful on how we proceed."

“At least we knew Jake, who was Megan’s fiancé. Ray Burl is a largely unknown quantity that we have to put under our magnifying glass. We’d only nod and smile hello back to him on the poultry aisle at the IGA.”

“Ray Burl struck me as a nice enough guy.”

“I’ll give you what my intuition is telling me. This murder case is going to be a bigger can of worms for us than Megan’s case ever was.”

“We’ll have to depend on the help of our friends.”

“Who do we trust as a friend when any Quiet Anchorage townie, except Sammi Jo, might be the guilty culprit with the blood on their hands?”

Alma wasn’t discouraged. “Phyllis Garner and the Three Musketeers make four. Plus there is Louise, even if she’s not living here.”

Louise, their younger sister, didn’t get out to visit them much anymore because her crippling rheumatoid arthritis made long distance travel difficult. She had the same Scrabble bug that afflicted Isabel and Alma.

Thinking of the colorful Phyllis, Isabel laughed out. “Phyllis is a pistol, and Louise might remember something useful about Ray Burl. All is not lost.”

“I can hear Petey Samson now clawing down the front door. I’ll slip into my housecoat, clip the leash to his collar, and parade him around the block.”

“Don’t forget to take along the baggie and plastic scoop.”

Alma was a bit mystified. “What’s that?”

Again, Isabel laughed. “You’re in for a real education about dog ownership.”

“Okay, now I understand.” Alma was none too happy about it.

The local consensus held that Phyllis Garner represented Quiet Anchorage’s adorable eccentric whose bizarre wardrobe, gushy speech, and daffy behavior were part of the town’s social mosaic. She made it her life’s mission to keep every townie’s mailbox dusted off, which performed by traipsing around the neighborhood and

swishing the black ostrich feather duster she toted in her oversized sack purse. She accepted no gratuities.

The townies had watched this and her other far-out antics for so long, they'd lost finding any levity in them and quit laughing. They patted her on the shoulder and shuffled her along on her merry way.

Isabel and Alma had thought of Phyllis the same way until one day when she confided in them at her niece Sammi Jo's urging. Phyllis was nutty as a fruitcake, all right, but it was a big put on because under the goofiness she had an agile mind. She made her admission while the four ladies had convened around a window booth at Eddy's Deli, their go-to eatery for comfort foods at one end of Main Street.

Alma removed the paper napkins from the chrome dispenser and distributed them. Phyllis had worn a frothy yellow polka-dot dress with a festive floppy straw hat and pocketbook. She started out true to her jester's persona by telling them a joke.

"How many detectives does it take to change a light bulb?" she asked.

Isabel and Alma had no guesses and admitted as much.

"None at all." Phyllis winked with her crooked grin. "They always work in the dark."

The punch line provoked the three ladies, even Sammi Jo who'd already heard Phyllis tell it, to smile.

Then Phyllis dropped her customary singsong girlish tenor and turned solemn as a church deacon. "You see, I'm not who I pretend to be. I've just been having my fun and games by acting ditzzy. I really don't care if the townies' mailboxes are dirty or not."

"What in the world possesses you to do such an outlandish thing?" asked Isabel.

"It adds spice to my life in this dull as a mud puddle town," replied Phyllis.

The astonished Isabel was at a loss for words.

The mischievous Alma was nodding. "I bet pretending to be a lulu is more fun than a shopping spree at Macy's the day after Christmas. I'd be tempted to do it, too, except everybody would

catch on. What's more, our town can only handle the one screwball lady, or I should say seemingly screwball lady."

Sammi Jo got to the crux of why she'd called their luncheon. "If I was a betting lady, I'd place a wager on some time down the road we can use Phyllis in her brilliant disguise to pry around and pick up some useful tidbits of intelligence."

Isabel giggled behind her hand at how the preposterous suggestion tickled her funny bone. "Zany like a fox, Phyllis comes and goes with her radar eavesdropping on unguarded conversations. I love it."

Phyllis flashed the okay sign, linking her thumb and forefinger to create a small circle. "There's one catch. You have to swear on your hearts you'll never compromise my cover. Or else I won't be effective to you, and I'll no longer get to enjoy my hijinks."

"We'll safeguard your masquerade," said Alma. "You'll become the secret weapon our detective agency keeps in reserve."

Sammi Jo beamed with pride over her cunning aunt putting one over on the townies.

"Now that that's been ironed out, who is springing for our luncheon?" asked Phyllis. "Keep in mind I'm just a ragamuffin bag lady who's collecting aluminum cans to sell for cash and pinching her pennies."

"What catches your fancy?" asked Isabel.

"Pheasant under glass," replied Phyllis. "Escargot and grits heaped on the side."

"You must've switched back to the old screwball Phyllis," said Isabel. "Recheck the menu, dear. How does the corn beef reuben and a root beer sound to you instead?"

"Rings like a winner," replied Phyllis.

Today the same foursome conspired at the same window booth at Eddy's Deli for brunch. Despite the tantalizing aroma of fried chicken, all the ladies but Isabel selected coffee and blueberry muffins. Isabel preferred a carafe of hot green tea and a sticky cinnamon bun.

“Do you need any dusting performed?” Phyllis nodded down at the feather duster she’d brought in her oversized sack purse. “Pro bono, of course.”

Their favorite server Tabitha smiled. “Thanks, but no. Maybe the next time you come you can dust off Eddy’s bald spot. Until then, I do like your feather duster. Is it a new one?”

“Yes ma’am and Wilma Smith peddles them in her bodega. Just ask her for the cut-rate special from Phyllis.”

“Wilma’s bodega is on the road to Reynolds Kyle’s drag race track.”

“Right.”

After Tabitha beelined to the kitchen to fill their orders, a pale-faced Sammi Jo, gazed about the deli and ensured they dined alone.

“Quiet Anchorage doesn’t feel so friendly to me since Daddy left us. Walking along Main Street gives me the heebie jeebies as if I can detect the killer’s feral eyes fixed on my every move. I shiver from the fright, and that’s not like me.”

“Is it your intuition you’re his next victim?” The set of worry lines furrowed Isabel’s forehead.

“The thought of it turns me numb inside,” replied Sammi Jo.

Phyllis put her arm around her niece’s shoulders. “Buck up, kiddo. You’ve got three solid friends to lean on here. While I go about in my disguise, I’ll keep a sharp ear and eye out for any useful lead to slip to Isabel and Alma.”

“Thanks, Aunt Phyllis. That reminder warms my heart. It’s just that I don’t understand why anybody would have any reason to kill Daddy.”

“Just be prepared because the true motive sometimes never comes to light,” said Alma.

“Even so, we’ll keep digging as hard as we can,” said Isabel.

“Ray Burl was a difficult man to understand and know but not to love,” said Phyllis.

Putting on a brave smile, Sammi Jo patted Phyllis on the hand. “Daddy was always there to give me a pep talk when I was down in the dumps.”

“Why did he keep such long hours working at Barclay’s Turf Farm?” asked Isabel. “Was he deep in debt to the bank or to somebody else and trying to earn the money to get out from under them?”

Phyllis took a stab at answering Isabel’s question. “Ray Burl always believed in the virtue of hard work and viewed it as his true salvation. That sounds corny to hear said, but that’s what he believed in from an early age.”

“Where did his money go?” asked Isabel. “He must’ve pulled down a respectable amount with the overtime he was logging in. He sure didn’t put his cash into the small Cape Cod where he lived.”

“He traded being a wage earner for drawing a salary when he took over as the foreman,” said Sammi Jo.

“Maybe he wasn’t making that much then,” said Isabel.

“His working twice as hard would prove he was the right guy to be promoted to foreman,” said Alma.

“We can accept he was a natural workaholic who strove to accomplish his best,” said Isabel. “Sammi Jo, had he mentioned a last will to you?”

She waggled her head. “That would be the last topic our banal chats would ever cover. He never took the long view into account or was much of a forward thinker. Since Mo took off on us, he was getting by one day at a time. How about it, Aunt Phyllis? Did he let you in on his final wishes?”

“Ray Burl had no desire to admit his mortality or to consider who’d get his earthly possessions if he should die. I’m no Perry Mason or Ben Matlock, but I assume whatever he owned of value will go directly to you since you’re his closest next-of-kin.”

“I’d just as soon trade it all to bring him back if I could,” said Sammi Jo. “All the legal mumbo jumbo will have to wait because my first priority is to nail whoever did this to him.”

“Was his demeanor any different of late?” Alma tried to get a read on his recent mindframe. “Did he act more anxious or uptight? Did he seem abnormally absent-minded or distracted? Was he less forthcoming or short-tempered than usual?”

“Daddy just acted like he always did,” replied Sammi Jo. “I didn’t notice anything remarkably different or changed about him. How about you, Aunt Phyllis? Did you pick up on anything?”

“You saw and talked to him more often than I did, but nothing stands out that’s not par for the course. Maybe he looked a little tired, but that was due to his heavier work schedule.”

“You must’ve seen his turf farm crew doing their backbreaking field work,” said Sammi Jo. “They earn every nickel they make there.”

Phyllis nodded.

Isabel smiled at seeing Tabitha stride out of the kitchen hoisting a tray on one hand with their orders. “Excellent, now we can chow down. Cancel all further talk of murders and killers, please.”

“Never cheery mealtime topics,” said Sammi Jo.

Tabitha usually served the beverages from the right side while the side dishes came from the left, but while at their booth, she just set down the cups and plates while standing at the booth’s end. She was careful. Before she left, she patted Sammi Jo twice on the shoulder and smiled.

Sammi Jo nodded, appreciating the encouraging gesture.

Chapter 6

Unlike Isabel, Alma didn't need a hearing aid. She had her share of the aches and pains all mature ladies endure, but she never feared going deaf. Departing on foot from Eddy's Deli, she keyed on the dog-day cicadas chirring from the lofty branches of every other oak and maple tree in the yards and those along Main Street.

Alma maintained her pace in the single file walking between Isabel and Phyllis on the sidewalk. Sammi Jo had left them and returned to her apartment one floor above the drugstore. She'd powder her nose and catch up to them later. Alma was grateful she'd listened to the weather lady's forecast and worn a short-sleeved blouse. The sunny morning was growing hot as sitting under a beauty salon's hair dryer.

"Do you like hearing them go on, too?" asked Phyllis.

"Are you back to being the ditzy Phyllis?" asked Alma. "I'm not certain which one I'm speaking to now."

Phyllis laughed. "I'll never again deceive you and Isabel in our private moments. Otherwise it'll be game on with me as the ditzy Phyllis."

"How did you know I was just thinking about the cicadas raising such a fuss?"

"The noisy cicadas are this morning's biggest excitement. How could you be thinking of anything but them?"

Alma couldn't dispute Phyllis' assertion.

The wooden bench reserved in front of the Lago Azul Florist Shop had no takers, but three would be schlepping along any minute now. Meantime Phyllis shared a joke she'd made up on the fly with Isabel and Alma.

"Knock, knock, Alma."

She sighed but was a good sport about it. "Who's there?"

"Sherlock."

"Sherlock who?"

"Sher-lock to crack this murder case."

Smiling while Phyllis snickered, Isabel funneled them into the florist shop. The air conditioning adjusted to an igloo setting offered the ladies a respite from the morning swelter. Isabel wished she had brought her sweater while Phyllis removed her floppy straw hat.

"It's colder than a morgue's cooler in here," she said.

Alma was leery to ask Phyllis, always full of surprises, if she'd had any personal brushes with morgue coolers. Instead Alma admired the red and yellow summer poinsettias in the terracotta pots arrayed along the counter. The showy flowers gleamed with the vivid colors that could steal away an admirer's breath at first sight.

"Good morning, ladies." The speaker behind the counter was as square as she was tall, and her sorbet-colored sundress looked elegant as it did flattering. She finished smoothing out the wrinkles in it.

"Hot one again today," said Isabel.

"It's hotter than jalapeño peppers at a weenie roast," said Corina. "And that's as hot as it ever gets in these parts. Phyllis, we're terribly sorry for your loss. Nobody worked harder or longer than Ray Burl did. He was an inspiration to us all."

"Thank you for your kindness." Phyllis suspected Corina was a little too eager to find out if his funeral held within a few days would bring a spike in her flower retail business. "I'm sure he'll be missed by many folks, you included."

"No question about it," said Corina, nodding. "How might I help you good ladies?"

"We're back at doing our private eye thingy," said Alma. "Sheriff Fox doesn't give it his seal of approval, but this is still a free nation the last time I read the one-dollar bill in my wallet."

"I saw ace reporter Cathy Johnson's newspaper article about you," said Corina. "How exhilarating it must be."

"Murder comes nothing close to be exhilarating," said Alma. "You draw a fair amount of traffic in your flower shop, and we know how the townies love to yammer about something as juicy as a murder. Have you heard anything interesting?"

One hand cupped under her elbow, and the other hand tapping a finger on her lip, Corina struck a pose of contemplation. "Just the

usual speculations but nothing in particular." She looked at them. "Sorry I couldn't be of more help."

Phyllis dropped out of her daffy guise. "Ray Burl had been a single man from way back. Did he ever hit on you or your daughters?"

Corina fluttered her curly eyelashes. "If only I could've been so lucky. As for my daughters, no, he was too long in the tooth for them to be interested even if he had made any overtures to them."

Wanna bet a dozen of your long-stemmed American Beauties on that? thought Alma, irritated by Corina's flippancy. The glass front refrigeration locker where Corina kept her flower arrangements to preserve their freshness switched on, purring with a purposeful hum.

"Did Ray Burl ever come into your shop?" asked Phyllis.

Corina shrugged. "Men seldom mosey by unless they want flowers for an anniversary, birthday, or to smooth over a rough patch with their significant other."

"You already told us you kept an eye on him," said Phyllis. "Where did you see him?"

"Look, it's not like I kept a detailed journal or diary on the man's whereabouts." Corina sounded increasingly aggravated.

The more diplomatic Isabel interceded. "We're not trying to tweak you, but it's crunch time, and we have to work fast." She lifted a hand to the glass panes at the shop's display window. "The hardware store sits opposite of you. Did you happen to observe Ray Burl entering or leaving it? Perhaps he'd bought an item and carried it. That's the sort of details we're after here."

Corina was mollified to a degree. She mashed her curly eyelids shut and quirked her lips for the drama in it. Alma had been ready to leave three minutes ago.

Even with her bare arms covered with goose bumps, Isabel appeared less edgy. She gaped at Corina, hoping to obtain their first solid lead.

Corina spoke in a hesitant voice. "Where did Ray Burl work?"

"He's an old timer at Barclay's Turf Farm," replied Alma, snappish.

Isabel scrunched up her eyebrows, a mild rebuke she sent Alma to lay off a little.

“Why is your question pertinent?” asked Isabel.

Corina lifted up her curly eyelashes. Her electric blue eyes crackled with new excitement. “Because it has jostled my old memories of Ray Burl.”

“Did he buy a lawn or garden tool at the hardware store?” asked Isabel.

Alma teetered on the verge of making an impatient *tsk-tsk* noise, but she knew Isabel usually had a good reason behind pursuing her inquiries. Waiting might yield something.

“Going back to last winter is when I’m thinking of,” said Corina. “I remember certain as the nose is on my face seeing Ray Burl leave the hardware store brandishing a firearm.”

Alma flitted her eyes to Corina. *This just might be interesting to hear*, she thought.

“Was it a pistol?” asked Isabel.

“You could write what I know about guns on a bubblegum wrapper, but...” Corina stretched her hands as far as they’d spread. “...his firearm was a great deal longer than a pistol is.”

“Was it either a rifle or shotgun?” asked Isabel.

“Does the shotgun use the pipe with the bigger hole inside it?”

Isabel nodded that was correct.

“Then I guess it had to be a shotgun he took out,” said Corina.

Phyllis tilted her eyebrows, but she was astute enough not to tip off her surprise to Corina. Ray Burl had never been a violent man nor cared one whit for hunting game like the guys Phyllis had known liked to do. He didn’t let his scraggly beard grow until he’d bagged his first buck of hunting season. He didn’t take hours of target practice sighting in his high power rifle’s scope and sharpening his aim. He didn’t fawn over or caress his prized firearms displayed on a walnut rack or stacked upright inside a mahogany cabinet. Killing wasn’t part of his psychological makeup.

Ray Burl had just the one fixation. He was an industrious worker. He didn’t slack off for either Christmas Day or Thanksgiving Day, but instead he stayed busy sawing, screwing, and gluing, say, on an

in-progress china cabinet. The townies' running joke went he craved the nonstop labor in order to keep him from going crazy as a betsy bug. Perhaps there was a kernel of truth to the joke.

"If we're finished, I need to get back to my flowers," said Corina. "Phyllis, I'll be glad to discuss any needs you may have for Ray Burl's funeral if you brought along cash or credit cards."

Phyllis shifted to the counter. "You gals can take off if you like. I'm getting with Corina about ordering the flowers."

"Do know which ones you want to pick?" asked Isabel.

"Ray Burl was partial to irises, snapdragons, and lilies-of-the-valley," replied Phyllis. "We attended Fats Browning's daddy's funeral, and Ray Burl mentioned them to me."

"Those flowers will look extra nice," said Isabel.

"They're my favorites, too," said Alma.

Chapter 7

Quiet Anchorage's pharmacist, Vernon Spitzer, had been Sammi Jo's previous landlord, but he'd taken a long cruise and sold the pharmacy to Eustis Blake. Whereas Vernon was an obstreperous man who had little use for indulging in such niceties as customer relations, Eustis was affable as your closest cousin. If you collected every clichéd trait of the nerdy pharmacist down to the marshmallow white smock, wing tip Florsheims, and balding egghead, you'd have an on-target description of him.

He kept the pea green tiled floors well mopped. He routinely fussed over straightening up the women's accessories—bright chic scarves made in the U.S.A., Godiva Chocolate Truffles, and wind up alarm clocks—displayed on the shelves sure to snag their eye. Isabel and Alma had been after him to sell Scrabble along with Bingo game boxes. He'd acquiesced and now did so.

The four ceiling fans with their polished tung wood blades swirled nonstop and Sammi Jo found them charming as those used to cool Rick's Café with Sam tickling the ivories. Eustis would open the drugstore five minutes early, and he didn't mind staying open late within reason if he knew a customer wanted to pick up a prescription. From the git-go, Sammi Jo had liked him as a vast upgrade over Vernon.

She'd held her breath, fearing Eustis would jack up her apartment's rent, but he almost acted apathetic as to whether or not he received it from her. The town grapevine buzzed he was from La Jolla or Malibu Beach, and she was at a loss to fathom why he'd trade California's sunny, temperate climate for here. Quiet Anchorage sat in the Piedmont of the Blue Ridge Mountains where the winters by mid-January could turn almost as brutal as a Klondike winter. Perhaps he took a new pleasure in experiencing the changes to the four distinct seasons. At any rate, the townies welcomed him with open arms.

Neatening the racked Japanese manga comic books, striking for their saucer-eyed characters, he stopped and returned Sammi Jo's wave. He'd already expressed his condolences to her.

She headed to the rear where the interior staircase ascended to the six apartments, hers the last one on the right. Her neighbors were single moms with irregular work schedules and seldom at home. She gave Eustis one of her sweet smiles as she passed him.

"Hey there, sir," she said. "What do you know good?"

"It's Saturday, my busiest time of the week," replied Eustis. "Is that good enough to make your list?"

"Taking care of business always tops my list," she said.

"Speaking of which, Reynolds Kyle poked by earlier. You weren't in, so he told me to let you know he'd be returning later this morning."

Reynolds Kyle was Sammi Jo's latest boyfriend. He made a comfortable living by owning the popular drag race track operating a couple miles away in the old Tandy peach orchards. Someday the relentless suburban sprawl would most likely wipe the drag race track off the map.

"Thanks for the warning," she said. "I have a good idea of what he wants from me."

Under his groomed appearance, Eustis had an earthy side since he was also a red-blooded male with a pulse. "I'm not touching that one, Sammi Jo Garner. Whatever happens upstairs behind closed doors stays upstairs behind closed doors."

Halting on a dime, Sammi Jo widened her eyes, pretending to be taken aback. She hooked her thumbs in the small pockets to her shorts. "I was referring to Reynolds' paying me back the twenty dollars he borrowed from me last Wednesday. What do you mean?"

Blushing to show beet red clear up to his ear tips, Eustis fell for her bit of teasing. "Nothing, Sammi Jo. I was just passing along Reynolds' message is all."

"Kidding," said Sammi Jo, cracking an insouciant grin. "Lighten up a little, dude."

"Okay, you got me good there," said Eustis with relief.

“If Reynolds pops up again, just point him upstairs,” she said. “Meantime I’ll be sorting my dirty laundry.”

“Uh-huh.” This time Eustis quit while he was still ahead.

“Ray Burl was a good man, Sammi Jo. Everybody respected him. And that’s saying something about his tons of character, too. He and I didn’t always see eye-to-eye on things, but I always held a high regard for him.”

Reynolds fidgeted, sitting in the straight-back chair as she pawed through her mountain of laundry, separating the reds, whites, and blues into their respective piles. She’d let her laundry slide for too long and needed to get back on a regular schedule, but she’d rather watch the moss grow on a rock or listen to a morning traffic report than do her wash. Lugging her loads to Clean Vito’s on the far end of Main Street was just the first hurdle.

“Do you have to be doing that right now?” asked Reynolds. “We’re trying to hold a conversation here.”

“Unless you have the extra energy to get it done, yeah, I do,” she replied.

She’d removed the laundry from inside the rattan hamper, her most recent acquisition from the new big box store built on the old Thorne farm. Unlike Alma, whose shadow would “absolutely, positively” never darken its doorway, Sammi Jo often did her shopping there.

She knew why Reynolds was squirming like a worm: to light up a cigarette. She’d banned their use in her apartment. The smoke set off her smoke detectors to wail away like a scalded cat, and she didn’t feel like going to the trouble to pop out their 9-volt batteries so he could satisfy his nicotine fit. His cigarettes were becoming a big turnoff in their relationship anyway. She might have to lower the boom on him soon. Like today.

“God only knows Daddy could be a stubborn cuss to get along with at times,” she said. “He never mastered the smooth people skills like a preacher or undertaker uses. Handling sod for a living didn’t force him to upgrade them.”

Reynolds flared his onyx black eyes at her. The soul patch was a recent touch of masculine vanity he'd added, and she hadn't made up her mind yet if she liked it. He was a lean six-footer who as a young buck had raced stock cars until an epiphany struck him. He realized how owning the drag race track eliminated his finding the grease forever caked under his fingernails. He liked to brag to anybody who'd listen he was an up and coming entrepreneur in the blockbuster NASCAR industry.

They'd connected during Jake's homicide case when Sammi Jo, Alma, and Isabel had driven out to his drag race track for Sammi Jo to question him. They'd hit it off, and one movie date (he'd paid her the poetic if not overblown compliment she had the "statuesque beauty of a young J Lo") led to another even hotter rendezvous. By now, they felt as if they had a good thing going, and both had their reasons to keep it that way.

"Though a gent of few words, Ray Burl was the crew foreman," said Reynolds. "That is to say he knew how to bark out his orders to keep them hustling to complete a day's work."

Sammi Jo decided a break was in order, and she had a seat in the other straight-back chair next to Reynolds. She gave the three piles of laundry a ruthless glance. She crossed her legs, drew in a breath, and let it out. "Daddy never yelled at his men that I ever heard about. He always kept his head down and worked like there was no tomorrow. He led by his follow-me example."

"Is that what he told you?" asked Reynolds.

"Not in so many words but I believe I know my father a little better than you do, Reynolds Kyle. He was an honest, clean-living Christian man. So, stick that in your pipe and smoke it."

Reynolds used his lopsided smile, the one that melted her heart, to defuse her frosty tone. "Don't tee off on me, since I'm on your side."

"Then don't be sitting in my apartment dissing my late father, especially when he's not here to defend himself."

"My saying he was a no-nonsense boss isn't meant as taking a swipe at him, but it's a fair take on how he ran the show at the turf farm."

“Did you ever get into a quarrel with him?” she asked. “You mentioned you didn’t always see ‘eye-to-eye on things.’”

“We never got into a spat. That was my general comment on how our thinking sometimes differed. I’ll give you a for instance. I know through a third party he called drag racing a redneck sport. But since it’s my livelihood, I took umbrage over his wisecrack.”

“But you never heard that redneck statement come straight from his lips, did you? You depended on your third party’s integrity to get his quote correct. Was she as pretty as I am?”

“How can you be so all-fired sure the third party was a she?”

“I seriously doubt if you ever carry on a meaningful conversation with anybody but whoever is your current girlfriend.”

Reynolds flopped back in the chair, his flattened hands put up at her. “Whoa right there. I don’t like where this conversation is headed. Can we drop it?”

“Not quite yet. I asked Isabel and Alma to look into Daddy’s murder, and they were kind enough to agree to do it. I trust them, and they’ve got a bloodhound nose for sniffing out the truth. They’re interested in knowing if Daddy had any rows within the past month. You know, who didn’t like him, and who his enemies and detractors were.”

Reynolds folded his arms high up on his chest. “I did not kill your father, Sammi Jo. Let’s get that much straight right this second.”

Reynolds’ denial was vehement enough to ring with veracity. She didn’t want him angry enough to clam up and storm off in a huff, so she did some smoothing of his ruffled male feathers. “I’m not making the accusation you are his killer. Let’s get *that* much straight right this second. What I am asking you is to rummage around in your memory bank and see if you can dredge up whether Daddy got on the bad side of anybody, or if anybody bore him any ill will.”

“Nothing immediately springs to mind. Something weird is going on here. Why are you three gals up for this and doing Sheriff Fox’s job for him? You have tons of grief to cope with, and you

shouldn't be saddled with the responsibility to round up Ray Burl's murderer."

"Because, to put it bluntly, Roscoe Fox couldn't find his ass with both hands tucked inside his back pockets. He's of little use to me, and you can bet your checkered flag I'm going to put Daddy's killer behind prison bars if it's the last thing I do."

Seeing the fury crackling in her eyes shot a pang of fear through Reynolds. She meant business, and he pitied whoever pulled the gun's trigger on her father. If she let her impulses get the better of her, she'd do something rash, and there'd be a second corpse ending up inside a drawer at the morgue's cooler.

How did he go about calming down Sammi Jo? Well, first off he'd better go fire up and smoke that all-important cigarette, or else he'd go barking mad by putting it off for a heartbeat longer. Second, he felt helpless over finding the eloquent words in offering his support to her. Third, smoking that cigarette was nearly a matter of life and death. So, he just acted like himself, tattoos, warts, and all.

"Do me a big favor and let Isabel and Alma be the ones who lead on this deal. They're not emotionally charged up by Ray Burl's murder like you obviously are. You should first trust their coolheaded judgment over your own."

"I already have decided to do that, so it's not an issue. I love those sweet, old ladies as if they're my own grannies. So, don't you go talking trash about them, too."

"I won't, because their being with you makes me feel better. Do you believe they can they get to the bottom of this nasty business?"

"Is a bullfrog's ass watertight?"

"I reckon it is enough." He licked his lips, started then stopped cracking his knuckles, and wiped off his perspiring forehead with his wrist. "Is it hot enough to singe off your eyebrows in here, or is it just me?"

"I keep it a comfy seventy-two degrees Fahrenheit," she said. "Please head on outside and poison your lungs before you blow a main gasket on me. Just use the rear alley. Eustis doesn't like for the cigarette smokers to hang out in front of the drugstore. He fusses it's bad for business."

A thrilled Reynolds poised to jump up from the chair, and this time she put up her flat hand, detaining him.

“But here’s what it is, darling,” she said, recalling how Isabel’s young son Cecil had died of cancer from his cigarette smoking habit. “Before we ever cha-cha back yonder again” – her nod went toward the boudoir doorway showing her ecru chenille bedspread – “you’ll have to quit the cigarettes. I kid you not.”

He felt his jaws go slack, and his unhinged mouth suck in for air. “Mercy.” She was 100% for real. He knew she hadn’t cared for his tobacco habit since she was a reformed smoker. They were always the most entrenched of the anti-smoking crusaders.

“Does that mean you’re cutting me off like that?” he asked, chopping his vertical hand through the air. “Beginning this moment on Saturday morning?”

“Did the tin man need a brain?”

Reynolds paused, sorting through the *Oz* cast of characters. “I thought he needed a heart, and the scarecrow is the straw-stuffed dude who was hard up for getting the brain.”

“Whatever. You get my larger point being made.”

Reynolds groaned like the mountain wind sluicing through the pine tops. “You’re a hard woman, Sammi Jo Garner. Hard as nails, you are to me.”

Blank-faced, she didn’t smirk or sneer in triumph as he expected to see her do. He decided to dig in a bit and try to gain a little wiggle room with her.

“I tell you what let’s do. We’ll compromise and make it more reasonable. I’ll cut back and taper off on the number of cigarettes I smoke over the next two, no let’s make that three, weeks. How does that proposal sound to you?”

“It sounds like a clunker. It’s a no-go on the cigarettes, Reynolds, or it’s a no-go on the cha-cha. Straightforward as that. Which is it to be? I’m waiting to hear your final decision.”

He spotted a sliver of daylight, figuring he could sneak in a cigarette when they weren’t together, and she’d never be any the wiser for it. He’d promise her the moon if it let him take a cigarette puff on his next drawn breath. Nobody at the drag race track would

rat out Reynolds for smoking, or else they'd be finding themselves a different venue to indulge their need for speed. His pulling a fast one on her was as easy as taking a Sunday drive through the Piedmont. He'd guffaw like Joe Cool with his pals over his outfoxing her between taking all the cigarette puffs he felt like. He was so proud of his cunning scheme until she spoke again and torpedoed it.

"Don't go calculating you can be sneaking cigarettes behind my back," she said. "My hypersensitive nose can pick up the fresh tobacco scent on you from a mile away."

He groaned louder. "Sammi Jo, you're putting me in a terrible bind. Even a condemned man facing the firing squad is allowed to smoke a final cigarette. Surely you'd let me do that much."

"Out of the question."

"You mentioned a pipe. I'll just make the switch from cigarettes to using a pipe to smoke. I'll look so professorial and distinguished."

"I was using a metaphor, Professor. Do I have to explain what it is to you?"

"No, I'm aware of what metaphors are." He commenced to rocking back and forth in the straight-back chair. "You should give me a little advice. How did you manage to quit? There must be a secret way you can give me to break the smoking habit."

"I've got two words for you, Reynolds: *cold turkey*."

He groaned again, only it came out as longer and louder before he got up and skulked out of her apartment.

Chapter 8

Isabel had stopped short by the door exiting the florist shop to the bright sidewalk on Main Street.

“Oh, for sweet gracious sake, I don’t believe this. It’s much too early to deal with the likes of them, Alma. I can’t do it, and I won’t do it.” Isabel pointed out the glass pane. “Look at who’s deigned to drag themselves out of bed and occupy their bench.”

Alma didn’t bother to confirm who Isabel was referring to since they both knew Ossie Conger, Willie Moccasin, and Blue Trent were town institutions. The trio of senior gentlemen, who verged closer to eight decades than the youthful seven the sisters insisted they were, sat tic-tac-toe three in a row on the same bench every single day of their lives. It was angled just so on the sidewalk to capture the sun’s rays for the day’s longest period. The shop owner Corina was the grand niece of one codger, but Isabel couldn’t recall which one it was. Willie, perhaps.

Taped to inside the glass pane above the bench was a sign written in bold black letters reading, **NO LOITERING ALLOWED! THAT MEANS YOU, TOO!** The trio of gentlemen had grown that territorial over their bench. To solidify their claims, Willie, the whittler of the Three Musketeers, had carved their first and last initials—*OC*, *WM*, and *BT*—into the wooden bench’s seat. They didn’t miss a single detail going on from their vantage point between their soaking up the August sunrays, fitting in their catnaps, and telling the outrageous lies on each other. Sometimes they played dominoes for sticks of chewing gum.

Isabel had turned around, craning her head and searching for either a side or rear exit. She was determined to avoid meeting the gentlemen who loved nothing better than to buzz the sisters’ ears off. They could go on blathering about a lot of claptrap for longer than Isabel and Alma could play a Scrabble marathon. But the sisters had a murder case on their hands to tie up, and little time for entertaining the champion baloney artists.

“Our at least not saying hello would be rude,” said Alma. “How could you be such a grinch and do that to them?”

“I’m not a grinch, so take a rain check, and we’ll do it on a different morning,” said Isabel. “We’ve got a big job to complete, a concept that’s alien to their indolent natures.”

“Will you stop it? You don’t mind seeing them for striking up a game of Scrabble, but now you’re too busy to say hello. Besides, I suspect Ossie is growing sweet on you.”

“Horseradish, too. He’s cast out his nets to snag a wife cum maid to wash his clothes, fix him large Sunday breakfasts, and vacuum his apartment. But this old maid has retired after a lifetime spent doing all that for one man, her beloved Max.”

Ignoring her rant, Alma had opened the shop door, creating a whooshing noise that attracted the Three Musketeers’ attention. They wore matching sky blue aloha shirts. Ossie was the first gentleman to smile and wave at Isabel.

She sighed in mild annoyance and trailed Alma into the insufferable heat.

The gentlemen had removed their sunshades. Willie, the most vociferous one, was responding to Alma’s salutation.

“Why if life got any more peachy keen for us, Alma, I declare we’d have to hire somebody to help us enjoy it.”

Alma nodded with an encouraging smile at Isabel not to act so standoffish.

She counted the umpteenth time she’d heard Willie use the pet saying before she tossed out one of her own.

“Hot enough for you, gentlemen?”

Ossie jumped on that one like a ravenous goose on a June bug. “Indeed it is, Isabel.” One hand in his pocket jingling his keys and coins, he patted the empty space on the bench seat between him and Blue. “Why don’t you take a load off and relax with us? Lookie here, I saved you a spot. Willie and his carving knife can add your initials, *IT*, if you like.”

Isabel lost her forced smile. Loafing and joking around under the sun with three old fossils was the last thing she wished to do. She sent Alma a sharp glance to throw her a lifeline.

Now.

"We'd love nothing better, Ossie," said Alma. "But right at the moment finds us up to our necks in solving Ray Burl's murder case."

Murmurs of disbelief and shock rippled along the bench.

"Godawful is what befell Ray Burl."

"One murder—Jake's—was horrid enough, but now the two murders are unbearable."

"Justice will never be served for Ray Burl."

"Not with Sheriff Roscoe Fox pitted against the killer, it won't be, no sirree."

"Poor Sammi Jo."

"She must be coming unraveled at the seams over this."

"She's got to be."

Alma horned in before the next gentleman could pipe up in their Greek chorus. "That's our opinion, as well. She has requested us to help Sheriff Fox."

Hand out of his pocket and shuffling his shoes, Ossie snorted. "Good luck to you there."

"If Roscoe Fox had half a brain, he'd be dangerous," said Blue.

"Yeah, but when compared to his deputy sheriffs, he's an Einstein," said Willie.

Alma caught herself nodding at the Three Musketeers' skewering Sheriff Fox after Isabel frowned at her.

"He once tried to arrest a blue tick hound for jaywalking, or was it for spitting on the sidewalk?" said Ossie.

"Unbelievable," said Blue.

"Ditto," said Willie.

"Of course, he did once lend me a sawbuck which I've never repaid him for," said Ossie.

"He also gave me a hand to find my lost raccoon Bosco inside my basement," said Blue.

"There was the time he gave me a lift to the doctors while I was hitchhiking to Warrenton," said Willie. "All we talked about was sports."

"I guess he's not such a bad bloke, after all," said Ossie.

Impatient Isabel was left tapping her toe. "What do you know about Ray Burl?" she asked.

"He was salt of the earth folk."

"The A-1 best there ever was."

"The Almighty never created a more honest fellow."

Alma stepped in again. "Isabel's interest centers on Ray Burl's homicide. Have you heard anything of note floating around our whistle stop of a town?"

"In other words any gossip," said Isabel.

"Information," said Willie, indignant. "We don't have anything to do with receiving or promulgating common gossip. It's a sin before the eyes of our Good Lord."

Isabel bit down to keep her lips buttoned and not blurt out her thoughts about the hypocrite Willie.

Blue removed the broken matchstick from between his lips. He studied the matchstick's chewed end for a moment. "I'll tell you what I heard, but I can't reveal where it came from to you."

"Sock it to us, Blue," said Alma. "We'd like to hear it."

He swiveled his head from left to right like a creaky weather vane, ensuring no pesky eavesdroppers lurked near them. "My confidential snitch informs me Ray Burl was a dump job at the turf farm, and he got killed someplace else."

"It's got to be a two-thugs job then," said Willie. "One thug couldn't lift a corpse that's got to be as heavy as one of those rusty barge anchors set out in front of the fire station."

Ossie interjected. "Then a hit man and his assistant did the bloody deed."

"Ossie, you're about as sharp as a potato," said Willie. "A hit man doesn't get paid enough money to hire a Sancho Panza sidekick."

"I bet my flat screen TV and dog tags a hit man out there uses an assistant," said Ossie, defensive.

Sucking between his teeth, Willie scoffed.

Isabel, discombobulated prior to this discussion, found her thoughts tied up in messier knots. "Let's table the hit man angle for

the time being," she said. "We can always return to it if we run out of other ideas."

"Just saying it pays to think outside the box," said Ossie. "If a professional hit was ordered on Ray Burl, the assassin is long gone from our Dogpatch, so we have nothing to fear."

"Corina told us she saw Ray Burl carrying a shotgun he'd bought from the hardware store," said Alma. "Evidently he wasn't a big hunter. The obvious question is why did he buy the shotgun?"

"That event went right by us," said Willie. "I've also never heard of Ray Burl tagging along with the hunting crowd."

"He always worked up a storm at the turf farm," said Ossie. "The only game he may've bagged was the night crawlers he found wiggling under the sod."

Blue snickered behind his gnarled, liver-spotted hand while Isabel failed to see much hilarity in Ossie's latest ridiculous speculation. Kicking around Ray Burl's murder amounted to the monumental waste of time as she'd predicted it would be. She cleared her throat extra loud while checking her wristwatch, and Alma knew their meeting was finished.

She said their good mornings and thanks to the Three Musketeers. She refused to acknowledge Isabel's smug I-told-you-so expression as they strolled away over the sidewalk, leaving the bench and its three occupants whispering all at the same time. The sun was shining, they had a new topic to chew on, and life was never any more peachy keen, as Willie liked to put it.

Chapter 9

Isabel missed the simple pleasures of using her own porch, front or back, since their brick rambler on Church Street lacked for one. Whenever she and Alma rode down the block, she had porch envy while observing the older homes offering their lucky dwellers the amenity. Their sturdy clapboard of a farmhouse on the outskirts of Quiet Anchorage had been blessed with a wraparound porch. Their mother, Gwendolyn, had referred to it as the “verandah,” giving it an eloquent sound.

You could loll on the verandah with plenty of room to spare and sip your mint juleps, or in their case, Mason jar glasses of iced tea. All the girls learned Southern ladies sipped their iced tea while the boys guzzled their beer. The heartthrobs and heartbreaks of boys had lurked further on the horizon for the Trumbo sisters.

Isabel’s most memorable boyfriend was The Indigo Kid, so called because he played a blue guitar. His dreams of stardom far outstripped his musical talents, what she had told him during their stormy breakup. Much later, he made his fortune by playing the stock market. So it went.

The ideal hours to savor their porch sitting fell during twilight when darkness took its sweet, old time to drape its deep purple shawl over the farm. Mark Twain, relaxing dressed in his signature white linen suit while puffing on a stogie, was an avid porch sitter. If it was good enough for the creator of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, then it had to be good enough for everybody else in America.

Listening to their herd of dairy cows munching on the succulent pasture grass, she’d sway to and fro in the bentwood willow rocker. The sisters sat and gabbed, their deft fingers shelling the lima beans and black-eyed peas they’d picked from the vegetable garden in the early morning cool. They collected the shelled lima beans and black-eyed peas in galvanized tin colanders for later washing, cooking, and canning. The filled Mason jars of lima beans and black-eyed

peas stayed on shelves in the root cellar throughout the winter months.

Television was still the futuristic stuff of the Dick Tracy comic strips, and air conditioning was a ways off for the Trumbos. Electricity had arrived via the REA's copper wires strung from the poles, and the Trumbos had interior lights. They banned the electric lights' harsh glare from emblazing the porch and ruining its homespun tableau. Sometime right along there, Isabel had aided Watson and Holmes in tracking down the Baskervilles' devil hound terrifying the Scottish moors. From then on, she was hooked for life as a reader. Later, Dame Agatha taught Isabel the ladies could also be detectives, something she passed on to Alma.

There was more awesome porcheside diversions for the sisters. They often played popular card games like Hearts and Old Maid or board games like Monopoly and Mahjong. Scrabble came later after it'd been trademarked in 1948 and licensed to the Selchow & Righter Company. Isabel knew the manufacturer's information printed inside the box lid since they still played using the same old game board.

Over the night insects' loopy jazz, Isabel could discern the nearby Coronet River gurgling over its sandbars and rocks with its bright musical notes. The distinct whistle to the steam engine express wafted up to her from further afield. Her exhilarated heart thumped. She couldn't recall its exact arrival time at the Quiet Anchorage depot, but you could set your watch by it.

Lightning bugs glinted like a host of flickering candles raised at a Christmas church service. She could never bring herself to capture the lightening bugs and cruelly trap them inside a Mason jar. The times she relished the best were to sit rocking and whistling back to the skittish whippoorwills trilling from beneath the close-by pine barrens and ironwood thickets.

On the other livelier nights she enjoyed the alto saxophone riffs blown by Charlie Parker. They came from his bebop 78s the sisters played on an old crank Victor-Victrola phonograph with its steel needle. She lounged in the bentwood rocker, tapping her toe along with Bird's sax she'd heard blown dozens of times.

He never missed a bar he made up as he improvised his solo breaks. Louise once said the upbeat hens laid more eggs while listening to Charlie. She wasn't kidding. Years later, Isabel's husband Max, also a fan, said he'd once seen Bird play live along with the trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and pianist Bud Powell up in The Big Apple.

After the show, the enthralled Max had even met and shaken hands with Charlie Parker—"his palm was soft as a baby's butt," Max had said—in the jazz players' green room, which was really painted crimson red. Hearing that coup floored the saucer-eyed Isabel, but she'd already set her mind to wed Max at her first glance taken of him. The boy didn't stand a chance.

Charlie Parker's 78s were scarce as hens' teeth now, said the collectors of old records. Isabel had no clue of what became of their Charlie Parker 78s. The rural families often used old cisterns, ravines, and marshes for their rubbish dumping grounds. Isabel had forgotten where their dumps were made, if she ever knew the locations. Subdivisions now rested on top of them. She hoped their Charlie Parker 78s met a kinder fate than getting trashed as refuse.

Was it any big mystery after Isabel's retirement and Max's death why she elected to sell her residence, pull up stakes, and return to her native small town? As she viewed it, the good things in life ran in cycles. It wasn't until you closed the loop that you could recognize it. Her return to Quiet Anchorage had accomplished that.

Also retired, Alma had seen the advantages to hitch on with Isabel. Now if they could only persuade Louise to move back to Quiet Anchorage, they'd be together as a family from their native small town. On the other hand, their niece Megan would probably never return to Quiet Anchorage after being run through the wringer over Jake's murder.

The horror of a second murder, this time Sammi Jo's dad Ray Bur, didn't shake Isabel's resolve to stay put. Tenacious as a tick in her private eye role, she'd find a way to solve it.

Chapter 10

Double-timing it across Main Street, Sammi Jo overtook Isabel and Alma after she saw them filing into Matthiessen's Hardware Store. Blaine, the proprietor, was nowhere in sight when Sammi Jo hailed the murmuring sisters who'd stopped at the display shelf of emergency battery-operated LED lanterns. She told them Phyllis had left the flower shop to do some dusting on her way home.

Isabel and Alma also smiled.

Alma picked up one lantern and inspected it. Every bad thunderstorm assailing Quiet Anchorage knocked out their electric power, and she was fed up with relying on flashlights and candles.

Isabel flipped up the price tag attached by a string to the lantern's handle. The wrinkles appeared in her forehead as she experienced the sticker shock.

Votive candles and D cell batteries for the flashlights fell more within their fixed incomes budget. Alma pointed out how the LED lantern's illumination was more brilliant, and if they bought a pair of them, Isabel would have one handy to use whenever Petey Samson scratched at the front door at night. Alma asked for Sammi Jo's opinion.

"If you expect Blaine to be willing to take our questions, he'll want you to buy something expensive," she replied. "Like the two lanterns."

"Did you know Ray Burl bought a shotgun here last winter?" asked Alma. "Corina from across the street said she saw him exiting from here with one."

Sammi Jo was left dumbfounded. "I had no idea. He never mentioned it to me if he did. I've got to wonder about that because he'd no liking to hunt or shoot."

"Maybe it was for his personal protection if he felt threatened or vulnerable," said Alma.

"Like I said before, as far as I know, he didn't have any enemies," said Sammi Jo. "Wouldn't a handgun be a better self-defense

weapon?"

"He could use a sharp hacksaw and crop off the shotgun's steel barrel," said Isabel. "The unsavory elements are apt to do that in the hardboiled mysteries we like to read on occasion."

Alma nodded once. "The sawed off shotgun also instills boatloads of fear in any character staring straight down into one's bore dark as the black hole of Calcutta."

"I can imagine how it does," said Sammi Jo, never a fan of firearms. "Pick up three lanterns, one also for me. I'm down to using a penlight's wimpy beam to fumble my way around my dark apartment after the current flickers off."

"Three brand new lanterns are coming right up," said Alma.

She removed the lanterns off the display shelf, and with Sammi Jo's assistance, carried them to the back of the store to set on the waist-high counter.

The cash register occupied the corner, but there was no sign of Blaine. The odors they smelled were a hardware store's smorgasbord of paint thinner, plant fertilizer, and motor oil.

Sammi Jo jabbed her fingertip on an identified black button that produced a rusty buzz in the backroom.

They waited.

Nothing.

Sammi Jo glanced at Isabel.

"Just lean on the button, dear, until it wakes up Blaine," she said. "He installed it because he's prone to take catnaps during the slow times."

"Owning the store has its privileges," said Sammi Jo.

"For Blaine, he comes by it honestly," said Alma. "His grandfather and father took the same lackadaisical bent."

"He better dial it up a notch, or Home Depot will run him out of business," said Sammi Jo. "It happens all the time."

"Evidently he doesn't keep abreast of the business trends," said Isabel. "Shush. I can hear him prowling around."

Sammi Jo let up her finger pressure engaging the button, and the obnoxious buzzer fell quiet. She gave Isabel a thumbs up as Blaine, half-dazed and tousled, entered from a doorway at the far end

behind the counter. He'd stacked on ten pounds to his short frame since the last time Sammi Jo had seen him. He lumbered sloth-like down the counter until he faced them with a solicitous smile.

"I've been going over my inventory list," he lied. "But I can always use a break from doing my paperwork. May I be of assistance to you, ladies?"

The nearest lady to the counter, Sammi Jo handled the transactions for the lanterns and information gathering.

"Ring us up these three items," said Sammi Jo, nudging the lanterns at Blaine. "Before you ask, yes, we'd like them bagged. Paper, not plastic, too."

Elated to be tossing some money in his till, Blaine punched up the purchases on the cash register despite the bar codes included on their price stickers. "Such a calamity about your dad, Sammi Jo. He will be truly missed I can tell you without reservation."

"Yeah, I know the turf farm keeps a big account with your store," said Sammi Jo. "But thanks for your condolences just the same."

"He bought more stuff here than just for the turf farm," said Blaine. "Matter of fact, he paid for a Mossberg pump 12-gauge shotgun earlier this year."

Sammi Jo capitalized on Blaine's broaching the very topic she wanted to discuss with him. "Where are your firearms for sale?"

"I keep them locked up over in the new annex." Blaine hiked his thumb up over his shoulder.

"A 12-gauge packs a lot of firepower," said Sammi Jo. "Did he tell you why he needed to buy so much?"

Blaine had a noncommittal smile. "We talked, but I don't remember that coming up. Guys hunt big game like turkeys, deer, and bears."

"Did he also buy a hunting license?" Sammi Jo paid Blaine the amount the cash register had rung up.

"Well, let me see about that now..." Pursing his lips, Blaine froze while he was counting out Sammi Jo's correct change. "...uh, I guess I'm drawing a blank on that."

"No doubt you are," said Sammi Jo. "Daddy had no use for killing living things, even for the so-called sport of it."

“Hey, don’t go knocking legal hunting,” said Blaine. “Hunters — gals and guys, alike — are among my finest customers.”

“So they are,” said Sammi Jo. “My point is Daddy wasn’t picking up the shotgun for bagging an eight-point buck, black bear, or trophy gobbler.”

“I see what you mean. What reason did he have for buying the Mossberg?”

Sammi Jo leveled her penetrating eyes on Blaine. “That’s what I was hoping you’d be able to give me a hint about.”

Blaine finished counting the change into her palm and bagged up each lantern. “I can’t help you beyond what I’ve told you. Your dad was a laconic sort. More than fifty words for him was a speech.”

“He didn’t go on at length to get across his message,” said Sammi Jo. “But you knew where you stood with him after you heard what he had to say.”

Blaine bobbed his head. “True enough, that.”

Isabel asked her question. “Did Ray Burl bring up his job?”

His eyes gleaming, the animated Blaine nodded. “Now I get it. You ladies are getting back to running your private eye club.”

“Business firm, not a club,” said Sammi Jo. “Since we’ve been written up in the newspaper, that’s general knowledge.”

Blaine leaned his forearms on top of the cash register. “You’re angling to beat Sheriff Fox to the punch to get Ray Burl’s murderer. That would be a feather in your cap, lots of publicity followed by loads of new *cha-ching*, something I also love hearing.”

“Blaine, we’re not trying to drum up business at my late Daddy’s expense,” said Sammi Jo.

“No, of course, you’re not.” Blaine backpedaled. “But to answer Isabel’s question, he never said how it was going over at Old Man Barclay’s place. Ray Burl gave me a list of what supplies he wanted, and I filled his order.”

“How did he pass the time while you did that?” asked Alma.

“He leaned against the counter where you’re standing and watched me. I tried to chat him up like in a game I’d play with him, but he just grunted and shrugged me off.”

“Did he add any bullets to his order?” asked Isabel.

"Bullets?" Blaine scratched his stubbly jaw. "For his shotgun?"

"Isabel asks did he buy any ammo," said Sammi Jo. "Shells for loading the Mossberg."

"I get you. He bought #00-buckshot. Ten rounds come in each box. Expensive loads, too. The-top-of-the-line I sell my customers. The copper-plated hard alloy pellets give the shooters a smoother discharge."

Blaine's shotgun smarts failed to wow Sammi Jo since she wasn't interested in buying one. "But the cheapies blow a hole in the victim's chest just as big as the expensive shells will do. Am I right about that, Blaine?"

Isabel and Alma exchanged eye twinkles. Their Sammi Jo demonstrated again how she was a tough *and* smart cookie.

"That would be irrefutable fact," said Blaine.

"Then we're all set by just ascertaining that much," said Sammi Jo. "But thanks for your in-depth expertise."

"I'm happy to give it any time you need it." Blaine tilted his head at her. His expression changed to a quizzical one. "I hear tell you're dating the debonair Reynolds Kyle. Is there any truth to it?"

"You hear all types of things, Blaine. Are you asking if I care to comment on the gossip you picked up?"

"I just wondered about it is why I ask."

"All I can say is you'll have to go on wondering because I've got no comment." Sammi Jo, toting the sacked lanterns, led Isabel and Alma out of the hardware store. Once they returned to the baking sidewalk out of earshot, Sammi Jo made the most important observation.

"Why does a peace loving man like Ray Burl who shied away from firearms get a hankering to buy one of the most lethal calibers sold on the market?"

"That question might be what a Golden Age private investigator would call a conundrum," replied Isabel.

"I think conundrums stink," said Alma, scowling. "They keep me awake more than Petey Samson does with his yodeling like Slim Whitman at the moon."

"You must be dreaming," said Isabel. "I know for a fact Petey Samson does not yodel."

"Who is it I wake up to hearing raise a squall on your end of the brick Rambler? Is it you? I sure hope not."

"Alma, a pack of coyotes might be the noisemakers," said Sammi Jo. "They've taken up residence in our slice of heaven."

"Coyotes. Here in Quiet Anchorage. What's next for us? Eddy's Deli turns into a dancehall saloon, tumbleweeds skip across the lawns, and the men strut around bowlegged?"

Leaving Isabel and Alma, Sammi Jo returned to her apartment, taking her new lantern, while the two sisters with theirs went back to the brick Rambler. As they braked in the driveway, Alma asked Isabel a question.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking of how this conundrum might be over our heads?"

Isabel switched off the ignition key. "I was mentally listing the words beginning with the letter zee that can be made up in Scrabble. There's zoo, zebra, and zig."

"Zounds, I wish you'd give this more of your attention since two heads are better than one."

"It's a temporary distraction I'm using to clear my mind."

"Let's recap then. What do you see as Ray Burl's possible motives to have purchased the shotgun from Blaine?"

Isabel wasn't alarmed as Alma. "Maybe no connection exists between his doing so last winter and his getting killed now. Maybe one of his men at the turf farm gave him the money and asked him to buy it when he came to town."

"That sounds plausible enough." Alma gazed across the front lawn. "We should let the grass get tall with this drought on, or we'll have a patch of brown crinkling like a Brillo pad underfoot."

"Camilo and his crew need the work," said Isabel. "I feel sorry for them toiling out under the blistering hot sun to earn a paycheck."

"They do an honest job, and I like them," said Alma. "I hope they're still in business to use again next summer."

"We can water our lawn with sprinklers like the McKinleys and Lopezes do," said Isabel.

“Let’s keep that idea stashed in our back pocket,” said Alma.

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Chapter 11

Sammi Jo had fallen into a blue funk over her father's savage death. She'd been as close as a daughter could get to a taciturn, all work-little play father. His leathery face bore the patina of a rich mahogany suntan and windburn gained from his tending the commercial sod. Before he got into the turf racket, he'd worked at a succession of outdoor jobs, and he'd viewed himself as a blessed man.

The photo album bore a persimmony orange cover, and Sammi Jo had bought it with her allowance money at the Family Dollar Store. She didn't feel schmaltzy over her girlhood days. But she was practical enough to keep a record should her inquisitive whimsy ever strike her to revisit them as it did now. She stowed the photo album under her sofa where she stooped. Annoyed, she used her thumbnail to scrape off the faded price sticker from the photo album's right-hand corner. Her lemon yellow smiley decals remained untouched.

She flipped over the front cover. Inside it, she'd printed in block letters with a black Magic Marker, "YOU'VE STOLEN THE PROPERTY OF MS. SAMMI JO GARNER!" Luckily, she'd grown up when Kodachrome was still used, and no digitized pixels had corrupted the visual world. Sporadic snapshots documented her maturing years. Coffee and chocolate stains discolored a few images while Mo had printed the dates in the top white borders to the other snapshots. A frisky cat named Tyger had chewed on a few snapshots' corners. Sammi Jo had Scotch taped two snapshots to repair their rips.

Studying the snapshots struck an emotional chord to resonate through her. She didn't attempt to curb or harness the churn of emotions, but rather she rolled with it.

"All aboard the Memory Lane Express," she said, poking fun at her nostalgic mood. "I haven't had a reason to board it in too long."

Almost reflexively, she began singing the lyrics to a children's nursery rhyme Mo had taught Sammi Jo one afternoon while they were at the Cape Cod. They'd been eating strawberry Moon pies with Mountain Dews under the shade of the honey locusts in full bloom. Despite her wild streak, Mo had spent her all-too-rare tender moments with her daughter between watching the soap operas and game shows. The song that Mo had learned from a favorite aunt ran:

*Ladybug, ladybug, fly away home,
Fly away home.
Your house is on fire, and your children are gone,
All except one,
And her name is Ann,
Her name is Ann,
And she hid under the frying pan.*

Sammi Jo's mother was Maureen Lionheart, or simply Mo. She was born a free bird that no cage designed was able to hold. Sammi Jo reflected on Mo's footloose ways. The partygoer hard-cores stopped and collected her (she always wore the same little black dress) at the end of the Garners' driveway. If it was boogie down night at the Lions Club building, be sure to pick up Mo. If a honky-tonk located within an hour's drive hired a live bar band to crank out country and western hit tunes, be sure to pick up Mo. If a festive neighbor threw a wingding with forty-ouncers chilled on wash tubs of shaved ice, be sure to pick up Mo. Nobody danced faster or longer than she did because she brought the hottest get-down fever.

Sammi Jo sized up the snapshot of her mother's struck pose in the little black dress with a hipshot casualness, devil-may-care eyes, and an imp's smile. Sammi Jo kept a few memories of Mo who'd the last time gone alone to the beer keg party thrown at a hay barn in May. Perhaps the band had driven up from a small town like Stuart's Draft, which the steel pedal guitarist told her between his guzzles of beer. Perhaps they laughed. Perhaps she dug his style and wanted to hit the road. At any rate, she didn't return home to the

Cape Cod with the salmon-pink streaks painting the eastern sky to sunup.

Sammi Jo had been six and started reading Dick and Jane with Puff and Spot at the elementary school. Ray Burl fixed their breakfast—sunny-side-up eggs, scrapple well-fried, and rye toast with raspberry jam—and didn't say a word about it then, or ever after that fateful morning.

He hadn't shrugged, winced, or shed a single tear. It was as if Mo had been a short-term visitor in their household and overstayed her welcome. She'd split with no advance notice. Her exit didn't render her *persona non grata* so much as she was seen as a passing fad, here today and gone tomorrow.

Ray Burl continued to wear his wedding band, even after he signed the official divorce papers that had arrived by certified mail. He got rid of her things, the hospital ladies' auxiliary accepting them, no questions asked. He also never dated another lady as far as Sammi Jo knew. He wasn't bitter, just seemingly indifferent.

She resolved to become everything unstable Mo wasn't although Sammi Jo was the spitting image of Mo ("only with a curvier figure and more soulful eyes," the nude Sammi Jo reassured her reflection in the full-length mirror). Lingered on the photos of the errant Mo, Sammi Jo divined a sense that Ray Burl had lived as a lonely, lost solitary man. His nose-to-the-grindstone diligence shown on the job supplied him with his most effective coping mechanism.

Staying busy, he didn't lament the wife he'd loved, and the mother to his child who'd turned her back on them both. On the other hand, he compensated for her absence because Sammi Jo had been rich in love—a billionaire!—as she matured into a young lady. She felt it and embraced it, a warm, nurturing grace flowing through her.

A reticent man, Ray Burl had conveyed his feelings in subtle ways she savored as endearing and would never forget. She riffled through the photo album's clear acetate sleeves until she came to the section of his pictures. Burning tears seeped into her eye corners. She plucked a tissue from its cardboard box and wiped away the

moistness. Her sentimental crying felt silly, but it also felt more cathartic, so why pen it up?

Ray Burl had the most expressive pair of eyebrows. He possessed the knack to arch them at a stern or bemused tilt while she was yakking away, say, on a problem she was dealing with at school. He wasn't put off by those lengthy silences that made their conversations lag. It was as if he waited on her to go on, posing two or three solutions, then picking the most pragmatic one to implement.

He'd approve of it with the slightest eyebrow's rise. If she didn't pay close enough attention, she'd miss seeing it. She replayed an instance when she'd broken up with a high school boy whom she thought she loved to bits. Wedding bells chimed and pealed, sweet and clear, in the near future, at least to her ears they did.

Ray Burl and she had sat at the Cape Cod's dinner table, their simple meal she'd fixed of country ham, mashed spuds, and red-eye gravy finished. It was their time for sharing stuff.

"Mickey said we didn't click, so he dumped me," she said. "Have you ever heard tell of such a spiteful thing?"

"He's no good. Forget about him. Move on." Ray Burl's eyebrows knitted together into an emphatic dash.

"His mother didn't raise him right. I mean you just don't throw away something special like we had going on between us."

"He's no good. Forget about him. Move on."

"But I've got him figured out. He's fixed his wolf eyes on Kathy Buck. Her family inherited a pile of money. He wants to buy a fiery red Tans-Am so bad he's busting. Sweet, little Kathy will peel open her fat wallet for him."

"He's no good. Forget about him. Move on."

On her indignant roll, Sammi Jo still hadn't registered Ray Burl's refrain of advice. She parted her lips to speak again when he rapped his bony knuckles on the tabletop. Startled by his behavior, she looked at him. His eyes clear as a mountain brook, hard as a zinc Mason jar lid fastened to her.

"I said this Mickey is no good. Which part of that didn't you understand? So, forget about him and move on. He did you a huge

favor.”

“Okay, Daddy.” She’d nodded once. Hearing it articulated made perfect sense to her. What other choice did she have? Mickey said he was no longer intrigued by what she had to peddle. The new merchandise—Kathy Buck—in his U.S. Government class dazzled him with a brighter sheen. He was free to go sample her 38-24-36 hourglass wares. Sammi Jo only hoped Kathy one day sooner than later wised up to Mickey’s slippery loyalty and gave him the boot.

“Are we all straight now?” asked Ray Burl.

“I’ll do as you say. There will be other boys. I hope.”

“A few good ones are out there. Just wait. Look sharp. Grab the best one. You’ll know when it happens.”

That amounted to the extent of their deepest talk. Maybe Ray Burl had said all he deemed necessary to enlighten her. She’d been plenty curious, but she never asked him about the rosy circumstances surrounding how Mo and he had fallen in love.

Had they first slow danced to Hall & Oates’ “Sara Smile” or Willie Nelson’s “Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain” where each partner pressed against the other felt the love spark leap between their galloping hearts? Later on, at the right time, how did he propose to her? Did she afterward squeal with delight, jumping up and down?

Ray Burl was agile on his feet while Mo was a vivacious spirit. It was a winning combination leading them to soon tie the knot. Sammi Jo preferred to believe they’d been gay as a pair of larks. Somewhere in the middle of that conjugal bliss, she’d been conceived. The cheaper-than-an-OBGYN midwife, an ancient Filipino named Betty Sue Kuk, had facilitated Sammi Jo’s wailing entry into the world. Had Mo left her swaddled in Betty Sue’s care and taken off for the honky-tonk with the loudest foot-stomping music?

Sammi Jo’s sight drifted down the clear acetate sleeve to a Kodachrome print. Brandishing a horseshoe before his face, Ray Burl had been captured in a candid pose. He’d closed one eye to aim his horseshoe, or he’d winked into the camera lens. She would pay a bundle for his curly hair the brown color of apple cider. He took his simple man’s leisure in nothing more complex than clanging pitched

horseshoes at the metal stakes to score a leaner (2 points) or a ringer (3 points).

She also remembered him instructing her on the north-south orientation of planting the metal stakes kept the sunrays out of the contestants' faces. He couldn't quit once he got underway with playing horseshoes any more than Isabel and Alma could with Scrabble. Sammi Jo had learned from experience not to get sucked in, or she'd never get away from their brick Rambler.

They were absolute dears, but enough already with the Scrabble. Getting back to Ray Burl, she felt her pulse grow a bit fainter. She realized the paralyzing numbness locking up her emotions would, in due time, break away, and she'd grieve the proper way over his loss. She'd cry out her eyeballs, and then some. If he were still around, he'd advise her in his cryptic manner:

"Hey there, girl, don't waste your tears over something so final as my death."

She wasn't as sure how he might comment on her taking such an avid interest in nabbing his killer. He'd known she played an instrumental role in solving Jake Robbins' murder and freeing Megan from prison. Sammi Jo wasn't doing it to please Ray Burl but to secure her peace of mind. Until his craven slayer faced justice, Quiet Anchorage could feel neither safe or snug as her hometown should.

Her trip completed, she was set to hop off the Memory Lane Express. Closing the photo album with a soft but decisive snap marked her disembarking. She knelt. The photo album went back under the sofa for safekeeping. If the need or whim for consulting the photo album cropped up again, she'd know from where to resurrect the snapshots.

"What do you suppose ever became of Mo?" asked Sammi Jo, sitting alone on the sofa. "I wonder if she thought again of Ray Burl. Or me. I wonder if they had a big quarrel before she took off. I wonder if she rode the Greyhound through a string of kudzu towns with their honky-tonks and gin mills. Or did she opt to melt into some large city's anonymous crowd? I wonder about all that stuff and wonder if I'll ever really know any of it."

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Chapter 12

“Claude showed up again after vanishing for so long.” The male’s nasal voice laughed with clear relief. “He’d gone abroad to loaf in Western Europe, Luxemburg to be specific. He likes to refer to it as his doing spadework for a debut novel he’s been intending to pen for the past twenty-six years. I call it loafing because that’s all it ever amounts to, you see.”

“Did Claude pay back the debt he owes you?” asked Alma.

She was on her cell phone speaking to Mr. Oglethorpe—she pictured him as Dickens’ Bob Cratchit—at his downtown Richmond skyscraper office. Mr. Oglethorpe was the Virginia state official tasked with issuing the private investigator licenses, and the sisters had spoken to him a number of times over the status of their license.

As far as she knew, they remained in good standing with Mr. Oglethorpe’s office. If they weren’t, she’d every confidence he’d set them straight by telling them to send him another check. Credit cards paid online were also acceptable.

“Claude settled his debt, including interest. I’d’ve dropped my false teeth, if I wore false teeth. He assured me his crisp as spinach C-notes weren’t stolen from a casino or counterfeited phonies. Nevertheless I had them checked out by a friend who’s an expert. It’s not that I don’t trust Claude, but it always pays to be careful as far as money is concerned. Thankfully his money was the correct legal tender.”

“Is all copacetic again in the Oglethorpe clan?”

“We’ve reconciled our differences, yes. There’s no cause now for you and Isabel to be troubled about taking on my case to find Claude as I had requested. That’s why I called you.”

“Stupendous,” said Alma. “You’re at work on a Saturday, too. How diligent. Are you striving to score brownie points with your supervisor?” Alma had worked for the federal government for longer than she cared to admit. She knew a thing or two on how the greased wheels of bureaucracy turned.

“Alma, I’m shocked. What a crass thing to say. I’m merely an industrious public servant doing the people’s business on a Saturday, if it’s warranted, as it is on this one.”

Yep, he’s brown-nosing, recognized Alma. “Knock yourself out, Mr. Oglethorpe. You’re a brilliant inspiration to your co-workers.”

He laughed. “Well, I do what I can, Alma. By the way, I meant to ask if you and Isabel have anything private eye-wise cooking at the minute.”

Alma was on her instant guard. The last thing they needed was interference from Richmond as they had put up with during their cracking Jake’s murder mystery. She turned cagey, feeding Mr. Oglethorpe a pat cliché summing up their activities.

“We always keep an iron in the fire so our investigative skills don’t grow stale for the times we need to use them.”

“That’s a symphony to my ears. At first I was afraid you were going to tell me you were up to your eyeballs in another homicide case. But I know you’d never do that again since you know it’s a big no-no for PIs such as yourselves.”

You think so, huh? Alma just laughed, hoping it didn’t sound too guilty and give them away.

“Your private eye license is up-to-date. I checked on its status before I rang you.”

While he laughed, she debated whether to go ahead and fill him in on Ray Burl’s murder. She opted not to do it. Mr. Oglethorpe could read all about it online if he was nosey enough to stay abreast of current events in Quiet Anchorage.

The fly in the ointment was she and Isabel hadn’t completed training Mr. Oglethorpe on the ways senior sleuths, such as themselves, did things. If a murder case reared its ugly head, then of course they couldn’t just sweep it under the carpet and ignore it. Their ingrained snooping wouldn’t let them. There was nothing at all unladylike about maturer ladies assisting the local authorities to resolve homicide cases. Miss Marple and Jessica Fletcher had made a bountiful living out of doing it for many decades.

Alma had their novels in her library to prove it if Mr. Oglethorpe expressed any doubts over the claim. The fact both female sleuths

were fictional didn't crack any ice with Alma. She contended they could be just as well be true to life, and her analogy held up fine.

She let Mr. Oglethorpe prattle on for a half-minute about how sticky on top of roasting the weather had turned in Richmond, all the time speculating if he planned on paying the office elves to finish his day's work. After he wound down, she inserted a hasty but congenial farewell. She had pressing matters to square away.

"Silly man," she said while bustling down the hallway past her bedroom entry to reach the door on the brick rambler's wing. "He needs to get a rambunctious dog like Petey Samson to complicate his life."

Alma poked in the door to open on an airy chamber she and Isabel left unheated during the winter months to trim the natural gas heating bills. The interior temperature plummeted to the low point where they liked to refer to the cold room as Siberia.

Siberia housed their extensive mystery and crime fiction library. The only firearms, trench coats, and fedoras they kept around the house existed on the printed pages. She marveled at the wall shelves laden with the used paperbacks and hardcovers, contemplating what a glorious pair of pack rats they'd become. "A room without books is like a body without a soul," according to Cicero. If the Roman philosopher's adage was true, then they had lots of soul.

Neither sister could bear to part with a book once it'd been read from cover to cover. They never could predict when they'd get the itch to reread it. No liberal application of calamine lotion would relieve the itch, only holding the dog-eared paperback in your palms for poring over again. Alma entertained a notion they'd be breaking down and buying the newfangled e-readers soon, but for now, the printed page was the only way to go for them. Then Isabel had suggested they hold a yard sale to clear out some of Siberia's overflow. They'd donate the proceeds to their favorite charity.

"What did you just say?" asked Alma, bug-eyed with disbelief.

"We should organize a garage sale and unload some of our clutter," replied Isabel, cringing a bit. She knew she'd really stepped in it this time with Alma. "We'll let somebody else enjoy the books as much as we have."

She felt her face turning frosty as a Popsicle. "I'd rather cut off my other foot, so I'll just pretend I didn't hear your sacrilegious statement."

"What happens when you and I are no longer here to be their caretakers?"

"Simple enough. We'll bequeath them to Megan."

Scratching her collarbone, Isabel looked skeptical. "Have you spoken to our niece about this? She is getting our honking big family bible, but her also taking our entire library of mysteries and crime fiction might overwhelm her."

"I realize she doesn't have the same voracious appetite to read like ours, but that will alter once she immerses herself in our trove of books."

"Pigs will fly like eagles first. Megan will haul our books out of Siberia. She'll put them out on yard sale tables set up along Church Street on parade night. Either that or she'll order our paperbacks to be pulped and made into birdcage liners."

"Pulped. Birdcage liners." Alma gasped behind her shaky hand put to her mouth. "You're just pulling my leg."

"Unless you know how to fly the U-Haul crammed full with them up to the Pearly Gates and Saint Peter, yes, I mean our books."

Alma posed a solution. "Leave them to Sammi Jo. She's already a real life detective."

"Doing it and reading about it are two different matters, and I see her as being far more the former. Let's table the issue, and return to it when we've had enough time to analyze it more properly."

"So ordered," Alma had said.

She now dragged her fingertip along the shelved rows of paperbacks organized in alphabetical order by their authors' last names. She saw the usual suspects, past and present authors. She might ask Phyllis to borrow her feather duster and hit the dusty shelves. Then Alma knitted her brows at spotting the gaps in the collection as if a thief had plucked out a paperback here and there so the casual observer wouldn't notice their absence. Slick, but Alma wasn't a casual observer. A stir of suspicion inside brought on

Alma's frown. Isabel wasn't lowdown enough to winnow out their library without a word spoken to Alma.

"There has to be a logical explanation," she said.

Right at the moment, Isabel was out walking Petey Samson. She'd told Alma he was wearing her to a nub, and they might have to hire a professional dog walker. Alma pointed out they lived in Quiet Anchorage, and locating a professional dog walker might pose a bit of a challenge. But Isabel wasn't daunted from tackling it.

Alma's detective thoughts kept circling back to Ray Burl's shotgun. It was out of character for him, and that inconsistency puzzled her. Since he'd been reticent, he would have never admitted to Sammi Jo if a dangerous enemy had threatened him. Alma considered if he owed somebody a lot of money. She identified no pawn shops or loan sharks (she couldn't remember if were they called *shysters* or *shylocks* from filling in her crossword puzzles) operating anywhere close-by. She wondered if he bought his cashmere dress suit on Main Street. Their town only supported the basic shops. Not all that long ago, a ladies consignment boutique had opened next to the Lago Azul Florist Shop on Main Street.

Unfortunately, the boutique couldn't woo in enough customers and profits to stay afloat. Isabel, who'd visited it, said the snooty proprietor peering down her aristocratic beak had also marked up her commodities. The expensive clothes could only be lifted by their hangers off the racks. The clothes' styles catered to the yacht or country club crowd, and Quiet Anchorage had no yachts or country clubs.

Knuckles rapping on the front door brought Alma bustling from Siberia out to the living room. On the porch, Isabel looking frazzled as Petey Samson who woofed greeted Alma.

"I forgot my key." Isabel stepped into the living room. "Petey Samson pulled at me to circle the block again, but he's got to learn a lady of my age poops out fast."

Alma closed the door to the late afternoon inferno. "He's a bundle of energy and a handful to manage."

"We love him just the same." Isabel undid the leash from his collar. He'd full range of their brick rambler and snoozed anywhere

he pleased except in Siberia. No dummy at keeping their affections, he visited both bedrooms during the night to slobber, snooze, and grunt.

Already cramped for bed space, Alma bemoaned how he was getting pudgier from his voracious appetite. She'd draw the line if Isabel began setting a third plate and linen napkin at their dinner table. Dogs ate on the floor, even the spoiled dogs.

"Did you remove any of the books from Siberia?" asked Alma.

"*Mea culpa*. I mailed them to Megan, hoping she'll love reading them as much as we have."

"I thought so. Who all did you mail to her?"

"I selected the grand ladies: Helen McCloy, Dolores Hitchens, Margaret Millar, and Dorothy Uhnak."

Alma nodded once. "You done good. They'll whet Megan's appetite for reading if there are any lady authors who can accomplish it."

"Exactly how I feel."

"It's also your roundabout way to arouse her interest enough to accept our library once we kick the bucket."

Isabel shrugged. "Hey, the beat goes on."

"Are you going to take your afternoon siesta?"

"I'm washing up after trotting Petey Sampson around in this heat then do some reading. You might be evaluating what our next move will be."

"Nothing pops to mind, and there are only so many places you can go snoop in our postage stamp of a town."

"Then unmasking the killer shouldn't be this difficult," said Isabel. "There are only so many candidates who can be our main suspect."

"Are you assuming Ray Burl knew his killer?" asked Alma.

"For the time being, yes, I am," replied Isabel.

Chapter 13

Despite Isabel's pronouncement, she did lie down on her bed after she finished washing up from her walk. The comfortable mattress promoted sleep, so she decided to take advantage of it since she was right there. She closed her eyes tighter and willed herself to capture forty winks. She could just as well have wished for banknotes to ripen on the trees like apples for all the good it did her.

Ideas, some more credible than others, teemed and buzzed inside her brain. She harnessed them and focused to set them straight as the railroad line tracking like a backbone through Quiet Anchorage. As she saw things, Ray Burl hadn't been the type of man she'd label as a trouble magnet. It wasn't in his makeup to antagonize others and get into physical altercations. He had no bad reputation or arrest record. He'd been easy-natured and laid back like Sammi Jo was.

Given those facts, who killed cock robin? mused Isabel.

She sniffled. She held a disdain for late August when the ragweed and goldenrod grew with abundance, triggering her allergies. She had a prescription for a medication that did a halfway effective job of relieving her symptoms of a runny nose, frequent sneezing, and red shot eyes. All of Isabel's sniffing, blowing, and rubbing drove Alma bonkers. Last year she'd suffered the allergies, and this August they'd switched places.

"For the life of me," Alma would tell her, "I can't understand your reluctance to take your pills except to attribute it to your innate stubbornness."

"But I'm not that bad off," said Isabel.

"Not yet," said Alma.

Whenever they left the house, Alma remembered to tuck several extra tissues inside her pocketbook because Isabel always asked if she could "borrow" one. Alma wondered if Petey Samson's dander and hair triggered Isabel's allergies. If he did, it didn't matter one whit since Isabel would never part with her beloved mutt. On the other hand, Alma had to admit she'd also grown rather attached to

Petey Samson and couldn't imagine their days and nights without him gallivanting under foot.

Isabel liked hearing the chirring drone the cicadas sent up beyond her window open to expose its screen. Before she knew it, the field crickets would be moving in with them to escape the chilly autumn nights and chirping to beat the band. Petey Samson would ignore them because he wasn't the breed of dog who hunted measly crickets.

Ray Burl hadn't been fond of hunting either. He derived no pleasure in bagging his game limit, and then cooking the wild meat on his Weber Grill.

"Dig a little deeper into his past," Isabel coached herself. "There was a Mrs. Garner, Sammi Jo's mother. Now, who was she, Isabel?"

More often than not, the names were tricky for her to recall, but not this time. She knew Mrs. Garner's first name was Maureen, or Mo for a nickname. Isabel rolled over to rest on her side in bed. Mo hadn't left much of a visual impression before she capered off to parts unknown.

Isabel couldn't draw a mental sketch of Mo. Had she been a blonde, brunette, or redhead? She was another Good Time Charlene out to enjoy herself before her wanderlust got the best of her, and she blew town. Isabel had known a few Good Time Charlenes over the years and couldn't wrap her mind around their scattershot thinking.

Sammi Jo had brought up her mom only twice with the sisters and then in brief passing. Sammi Jo had to carry lots of hurt and anger caged up inside her. Estranged mother and daughter probably didn't stay in touch. What reason would they have? It was Mo's tragic loss, concluded Isabel, because Sammi Jo was a sweetheart.

Isabel tried to paint a picture of the nomadic lifestyle Mo had adopted. Did she maintain any further contact, even the occasional postcard sent, with her ex? Did anything tie them together besides their daughter? Did the demons of guilt and remorse trouble her soul deep in the lonely midnight hours? Had she corralled another man, fallen in love with him, and started a new family, its members oblivious to her first one since she kept a tight lid on her past?

Such arrangements developed even in this tell-all, show-all social media age. That made it a challenge for Isabel and Alma to excavate any useful data on Mo. Sammi Jo was their computer guru who was well-acquainted with Mr. Google. If there was any way to trace the will-o'-the-wisp Mo and assemble a dossier on her, Sammi Jo was the right expert to accomplish it, or it couldn't be done.

Isabel reined in her thoughts, deciding she was ranging too far ahead with the Mo idea. The cell phone was under the pillow. Isabel rang a familiar number, and Alma just out in the living room answered with a "*bon giorno*."

"Italian for good morning," said Isabel. "Crossword puzzle?"

"Yes, and today's theme is foreign language phrases," replied Alma tapping the ink pen, not pencil, on her chin. "What's a seven-letter word for 'running in circles?'"

"T-R-U-M-B-O-S."

"That fits. Thanks, sis."

"You're welcome. Let's now talk murder."

"Wait one second, please...*clank*, there goes my shifting gears... okay, I'm all set...you may proceed."

"Funny. Now reflect back years ago with me. Wasn't Ray Burl married to a Maureen?"

"Of course. She was Mo to everybody. What a coincidence she also came up in my thinking while you and Petey Samson were out enjoying today's steam bath."

"What can you dredge up on Mo?"

"She liked her wine, men, and song. Sammi Jo inherited none of her genes. They're made different as night and day."

"Was there any scuttlebutt about Mo carrying on any hanky-panky?"

"If she did, no guy was mentioned in the same breath. On the other hand, a gal who's the life of the party has to find a place to roost after the party is finished."

"Didn't she wield a nasty temper?"

"She was like Mount Vesuvius ready to pop off any time she didn't get her way."

"Very interesting. Some townie might know of her fate."

“Or if she had a burning reason to lam off so fast and without saying goodbye to anybody.”

“I’m getting up in a few minutes. In the interim, pick where our dinner out should be tonight. We’ll head up to Warrenton maybe. Are you in a more of tortilla or moo goo gai pan mood?”

“Either is fine with me, but you’ll have to postpone dinner. Sheriff Fox just braked in the driveway, and I can see he took his meanie pills this morning. Something big has torqued him up.”

“Oh brother, I can hear the rumblings of the Riot Act coming.” Isabel paused. “If he’s apprehended Sammi Jo, I’ll sic Petey Sampson on him.”

“See if you can beat Roscoe coming into the living room. Petey Samson is bristling and growling like I’ve never heard the pooch do before.”

“I warned you once, but I’m not going to warn you twice about your meddling,” said Sheriff Fox. They conferred in the living room, him seated on the sofa and the sisters in their armchairs. He used his sternest cop voice while scolding them.

He also used a handkerchief to mop the sweat droplets off his brow and forehead. Why they didn’t run the air conditioning baffled him. Freon or ice water had to circulate through their veins. More droplets beaded up, further tweaking his crabby disposition. Just then, a growl came, and he turned to see Petey Samson’s snarl and bare his fangs.

Hiding her smile from Sheriff Fox, Isabel shushed Petey Samson.

“Have you arrested, or do you have plans to arrest Sammi Jo?” asked Alma.

His hesitation gave him away to the shrewd ladies. He couldn’t snooker them no matter how early he got up in the morning, and he’d pay a king’s ransom to bask in the satisfaction of having bested them just once. That would add an extra glint to his sheriff’s badge. They always seemed to be one step ahead of him, so he’d just have to take longer steps to catch up and overtake them.

Alma resented his bossy attitude while seated in their living room, no less. “You harangue us to back off while you frame Sammi

Jo for her dad's homicide. Over my dead body first, Roscoe, and I'm not coining a pun either."

"Are you defying my direct order?" he asked.

Again, Petey Samson growled.

Sheriff Fox gave him a circumspect glance while tempted to growl back louder at the little, flea-bitten Cujo that needed to wear a muzzle.

"What leads you to think we've been meddling, as you so inelegantly put it?" asked Isabel.

"I just got an earful from Blaine about your wheedling him. For your edification, I'd asked the same questions, and my department already knows Ray Burl purchased the Mossberg shotgun on January 13th of this year from Blaine. I'd bet my bag of Dunkin' Donuts you hadn't dug up that nugget." Sheriff Fox smirked at them.

Alma cast her eyes to Isabel. Had Roscoe always been this careless? He'd just given away the information they now didn't have to work to obtain.

"We stopped at the hardware store while running our errands," said Isabel. "Naturally our chat gravitated to the gruesome murder. Everybody is in an upheaval about it. Citizens wonder if their sheriff can protect them."

"My deputy sheriffs are on top of it, so you can allay your frets. I fully anticipate we'll effect an arrest within the next week. At that time, I'll convene a press conference at my station house to announce it, and you're both cordially invited to sit in the front row where you can be sure to hear me."

"If your boastful optimism runs so high, you have a suspect in mind," said Alma. "That suspect had better not be Sammi Jo. That's a fair warning."

Sheriff Fox sat up straighter on the sofa, presenting a taller, more imposing authority figure in charge of this situation. "She's been warned not to leave town, or she'll be in big trouble, and that's spelled with a capital T plus an exclamation point." He mopped his forehead again.

“Roscoe, don’t go taking that high-minded tone with us,” said Isabel. “We changed your diapers and fed you from a bottle.”

Sheriff Fox felt his jaw muscles tighten to jut out his chin in a bellicose pose. He tamped down the rising embarrassment flushing red up his neck. He refused to let Isabel and Alma browbeat him with their disapproving scowls, schoolmarmish fuss, and berating words.

“Aiding and abetting a fugitive is a felony,” he said. “I’d hate to charge you with it.”

“We’re not harboring or helping any fugitives, Roscoe,” said Alma. “You know where to find us, day or night, to search to your heart’s content. Just be sure to bring the signed search warrant.”

“Also try to use your cell phone and call ahead,” said Isabel. “Petey Sampson is set in his canine ways and doesn’t like getting surprises, as you can see.”

“I’ll make every effort to extend that courtesy,” said Sheriff Fox, his cadence huffy.

Alma met Isabel’s eyes again, and they agreed on something.

“Dwight Holden,” said Alma.

Isabel nodded. “We need to retain our legal counsel since Roscoe sees fit to throw around his threats of our arrest like wedding rice.”

He laughed at them. “Dwight is a boob. He might know his law books through and through, but in real world terms, he’s clueless as a chimp shopping for a tuxedo and cufflinks.”

Pot calling the kettle black, thought Alma.

“Dwight will do the right thing,” said Isabel.

“That includes making any necessary phone calls to our good friend Judge Redfern,” said Alma.

“Judge Redfern? Your good friend?” Sheriff Fox lost his smug levity and swallowed. Hard. How had he forgotten about that pesky detail? He cleared his tightening throat with a scratchy cough. “Is that who you just said?”

“Your hearing is up to snuff,” replied Alma.

“But she’s like the dragon lady,” said Sheriff Fox.

“Then I’ll offer some free advice: you better strap on your fireproof suit,” said Alma. “Because we intend to fight your fire with

our fire.”

“I’ve got to get back to the station house,” said Sheriff Fox.
Petey Sampson growled louder.

“I believe that would be for the best,” said Isabel.

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Chapter 14

Dwight Holden, as the best Alma could discern it, was powering through a midlife crisis, or perhaps it was male menopause, if such an ailment existed. In short, he'd become a bigger wreck than a demolition derby since they'd last seen the criminal attorney.

First he'd moved from his high-scale condo into a tinted glass A-frame he'd had erected on the southern edge of town in a forested lot of weeping willows and sycamores. Then he wore his salt-and-pepper mane gathered into a Colonialist's pigtail. As if all that wasn't incongruous enough, he'd gotten his ear pierced and flashed a gold stud earring similar to the one of his sports idol, Michael Jordan.

Alma, Isabel, and he conspired in his home office. They'd eaten dinner at home, and so had Dwight judging by the dirty dishes they observed stacked in the kitchen sink. The lingering charred odor matched to burnt pork chops. Even Alma with her diminished sense of smell could register how Dwight was a subpar cook in addition to a reluctant dishwasher.

Isabel was also stunned. "Dwight, are you having a difficult day?" she asked.

A slight man not much taller or heavier than the sisters, Dwight stroked his chin, acting as if her question flummoxed him. "I'm not sure I take your meaning, Isabel. Pretty much everything is coming up roses, thanks."

Alma could no longer stifle her exasperation. "What ails you, Counselor? We've heard of being stuck in the August doldrums, but seeing this is obscene." She swept a hand to signify the A-frame's disheveled condition. "For starters, you live in this glass fish bowl instead of the condo. Why is that?"

"I like the tranquil views into the woods and Mother Nature."

"What's up with the unwashed dishes left in the sink?" asked Alma. "Can't you hire a maid service? Did you run out of dish detergent? Ever heard of keeping a shopping list?"

"I find it more efficient to wash a large batch of dishes at once."

"Meantime you attract a plague of mice and roaches," said Alma.

Dwight steepled his fingers and centered his chin on them. "Oh."

"Yeah, oh. And why on earth are you wearing ladies' jewelry?" asked Alma.

Isabel broke in. "Gentlemen do that now, Alma. Earring studs are considered in vogue for manly wear."

"Well, I, for one, don't like it," said Alma.

Sighing, Dwight clasped his hands in his lap. "Anyway. What brings you to my humble abode after my office hours may I inquire? I have a sneaky feeling I already know what the topic of this meeting is set to become."

"If your sneaky feeling points to Ray Burl's murder, then you're correct because we find ourselves in the throes of its investigation."

"Uh-huh," said Dwight, kneading his temples with his thumbs. "Have I ever brought up you are my most controversial clients?"

"That's what makes us so interesting," said Alma.

Isabel smiled in sympathy. "We can't be blamed for getting into these jams. Believe it or not, we go to extraordinary lengths to avoid getting involved, but it runs counter to our nature. We must've been born to be Nosey Grandma Parkers butting into others' business."

"I see." Dwight stopped massaging his temples. "Don't doctors prescribe anti-snooping meds to manage your, uh, condition?"

"They'd be of little benefit," said Alma. "Only an Act of Congress will make Isabel take her allergy pills."

"My allergy is much improved," said Isabel, sniffing.

"Might either of you carry any spare aspirins in your pocketbook?" asked Dwight. "I can feel a migraine is seconds away from hitting me."

Alma leaned forward and poked Dwight in the forearm. "When it rains it pours, and you're our handy umbrella."

"It's nice to feel needed," he said. "This marks the first time I've been compared to an umbrella of all things."

"Enough dithering," said Alma. "Roscoe Fox is giving us a lot of trouble over our helping Sammi Jo."

Dwight tilted his eyes upward to regard the stucco ceiling. He imagined how nice it would look if he painted it gentian blue. Right now he'd better get rid of his prickliest clients. "Sheriff Fox is perfectly within his legal rights to do that since you should not be interfering with his police work. I've talked myself blue in the face lecturing you on that concept."

"Roscoe is taking the easy way out again by railroading Sammi Jo into a murder charge," said Alma.

"How might you know that for a concrete fact?" asked Dwight. "Did he expressly tell you he's set to arrest her?"

"We're no spring chickens, Dwight, but we're not going senile either," replied Alma. "History repeats itself. He pulled the same chicanery on Megan after Jake was murdered. It hasn't slipped your mind what a quagmire that turned into for us."

"The nightmares from it still wake me up shaking like a leaf and in cold sweats," said Dwight.

"Then you better get behind us to prevent it from happening again," said Alma.

Dwight narrowed his eyes into studious squints as if peering into a laptop screen at Isabel, the sensible one. "Is the status quo nearly dire as Alma likes to portray it?"

"She's never fibbed to you, Dwight. You can take everything she's just told you as the gospel truth."

"Well, until Sammi Jo is charged with a specific crime, I can do little for her," he said. "My most prudent counsel is to wait and see what unfolds."

Alma wasn't receptive to accepting that trite advice. "Nice try, Dwight. But we've hired you to fulfill your role in our finding Ray Burl's killer."

"Mother implored me to go into medicine," said Dwight. "But I was too rock-headed, and I knew better than she did. So I became an attorney. Now look where it's gotten me. Things are a big mess. All right then, Isabel and Alma, I'll play along with you, but I have one unshakeable caveat. I refuse to do anything that is regarded unlawful or unethical. I have to be able to sleep at nights."

“Just leave the dirty work to us,” said Alma. “We’re a pair of old, kindly grandmas no jury in the land will convict and send to prison.”

Dwight knew that was a popular myth, but he didn’t share that insight only because he didn’t want to deal with the sisters any longer than he had to.

“I’ll write you a check, Dwight,” said Isabel, reaching inside her pocketbook for the checkbook. “How much is your retainer?”

“Money isn’t a priority right at the moment,” said Dwight. “We’ll settle that while at the office. Will that be all, ladies?”

“One more action item,” replied Alma. “Get a haircut at Marvin’s Barbershop in case we need to appear before the bench. I’m not letting Tommy Chong represent us so we can get cited for a contempt of court.”

“Again, that’s part of my new manly fashion statement,” said Dwight.

Isabel nudged Alma for them to make a graceful departure before she made a regrettable comment on Dwight’s misguided manly fashion statement.

Chapter 15

Riding home after their confab with Dwight, Isabel, their driver, was mulling over how irascible Alma had turned since Sheriff Fox had visited them. She wasn't at her sharpest when her mercurial nature governed her actions, which sometimes bordered on impulsive and ill-advised. Isabel weighed if she should caution Alma against going off half-cocked, but Alma was already aware.

"The plot thickens," she said. "We better stay on guard, above all me."

"Sterling advice." Isabel noticed how the friskier breeze had turned the oak leaves inside out, exposing their paler undersides. That was a weather sign of rain in the offing, but she'd believe it only when she felt the first drops spattering on her upturned face.

Alma fussed inside her pocketbook but not for her keys. "I'm sure I bought a roll of peppermint LifeSavers when we last shopped at the IGA."

"There's a six-pack in the kitchen's penny candy jar," said Isabel.

"They must be what I remember getting." Alma ceased her pawing. "Here's a question for you. Do you get the sense Sheriff Fox is bluffing us?"

"About his charging Sammi Jo with Ray Burl's murder?" Isabel paused to deliberate. "Maybe, but if he is, why do we draw so much of his concern?"

"He likes to call it our 'meddling' in his police affairs."

"We've been known to do a bit of that from time to time."

As they made the turn on Church Street, Alma shifted her pocketbook in her lap. "If he's just stirring up a big smokescreen, we should be asking what he's actually got up his sleeve."

Isabel laughed. "Oh come on, Alma. Listen to us prattle on like this. You give him too much credit because he's not that brainy or sneaky. This is Roscoe Fox we're talking about, not Steve McGarrett or Theo Kojak."

Alma smiled at the references to their past favorite TV cop shows. "But is Roscoe taking a different tack on us? Something we haven't thought of to predict?"

"He's all bluster and bark to conceal his deepening frustrations over not getting any positive results. That's why he refuses to take his crosshairs off Sammy Jo."

Alma nodded. She saw their neighbor lady, Mrs. Agnes Ruby Stringfellow, had painted her wraparound porch the shade of robin's egg blue. Agnes Ruby was a widow like Isabel who ran the Senior Folks' Center located only a block up and over from their brick rambler. Agnes Ruby rode choppers into her late 70s, smoked stinky cigars, and could cuss the ears off a rap idol. She was also trying to lobby them to drop by some afternoon and join their guilty pleasures such as leathercrafts, basket weaving, and, most exciting of all, playing Parcheesi or Chinese checkers.

Well. Alma had informed Agnes Ruby in no uncertain terms the sisters played one, and only one, game: Scrabble. If the Senior Folks' Center should ever adopt it as one of the guilty pleasures, they'd check into participating. But until such time, Agnes Ruby could go blow smoke rings from her Harley before she'd ever see Isabel or Alma at the Senior Folks' Center. *Basket weaving*, Alma had fumed while hanging up the phone. The lady was "tetched in the head," as their father Woodrow used to mutter behind their mother Gwendolyn's back.

Isabel now parked in the driveway. Pie-crust brown grasshoppers, energized by the August heat wave, were jumping over the lawn. As girls, they used to chase them down to catch and use as bait to fish in the Coronet River. In similar fashion, she'd love to identify something they could offer as bait to entice out Ray Burl's killer.

The far-fetched idea was lifted straight out of the plot to a Golden Age mystery novel. Isabel didn't put much stock in such a ruse's value in the twenty-first century. Today's killers were too sophisticated and guileful to trip up and stumble into such a simple trap laid for them.

“Why don’t we in a bit take a spin out to the turf farm?” asked Alma. “We’ll go see with our own eyes where it all went down.”

Isabel looked to Alma. “This being a Saturday, I doubt if it’s open.”

“Do the customers not come in on Saturdays?”

“Ray Burl the foreman was probably there for the Saturday hours, but Mr. Barclay won’t have found a suitable replacement this soon.” Isabel undid her lap-and-shoulder belt. “But you’ve got me curious enough to go and personally see the layout.”

“Inside it should be cooler.” Alma also unbuckled her lap-and-shoulder belt. “I feel like a baked yam sitting out here under the sun.”

Pooped out in her apartment over the drugstore, Sammi Jo felt torn over whether to phone Reynolds and beg off from their date. Not that they’d made any grandiose plans beyond chowing down at Eddy’s Deli, or if they could ignore their growling stomachs, going all in and driving the seven miles north to Warrenton, the closest town of any larger size.

Once there, they’d enjoy their pick of any fast food chain restaurant on the west bypass. His favorite was a Greek pizzeria while she was more taken with the pancake house unless it was Sunday morning when she went for the delicious brunch served at a steakhouse.

When her cell phone inside the carrying case she clipped to her waistband rang, she found her caller was Alma.

Sammi Jo was hip to their proposal to canvass the turf farm. Reynolds could always hang around the drugstore downstairs chatting with Eustis, slurping down a root beer float at the soda fountain, or reading the latest comic books if she wasn’t back in time.

She felt relieved their relationship hadn’t progressed to where they felt comfortable enough to exchange door keys. She doubted if they’d get that serious. Reynolds was a fun dude to pal around with, but did he measure up as husband material? Were kids, SUVs, and a home mortgage part of his foreseeable plans? Did his quest for speed

found at the drag race track keep him amused enough? If he proposed to her, she'd feel obligated to ask the diamond ring's karat size he'd selected. Then she'd give it the sparkles-on-the-wiggled-finger test.

She sighed out loud. Quiet Anchorage didn't offer a young single lady a pool of eligible, much less desirable, bachelors to romance, marry, and grow old together with. Although Isabel had married the local boy Max, Alma had moved away before she got hitched twice. Sammi Jo might have to follow in Alma's footsteps. On the other hand, new folks were relocating to these parts all the time. Sammi Jo might expand her vision beyond her circle of friends and meet a new guy who'd sweep her off her feet, which allegedly occurred once in a girl's lifetime. Thinking of that heartened her spirits. Right now it was back to work. She put aside her love life and donned her deerstalker hat.

She owned the brand of answering machines that recorded her telephone conversations, and she'd accidentally taped a call she'd had with Ray Burl. She remembered the recording, found it, and replayed it, her ears sharp to catch any clues Ray Burl may've dropped while he spoke. She'd phoned him during their murder investigation of Jake Robbins.

Clarence Fishback, one of Roscoe Fox's backstabbing deputy sheriffs no longer on the scene, was mentioned. Sammi Jo activated the recording and let it run as she stood over the answering machine, listening up. She'd caught him on a rare day when he'd felt loquacious: he'd probably never held a longer conversation with her.

"Hi, Daddy, just me here saying hey there."

"Sammi Jo? What's the time?"

Her pulse quickened at the cadence of his familiar twangy drawl.

"Eight o'clock."

"So it is. Don't you need to be at work?"

"Well, that's why I called. See, I landed this new gig."

An exaggerated moan came from him. *"What's the job this time?"*

"Before I say, promise you won't blow your stack."

He laughed. *"After all this, nothing you can throw at me is a shocker."*

"I've taken up the private detective trade. Isabel and Alma Trumbo started a new firm, and they asked me to come and work for them."

He laughed again using his gruff charm that was there when he needed it to be. *"The gumshoes in the old movies are an odd bunch."*

"What do you think of it?"

"Any honest labor tied to a steady paycheck is cool by me. I didn't realize we'd a demand for private eyes in town. Are they bonded and licensed?"

"Not yet but it's in the works. We're still setting up shop, and Megan Connors is our first big case."

Ray Burl scoffed. *"I can flat-out say she is no killer."*

"Same thought here. Any theories on who pulled the trigger?"

"I've been too busy to give it much thought. Jake didn't go out of way to pick fights. He kept to himself and fixed the cars. His daddy Hiram and I were road dogs back in the day. Now, Hiram had an Irishman's temper, and I'd lay betting odds Jake also kept one buried deep inside of him."

"Clarence and Jake were pals who fought over their race car."

This time Ray Burl grunted. *"Even so, Clarence lacked the grit to take out a gun and use it on Jake."*

"Crazy Willie swears a UFO did in Jake."

Ray Burl used a dry chuckle. *"True story. Ages ago on a whim, he rode the Greyhound to a convention held in Roswell and got hooked on reading the spooky science fiction stuff."*

"That accounts for his bizarre slant on life."

"That's just his shtick. Crazy like a fox, Willie is perceptive if you're able to look beyond his goofiness."

"So, do you think this PI job can pay the bills?"

"Sure. Go kick some major butt for Megan."

"Your vote of confidence is appreciated. How's the turf farm treating you?"

Sammi Jo listened closer for any clue about the place where he was found murdered.

"My crew humped under the floodlights until midnight. An eighteen-hole golf course in Gainesville needed a rush, and we made schedule."

"Now I know where I got my working fool genes. Well, I better also make some money. It's been swell talking to you," Sammi Jo had said to

close out their phone communication.

She was now left shaking her head before the recording had completed its replay. His murder the previous Thursday had wrecked her young heart. Nothing in their exchange offered her any new insight as to who might've harbored a serious grievance against him. She'd run smack-dab into another stone wall. His twangy drawl almost speaking to her from beyond the grave was eerie to the point of creepy, and it unnerved her.

Her first impulse to erase—her finger rested on the answering machine's button—his words preserved on the tape wasn't a strong enough one, and she spared their recording. Her finger lifted off the button. Later, Isabel and Alma might want to give it a close listen and see if they picked up on anything Sammi Jo had overlooked. If they also contracted a case of the heebie jeebies like the one perturbing her, then she'd destroy the recording.

Chapter 16

Ambrose Barclay had gone into the turf farm business after growing up on his father's dairy farm. Their cows got milked twice a day, early morning and late afternoon, 365 days a year. Barclay grew bone-weary of the incessant chore. After his father drowned atop a silo filled with shelled corn that sucked him down and suffocated him like quicksand, the farm went to Ambrose.

He married the shiniest apple of his eye, Elsie Denise China, who managed the volunteers at the hospital ladies' auxiliary. The Barclays adopted a young boy, Alexandru, from Romania and a younger girl, Biyu, from China. Without a shred of guilt, Mr. Barclay sold off the dairy herd and planted the farm's flat terrain in commercial sod. The townies leered and snickered behind his back at his folly, but he'd done his homework and figured out how to turn a buck. In time, he promoted his hardest worker Ray Burl Garner to be the foreman.

"Mr. Barclay was over the moon on how Daddy ran the turf farm," said Sammi Jo from the rear seat. Isabel was at the helm. They'd just cleared the Farmers Co-op on Main Street, which appeared busy as it always did. "He was Mr. Barclay's golden goose, and he knew it."

"Is it your contention Mr. Barclay had no apparent motive to see your father dead?" asked Alma, up front with Isabel.

"Not if Mr. Barclay is all about raking in the profits as I'd say he is from what Daddy told me," replied Sammi Jo.

"Did he get along with his boss?" asked Alma.

Isabel took the question. "She already answered that, Alma."

"Not necessarily," said Alma. "Ill feelings between employer and employee can still breed even if the money is flowing in like it was there. Sammi Jo?"

"Daddy never had anything negative to say about Mr. Barclay," she replied. "As long as there was plenty of work to be done, Daddy was a happy man."

“Sis, are you cool enough?” asked Alma.

“I’m comfortable, thanks,” replied Isabel. “Turn off the air conditioner if your nose is turning into an icicle.”

Alma sought to make it a majority. “Sammi Jo, how do you want to cast your vote? Should the A/C be left on or turned off?”

Several car lengths of silence ensued, and when Alma turned around in the front seat to see what the matter was, she confronted something stunning. Her mouth dropped, but no words expressed her instant sympathetic reaction. Fat tears trickled down Sammi Jo’s cheeks despite her visible effort to strain and hold it together. Her chin quivered, and her bottom lip protruded.

She swiped her fingers to scrape away the tears, but new ones welling up in her eyes replaced them. She had the poise to give Alma the *sh-h-h* gesture with her index finger put to her pursed lips. Sammi Jo didn’t want Isabel to know, but Isabel had glimpsed Sammi Jo crying in the rearview mirror.

“Are you wrestling with a bout of the blues, dear?” asked Isabel.

Sammi Jo did the finger swipe again, allowing her extra time to compose herself. “Before you came, I played an old recorded phone conversation between Daddy and me on my answering machine. I hoped to discover something he said that might be of use to us, but I was too optimistic. We just talked, and the sound of his recorded voice resonated louder in me just now. Give me a minute, and I’ll be back on the beam with you.”

“Take all the time you need,” said Alma. “Losing a father like you did is a big stress.”

“Our father Woodrow died many years ago,” said Isabel. “Not a day goes by that I don’t touch on our parents. They never stop being your mom and dad, even in their deaths leaving this world.”

“Doesn’t the greeting card verse say time heals wounds?” asked Sammi Jo.

“Perhaps that’s true in love but not so much in death,” replied Isabel. “Our turn is rolling up fast, and we should phone Mr. Barclay and announce we’re coming to give him the third degree.”

“I’ll just say we’re getting together for a neighborly cup of coffee and chat,” said Alma.

She used her cell phone and made the call to the turf farm's listed business phone number. Isabel was traveling down the potholed lane running between the washboard flat fields of emerald green bluegrass. The crews had mowed it trim and neat as the White House lawn is for the Easter Egg Roll as seen on the TV news. The stalks of wild Queen Anne's lace and chicory bloomed white and blue flowers, respectively, alongside the lane shoulders.

"The nice bluegrass belongs pictured on the front of a postcard," said Sammi Jo.

Alma's phone rings attracted no greeter, and she gave up as they drew within view of the brick office and three varisized outbuildings, all fabricated from corrugated steel panels riveted together. Rolls of harvested sod on the wood pallets were stacked like hotcakes atop the flatbed that a tractor trailer would haul to the client's site readied for planting. The forklift used to move the pallets was parked to the side of the OFFICE, as the door sign read. The shingle hung out below it identified the top banana as MR. AMBROSE BARCLAY, CEO.

Alma thought Ambrose took himself a bit too seriously. He'd started out from the same modest beginnings as they all had in Quiet Anchorage. His luck happened to turn out better than the majority of his neighbors or peers. Not everybody could sit at the top of the heap. The townies knew of his hit-the-lottery fortune by heart, and it was the frequent talk of the town.

Besides the fecund smell of tilled soil, Sammi Jo also registered the stronger, sweeter scent of the mowed grass. She'd read in a brochure Ray Burl had left that researchers determined cut grass gave off a natural chemical that revived people's despondent moods. She was curious enough to volunteer to mow Isabel and Alma's lawn the next time it was needed to see if the released grassy smells afforded her any relief to beat the blues.

"Where is everybody?" Alma searched through the sedan windows. "Doesn't the crew stay busy six days a week?"

"Ray Burl can no longer crack the whip," said Isabel.

"Then wouldn't Mr. Barclay step up and fill in?" asked Alma.

"As the big shot CEO, he's not inclined to deal with grass unless it's on the links, and he's taken along his caddie and bag of golf clubs," said Sammi Jo.

"I'll tell you where I'd start our inquiries." Alma aimed her forefinger at the brick office building. "If anyone is around, they'd be working in there."

Before they could haul out of the sedan, the office door gave way, and a young lady stepped outside. She was plain, a polite way of saying mousy, but she wore a smart professional suit. Her right hand shielded her eyes from the sun, and she squinted at the ladies who stared back from sitting inside the idling sedan. Isabel turned off the engine, patted at her hair, and tugged up her door latch.

The professional lady, her eyes still shaded by her hand, watched their progress over the walkway up to the office. She tucked a black Etienne Aigner handbag under her other elbow as if she'd just stepped out of the restroom and not taken their phone call. She lowered her hand, and her nod coincided with her automatic smile at them.

"Might I help you?" she asked.

With that accent, she's got to hail from New Jersey, thought Alma. "We're hoping to spend a little time with Mr. Barclay," she replied. "Is he available?"

"Do you mean for placing a sod order?" The professional lady tugged at the cuffs to her business suit jacket. "I can process whatever your order is. Are you resodding your lawn in bluegrass or fescue?"

"Let's restart this proceeding. I'm Alma Trumbo. She's my older sister Isabel Trumbo, and this young lady is Sammi Jo Garner."

The professional lady followed each of the introductions Alma made with nods until she finished with Sammi Jo. "Oh my," said the professional lady, her fingers brought up to her mouth. "Garner. Are you related to Ray Burl, by chance?"

"Since Quiet Anchorage isn't exactly as big as New York City, you can pretty much assume I am," replied Sammi Jo. "The late *Mr. Garner* was my father, and that explains why you see us here."

“My deepest sympathies, Sammi Jo. That was so awful and horrid. He was a sweet man and well-liked here.”

“Thanks, but might we make this more civil? I don’t believe I caught your name.”

“I’m Karmine. Karmine Meriwether. I take care of the office needs around the turf farm.”

“Are you a one lady band?” asked Isabel.

She put on a nicer smile, and Isabel found herself drawn to and liking Karmine. “It’s just me holding down the fort,” she replied. “Mr. Barclay doesn’t like for me to work alone after what happened to Ray Burl. But I’ve got my cell phone and pepper spray close at hand. The windows and doors are locked up tight. I park my car around back so nobody from the road can see I’m here working by myself.”

“Where is the work crew?” asked Sammi Jo.

“Mr. Barclay gave them the Saturday off after everything that has happened,” replied Karmine.

“You’re not a native, are you, Karmine?” said Sammi Jo.

“I’m from a Hoboken neighborhood that is an easy stroll from Sinatra’s Monroe Street. I packed up the U-Haul to move down after Mr. Barclay offered me the job.”

“Congratulations,” said Sammi Jo. “Why did he pick you over the pool of homegrown applicants?”

Karmine scowled, the wrinkles furrowing her forehead. “Because I didn’t have to be trained on the financial software package he’d bought. I had the right skills to come in and hit the ground running, and it impressed him to pitch me a job offer on the spot. I snapped it up since I need the work.”

Isabel nodded. “It looks as if you’re taking care of business in a marvelous fashion.”

“Well, he doesn’t mind going off and leaving me in charge. Anyway, he’s not here, and I don’t expect him back until Monday.”

“Did he leave town?” asked Isabel.

“He likes to go with his family to his beach bungalow. I’ve got his private cell phone number, but he’d be livid and fire me if I gave it out, so I won’t.”

"We're not here to get you into trouble with your boss," said Isabel. "As Sammi Jo says, we're informally looking into Ray Burl's murder."

Karmine's frown deepened. She squared her shoulders in the business suit jacket, and she looked hot and flustered.

Or else she wasn't used to wearing the formal clothing, thought Isabel who couldn't tell for certain which was the case.

"I don't get you," said Karmine.

"We're private investigators like you may've seen in the movies," said Sammi Jo.

"I see," said Karmine although it was unmistakable she didn't grasp the uncommon concept of small town private eyes who were also female. She lifted her arm to point the way, and she dropped her handbag. It plopped on the pavement. "I can show you where I found Ray Burl's body, if that interests you."

Sammi Jo stooped down and retrieved Karmine's handbag.

Its weight surprised Sammi Jo. She'd forgotten what a pain toting a handbag could be. She'd quit carrying one because her handbag upgrades had gotten larger and heavier from containing the more stuff she didn't need. So, she jettisoned the handbag and now traveled light with her driver's license, a sawbuck, and a credit card in her hip pocket.

"We're very interested since you asked," Isabel said to Karmine. "Lead us to the spot where you found him."

Isabel met Alma's pleased eyes. They knew who reported the dead body to Sheriff Fox.

Karmine paraded them across the asphalt lot. The door to the largest of the three outbuildings a softball's pitch away was where they stopped.

Karmine looked at Alma. "I figured the CSI techies would draw a white chalk outline of where Ray Burl lay on the pavement, but they did no such thing. They just tied up the yellow police line tape and snapped a bunch of creepy pictures. He didn't leave a big bloodstain for the crew to scour away."

Isabel didn't clarify how the chalk outline seen on the TV cop dramas was a stage prop, or so Sammi Jo had googled it for them.

“You’re standing right about on the same spot where I found Ray Burl killed,” said Karmine to Alma.

The superstitious chills rolling through Alma spurred her to take a backward pace. Isabel shuddered after Alma did.

“Did Ray Burl make use of a locker, desk, or office we can search?” asked Sammi Jo.

“None of the men do,” replied Karmine. “Our operation isn’t that large.”

Sammi Jo tipped her chin at the outbuilding. “Then what’s done inside there?”

“The mechanics repair and maintain our sod farm equipment,” replied Karmine.

“Have you been inside it?” asked Sammi Jo.

“My domain is strictly inside the office,” said Karmine.

“Then how did you know my father was dead?” asked Sammi Jo.

Bewilderment left Karmine stunned for a moment. “Because I first saw him from my office window.” Her upraised Aigner handbag directing their attention to behind them. Sure enough, there was a window in the office building.

“I stood up from my desk and stretched when I looked out the window. Ray Burl was lying here on the pavement. I’d no idea he was dead, and I was alarmed he’d fallen from sunstroke, or Heaven knows what. I dashed out to try and help him before I called the guys from the shop and then phoned 911.”

“Did you hear a single gunshot fired?” asked Isabel.

Karmine did a curt headshake. “Even if I did hear a loud noise, I’d ignore it. The big diesel trucks are backfiring all day long, and by now I’m immune to hearing them.”

“Do you happen to own a firearm?” asked Isabel.

“I don’t believe in them,” replied Karmine. “My sister Loretta back in Hoboken came within a whisker of dying from the gunshot wounds she sustained during an armed mugging.”

“Who in your opinion killed Ray Burl?” asked Isabel.

“Frankly, I believe one of his old disgruntled workers returned and went postal on him,” replied Karmine. “He pushed them too

hard, angered them, and a few malcontents soon quit the crew. I swear you just can't find any hard workers anymore."

"Had Ray Burl worn any expensive jewelry like a gold wristwatch or a diamond stud earring lately?" asked Isabel.

"Not that I ever saw on him," replied Karmine. "We didn't have that much contact. He worked in the fields and was only at the office when he came to work and when he left for home. I didn't even know he had a daughter until you came just now."

"Has Sheriff Fox gotten with you?" asked Isabel.

"He asked me a few questions that were different from yours," replied Karmine. "He gave me his business card and told me he'd return with additional questions, but I haven't seen him since then. I don't like him. He's too pushy and tyrannical."

"You don't know the half of it," said Sammi Jo. "We expect him to turn green and grow scales any day now."

Karmine smiled, but her eyes slitted with tension. "Otherwise, speaking for me, it's been nothing but a pure pleasure and honor to live and work in Quiet Anchorage. I crack up when I talk to the three old codgers parked on the wooden bench. They are town treasures. Do you know them?"

"We've held a conversation or two with them," replied Alma.

"One was telling me a wild UFO tale," said Karmine. "He swears up and down the aliens abducted him, but he used his wiles and escaped from their flying saucer. He said he passed a polygraph to prove he's telling the truth. Can you believe it?"

"That old codger would be Willie," said Alma.

"Willie is prone to indulging a rampant imagination, so I wouldn't put too much credence in it," said Isabel. "We've taken up enough of your valuable time. Thanks for giving us a few minutes. Alma, do you have anything left to ask Karmine?"

"What time did you see Ray Burl out here?" asked Alma.

"It was after-hours on Thursday, around sixish or perhaps a bit later." Karmine pivoted to face the office and took her first step going that way. "I didn't check the clock to give you a specific time. Sheriff Fox can tell you when I placed the 911 call."

Fat chance was Alma's mental response. "Sammi Jo, is there anything else for you?"

Her eyes fastened on Karmine, Sammi Jo gave her parting instructions. "We'd prefer it if you'd keep our meeting in confidence. Working behind the scenes gives us our best chance."

"I can be discrete," said Karmine without batting an eyelash.

Isabel printed their cell phone numbers on a memo pad's page for Karmine since they didn't carry business cards like Sheriff Fox.

The three private investigators left in the sedan. Karmine watched, her right hand again shading her eyes, their departure stirring up a cloud of dust on the lane to the state road.

Chapter 17

"Were they close to each other?" asked Louise over their link.

Alma nodded until she realized she was on the cell phone with her younger sister Louise. "Reasonably so as fathers and daughters go. Sammi Jo kept in regular contact with Ray Burl when he wasn't putting in the loads of overtime at Mr. Barclay's place."

Louise chuckled. "Ray Burl was always busy as a beaver. I bet Sammi Jo is a chip off the old block."

"She's a tireless worker, too, but she also has a personal life, and she knows how it's important to stop and smell the roses."

"Is she seeing anybody romantically?"

"Reynolds Kyle and she are dating fairly regularly."

"Does she know that his daddy..."

"...no, and don't you dare breathe a word of it to her either. If Reynolds wants her to know, then he can be the one who tells her, not us. Plus we've got no concrete evidence except the rumors that flew around town."

"The apple might not fall too far from the tree."

"Infidelity isn't an inherited gene. Maybe Reynolds saw the error of his father's tomcatting ways and decided he'd become the better man because of it."

"I'm just saying I'd hate to see Sammi Jo get hurt because we felt it wasn't our place to tip her off. I realize it happened decades back, but time doesn't change a tiger's stripes."

Isabel spoke up from also sitting in the living room. "I expect Sammi Jo already knows about Reynolds' dad."

"Sammi Jo knows how to take care of herself," said Alma to Louise. "Stuff a sock in it if you talk to her."

"Uh-huh. And after Reynolds does her dirty, are you going to bring it up then? Or will your guilt and shame over your high-minded principles still keep you silent?"

"Maybe you and Isabel should take up this discussion."

"I heard her talking in the background. Put her on. I'll wait."

Alma passed the cell phone over to Isabel in her armchair.

"Louise is flinging one of her hissy fits with a tail on it," whispered Alma. "You'll have to settle her down because I don't know what to do with her."

Isabel accepted the cell phone from Alma. "The two of you come to loggerheads, and I have to play the umpire."

Alma enacted a so what shrug. "The oldest sister has always arbitrated family squabbles since the dawn of time."

"Hello, Louise," said Isabel, still looking at Alma. "How is your arthritis treating you?"

"I'm still beating it down with my hickory cane. I suppose you just heard Alma's side of our spirited discussion. What do you think? Should we tell Sammi Jo or stay mum about how Reynolds' father was a skirt chaser?"

"You both make valid points, but this time, I'm going to have to side with Alma."

Alma gave Isabel a thumbs up.

"Moving right along then, why did she call me?"

"Sammi Jo asked Alma and I to give her a hand. Despite her brave face, she's all cut up and hurting inside. The only solace she can find is to punish Ray Burl's murderer."

"I don't blame her. Any suspects?"

"A few make our shortlist, but none really stick out."

Isabel heard the tinkle of Louise stirring the spoon in her ceramic mug of hot green tea. "Was robbery the motive?"

"Sammi Jo went to the crime scene and says Ray Burl still carried his wallet with the money left folded inside it. She can't zero in on anything missing among his personal effects. Robbery most likely wasn't the motive."

"Revenge?"

"That is quite possible even though it's out of character for Ray Burl."

"He was even-tempered, as I recall."

"You have an impeccable memory. Sammi Jo said he hardly ever raised his voice to her."

"My impeccable memory of his ex runs just the opposite."

“Maureen Lionheart.”

“The very one, or she was simply Mo, as she preferred to be called.”

“Mo was a live wire is our most striking memory of her.”

Louise had to laugh. “‘Live wire’ is for openers. Mo never knew of a party she ever missed.”

“Do you remember anything specific?”

“All I ever heard was the same tired gossip over the fences that you did.”

“We questioned the Three Musketeers, but Willie told us they’ve got nothing to give us.”

“That doesn’t come as a surprise to me. You tapped the wrong oracle.”

“Is that a fact? Who, then, might know better than they do?”

“If it was me, I’d go see Rosie McLeod and Lotus Wang, your champion townie busybodies. If they don’t know anything, then you’re simply out of luck.”

“How could I overlook thinking of Rosie and Lotus, especially when they’re in plain view? We’ve used them before, and I appreciate your reminder. Alma does, too, as she’s sitting here with a smile stretching from ear to ear.”

“Glad I could do some good since I’m an honorary member of your private detective firm, but I hardly contribute to it.”

“You offer us excellent quality in lieu of quantity, and we’re indebted. We’ll go pin down Rosie and Lotus the first thing after church lets out this morning.”

“Tell them I said hi. That’s it, though. Say anything else to them, and it will be all over Quiet Anchorage faster than a pack of dogs on a three-legged cat.”

“Alma and I have found the best policy is to get them primed to talk. Then we just hang back and let them cluck away like a couple of Domineckers. Most times we don’t have to give them any personal information.”

“Then I’ll let you get along with it. Thanks for giving me a holler. Do it again at any time. I love hearing from you gals back home.”

“Sure thing. Bye-bye, Louise.” Isabel hung up, smiling. “She’s always a help in one way or the other to us.”

Alma nodded once. “I can’t stay angry at her for any real length of time. She’s still one of us even if she doesn’t live here anymore.”

“Our campaign of enticing her back to Quiet Anchorage goes on,” said Isabel.

“Maybe we should hold off on doing that until the homicide rate has declined a bit,” said Alma.

“Good idea,” said Isabel. “I should hasten to add I wonder if we can hold off for that long.”

Isabel and Alma toiled by the Lopezes’ yard, which was showing off blooming dahlias, hydrangeas, and zinnias, all colorful and vibrant enough to be the table arrangements at an August bride’s wedding reception. Alma had tied the knot twice, both failed social experiments and both exes—their names had been redacted from her memory—now buried in out of town cemetery plots. She preferred to shy away from cultivating any memories about her marriages.

Instead, she centered her idle thoughts to recount Isabel’s marriage to Max. That came as close as you could get to a storybook one. He’d passed away a smart while back, and Isabel still grieved in her quiet, stiff upper lip way, most folks unaware of how much pain she’d suffered from the personal loss.

Alma had also felt bad for Isabel who’d lost her only child, a son named Cecil, to lung cancer. The three-packs-a-day cigarette habit he couldn’t lick no matter how valiantly he tried had claimed him early. Max had been a happy-go-lucky guy always quick with a joke. By contrast, Cecil had been a reserved young man who took more after his mother than his father.

“Today marks the anniversary of Max’s death,” said Isabel.

Alma startled, spooked at how Isabel had read her thoughts. “How long has it been? I lost track of time very soon after I retired when calendars weren’t nearly as important anymore.”

“The truth be told, so did I about the same time. The number of years is irrelevant since the loss never lessens its sting. But those

were blue ribbon years, and I don't regret living them. If I had the chance, I'd do it all over again exactly the same way."

"Max was a good man, and we were all a little better off from having known him."

"Thanks for saying that. Some days I ache for him more, and other days I pine for my boy Cecil more. The double whammy days are when I miss them both just as much. Today might be one of those double whammy days."

"I don't mean to begrudge your right to indulge your melancholy, but we've got solving a big murder on our hands."

"Don't fret, Alma. I keep everything under control because I know I can't let you and Sammi Jo down. That wouldn't be fair after I agreed to help."

"Did you and Petey Samson do the morning loop?"

"Indeed we did. I was set to ask you if you wanted to go along with us, but I saw you nestled in bed snoozing away, and I couldn't bring myself to wake you."

"That was probably for the best," said Alma. "I'm not a morning person, especially before downing my first cup of coffee."

"Yes, I'm keenly aware of that idiosyncrasy," said Isabel.

Chapter 18

Clean Vito's Launderette located on Main Street sat further down from the IGA and the bench where the Three Musketeers held court. On Memorial Day a year ago, the three-alarm blaze had erupted at two o'clock in the morning, and the launderette roared up in a column of flames, sparks, and smoke. The VFD, responding to the fire station whistle going off, had battled the inferno for the remainder of the night, but sooty daybreak revealed how they'd been vanquished. Clean Vito's was left as a smoldering char heap.

"Excess lint built up and trapped in the dryer vent was sparked and caused the fire," Alma had conjectured in private to Isabel.

Arson was never suspected. Quiet Anchorage felt as if it had lost a large part of its soul. Such a profound reaction couldn't be avoided. The townies regarded every small business on Main Street as a sacred institution since the majority had been in the same family tracing back for several generations.

Vito Salvador had insured his launderette against fire, and he sprang into action after the insurance settlement money came through to erect the new, improved Clean Vito's. Isabel and Alma hadn't visited it since its opening earlier in the summer. They did their own laundry with the old but indestructible Norge washer and dryer at the brick rambler. Alma wouldn't hear of their putting up and using a washline to demean the appearance of their yard.

Rosie McCleod and Lotus Wang haunted Clean Vito's, and if a townie wished to kibbutz with either or both ladies, the townie knew where to always find them.

A decade younger than the sisters, Rosie gangly as a giraffe and Lotus rotund as a hippo could be retired from their careers. Nobody was sure if they'd ever seen them engaged in anything that could pass for a career, or if they'd ever held any gainful employment. Alma was of the mind Rosie or Lotus had inherited a large pot of family loot, making them independently wealthy and unencumbered to be the ladies of leisure.

What leisure pleased them was spending their days at Clean Vito's, chatting up any patron schlepping in with their laundry. Either lady was eager to pitch in and assist with the heavy lifting in exchange for hearing any juicy morsels of hearsay.

Alma saw nothing wrong with their indulgence since they weren't harming themselves or anybody else. Isabel reserved expressing her dim view on how they were lazy as house cats only because she realized their value as a source of information.

Isabel parked next to the handicapped space occupied by a shopping cart and kid's skateboard. She and Alma gawked out the windshield at the new Clean Vito's Launderette. Vito had opted for a Classical flair highlighted by the pair of white Corinthian columns to flank the front entrance. Dusty rose-hued exterior stucco covered the walls, and mistletoe-green patio carpet paved the walkway and apron. Singing a wistful Hank Williams tune, Norah Jones crooned from the PA speakers mounted in the overhang sheltering the apron and front entrance.

"Vito went a little over-the-top rebuilding his launderette," said Isabel. "His new one is a gaudy attention-getter. I had no idea. Did you know this was here?"

"We seldom venture this far down on Main Street and need to get out more to see the new sights," said Alma.

"Is it supposed to resemble the cross between an ancient Roman and Greek temple?"

"Beats me, Isabel. If I didn't know Vito was in the laundry business, I might suspect he's operating a bordello in a Texas border town."

"Alma, play nice. We're headed inside, and I don't want that picture lingering in my mind."

"Especially just after our hearing the preacher's sermon on the wages of sinful lust." Alma tilted her ear with her hand cupped behind it. "Vito does have good tastes in his music."

"Norah is blessed with a gorgeous voice. By the way, this morning I went to use the bathroom scales, and they seemed to have gone astray. Did you hide them again?"

"The next run we make to Warrenton, we should stop at Walmart for new bathroom scales. Ours are defective."

"Picked up five more pounds, did you?"

Alma shrugged. Isabel was out first, but Alma led their stride into the byzantine launderette.

It resembled an ant colony. All the washers swished away while all the dryers tumbled with a whirring drone. Despite the dearth of vehicles in the lot, every customer who lived within walking distance must have picked the late Sunday morning to do their weekly loads. The working folks, some holding down two or three jobs, scheduled their domestic chores for when they could insert a free hour. Sammi Jo would schlep in her laundry baskets later.

"Thank our lucky stars we don't have to fight this jungle to do our wash," said Isabel as they stood at the entrance surveying the activity.

Three ladies sitting in molded plastic chairs twiddled with their cell phones instead of thumbs while they waited for their wash cycles to complete. One teenaged girl was stuffing her tangles of jeans and tank tops into a front-load machine. At the end of the nearest row, a thirtysomething man sporting young Elvis sideburns grinned over reading the Sunday comics. The refreshingly clean scents of laundry detergent was a powerful enough smell to please the sisters.

"That reminds me there's a load of towels I left in the dryer," said Alma.

"I folded them up to put away in the linen closet," said Isabel.

"Thanks. Vito must be pocketing a mint," said Alma. "He'll be able to open a chain of launderettes."

"What are you talking about?" said Isabel. "He's got one up and running in Warrenton on South Main. He's a business tycoon."

"And we're private detectives, so where might our two favorite stoolies hang out?" asked Alma. She gave the bustling scene another visual sweep. "Don't tell me they didn't make it in this morning."

"Heaven forbid that should ever happen," said Isabel. "The doorway over there might go to a lounge, ideal for our stoolies to accost the patrons."

Isabel's guess was spot on. Rosie and Lotus occupied a pair of the molded plastic chairs placed before the bank of soda pop and vending snack machines. Both ladies clutched their cell phones like most ladies do their purses. Information was power, and they were the power brokers. Their tongues wagged like Petey Sampson's tail when he wolfed down a doggie treat.

"Would you look at who's coming there, Lotus. Our very own Jessica Fletcher times two have arrived."

Lotus nodded with an amiable smile. "The game must be afoot, Rosie, because they're also wearing their Miss Marple faces, always the dead giveaway."

"Speaking of the dead, might their consternation stem from the recently departed Ray Burl Garner?"

"Indeed, Rosie. The most foul play has roused them out from their Scrabble game board to go hunt down his evildoer."

"If was a betting lady, I'd wager they seek our assistance."

"I happen to know you *are* a betting lady, Lotus, so name your wager."

"No bet, I'm afraid. Besides we never charge our dear friends but do it because we're thrilled to pitch in whenever we can."

Lotus was the first one to acknowledge Isabel and Alma who waited for them to wind down from their witty banter. "Let's cut to the chase," said Lotus. "What might you like to know about Ray Burl?"

"He remains something of a riddle wrapped in a mystery," said Isabel. "Our speculations center on who may've killed him. We're picking your brains for any news about any recent interlopers moving to Quiet Anchorage."

"They flock here by the legions with their SUVs and motor boats," replied Lotus. "We're not able to keep tabs on them all, so we limit our attention to lavish on the First Families of Quiet Anchorage."

"Like you Trumbo sisters, for instance," said Rosie.

"Do either of you happen to remember Ray Burl's ex?" asked Alma.

Lotus nodded but without a smile. "Maureen Lionheart rings a bell from a good ways back."

"What's the skinny on her?" asked Alma.

"Mo was a real piece of work," said Rosie. "I once saw her shoplift a Slinky toy sold over at the drugstore, but I didn't say a peep only because I didn't want it to go on her permanent record. Adults bend over backwards cutting the kids so many breaks. She'd be middle-aged by now, and time is cruel to some of us ladies. We cover our mirrors, shun passing before any reflective glass, and save up for the Botox injections to fill in our frown lines and crow's feet."

"Speak for yourselves," said Alma. "Time hasn't robbed us of our looks. Right, Isabel?"

She said nothing with a straight face.

"Nobody has gotten a follow up report on Mo although I wonder about her every then and now," said Rosie. "A gypsy's itchy feet sent her clambering aboard the Greyhound that morning after the barn party. She kissed off Quiet Anchorage, skedaddled, and vanished into the mist."

"What became of her parents and relatives?" asked Alma. "Are any of the Lionhearts still living around the area?"

"All of them are either planted in the town cemetery or have moved away," replied Lotus. "She has an aunt residing on the Upper Peninsula in Michigan. I don't recall her name offhand but give me a day or so, and I'll think of it."

"That wraps up our all on Mo Lionheart," said Rosie.

"Thanks for taking our questions," said the disappointed Alma. "We'll be getting along now."

"If we hear anything worth repeating, we'll give you a quick holler," said Rosie.

"That would be swell," said Alma. "Thanks again for your time."

"Always a pleasure to speak with you," said Lotus. "Be sure to keep us in the loop, too, on anything of interest you may hear or learn on Mo or Ray Burl. We'd love to hear all about it."

Rosie's smile coincided with her emphatic nod.

"Yeah, I just bet you will," said Alma, barely filtering the sarcasm from her voice.

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Chapter 19

Isabel dealt with the same dismay as Alma did when their consulting Rosie and Lotus didn't pan out any leads in tracking down Ray Burl's killer. The large influx of new residents, the bulk of them residing in the subdivisions and the one or two gated communities ringing Quiet Anchorage, made it impractical to look at them all. The gated communities mystified Alma. She envisioned next their medieval use of moats with alligators as well as heavy-duty drawbridges to crime-proof their enclaves. But no moats or drawbridges prevented the Trumbo sisters from getting whatever dope they needed.

The brassy flush of sunshine engulfed Main Street, and the heat waves shimmered up from the pitch black pavement. They strolled two-abreast along the sidewalk. Isabel wished she'd worn her floppy straw hat to shade her nose from where her doctor had removed a precancerous skin patch. Alma and she stuck to the shade cast by the green and white striped awnings.

"Sammi Jo should be up and at 'em," said Alma. "What's say we get her and eat Sunday lunch at Eddy's Deli, my treat? A cold chocolate malt and bear claw tempt my sweet tooth this morning."

Isabel was more aware. "I'd love to go, but she might frown on us for infringing on her Sunday morning."

"I hardly think it's an indecent hour to pay her a visit, Isabel."

"Suppose she entertained overnight company, and they've slept in? Our presence might create an awkward situation for them and us."

The light bulb flared on in Alma's gray matter. "Reynolds is the overnight guest." She chuckled. "Sorry it took me a while to catch on. It's been decades since I last had my Reynolds to—"

"I see where you're headed, so please spare me the tawdry details." Isabel tipped her head forward to introduce her alternate suggestion. "Our time might be better rewarded by seeing our male brain trust."

Alma knew without glancing across Main Street that Isabel had in mind the Three Musketeers, and Alma wasn't cheered by the prospect. "We've already tried them and left with nothing like we just got from Rosie and Lotus."

"The gentlemen said they didn't have anything but Ossie's outlandish hit man idea *right then*. But now they've had the time to think. Who knows what new developments they may have? All we have to do is ask them. That costs us nothing except the time and effort to cross the street."

"Even the thought of doing that taxes me out," said Alma.

She had no choice but to follow as Isabel cut to the right and approached the gentlemen arrayed on their customary perch. They wore their sunshades and dog tags from seeing live combat in the big one. Willie the woodcarver sat cutting the wood shavings from the partial sculpture. At least he didn't use the knife to clean out the grime from under his toenails. He'd also be sure to sweep up the wood shavings later, or Corina would take away their bench. He gave the sisters the squinty eye before he elbowed his cohorts dozing in the sunshine. They had company, and it was time to look alive.

After removing the broken match from his mouth, Blue grinned with an animated wave. "Salutations, Isabel and Alma," he said.

"Where is your Scrabble board?" asked Ossie, now wide awake. "Is it the collapsible or inflatable one you carry in your pocketbook?"

Before Isabel could respond, Willie made a snap decision. "Round up the card table with the beach umbrella and steal a pair of chairs inside from Corina. See if she's got a pitcher of iced tea chilling in the kitchen fridge and get the tall glasses from the cupboard."

"I didn't bring a Scrabble board," replied Isabel.

"Not an obstacle," said Willie. "I'll slip home and grab mine out of the old pie chest."

Blue rubbed his hands together like a gleeful kid might do at the Ben & Jerry's ice cream counter. "Nothing beats Scrabble unless it's cane pole fishing on the Coronet River."

"I'd say Scrabble trumps cane pole fishing any day of the week." Willie elevated from the bench. "Just hang loose, and I'll be back in

two shakes of a monkey's tail."

"Be sure you don't bring your trick dice," said Blue. "I told you to throw them away, but I know you haven't."

"Blue, relax since dice are used in craps," said Ossie, one hand in his pocket jingling his keys and coins.

Isabel knew the grating habit would flip her wig if she ever became the next Mrs. Conger.

"That's why you keep losing at Scrabble," said Ossie.

"Actually it's because I balk at wearing my bifocals," said Blue. "The letters and numbers on the tiles look blurry like the objects do when I drive."

"Keep your seat, Willie," said Alma. "Talking is the extent of our visit this morning."

Carving knife in hand, the sulky Willie resumed his perch. "God created Sunday mornings to relax from your daily tasks, and Scrabble falls under the leisure category."

"Ray Burl's murder weighs more on our mind," said Isabel. "You're our eyes and ears on Main Street where you soak up the details along with the plentiful sunshine."

Willie continued whittling on the soap bar-sized chunk of wood. His voice turned devious. "Praise and flattery are swell to hear, Isabel, but this time it's going to cost you a little more."

"Friends shouldn't charge their friends money for doing them favors," said Alma, irritated.

"You didn't let me finish what I had to say," said Willie. "The clink to cold cash is also nice, but it doesn't interest us."

"Go on then," said Alma, suspicious. "What is your price? Name it."

"I calculate our valuable dope is worth three games of Scrabble," said Willie, leveling his shrewd eyes on the sisters. "That's our best and final offer. Take it or leave it. Makes no difference to us."

Ossie and Blue nodded in their unanimous support of Willie's proposal.

Isabel was smiling. "You're undercharging your fee since you could've squeezed us for at least four games."

Ossie stomped his shoe on the concrete. "Willie, you sure do stink for being the horse trader you like to brag you are."

Blue looked disappointed as if the town pranksters had swiped their bench.

"Give us what you have," said Alma. "Then we'll decide how much it's worth to us."

"That shotgun, the one Corina claims she saw Ray Burl walk out of the hardware store carrying," said Willie. "We've gotten an update on it."

Alma fidgeted with impatience. "And..."

"And the shotgun wasn't for him," replied Willie.

"Who then was it for?" asked Alma.

"We haven't learned that part," said Ossie, horning in. "Before you ask it, no, I won't reveal our source. We have to guard our reputations for discretion. But you can rest assured our dope is rock-solid."

Isabel nodded. "Of course, like it always is. I suspect Blaine is the one who told you what he's now remembered about Ray Burl and the shotgun."

Ossie nodded.

"Ray Burl said the shotgun wasn't for him, but he didn't say who it was for," said Isabel. "Was the shotgun a new or used model?"

"Blaine only sells new firearms," replied Willie.

"Then I believe Ray Burl was purchasing the shotgun for somebody at the turf farm," said Isabel.

"Sounds reasonable," said Ossie, stroking his chin.

"Getting back to our original topic: Scrabble," said Willie. "I realize there's been a summerlong drought, but are you ladies receptive to taking a rain check?"

"Yes, Willie, once Ray Burl's murder case has been put to bed, we'll restart our games. That's a pledge from Alma and me to you because we miss playing it as much as you gentlemen evidently seem to have."

"Hurray, the confetti and streamers will cascade down from the rafters again," said Ossie.

"I'll add my hearty amen to that," said Blue.

“Willie, my curiosity has gotten the better of me,” said Alma. “What are you fashioning from that block of pine?”

He brandished his in-progress art like a jeweled scepter. “So far, it’s a vague shape I can only envision in my imagination.”

“I thought you told us yesterday it was going to be a ’57 Thunderbird, the best sports coupé you owned,” said Ossie.

“Uh-uh. I said ’57 Chevy Bel Air,” said Willie. “I wouldn’t be caught dead inside a Ford.”

“You know what I mean,” said Ossie.

“The ’57 Chevy Bel Air was my original aim until I slipped with the knife and lopped off the trunk part,” said Willie. “Better than it being my thumb. Anyhow, I didn’t have a Plan B in mind, so now I’m just winging it like the story of my life.”

Chapter 20

A few minutes past Sunday noon put Isabel and Alma in the shady inset doorway to the IGA. Its doors opened at noon, but Jumpy Blixt, its proprietor, wasn't the most punctual merchant. He moved at his own pace, often a terrapin slow one. That he was able to turn a profit was a bit of a head scratcher. Isabel remembered they were running low on doggie treats (small wonder) and needed to pick up some packets. Alma was fussing inside her pocketbook.

"What are you after now?" asked Isabel.

"I've misplaced my keys again," replied Alma. "Can you believe it? I must be losing what few are left of my marbles."

"You dropped your keys on your armchair," said Isabel. "I saw them as we filed out the door and put them in my pocketbook. Here, you can take them back."

Alma tucked her keys inside her pocketbook. "Thanks. Can we trace who Ray Burl purchased the shotgun for?"

Isabel shrugged. "We can return to the turf farm tomorrow when the crews are working and ask around if anybody wanted Ray Burl to buy it for them." She nodded at the glass door. "Jumpy is coming."

Alma checked her wristwatch. "Only six-and-a-half minutes late. His punctuality is improving."

Jumpy was a burly man who used a well-trimmed goatee to camouflage a weak chin. In a previous century, he would play the village blacksmith who could pound a mean horseshoe into shape from a length of red-hot steel removed from the forge. His age fell within half their ages. Sammi Jo had worked for Jumpy over one summer while in high school, and she said he'd never tried anything fresh with her. Isabel and Alma who'd dealt with their own rascals during their careers knew what she meant.

He motioned with his hand for them to occupy the nippy indoors with the air conditioner running at full blast. They did as he asked, and he closed the door behind them.

"It's hotter than a field of burning tree stumps," he said.

"Nothing to do but grin and bear it," said Alma.

"Did I hear correctly you ladies were fishing for snapping turtles to make for soup?" he said. "Do you add parsley or oregano for its seasoning?"

"Snapping turtle soup." Alma made a yukky face. "Where did you hear such a fanciful tale?"

"Willie blabs everything. He claims you along with Sammi Jo were fishing underneath the steel truss bridge on the Coronet."

"She goes there seeking a quiet nook to do her thinking," said Isabel. "She invited us along, but we didn't bring any fishing tackle or bait any hooks."

Jumpy crossed his arms and frowned, not following them. "You want to run that by me again. What's the point if you're not going there to fish or skinny dip?"

"Those are guy things, but she was doing a gal thing," said Isabel.

No more clearer, Jumpy decided to let it ride. "She's been dragged backwards through a knothole over her dad's murder is all I know. It's a crying shame, too."

"Who do you think killed Ray Burl?" asked Alma, blunt as usual.

"My idle speculation sees a ticked off customer pulling the trigger," replied Jumpy.

"When did you last speak to or see him?" asked Alma.

Jumpy closed one eye with his hand placed under his goateed chin. "No specific date leaps to mind. He wasn't a regular customer like you are, so he must've driven elsewhere to buy his groceries. Imagine that. An uptight lady marched in yesterday, and she had the unmitigated gall to inform me she drives to the Warrenton Safeway to buy her fresh radishes and mangoes. I almost broke my guitar string and wanted to tell her to take a hike, but she'd turned on her heel and left."

"There's no pleasing everybody," said Alma.

"Don't you use the same produce distributor?" asked Isabel, drawing from her professional background in grocery retail.

"The radishes and mangoes come off the same refrigerated truck," replied Jumpy. "It's just that I have a more discerning eye in making my selections."

"Concerning Ray Burl, do you have reason to believe he drove to Warrenton?" asked Isabel.

"Either he was buying groceries, or he was banking all that dough he had to be raking in at Old Man Barclay's place."

"Is that the perception of Ray Burl?" asked Isabel. "That he was tight as bark on a tree and loaded with money?"

"Not Ray Burl, just his boss Mr. Barclay," replied Jumpy. "But what else did Ray Burl spend his money on since he lived like a hermit in the Cape Cod?"

"Maybe he just wasn't a conspicuous spender," said Isabel. "Did he have any friends? Did you see him pal around with any of the guys?"

"He was more of a lone wolf," replied Jumpy. "He was like that back in school, too. Still waters run deep, and all that stuff."

"Did he date the other young ladies besides Maureen Lionheart?" asked Isabel.

Jumpy turned and gave the meat counter a long gaze. He needed to get ready for the after-church Sunday crowds flocking in to do their weekly grocery shopping. While the wives on the produce aisle picked out the peaches and plums in season, the husbands would quiz him for inside tips on how to cook their steaks on their gas grills.

"Who else did Ray Burl date?" said Jumpy, thinking. "Nobody that I can recall offhand. Mo was easy on the eyes, and I tried my luck with her." He laughed. "But it was a no since she didn't go in for the country boy likes of me. Besides I danced like a walrus, and she did like to shake her bootie out on the dance floor."

"No big loss from what we've heard about her," said Alma.

"I have got no regrets on not getting hitched to her, but she's Sammi Jo's mom, so I can't say anything derogatory about Mo. It would hurt Sammi Jo's feelings, and I count her as my friend to ever want to do that."

“For the sake of our discussion, not to go any further than between us, what are your impressions of Mo?” asked Isabel “Why did she leave Quiet Anchorage so abruptly like she did?”

Jumpy shook his head in the negative. “I can’t add anything to what you must’ve already heard from the others.”

“Fair enough,” said Isabel. “Which aisle are your doggie treats on?”

“3-A, where they’ve always been,” replied Jumpy.

Not caring for his impatient tone, Alma moved to leave the IGA, but Isabel, never one to be ruffled, headed for aisle 3-A, and Alma tailed after her. Once they were out of earshot of Jumpy, Isabel stopped Alma in front of the spices section. Isabel’s eyes had a bright sheen to them.

“Did you notice how evasive Jumpy turned when we brought up Mo?”

Alma found it unexciting. “He doesn’t like to spread malicious gossip about her because she is Sammi Jo’s mom.”

“Alma, are we talking about the same Jumpy Blixt? Does that jibe with his normal behavior? He’s usually gabbing about everybody and everything under the sun.”

“I suppose he could still carry a torch for Mo, and he felt jealous over Ray Burl getting the girl and not him.”

Isabel nodded. “Jealousy is a powerful motive for a crime of passion like murder.”

Shooing away with her hand, Alma wasn’t interested. “That took place so long ago. You’re grabbing at straws because nothing else is working for us. Jumpy is no more a killer than we are.”

“You’re probably right on Jumpy, but Mo keeps coming up? Let’s delve more into her past. She had to have had girlfriends she confided in who still live here. Any ideas on how we can locate them without pestering more people with our old biddy questions?”

“I’ve got one possibility,” replied Alma. “Our public library might keep the high school’s old yearbooks. Browse through them and see if Mo poses in the group photos beside anybody. Our luck depends on how far back the yearbooks go, and we can check with the library when it opens a bit later.”

"A stroke of brilliance," said Isabel.

"Why, thank you, sis," said Alma. "It runs in the family, you know."

"Folks dressed sort of quaint when Daddy went to high school." Sammi Jo was now back with Isabel and Alma. They conversed in low tones. "Look at how young he is." Sammi Jo chuckled. "He was much thinner with the long hair of a rocker, too. I almost don't recognize him."

She pointed although Isabel and Alma standing on each side of her seated at the library table had also spotted Ray Burl. The yearbook photo captured him with his loose-jointed slouch among a small knot of male students. Their practical joker to the right had put up his veed fingers at the back of Ray Burl's head to imitate a pair of devil horns. A closer look identified the practical joker as a young Roscoe Fox, the future sheriff of Quiet Anchorage. His once having a sense of humor surprised Alma.

The electric wood lathe shown in the background indicated they'd been photographed in the high school shop. Mr. Eisner, The Industrial Arts teacher with an eye-patch and crooked grin, stood on the group's right end. "Quiet Anchorage H.S. Woodworking Club," read the caption under the photograph.

"I can see where Daddy acquired his carpentry skills," said Sammi Jo.

"He was a handsome young man," said Isabel.

"Quite the catch, he was, yes, I agree," said Alma. "Love his curly hair."

Sammi Jo peered up at them by looking over each shoulder. "I'm convinced he and Mom had to have been happy and in love with each other at least during the early days. Why else would they have gotten married right after high school? I'd never jump straight into a marriage like they did."

Something fell with stunning clarity into Isabel's mind. Sammi Jo's innocent enough question had triggered it. *Why indeed?* thought Isabel. *Did Ray Burl and Mo hold a shotgun wedding? Young couples felt that obligation more back then.*

Having seized on the same notion as Isabel had, Alma steered their conversation to the more immediate goal. "See if Mo appears in any pictures of the extracurricular activities. She'll either be sitting with or standing next to her same friend."

"Mom was everybody's friend," said Sammi Jo. "She always had to be the center of attention." Sammi Jo burst out in a laugh and used her hand to cover her mouth since they were in the main reading room. Luckily, the librarian was nowhere in sight to admonish them. "Do you think they ate dinner before they said grace?" she asked, dishing Isabel and Alma a wink. "I was on the way to make my grand splash in the world."

Isabel exchanged quick glances with Alma.

"No wait, I just did the math, and I was born fifteen months after their wedding anniversary," said Sammi Jo. "Shoot, I hoped I could add some cred to my reputation as a rebel."

Alma who'd picked up the yearbook was riffling through its pages, searching for any group photos that included Mo. Alma's gray eyebrows knitted into a dash. Sammi Jo and Isabel, both watchful and silent, willed Alma to strike paydirt, and she didn't leave them disappointed.

"When did Mo find the time to sleep during her senior year?" asked Alma. "She participated in the Choir, Pep Club, Drama Club, French Club, and National Honor Society. The last activity tells us she had to be smart."

The stoic Sammi Jo shrugged.

"Is she posed beside the same young lady or man in any of the photographs?" asked Isabel.

"Nita Browning appears beside Mo in the Drama Club, French Club, and National Honor Society," replied Alma.

"She's Fats Browning's oldest daughter," said Isabel. "An attractive lady, then and now."

"The same Fats Browning who is our Bingo announcer?" asked Sammi Jo. "Every Wednesday night he starts off the games in that sonorous voice of his booming over the mike, 'Okay, folks, eyes down!' Aunt Phyllis goes, wins an armful of tacky prizes, and cleans them out."

“One and the same.” Alma, shut the yearbook and returned it to its proper place on the bookshelf. “Nita is now a Redfern. She married Judge Redfern’s youngest boy. I have the dickens with remembering people’s names. What is it, Isabel?”

“Homer Redfern.”

“No-no, that’s not so either. Homer is the eldest son. The youngest boy has the curly red hair and works as a salesperson.”

“Then he’s got to be Nicky,” said Isabel. “Helen only had the two boys.”

“Yes, Nita married Nicky Redfern. They didn’t have any children. Or did they? Do I have the correct lineage, Isabel?”

“They’re empty nesters to the best of my knowledge. Do they still live in the cute gingerbread brown cottage? It has the yellow shutters behind the electrical substation on the road out to the turf farm.”

“Not anymore. Helen told me they moved because they had health concerns over their proximity to the electrical substation.” Alma looked at Sammi Jo. “I know Nita is just down the street from us, and Sunday afternoon means the chances are good we’ll catch her at home.”

“Should we call ahead?” Sammi Jo picked up her cell phone. “She might be entertaining guests.”

“Heads up thinking,” said Isabel. “Give Nita a quick buzz. Just say you’d like to chat with her about your mother. Don’t give Nita a specific reason unless she asks for one. If she does, just tell her you’re looking into your mother’s history, and you’re curious if Nita might have some high school stories to share with you.”

“Pitch it to sound nostalgic,” said Alma. “What lady can resist telling others about her glory days? She’ll embellish it, naturally, but we can work around that.”

“Did your glory days come in high school, Alma?” asked Sammi Jo.

Alma was taken aback by Sammi Jo’s direct question. “I wasn’t a goody two-shoes, but I wasn’t a royal stinkpot either.”

Isabel sputtered, attempting to restrain her devilish snicker.

Alma wasn’t amused. “Are you making fun of me?”

“Oh Alma, be truthful and fess up. You were a regular hellion, always cutting up and getting into trouble.”

Sammi Jo was smiling. “This is rich stuff, and I’m digging it. Just give me your craziest story before I call Nita. I’d love to hear it.”

“I’m afraid Isabel is joshing with you,” said Alma. “We had plenty of chores—I hilled enough rows of potatoes to construct the second Great Wall—to finish before sundown with no lax time to be cutting up.”

“Was it all work and no play on the farm, Isabel?” asked Sammi Jo.

Isabel gazed down at her outspread fingers. Yellowish calluses from the manual labor still toughened her palms. Her left index finger’s knuckle had healed with a slight crook in it. She’d broken it while Alma and she were using the woodstove axe to split open a disused tube of toothpaste to extract its sweet-tasting leftovers. The axe had slipped, or it had a cruel mind of its own to bite into Isabel’s finger. They set the bone and bandaged the injury in the farm kitchen because town physician was a useless lush.

“I’ll put it this way: there was never for the lack of anything to do,” she said. “We should go on and chat with Nita.”

“Make your call, Sammi Jo.” Alma glanced over at the library entrance. “Wait, you better postpone that call. A pesky fly just got caught in the ointment.”

Isabel’s turn and look indentified Alma’s pesky fly. “Oh for the love of Mike, where did he come from?”

The ‘he’ was Sheriff Fox. He approached already shaking his finger at them. He wore his stern sheriff’s mask. No doubt he’d espied their sedan parked outside.

Sammi Jo was glad Alma had reshelved the high school yearbook. Her doing that eliminated those set of questions from Sheriff Fox. Instant anger sharpened Sammi Jo’s tongue, but she decided to let her elders handle the irate peace officer since they had a lot of experience in that area.

“Hello there, Sheriff Fox,” said Isabel, sweet and prim.

“Don’t you hello me.” He gave his shaking finger a rest. “I’ve been keeping my eagle eye on you two—no, I’ll now make that three

—nosey ladies, and I don't like what I've seen."

"What observations of us have you twisted in knots?" asked Isabel.

"You've been roving up and down Main Street carrying on your sleuthing shenanigans. Evidently my warning didn't make enough of an impression on you."

Isabel was relieved their visit to Mr. Barclay at the turf farm hadn't reached the sheriff's ear.

"Did your deputy sheriff also illegally record our private conversations?" asked Sammi Jo.

"Careful there, young lady," said Sheriff Fox. "Don't get sassy. I've got half a mind to arrest you here."

"Sammi Jo is correct," said Alma. "You can't shut us up like inside of a..."

"Jail cell," said Sheriff Fox to finish her simile. He was gloating. "Then I throw away its key."

"A nunnery is what I had in mind," said Alma. "Nevertheless my assertion still stands."

"I better not catch you interfering with my homicide investigation." Sheriff Fox put his demonstrative finger back into action. "One more infraction will be all she wrote."

Isabel saw no gain in prolonging their discussion. "Will that be all, Roscoe?"

"No," he replied. "Why do I find you at the library?"

"Genealogical research," replied Alma. "One of our Trumbo ancestors may've been George Washington's spy at Valley Forge, and we couldn't dismiss or confirm it online, so here we be."

"The nosey gene from GW's spy must run in the blood, and you sisters inherited it," said Sheriff Fox.

"Will that be all, Roscoe?" repeated Isabel.

"For the moment, yeah," he replied. "But remember what I just said." He patted the double handcuffs attached to his duty belt. "Otherwise you'll be wearing my bracelets."

Sammi Jo wanted to retort how tacky his tastes were in jewelry, but he'd wheeled around and was striding back out the way he'd come into the library.

“We dodged that bullet,” said Alma, wiping the perspiration from her brow. “Barely.”

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Chapter 21

The lady gumshoes voted unanimously that it'd be more sensible to ride in the air-conditioned sedan rather than hoof it down the scorching sidewalk to Nita Redfern's place. She'd told Sammi Jo she was flying solo while Nicky was out of town for a couple of days on business travel. Salespeople lived out of a suitcase, or they didn't close out too many sales.

Sammi Jo summarized how she'd love to hear any choice stories Nita could repeat about her old pal, Mo Lionheart. Nita let out a hearty laugh over the memories rushing back, saying she had a hundred stories, all of them outrageous, brash, and hilarious as Mo was. Where did Sammi Jo want Nita to begin? Sammi Jo said she be thinking about that while they were en route and thanked Nita.

Isabel parked them under the sketchy shade to a streetside mimosa tree. She loved their shrimp-pink blooms and spicy fragrance used in candles and body oils, but Alma called the mimosa's seed droppings a nuisance.

Nita's compact ranch house, a three-bedroomer, came wrapped in a soft beige- almost ivory-colored vinyl. The most cantankerous lady to please, Alma took an instant liking to Nita's hydrangeas' blue flowers that changed to pink with their aging, a pair of ceramic birdbaths, and an American flag on display. Nita's kempt lawn had been mowed even more recently than the sisters' grass.

"This is the old Stonesiffer place," said Isabel. "Alice Stonesiffer was a grade school teacher and a holy terror the kids knew better than to misbehave around. I like the house's location in town."

"You asked our realtor to make an offer on it before we moved," said Alma.

"Do you remember our realtor baked sticky cinnamon buns before we entered the brick rambler to make it smell delicious?" asked Isabel.

"It must've worked like a charm because we bought it," said Alma.

“You also polished off three buns,” said Isabel.

“It was four buns if you insist on keeping a tally,” said Alma.

“Was it? I must’ve lost count,” said Isabel.

“Hey aunties, Nita opened the door,” said Sammi Jo. “Let’s not keep her waiting, or she might change her mind and close it on us.”

“Your mother was unflappable, Sammi Jo.” Nita rocked forward on the sofa, placing her hands under her thighs. Staying rooted to her native town, she’d probably better preserved her youthful looks than Mo had dealing with life-on-the-road’s hard knocks. “Every graduating class must have their girl gone crazy, and Mo represented ours. She was also a smooth talker who could charm her way out of any tight jam.”

Sammi Jo slouched a bit and shifted her weight to the other side in the armchair nearest to Nita. Hearing her mother called a “girl gone crazy” didn’t thrill Sammi Jo. Nita, 40+ pounds over her recommended weight, had little room for talking about other people’s flaws. Sammi Jo had a tart comeback bristling on the tip of her tongue to lay on Nita when Isabel was quick to intercede.

“We don’t necessarily want or need to hear of Mo’s legendary exploits. Since Ray Burl was shot and killed, Sheriff Fox has been chomping at the bit to wrap up his homicide investigation. Has he dropped by here?”

Nita’s head wagged. “I haven’t laid eyes on Roscoe since before Ray Burl died, and I couldn’t tell him anything pertinent.” She lost her exuberant air, a sober emotion contorting her face. “I’m very sorry about your dad, Sammi Jo. I’m sure it must be a blow to you.”

“It has been tough to cope with this week,” said Sammi Jo, weary-sounding. “It’s important his killer pays his dues for his crime.”

“As well it should be,” said Nita. “You’re entitled to gain the closure. So, you’re detectives of a sort, and I gather your questions are tailored for tracking down Ray Burl’s killer. Am I correct in making my assumptions?”

“Our best case scenario is to prove to Sheriff Fox who should be arrested for Dad’s murder,” replied Sammi Jo.

“Fire away then,” said Nita with a smile. “I’d love to help you in any way I can.”

“We saw you next to Mo in your high school yearbook’s photos,” said Isabel. “Were you both close?”

“We grew virtually inseparable back in school,” said Nita. “We often were mistaken for sisters although we’d only a nodding resemblance. We participated in the same clubs and socialized in the same cliques. She played our ringleader, and I had my hijinks tagging along with Mo.”

“Did you share your innermost secrets?” asked Isabel.

“A few of them, I suppose,” said Nita.

“Did you keep in touch with Mo after she got married?” asked Sammi Jo. “I was a little squirt, but I don’t entertain any memories of seeing you around the Cape Cod.”

“That’s because Mo and I didn’t hook up by then.” Nita was no longer smiling. “Within three months of her wedding, I married Nicky after our whirlwind romance. He and I joined our church, and we had the kids, Rick and June, and doing that changed the dynamics. Mo persisted in pursuing the brilliant lights and honky-tonk music. Not to sound snooty, Sammi Jo, but your mother never understood what it meant to put away her childish things as Paul instructs us to do in Corinthians.”

“No offense taken, Nita, but Mo was my mother, and I can’t change that fact no matter how immature or flighty she may’ve acted,” said Sammi Jo.

Nita mashed her eyes tight with a husky sigh. “Mo, Mo, Mo. God only knows how much I’ve wondered about your fate.” Nita flashed open her eyes, a startling cobalt blue. “Please don’t get me wrong because Mo wasn’t evil. But turbulence always seemed to follow in her wake.”

“How did you learn of her abrupt departure?” asked Sammi Jo.

Nita cocked her head at them. “Like everybody else did. The dramatic yarn of her Greyhound exit made the rounds faster than a prairie fire sweeps.”

“Did anybody catch a glimpse of her hanging out at the bus depot?” asked Sammi Jo.

“She left Quiet Anchorage without fanfare,” replied Nita. “Very unlike her, I have to say. Maybe she used a cheap disguise like a wig, beret, or sunshades. Doing something like that would mesh with her theatrical side.”

“Was she reckless or impulsive by nature?” asked Sammi Jo.

Closing her eyes once more, Nita weighed Sammi Jo’s descriptors with care. A moment dragged by as the memories of youth bobbed to the surface of Nita’s deliberations. The cobalt blues beamed on them again.

“Maybe she was at that,” said Nita. “Can you reflect back to the summer you turned sixteen? The world became your oyster. Life was jolly good fun, especially if you didn’t have a job, and you could stay out as late as you dared, and you could sleep in as late as you pleased. Ah, those were the good, old school girl days.

“That’s why the inner voice urged you to be in the moment and soak it up because your endless summer carried an expiration date. The problem with Mo was she never heard that inner voice having its say. Or if she did, she chose to ignore it. She aimed to chase her endless summer and keep it going. Do you see now why I say what I do about her?”

Sammi Jo had grasped the verbose Nita’s meaning by her third sentence. Mo was a party girl. Yeah, Sammi Jo had gone through the same wild phase but a year ahead of Mo’s timeframe. By the next summer at sixteen, Sammi Jo had taken on working three menial jobs some girls would never roll up their sleeves and do, but she knew the dirt washed off her hands fine.

The pay was a pittance, the labor bone-tiring. But a paying job was a paying job, so she reached down for some extra grit and kept on trucking. That was the Ray Burl in her coming out. She returned to the present, depressing since they’d really gained nothing useful on Mo from their seeing Nita.

Isabel was never one to concede defeat. “Did you ever hear any whispers of Mo’s hanky-panky?” she asked.

Nita minced her words as if she wanted to spare hurting Sammi Jo’s emotions. “Let’s just say Mo always hit it off with the gentlemen she met.”

“Did she sleep around?” asked Sammi Jo, point-blank.

“On that, I’m not qualified to give an answer. I wasn’t around Mo after our graduation. We no longer shared our secrets, not that I had any like that. Through it all, Ray Burl struck me as the oblivious, tolerant husband.”

“Tolerant maybe, but oblivious, not even close,” said Sammi Jo, defensive. “He knew which end was up about her.”

“Did he really know?” Nita’s frosty glare fastened to the younger lady. “I overheard them once arguing on an aisle at the IGA. Mo told Ray Burl she’d kill him if they didn’t move away from the Cape Cod. He muttered what sounded like to me that was the only way he was ever going to leave there.”

“She was probably just angry over something at him and venting,” said Sammi Jo.

“You asked for my frank impressions, so I gave them to you,” said Nita.

Isabel defused the tensing situation. “Is your church still looking for a new pastor?”

Nita smiled. “We’ve narrowed our shortlist down to the top three, one being a lady.”

“I’ll be praying for you to pick the right one,” said Isabel.

“Thanks,” said Nita. “Your prayers are appreciated.”

The three investigators could think of no further questions. Nita asked if they’d like a cold beverage, anything but alcoholic since the only spirits in the Redfern’s house came from above.

Before Alma could say a tall glass of iced tea would hit the right spot, gung ho Isabel indicated they should be going. Nita said she understood their urgency, and she’d be praying for their swift resolution, and they drove off from her ranch house, Alma still thirsty.

Chapter 22

Late every Sunday morning, a rally of muscle cars with their drivers' sweethearts' names painted on the rear fins squealed down Main Street. The drivers heading for Reynolds' drag race track fancied themselves as TV's Luke and Bo Duke gunning their General Lee back in the 1980s.

Reynolds dropped away the security chain from his front brick gate posts, each with a brass eagle mounted atop it. Ray Burl once wisecracked to Sammi Jo how the pair of eagles resembled vultures.

Avid spectators arrived early as possible to wait in line and buy their tickets. They streamed through the gate to reach the bleachers where they staked out their vantage points.

Reynolds didn't have to sweat if the racket his race cars raised was a nuisance because many local residents came to cheer on their favorite drivers and muscle cars. This Sunday found the sisters out in the midst of the hoopla. Since Reynolds was busy putting on his extravaganza, Sammi Jo holed up with the sisters inside the cool relief at Eddy's Deli. The mercury had climbed to the low nineties, and ordering hot cups of coffee or espresso was out of the question.

Instead, they each ordered their old summer standby beverage: a tall glass of iced tea. Isabel and Sammi Jo took theirs with lemon slice, but Alma liked a lime slice with a fresh mint sprig. Tabitha said Eddy was fresh out of mint sprigs, so Alma lowered her expectations and settled for the run-of-the-mill lime slice.

Isabel had glimpsed Sheriff Fox's cruiser through the window, its red-blue roof bar glittering like the town square Christmas tree as it zipped by on the street. When she pointed him out to Alma and Sammi Jo, he'd already vanished from their window vantage point.

"Where is Roscoe off to in a big hurry?" asked Isabel.

"There must be a sale on doughnuts at the Wawa, or he's setting up a Sunday speed trap for the muscle car drivers," said Sammi Jo.

"Good zinger," said Alma. "You make a first-rate cynical shamus."

“My zinger moments are what I live for,” said Sammi Jo.

“I don’t much care where’s he going as long as he stays out of our hair,” said Alma.

“Sometimes Roscoe is a roadblock more than an asset to uncover the truth,” said Isabel.

Tabitha sauntered up behind Alma, and Isabel smiled at the waitress.

“Will you not mention to Sheriff Fox we came here in case he should visit the deli?” asked Isabel. “We’re trying to keep a low profile around him.”

“Up to his dirty tricks again, is he?” said Tabitha. “How he managed to be re-elected sheriff I’ll never understand.”

“Simple. He was the only candidate after Clarence Fishback dropped out of the race,” said Sammi Jo. “Even if Roscoe Fox had run opposed, his shirttail kin would’ve voted him into office.”

“That’d do it, all right. Can I get you gals anything else? I’m chafing to go on my break for a smoke. Eddy is supposed to cover for me, but he’s too engrossed by fiddling with his new boy toy of a cell phone.”

“We’ll be fine,” replied Isabel. “Just a minute before you go. Has Ray Burl been a steady customer at the deli?”

Tabitha smiled. “You bet, and he’s a big tipper.” Her smile went south as she remembered Ray Burl was no more, and his surviving daughter sat at the booth as her customer. “Was, I mean, of course. I’m sorry as I can be for your loss, Sammi Jo.”

She nodded as she rotated the glass of iced tea on the tabletop. “Thanks, Tabitha. It’s still a shock to me, but I’m bearing up from it.”

“I wish I could help you, but I only had contact with him while I waited on the tables.”

“But you say he was a big tipper,” said Isabel. “Was this always his custom?”

“He left an extra sawbuck—ten dollars—after each meal about the time he got promoted to foreman. I figured he’d gotten a hefty raise and was sharing some of the love with us poor folks.”

“Is that what he told you?” asked Isabel. “That he’d landed a sizeable pay increase?”

“You know Ray Burl. He was a man who favored silence over talk. When he did speak, it was on the basic stuff. I liked him fine before he added the big tips to his tabs. You know, come to think of it, he did once tell me out of the blue he’d bought a shotgun. Then he chuckled, saying how it was something he’d never done before. I asked him if he’d taken up a new hobby, you know, like skeet shooting or duck hunting. ‘No ma’am,’ he replied. ‘I feel the necessity to keep one nearby in case I’m experiencing a bad day.’”

“What did he mean by saying ‘experiencing a bad day?’” asked Sammi Jo.

“I don’t have the foggiest idea. It just stuck with me since it was so unlike him. Personally, I don’t care much for guns so I let the matter drop. He didn’t further elaborate, paid his bill, and strolled out with that loose-jointed saunter in those slant-heeled boots. Well, I’ve got to be off before my break time is up. Later on, ladies.”

“Thanks for your help,” said Sammi Jo.

As Tabitha, her pack of cigarettes and lighter already out, whisked away from their booth, Isabel mulled over how Ray Burl’s shotgun kept popping up like a whack-a-mole in their conversations. He’d pretty much admitted to Tabitha he’d acquired it for self-protection. Isabel wanted to search at his Cape Cod for the shotgun, but she dismissed the idea because Sheriff Fox and his underlings had already combed through the rooms. Or had they yet? She backed up in her thinking and didn’t see why they couldn’t at least try their luck. She presented her idea to Alma and Sammi Jo.

Alma turned to Sammi Jo. “Why I bet checking inside of the Cape Cod hasn’t crossed Sheriff Fox’s mind.”

Sammi Jo grinned. “That’s a sucker’s bet to take.”

“Then what are we sitting around here for?” said Alma. “We’ll be off as fast as Isabel pays for our iced teas.”

Chapter 23

Ray Burl Garner had lived in a Cape Cod fabricated from cinderblocks. It was set a softball toss off the state road under a grove of honey locust trees. Unlike many of his neighbors, his Cape Cod lacked for a single stall garage while it cost about eight grand when built during the early 1950s. Stucco (pastel lettuce green) covered the Cape Cod's exterior while paint over plaster (bright canary yellow) adorned the interior walls.

Sammi Jo had accepted the Cape Cod as a primitive but colorful shelter, and true to form, Mo carped how she loathed to take up residence inside a bat cave. She was correct in that the Cape Cod suffered from a few drawbacks. Foremost, the moisture wicked up on the interior walls after the weather turned cold.

Ray Burl, striving to make a happy wife for a happy life, experimented with applying the different epoxies and paints on the wall to dispel the dampness. No remedy he tested worked out very well. All the while, Mo stewed at a long simmer when she didn't explode with her temper until she finally had enough and vamoosed on the Greyhound that morning in May.

Sammi Jo had stored up lots of happy girlhood memories, and the best of those were her playing under the ornamental honey locusts. Their cream-hued flowers bursting out in late April suffused a pleasant scent. She predicted it would be a phenomenal commercial hit like Shalimar or Chanel No. 5 if the perfumeries could develop a process to distill the exotic bouquet.

She'd dab it on following Coco Chanel's enduring advice. She had tipped off the ladies to put on their perfume wherever they liked to be kissed. So far, only Reynolds knew where those sweet spots on Sammi Jo were located. His frequenting those sweet spots was in serious jeopardy if he didn't quit smoking cigarettes and remaining so insensitive about her father's murder.

Sammi Jo could do without the honey locusts' brittle, black thorns when she kicked off her sneakers and went barefoot like a

pigtailed heathen during her summer vacations until the first day of school civilized her again. Skillful with his hands as a jack of all trades, Ray Burl crafted the durable wood from the dead honey locusts into small pieces of furniture, like end tables and magazine racks. He sold these on the side as a way to supplement the family coffers.

The three ladies arrived at the Cape Cod. Sammi Jo inserted her door key, and they entered. She felt right at home and sensed her father's presence in the bedroom down the short hallway. She had the urge to holler out to him as if he still lived there.

"Yo, Daddy! You've got three guests out front. How about if you shake a leg? We've got oodles to catch up on, so don't you go and sleep away this gorgeous Sunday. Time is wasting. I say again, yo, Ray Burl! Where are you, sir? It's past time for working folks to rise and shine."

She heard the sane twangy drawl he'd last used on their recorded phone conversation she'd replayed earlier.

"What's that? Oh, it's you, Sammi Jo. Lord, I just now woke up. What time is it? I never set my alarm clock for Sunday mornings. Look, just come back in an hour. You and your friends don't want to be around me when I've just rolled out of bed and before my first pot of coffee."

"I'd do that for you, sure, but Isabel and Alma are the friends with me. They've been up for hours, and they're putting you to shame."

"Why didn't you say so in the first place? They're my most favorite people in the world. All right, I'll be out straightaway, so just hold your horses."

"Hey, Daddy, have you heard anything from Mom lately?"

Their imagined repartee playing through Sammi Jo's mind had a one-sided finality because Ray Burl wasn't at home. His absence wasn't a temporary but permanent status. She had no choice but to either accept it as true or go out of her ever-loving mind. A heavy, dark weight lay on her heart and slowed its pulse to a sluggish one. New tears seeped from their ducts into her eye corners, and she feared making a complete ninny out of herself again in front of Isabel and Alma.

Always attuned to others' somber moods, Isabel stepped up to guide Sammi Jo through the desperate interval. The older lady took

the younger one's forearm into her grasp.

"It's okay, dear, to be with your sorrows, but only for a little while, since we're here to accomplish something important."

Sammi Jo, slit-lipped and set-jawed, nodded her head while she gathered herself. Isabel was right. They'd ridden to the Cape Cod with the purpose in mind to dig out the clues illuminating Ray Burl's murderer. That was the extent of what they could handle doing on this visit. There'd be later trips when Sammi Jo could let her rawer emotions have their freer rein. She buckled down and resolved to carry out what they'd come to do.

"What is this note?" Isabel cast down her glance at a sheet of paper left on the foyer table. "I went off and left my reading glasses on my nightstand. Alma, how about you?"

"Unfortunately, I'm just as absent-minded as you are. Sammi Jo, we need your pair of young eyes. Can you read to us what this note says?"

She accepted it from Isabel, scanned the opening lines, and sneered. "It's from none other than Sheriff Fox, and not only that but it's addressed to you and Alma."

Isabel arched her bemused eyebrows. "My, my. Roscoe must've forgotten how to apply a stamp to an envelope, and what the U.S. Post Office does for us."

Alma glowered at the note. "What does our gallant peace officer have to say for himself? I'm sure it can't be anything close to nice."

Sammi Jo read out verbatim from the handwritten page she held before her.

"Dear Ms. Isabel and Ms. Alma, This is your sheriff writing this memorandum. If you're reading it, then you've entered my crime scene, and I must warn you to turn back before it's too late. No amateur snoops, such as you, are permitted access to this area until I have seen fit to release it, and that won't be any time soon either. You can rest assured if any clues are to be had, my capable deputy sheriffs and I will collect and process them. If you decide to defy my direct order, I'll have no recourse left but to arrest you for the obstruction of justice. That means jail time! Signed, Roscoe Fox, Sheriff of Quiet Anchorage"

“‘Amateur snoops,’ eh?” said Alma. “I take offense at his casting aspersions on us.”

“He’s also grossly incorrect,” said Isabel. “This isn’t the crime scene, but rather where the murder victim lived. Moreover I’d say the distinction renders his written memorandum null and void.”

“You should cover yourselves and ask your legal counsel if that’s the right assumption.” Sammi Jo handed the memorandum to Alma.

“A judicious idea.” Isabel turned to Alma. “Shall you ring Dwight Holden, or should I?”

Alma plucked out her cell phone like a plum from her pocketbook. “I’ll be glad to take care of it. Dwight and I enjoy a special client-attorney rapport.”

“He’s so jazzed any time we phone him,” said Isabel. “Meantime Sammi Jo, keep an eye out the door for our intrepid sheriff.”

Dwight’s relaxing Sunday came to a ringing halt after he answered Alma’s call, and she summarized their current legal quandary. He cleared his constricting throat before he also coughed a little.

Alma glanced at Isabel. “Dwight suffers from allergies like yours.”

“The poor dear,” said Isabel. “I’ll give him a few of my pills the next time we see him.”

“Should I ask him if he’s washed the stack of dirty dishes?” asked Alma.

“Give him a little while longer,” replied Isabel. “It was a high stack.”

Back on Alma’s cell phone, Dwight’s tenor sound strained and rusty. “Let me get this straight, Alma. You’ve disobeyed a written memorandum from our chief law officer, a crime besides incurring his considerable wrath. Now you’re contacting me at home and seeking my legal counsel after the fact on what you should do next. Well, I’m just thrilled to my toes.”

“We’ve committed no infractions,” said Alma. “How could we read Sheriff Fox’s memorandum until we came indoors where he’d posted it unless we have X-ray vision like Batman does?”

“Superman. What are you asking me then, Alma?”

“Is this a binding document since Sammi Jo now legally owns the Cape Cod?” asked Alma. “Besides the turf farm is the actual crime scene and not in here.”

“You’re just splitting frog hairs, Alma. If Sheriff Fox says it’s the crime scene, then it just is one. Accept that as stone cold fact and act accordingly.”

“Your advice stinks, Dwight. You sound like you’re in Sheriff Fox’s pocket.”

“I know the nuances of the law. Press your cell phone close to your ear and listen closely to me. Get. Out. Of. There. Pronto. Please.”

“Dwight, you’re avoiding my question.” Alma rattled the sheet of paper in her hand. “Is this a legal document or not?”

“If Sheriff Fox arrests you, my hands are tied. Even your friendship with Judge Redfern won’t get you off the hook. This time it won’t. She’d tell you the same thing. You’ve finally taken things too far and crossed the line.”

“Dwight, quit being an alarmist and worry wart,” said Alma, disgusted. “Are we standing on safe legal ground here?”

“I’m not going to respond to your question, and I’m also going to pretend we never spoke, because the next time I see you in a barred conference room, I want my conscience clear that I had nothing to do with it.”

“That gets recorded as a no. Goodbye, Dwight. Thanks for your help.” Alma closed their link.

“What did Dwight advise us?” asked Sammi Jo.

“He suggested we should proceed as if we never found Sheriff Fox’s memorandum,” said Alma with a straight face. “Or words to that effect.”

Isabel knew Dwight well enough to tell Alma was stretching the truth. “Work fast before Sheriff Fox catches us in here red-handed.”

“No sign of our own Wyatt Earp in his Crown Vic.” Sammi Jo still looked out the door’s glass.

“So far,” said Isabel. “Stay tuned.”

“Suppose he was savvy enough to install surveillance cameras to keep an eye on the Cape Cod?” asked Sammi Jo.

Isabel hunched up her shoulders. “Then we’ll have plenty of fast talking to do with or without our legal counsel present.”

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Chapter 24

Ray Burl fit Isabel's notion of a carpenter (he'd pick up side jobs in trade for a meal, Sammi Jo once joked) in that he was neat and orderly. Everything was kept in its designated place. Isabel half-expected to see he'd installed a pegboard in the kitchen to keep his cooking utensils in quick reach. However, it was a normal-looking kitchen with a gas range and humming refrigerator. If any greasy food odors lingered, she couldn't detect them. There were no pet accoutrements visible, she also noted.

Brick red, tight-knit carpeting paved Ray Burl's modest hermit abode. Two small, well-furnished bedrooms occupied the other half, the smallest of which Sammi Jo had used as a girl. Isabel observed the practical single bed, not a canopy bed gussied up in girly pink frills and valentine-shaped pillows. They schlepped upstairs, and their search there ascertained it was only a common junk repository.

"Not a Buckingham Palace or the Taj Mahal," said Sammi Jo, back downstairs. "I find it smaller whenever I come back."

"It's a lovely, quaint home," said Isabel. "Every bit as cute as the Cape Cods on Martha's Vineyard."

"Never more snug as a bug in a rug," said Alma.

"Ray Burl never saw much point in moving up to bigger and better if the Cape Cod served his needs, and it always did."

"There aren't a lot of hidey holes to stash his shotgun," said Alma, looking around them.

"Assuming it was Ray Burl's shotgun," said Isabel.

"I can't get his cashmere dress suit out of my thoughts," said Alma.

Sammi Jo twisted her lips into a knot. "It must've been a suit he bought somewhere recently because I don't have a recall of seeing it before he died."

"Why does a hardworking fellow need a dress suit?" asked Alma.

"That's the sixty-four thousand dollar question." Isabel gave Sammi Jo an inquiring glance. "Did Ray Burl wear the cashmere dress suit for going to church?"

A wan smile touched at Sammi Jo's lips. "He wasn't a God-fearing man. I doubt if his shadow had darkened a church's doorway twice since he marched down the aisle in his wedding coat."

"Scratch that as a possible reason," said Isabel. "Where else might require a man to go in a suit?"

"Was he a member in good standing with the Lions Club, Kiwanis, or Odd Fellows?" asked Alma.

"He'd been called an odd fellow once or twice," replied Sammi Jo. "Beyond that, no, he wasn't the civic-minded or outgoing type either."

The perplexed Isabel wrinkled her face. "Why does a gentleman don a cashmere dress suit on a Thursday evening, lock his door, and then later turn up as a corpse found lying in the parking lot where he works?"

"The answer has to lie in here someplace," said Alma.

"We could stay longer and look in the harder to reach places like behind the fridge and under the gas range," said Sammi Jo. "Knowing my father like I do, he'd think twice before keeping a valuable item in his digs. A safe deposit box is my best guess, and we can't go peek inside there."

"A pair of keys would go to its lock," said Alma. "Any object that small would fit into a crevice or under a section of loose wall panel."

"We don't have enough time to search in here that thoroughly," said Isabel. "Where are Ray Burl's carpentry tools?"

"He usually carried them in the tool chest riding in the back of his truck," replied Sammi Jo. "Sheriff Fox impounded it at the crime scene."

"Was anything of value glommed from his truck?" asked Isabel.

"How would any of us know that without seeing the police report?" asked Alma. "Sheriff Fox wouldn't share it with us if his life depended on it."

Sammi Jo escorted them into the master bedroom where she snapped on the overhead light. Ray Burl slept in a single bed that looked military in origin with its steel tubular frame. Isabel concluded he'd downscaled from the full-sized bed after Mo had bailed. He'd left no dirty crew socks or bib overalls littering the carpet.

His only three pairs of shoes, the scuffed up one used for his job, waited in a row in front of the chest-high bureau. It displayed an attractive wood grain of a mellow reddish shade, and Sammi Jo said he'd built it from the honey locust trees they'd passed under while they walked to the Cape Cod.

"Ray Burl was a genuine craftsman," said Isabel.

"Carpentry and cabinetmaking were his first loves and passions," said Sammi Jo. "Neither vocation offered him full-time work to make enough money to live on even as frugally as he did."

"Did he get a lot of customers for his carpentry projects?" asked Isabel. "Like any out-of-towners who'd learned of his talents through word of mouth?"

"I don't know how many side orders he took in, but he was nearly always wearing his tool belt when I was at the house. I remember breathing in the sweet smell of green sawdust when I stepped through the threshold."

"Then Ray Burl may've known his killer who was a customer," said Isabel. "That possibility enlarges the pool of suspects beyond those folks just living in Quiet Anchorage."

"He never wrote anything down like the customer names, and ran it on a cash-only basis."

Isabel had a seat on the bed. "I'll make believe I'm his killer. After I bump off my victim, I wish to cover my tracks and throw off the investigating sheriff. What elaborate lengths do I go to accomplish that? Think of the cashmere dress suit, in particular."

"Well, I suppose I could redress Ray Burl in it," said Alma. "I have to wonder how tricky it is to switch the clothes on a dead man. Obviously, he's not in any position to cooperate with you. It'd be awkward and cumbersome like trying to undress and dress a department store mannequin."

The mental image Isabel formed was a ludicrous one of stretching and fumbling with arms and legs. She focused on the suit itself. "Where might have Ray Burl bought the suit? No Quiet Anchorage merchant would sell cashmere. Did he order it from a sales catalog? From off the internet, say, on eBay or through Craigslist?"

"If it was me, I'd go to Warrenton," said Sammi Jo. "Peebles, perhaps."

"I believe cashmere might be a little more pricey than anything at that apparel outlet," said Isabel. "Alma, haven't we ridden by a men's tailor shop? My mind's eye remembers seeing one located on Main Street."

Her sister didn't have to give it a second thought. "Norman Rhee's is wedged between the Cheshire Cat Bookshop and Svoboda's Photography Shop."

"Mr. Rhee could fit a gentleman for a tailored dress suit," said Isabel. "He may not be real cheap, but he's convenient and efficient."

Sammi Jo wheeled around, walking fast to leave the Cape Cod.

Isabel hopped up from the bed.

Alma from the side of her mouth murmured to Isabel. "Sammi Jo has made up her mind on where our search goes next."

"I'm worried about her." Isabel turned off the light switch.

Voicing her apprehension was unlike the customarily placid Isabel, and Alma felt the fright leave a cold spot knotted in her chest. She offered no response before Isabel continued.

"All this scratching at her emotional wounds can't be helping her to mend."

"She said she won't rest until her father's killer is behind bars," said Alma.

At the opened front door, Sammi Jo turned and called back to them lingering in Ray Burl's old bedroom. "Isabel and Alma, quit your whispering and fretting back there. I'm holding up, so don't be afraid I'm set to fly to pieces at any second."

"We'll make out because Sammi Jo is tough as..." Alma trailing off couldn't quite put her finger on the appropriate comparison.

Isabel rescued her characterization. "Steel magnolia. She's tough as a steel magnolia."

"There you go," said Alma, smiling. "That's Sammi Jo on the button."

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Chapter 25

"I'll sit still for sleeping through, er, I mean cuddling with you to watch a classic chick flick," said Reynolds. "Which one is it to be? *Pretty Woman*? *When Harry Met Sally*? *Dirty Dancing*? *The Bridges of Madison County*? See, I've bought all your faves on brand new DVDs. Or I could be talked into enduring *Beaches* again, but that particular one will require a cold six-pack of PBR to go with the barbecued Doritos."

"First off, they're not called 'chick flicks,' Reynolds," said Sammi Jo of her guilty pleasure. "Hearing that condescending term sticks in my craw."

Cell phones linked them. Isabel was driving Alma and Sammi Jo to Warrenton. The afternoon swelter spurred Isabel to run the air conditioner at its next-to-highest setting. Meantime Alma pulled a cardigan sweater over her shoulders and buttoned its top button at the neck. Sitting in the rear seat, Sammi Jo felt comfortable.

"What might you call them?" asked Reynolds. "Is *touchy-feely cinema* okay by you? Fill me in, and the next time, I'll use the correct PC term."

"Skip that and listen. There's no way I can get with you tonight. I'm in the middle of doing something important with Isabel and Alma."

"Something that's more important than us? How could that be, honey?"

He sounded petulant and whiny, irritating Sammi Jo. She wanted to reach through their connection and shake a little common sense into him. "It's about my father's murder, and my pressing need to get a few answers about it. Sheriff Fox's answer is to march me off to prison, but that ain't going to happen as long as I draw mortal breath."

"Amazing. How might you know what Sheriff Fox is thinking?"

"I lost my crystal ball and tarot cards, but I do know he loves to take the path of least resistance. Megan Connors. Need I say

anymore to you?"

"He doesn't suspect you're Ray Burl's killer, and your hanging out so much with those old dingbats is making you paranoid."

"Old dingbats? Is that what you just said? Reynolds Kyle, you might get away with calling me spiteful names, but don't you dare insult my friends. Ever. Hear me? I'm not having it from you."

Isabel flitted her eyes to graze the rearview mirror. Sammi Jo wasn't smiling or sounding happy. She was ticked. Reynolds had better shape up and fly right.

"Apologies," he said. "Just saying. It's my opinion you're exaggerating how the sheriff has it out for you just based on your intuition. He doesn't seem to be making rapid progress, true enough, but we don't know what he's uncovered in his investigation, so give him a fair chance."

"Reynolds, my cow died, so I don't need your bull. Answer me this. Where is Sheriff Fox? Is he out with his posse of deputy sheriffs beating the bushes? Not at all. He's where he always is on Sunday afternoon: at your drag race track with a KFC drumstick in one fist and a digital camera in his other, while cheering at the top of his lungs."

"I can see him from where I'm standing. But come on, you can't begrudge the chief lawman for enjoying his Sunday R&R, especially after I've charged him for the full price of admission and hate to give refunds."

"Why should I cut Roscoe Fox any slack, particularly when I'm out here with Isabel and Alma playing *Charlies Angels*?"

"Hey, I gotta go, honey. A fistfight has broken out behind the concessions stand. This is bad stuff for my family-friendly image."

"Just signal to our chief lawman, and he'll rush in and break it up. That's what the taxpayers elected and pay him to do. Be talking to you soon." Sammi Jo stashed away her cell phone. *Men.*

"Did I hear you mention Sheriff Fox?" asked Alma.

"I did. Guess where he is? At the drag race track with Reynolds. A fracas broke out, and he's off to grab our sheriff to rush in and reestablish law and order. Good luck with doing that."

“Roscoe is at the drag race track,” said Isabel. “Knowing that might come in handy later.”

“Meantime step on it and catch Mr. Rhee before he closes up shop for the day,” said Alma.

“I’m surprised he advertises holding Sunday hours,” said Isabel. “Only the pharmacy is open today in town.”

“Walmart and the other big box stores give the local merchants plenty of competition,” said Alma. “Don’t get me started on my big box store rant either.”

“I’m also not their champion, but they’re not so shabby,” said Sammi Jo. “I’ve shopped there, and I’ve had pretty good luck with their products.”

“You don’t say,” said Alma. “On your recommendation, I might tag along with Isabel or you the next time you go. My new caulking gun has gone astray.”

If a traveler approached the town of Warrenton from the south, he’d arrive at a Y-fork in the highway. The east road was the new bypass skirting the commercial strip, which grew up along the older west bypass. But if he was Alma, Isabel, and Sammi Jo, he’d avoid taking either bypass and use the exit ramp. That road passed by the roadside Osage oranges, the drycleaner’s parking lot where the Farmer’s Market operated, and curved into downtown Main Street. The parking meters had been removed years ago.

The ladies found the Cheshire Cat Bookshop and Svoboda’s Photography Shop closed as they hailed Mr. Rhee standing outside his tailor shop. It was the hue of lemon meringue pie.

He leaned over, the door key in his grasp. The brown and beige pork pie hat with its tiny red feather on his thin head and his beige seersucker dress jacket lent him a jaunty flair. He saw their approach from the corner of his eye and finished securing the door. He returned Alma’s wave and “hello” without the trace of an accent.

Their alacrity wasn’t for a social occasion, and the ladies probably weren’t interested in men’s tailoring. He didn’t scowl despite his growing displeasure. They bore a familiar look but, closer up, he was less certain of it.

“Mr. Rhee, one moment, please,” said Alma who introduced them.

None of their names meant diddly to him.

“Are you ladies making a pick up?” he asked. “I can reopen my shop.”

“We’d like to discuss one of your possible customers,” said Alma.

“I see. Is he a relation of yours?” asked Mr. Rhee.

“Ray Burl Garner was my father,” replied Sammi Jo.

Mr. Rhee, peering down at his shoe tops, was shaking his head. “Garner, Garner...no, he doesn’t ring any bell. Sorry.”

The ladies surrounded Mr. Rhee as his thirst grew for that frosty can of root beer he’d left on the top shelf in his townhouse’s refrigerator. The afternoon heat had neared a sauna bath’s intensity.

“Ray Burl wasn’t a regular customer,” said Sammi Jo.

“Evidently not,” said Mr. Rhee.

“Might we speak inside where it’s more private and before we roast like chestnuts on the open hearth?” asked Alma.

“Do you see this taking that long?” asked Mr. Rhee. “I already told you I don’t know the fellow.”

Isabel had few qualms over fibbing if it expedited things. “Mr. Rhee, my elderly sister Alma gets these dizzy spells if she’s out in this heat for too long. Unless you want to deal with the embarrassing furor of an old lady passed out at your shop’s doorstep, our moseying inside is advisable.”

Elderly sister? Alma frowned at Isabel.

The unenthusiastic Mr. Rhee took her point. He reversed his ministrations at the lock, dropping his door ring with a sailor’s curse under his breath. He glanced at Isabel, and she smiled her prim smile. He sweated over whether they had some batty scheme cooked up to clean out the cash register. They’d only make off with five dollars and change. It’d been a slow Sunday.

The younger lady—Sammi Jo?—flashed the quick eyes like the stick up artist he’d encountered, the last straw that goaded him to move his shop. He couldn’t imagine where she carried a concealed weapon in the peach-colored blouse and short shorts she wore—

barely. Perhaps she'd taped a straight razor to the sole of one of her sandals.

His hasty over-the-shoulder glance confirmed she looked tough like a roller derby queen. Was she snickering at his fumbling efforts? He listened sharper, but only a cat-paw's breeze reached his ears. He nudged up the pork pie hat to let the breeze cool his perspiring scalp. That cold root beer was never further away from his parched lips.

"Mr. Rhee, would you like one of us to take a crack at it?" asked Alma.

"I haven't eaten since a prune Danish and coffee this morning," he said. "I'm a little swim-headed is all. Once inside, I'll perk right up."

"Sammi Jo will be glad to pitch in," said Isabel.

"No!" Mr. Rhee's head swiveled around to them. "I can manage it, no fuss."

"Whatever you say, Mr. Rhee," said Isabel. "We'll be patient."

"I'm feeling some vertigo," said Alma, putting her wrist at her forehead.

"Oh-oh," said Sammi Jo. "You better hurry, Mr. Rhee."

At last, he tripped the lock's tumblers and stepped back for them to file into his tailor shop.

They clustered by the brushed copper cash register at the counter's end. A red tailor's chalk the shape of an oversized guitar pick and measuring tape lay on the countertop. He left on his pork pie hat.

The chill from the running air conditioner bracketed in the transom raised the goose bumps on the ladies' exposed flesh. Alma could see the white crystallized patches of freezer burn forming on them if they overstayed their time in here. The stale nicotine of smokers pervaded the tailor shop making it a veritable man-cave.

Mr. Rhee toed the shop door closed and turned to them. "What's this about your father Ray Burl whom I've never met?" he asked.

"Last week – it was on Thursday – he was found murdered at his workplace," replied Sammi Jo.

Mr. Rhee winced at the announcement. "I'm sorry for –"

She heeled up her palm. "Thanks but just hang tight. Let me first tell you the rest of my story."

He relented. "Go on then."

"My father died wearing a cashmere dress suit. We've narrowed down the local places he could've bought it as new to your shop."

"Maybe, maybe not. Does it match today's apparel fashions?"

"No idea since I only saw it the once after he died."

"Did you snap a photo of it?"

"Huh? My father as a corpse? I hardly think so. Why do you need a picture?"

Mr. Rhee picked up the tailor's chalk, tossed it a few inches into the air, and snagged it in his palm. "It would help us to date the suit. Perhaps it's his wedding coat, and he kept it in garment storage over all this time."

"His suit might be an older one then," said Sammi Jo. "He wasn't big on current dress fashions."

"Men seldom are," said Mr. Rhee. "Their wives keep them fashionably dressed. Thank goodness for me, too."

Isabel brought up her concerns. "Cashmere is rather pricey, is it not? It also requires dry cleaning. Neither of those luxury expenses would be in a young bridegroom's limited budget."

"Perhaps an older friend or family member passed it on to him as gently used."

"Perhaps." Isabel mulled it over.

Alma elevated her hand. "Do you mind cutting back the A/C?"

Mr. Rhee blinked at her. "Are you cold?"

She presented her bare arm. "Can't you see all the goose bumps on me?"

He shrugged under his beige seersucker dress jacket and flipped off the air conditioner unit.

"Thanks," said Alma.

Isabel went on. "If Ray Burl did get the wedding coat as a hand-me-down, would he have come here for any alterations he required?"

"Probably not by me because I just moved to Warrenton last year."

“Where did you hang your pork pie hat before, Mr. Rhee?” asked Isabel.

“Annandale, inside the Capital Beltway, has a sizeable Korean population. But as an older man and a widower to boot, I sought a slower lifestyle. So I bought and opened my tailor shop here.”

“I was in the grocery store industry,” said Isabel. “How is business going for you?”

“You know how it is. Things can always be a little better,” he replied. “But I remain the eternal optimist.”

“How much do we owe you for your time?” Alma undid the clasp on her pocketbook.

Mr. Rhee, acting more relaxed now, smiled and wagged his head. “No charge for my newest friends. Besides, I didn’t really do anything for you.”

“You took our questions, and we’re grateful for your assistance,” said Isabel.

“You are more than welcome,” said Mr. Rhee. “Feel free to return anytime you’re in the neighborhood. I’d love to chat again.”

“We’ll do that,” said Alma, leaving. She enacted a Columbo half-turn spin, only without the chewed on cigar held between her fingers, and posed her final question. “By the way, Mr. Rhee, are you a Scrabble aficionado?”

Isabel arched her eyebrows. “Alma! What a cheeky thing to ask him.”

Mr. Rhee chuckled. “No, it’s perfectly fine, Isabel. I don’t mind it.”

“In that case,” she said. “How about it? Do you like to play Scrabble?”

The competitive spark gleamed in his eye sizing up the gray pair of easy marks. “I’m a little rusty,” he said, downplaying his skill.

“We can help you brush up your game,” said Alma also seeing an easy mark in him.

Chapter 26

Once they returned home, Alma tried to entice Sammi Jo into staying “to play a little Scrabble.” The younger woman politely declined. She’d been trapped by Alma’s Scrabble invitations in the recent past and knew the sisters cast aside all passage of time. They even deadened their cell phones. No interruptions other than a catastrophic asteroid strike obliterating the Earth would be tolerated.

That night while playing Scrabble, Sammi Jo had yawned her way until midnight, her tired eyes drooping half-asleep. But such wasn’t the case for Isabel and Alma. They only refilled their tall glasses of iced tea, powdered their noses, and drew out their first seven letters to begin the next game. They also fussed over tallying up the score after each play of their letter tiles.

“You’d better re-add those two numbers, Alma,” Isabel would say.

Alma squinted at the figures she’d written down on the tablet of paper. She tapped the pencil’s eraser on the tablet. “H’m. I forgot to carry the one there, didn’t I?”

“On my score total, you forgot to carry the one, yes.”

“Honest mistake. Since I’m doing a subpar job, would you like to keep score instead of me?”

“No, you’re the mathematician of the Trumbo manor.”

“Apparently I’m not a very satisfactory one by your estimate.”

“I’m just the check and balance here, Alma.”

“I feel so special to be watched over like a chicken hawk.”

Isabel pointed out the fix. “You could swallow your vanity and wear your bifocals.”

“Maybe I just will at that.”

Sammi Jo suppressed her smile over their mock squabbles. Isabel and Alma also spelled out the words, long and short, Sammi Jo had never heard used. All the same, she admired their passion, which she hoped to possess just a small portion of when, and if, she made it to their golden ages.

After Isabel returned with Petey Samson, made friskier after his walk, Alma stopped in Siberia to select a bedtime paperback. She craved a Ngaio Marsh or Dorothy L. Sayers mystery. Meanwhile Isabel, vegging out in her armchair, heard the carpet shouting out for Mr. Hoover kept in the closet. As the co-lady of the manor, she decreed it, along with the outstanding yard work, as tomorrow's problems. Also, she felt certain it had to be Alma's turn to trot around the vacuum cleaner. Perhaps they should look to invest in a robotic vacuum cleaner. Robovacs, they were called.

Petey Samson had bedded down inside the cardboard packing box Isabel had placed in the corner of her bedroom. She also kept his stainless steel water dish she refreshed every morning and evening there. She'd bought him an expensive wicker bed electrically heated, but he'd turned up his nose at it in favor of lying sprawled across the foot of her bed. This sleeping arrangement, while serving him well, left her an achy, sore grinch the next morning.

Inspired by an idea, she roused out a packing box, a leftover from their move and stored in Siberia. She placed the packing box in her bedroom, and Petey Sampson sniffed the packing box twice. After training his caramel brown eyes on her watching how he'd react, he occupied the packing box and flopped down inside it like emptying a basket of laundry. Within three swishes of his tail, he fell into a dog's beauty rest.

She realized how bored she felt sitting there. Frustrated was more accurate, she reconsidered. Here Sammi Jo needed their keen shamus skills more than ever, and all Isabel had collected was a bunch of intriguing but nevertheless lemons for clues. Even by her diminished olfactory sense, she could tell Ray Burl's shotgun might well reek of a red herring. They'd used too much effort trying to nail down the reason why he'd bought it.

She'd put off doing something for as long as she could. Contacting Judge Helen Redfern was always the last resort, but Isabel concluded they'd reached that critical stage. They had been pals going back through several U.S. presidents' administrations. The younger Judge Redfern, also a widower, resided in a stylish

McMansion north of Warrenton. Before there was any Judge Judy on TV, Helen Redfern had adjudicated with an iron gavel and no-time-for-fools attitude. If you broke the law twice, and you reappeared before her bench, no prayers could save you because she gave no quarter. except you headed off to a prison cell.

Isabel squinted to check the time on the Seth Thomas (off by an hour since the sisters paid no heed to the time changes) ticking on the mantel. It didn't feel late by her standards, but who could tell if a trial judge preferred to eat a late Sunday dinner? Isabel took the calculated risk and placed her call.

Judge Redfern's greeting sounded chipper and, even better, talkative. Isabel went through the obligatory litany of reporting on everyone's health. In turn, Judge Redfern mentioned her sons, Homer and Nicky, as well as her grandkids, June and Rick, were "fit as a mountaineer's fiddle," and she was battling allergies.

Isabel didn't bring up hers. She wished to get on to why she'd telephoned.

"No doubt you've heard about Ray Burl Garner," she said.

"Indeed I did. What on earth is going on in Quiet Anchorage? If it's no longer safe living there, nowhere else can be either."

"You have to realize, Helen, we're no longer just an oil spot on the road," said Isabel. "The local population has exploded with the new subdivisions popping up like mushrooms after a summer rain. With the surge of larger numbers, you'd expect a rise in the violent crimes like homicide."

"Uh-huh." It approximated a groan coming from Judge Redfern. "It sure doesn't make my job any easier."

Isabel suspected Judge Redfern saw a lengthy, contentious murder trial looming on her already crowded docket. To point out the increased crime also kept Judge Redfern busy and employed was crass, so Isabel moved on but treaded with care. She didn't want to discuss the specifics of the case, like if Sheriff Fox was set to arrest Sammi Jo, seeing as Judge Redfern might be appointed the presiding judge on it.

"What do you know about cashmere?" asked Isabel. "A gentleman's cashmere dress suit to be precise."

Judge Redfern understood Isabel's wariness about just touching on the far parameters of the Ray Burl Garner homicide case. "Personally speaking, I abhor it more than a hung jury."

"Really. Why is that, Helen?"

"My first cousin, Wilbur Pettigrew Mahoney, from Savannah died while he wore a cashmere dress suit. He suffered a massive coronary while he was tooting "Jesus Is Just Alright" on his trumpet at Easter Sunday church. The congregation, startled out of their wits, watched him keel over and lay there like a fish out of water. Nobody had the presence of mind to administer CPR on him. That's why I've always associated cashmere with death and funerals, so I have no affinity for it."

"Do gentlemen wear cashmere in your hall of justice?"

"I haven't seen cashmere worn in a few years," replied Judge Redfern. "If I did catch someone in it, I'd direct the bailiff to remove the offender on some pretense. Hey, why not? I'm the judge, and what I say goes."

During the reflective pause, Isabel watched Petey Samson prance into the living room, circle it with sniffs for a doggie treat, and then exit unrewarded. He'd return later when she wasn't so busy. "I don't mind telling you Alma and I are chasing our tails on this case."

"I assume Mr. Garner wore a cashmere dress suit when he was discovered dead. If that's so, don't say anything."

Isabel kept her lips buttoned.

"Without going into the ins and outs, I'd pursue the cashmere shroud angle if I were you. Have you thought of your killer playing a game of cat-and-mouse with you?"

"Not really. Food for thought. I've read about that being done in the psychological thrillers. Anyway, I'll let you get on with it. Good night, Helen, and my thanks."

"You both take care and do say hello to Alma for me."

"Will do for certain."

Alma picked up a roll of the peppermint LifeSavers from the penny candy jar in the kitchen and prepared for bed. Her bedroom's wallpaper followed the same tartan plaid pattern as her armchair

and apron. She was a baseball fan (not so much back during the steroids era from the late 1990s to the early 2000s) from since the playing days of slugging outfielder Frank Howard. Her old mandarin red transistor AM radio with its ear jack picked up the broadcasts of the Nats' string of defeats.

They were on travel to the West Coast, playing the San Diego Padres with a 10 p.m. game start time. She'd be hibernating by then. She sucked on a cooling peppermint LifeSaver and snuggled under the sheet scented from the aromatic cedar lining their linen closet. The nightstand reading light blazed down on page one to the Ngaio Marsh mystery.

Alma tingled with anticipation to dive in and let the story transport her to a different place and time in England. Then she remembered she'd been rude in not wishing Isabel a good night. She felt too pooped out to walk the length of the brick Rambler. Her cell phone was at hand's reach.

"What are you doing?" asked Alma.

"I just got off the phone with Helen Redfern," replied Isabel. "She says hi."

"Hi, Helen. Now, was doing that a good idea?"

"We took extra care to skirt going into the details of Ray Burl's case. She told me something I found quite arresting."

"Your voice sounds animated. Lay it on me."

"She characterized Ray Burl's dress suit as a 'cashmere shroud.' Isn't that a colorful term?"

"Colorful term, sure, but what did she mean, and what does it get us?"

"She's convinced, and she's persuaded me, the cashmere is our best lead to follow."

Alma's head began wagging. "No, I don't see that. Our drive to Warrenton didn't pan out a thing except to learn Mr. Rhee is a fellow Scrabble fanatic."

"Yeah, and I can't wait to sink our talons into the fresh meat." Isabel caught her competitive zeal. "I mean to invite over Mr. Rhee for a tall glass of iced tea over a friendly game."

“Forget about iced tea and Scrabble. What about the cashmere dress suit?”

“Our Three Musketeers might recall seeing Ray Burl wearing it.”

“Tomorrow let’s ask them.”

“So ordered.”

“What is the word on Petey Samson?”

“He’s just woken up and is scratching in his cardboard box. I’ll snap his photo with my cell phone camera and shoot it over to you.”

“That’s okay, but his scratching could be bad news. Fleas and ticks?”

“No, he’s just being the hound dog he is.”

“Then I bet he can also catch a rabbit. Night, sis.”

“Night, Elvis.”

Chapter 27

The next morning—why did Mondays always feel like the right morning to sleep in for an extra hour?—broke as another sizzler. On her end of the brick rambler, Alma awoke to find the Ngaio Marsh mystery propped facedown on her chin where it had fallen the previous night. She must've dozed off while reading, lulled by the clickety-sweet-clack raised by the night freight train passing through Quiet Anchorage. Stretching her arms overhead, she couldn't think of a pleasanter way to go to sleep.

After she sat upright in bed, she made a wish to find delicious frying bacon and percolating French Roast coffee, both of which the ball of fire Isabel was fixing for their breakfast. The coffee tempted her, but Alma substituted cold cereal in lieu of the bacon. Her fusspot GP would give a victory sign for her healthier diet choice. He'd also probably *tsk-tsk* at her addiction to the Godiva Chocolate Truffles. That was too bad.

She marveled over how blessed she felt to be retired and living out her golden years here. Her subsequent thought on Ray Burl's killer free as a buzzard tarnished the gold.

Grumbling under her breath, she climbed out of bed and stubbed her only big toe on the nightstand leg. How could a private eye be so clumsy? She had the urge to kick it, but that would make her half-foot throb, so she just got dressed.

August rolled on at a full broil, so she'd just think cool thoughts all day. She clomped into the kitchen where Isabel was getting the coffee on with a grand announcement.

"Today I'm lounging at the Coronet River. Remember our old swimming hole with the tire swing on the rope? Louise was a trapeze artist on it, something that's hard to believe now with her rheumatism. I'm lugging along an ice chest filled with Mello Yellow, Mountain Dew, and Dr. Pepper. I'll also pack a picnic basket of paperbacks."

“Hurray for you,” said Isabel. “Is there any room and time left for Scrabble?”

“Surely. If you’d like to play, bring it along, too.”

“Petey Samson?”

“I’d rather not. He’ll just get wet and muddy and track paw prints through the house.”

“Be thankful he doesn’t yodel like the coyotes keeping you awake do.”

Alma nodded.

“A scary dream jarred me awake at one o’clock this morning. I dreamt Sheriff Fox had arrested Sammi Jo. There I lay stiff as a board for the rest of the night, worrying about her.”

Alma bit down on her bottom lip, then asked, “Have your scary dreams of late been coming true?”

“Not so much that I’ve noticed.”

“Good deal. Just keep them going that way.”

“Don’t forget we’re leaving right after breakfast to consult the three wise men about cashmere.”

“I guess my old swimming hole idea has been preempted,” said Alma.

“We’ll have plenty of leisure for doing it later,” said Isabel.

Main Street appeared as deserted as Atlantic City’s boardwalk on a January morning. Alma liked seeing the recent efforts made to spiff up the walkways and shopfronts. The town council had voted for the new lines white as a lace doily painted on the repaved street. New coats of purple, red, and green color paints freshened the stores’ façades. The bench, once deemed by the town council to be an eyesore, had been removed.

Willie, riled as a wet hornet, had led a signed petition drive to have the bench, then in Sheriff Fox’s custody, restored to its erstwhile position of prominence. Isabel and Alma had been the first signees on his petition. Isabel had argued the Three Musketeers’ presence on Main Street added a friendly nuance to their town’s image.

After 95% of Quiet Anchorage's townies had blessed Willie's petition, the town council recast their vote and acquiesced.

Now Isabel and Alma approached the bench, seeking the two occupants' wisdom yet again.

They told the sisters that Blue was absent due to a bout of the brown bottle flu, but he usually recovered by the afternoon.

Alma asked their questions.

Ossie replied at once. "Oh my yes, I attended the June wedding of Ray Burl Garner to Maureen Lionheart."

He delivered Isabel a poignant look, but she ignored his entreaty. She liked maintaining her single mature lady status too much to remarry.

"It was held at the Mount Zion Baptist Church," he continued. "Now that I focus on it, I recall Ray Burl did wear a cashmere dress suit to his nuptials."

"Cashmere is worn in hot as blazes June?" said Willie.

"It's considered all-season wear and would be cool enough," said Isabel. "Go on with your story, Ossie."

"Well, I keep a sharper memory of the bride. Mo was resplendent in her long, white veil. I believe I may have cried since I'm nothing but a sentimental fool. They also didn't hire a professional wedding photographer. Too expensive and frivolous, said Ray Burl.

"So, Fats Browning filled in and took a few nice snapshots, but after he went to remove the roll of film for its development, he sheepishly admitted to the bride and groom he'd forgotten to load the camera. You see, Fats got dropped on his noggin while he was an ankle biter. Anyway, Mo pitched a duck fit, and I'd venture a guess Ray Burl put in some couch time on his honeymoon night."

"Ouch," said Willie, grimacing. "The first time bunking on the marriage couch is the coldest one." He tapped himself on the chest. "Trust me. I know this to be true."

Withholding comment, Isabel just smiled.

"Where might Ray Burl have gotten a cashmere dress suit in those days?" asked Alma. "From here in town, or did he go to Warrenton?"

“You’ve got me buffaloed there,” replied Willie. “I never buy the clothes in my household. Doris is in charge of Wardrobe. It gives her something constructive to do besides nag the living daylights out of me. We’re much poorer at the end of the month when the bills come due, but we’re also happier.”

One hand in his pocket jingling his keys and coins, Ossie snickered with a confidential smirk. “I used to set it up the same way. The wife did all of our shopping from the mousetraps to flypaper strips to crew socks. I pulled that slick con for years, and the wife didn’t wise up. It left me lots more time to spend right here where I belong.” He patted the bench seat.

Isabel doubted the veracity to his boast because the late Gloria probably gave daily thanks to the saints above to shoo Ossie out of the house during the day. “What are the chances Mo bought Ray Burl the cashmere wedding coat?” asked Isabel.

“I have a thought on that,” said Willie. “Maybe Mo picked it up as a secondhand piece from a consignment shop in Warrenton or Culpeper. They come and go, depending on the shape of the economy.”

“That’s a good idea for us to do tomorrow,” said Isabel.

“I feel sorry for Sammi Jo,” said Ossie. “She’s got to be hurting. Ray Burl was a good father, and he loved her like she was his real daughter.”

The sisters did double takes – *real daughter* – in tandem at Ossie.

“You want to repeat that last part,” said Alma.

Willie recovered from his shock. “Now you’ve gone and done it, Ossie. Repeating that vile piece of gossip isn’t worth the breath you expended to say it.”

He shrugged a little. “I’d never repeat it front of Sammi Jo, of course. But we’re all adults here, and we know how promiscuous Mo was.”

“She liked engaging in her fun, but I don’t believe she ever took things that far,” said Willie. “At least not as long as she was living under Ray Burl’s roof, she didn’t.”

“Well, there you have it,” said Ossie. “Two old duffers’ varying opinions, and only the one of us can be right. You private eyes had

better do your magic and separate fact from fiction.”

“In the interim, let’s give it up for our own Blue Trent who has recovered enough to come and join us,” said Willie.

At a turn, the sisters saw Blue hobbling along the Sunday morning sidewalk. When Ossie and Willie greeted him, he gave them a perfunctory two-finger salute off the temple. He flopped down on his initials gouged into the bench seat and croaked out his first sentence.

“The tainted oysters my nephew Ralph brought over last night nearly laid me low at death’s door.”

“Here I thought you had a monster hangover,” said Willie.

“I haven’t touched a drop of the hard sauce in more years than you’ve got fingers and toes,” said Blue.

“My apologies, Blue,” said Willie. “I misjudged you, amigo.”

“There was no harm, so there’s no foul.” Blue peered from under his hooded eyes at Isabel and Alma. “What topic was under discussion before my intrusion for which I have to apologize?”

“Mo Garner,” replied Alma.

“We’re debating the truthfulness of her running around while she was married to Ray Burl,” said Ossie.

“There’s a little more to it,” said Willie. “The rumor of who is Sammi Jo’s biological father also came up, thanks to blabbermouth Ossie.”

Ossie looked contrite.

“That ugly rumor is specious,” said Blue. “She’s the spitting image of Ray Burl, no room for a speck of doubt.”

“There you go.” Willie glanced at Ossie. “What further proof in the pudding do you require, sir? Seeing is believing.”

“You better get your cataracts removed, Ossie,” said Blue.

“It appears I’ve been outvoted two to one, so our democracy says it’s an unfounded rumor,” said Ossie.

“I like it much better being that way,” said Isabel.

“Where is your woodcarving project?” Blue asked Willie. “Did you finish making it? Let’s see it, friend.”

“I had to deep-six it,” replied Willie, glum. “The knife slipped again and almost slit off my pinkie. I better take up a new, less

dangerous hobby.”

“There’s always Scrabble to fall back on,” said Ossie. “That is if we can ever get our regular partners back to the game board.” He sent an accusatory squint to Isabel and Alma.

“Scrabble will have to continue simmering on the back burner,” said Isabel. “There’s still an unsolved murder hanging out.”

“Are you making any headway on it?” asked Ossie.

“Until we reach the conclusion, that’s a difficult measure to gauge,” replied Alma.

“However the glass is always half-full for us,” said Isabel.

Chapter 28

“I don’t know if it’s any big deal or not,” said Nita, Mo’s old best friend, over the phone to Isabel back at home. “But since we talked yesterday, I got to thinking about Mo, and I remembered she mailed to me a postcard a couple years ago, it must’ve been.”

“Really now.” Isabel’s pulse thumped harder. “Did you squirrel away the postcard?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t think I did,” replied Nita. “I’ve turned my house upside-down searching for it, but I struck out. Who saves a postcard, even if it was from an old high school pal?”

“Postcards are worth little more than just saying hello and wish you were here.” Isabel’s pulse lost its optimistic uptick. “Do you have a memory of the picture, contents, postmark, or anything about it?”

“The picture side showed a gorgeous marmalade orange sunset, or maybe it was a sunrise,” replied Nita. “Sent from just where, I’m drawing a blank on. Its short message—her precise words escape me, too—was written in her penmanship, which I recognized straight off. She uses a regal flourish to her letters, especially her capitals, that complements her flamboyant personality.”

Isabel could be direct and to the point if the need arose as it did now. “Do you put any stock in the rumor claiming Sammi Jo resulted from Mo’s hanky-panky?”

Nita sputtered, her indignation that strong. “That’s utter tripe. Small-minded gossips—ours are among the worst offenders—start spreading those nasty untruths and fan the flames until the whispers and innuendos grow unbearable.”

“We’re inclined to believe much the same,” said Isabel.

“It could be that’s why Mo left us,” said Nita. “She couldn’t any longer take her good name getting dragged through the mud. Rosie and Lotus enthroned at Clean Vito’s are the gabbiest of the bunch, too. I don’t go there anymore just to avoid meeting them. Lesser reasons have goaded the folks to leave our Peyton Place.”

Isabel deliberated over a long beat. “Mo strikes me as a lady who didn’t give a toss about what the townies said or thought about her.”

“You might be right on that score,” said Nita. “At any rate, we know she was still alive and well as of two years ago.”

Of course, anybody can forge a postcard and mail it, thought Isabel. She didn’t respond to Nita, and she took it as a cue their conversation had run its course. They said their farewells.

Alma cackled at a favorite TV sitcom rerun of George and Elaine bantering with Kramer and Jerry at the New York City coffee shop, but Isabel decided fitting in a nap would better suit her. Yawning, she slipped off to her bedroom and by the time she arrived there, she was no longer feeling nearly as drowsy.

She moseyed down the hallway, passed by Alma’s bedroom, and headed to Siberia housing their personal library. Indulging her yen to dive into a new book wasn’t her purpose for this visit. Rather, she hoped the library, imbued with the spirits of so many triumphant fictional sleuths, including the male ops Mr. Moto and Charlie Chan, would inspire her to unravel their real life murder mystery. Their sense of direction on it struck her as a confused one, akin to an old sea captain relying on his erratic celestial navigation.

She chuckled at her whimsy before she flopped down in an armchair, and stretched out her legs. Just as Sammi Jo had co-opted the spot under the town’s railroad bridge as her cloister to sit and ruminate on pressing matters, the library provided Isabel a similar bower. She wished she’d brought along her *Alaskan Outdoor* from the living room to browse. Well, she had plenty of stuff to read in here if she liked.

Noticing the gaps to the missing books across the shelves, she held out the hope Megan would fall in love with devouring mysteries. Isabel thought of phoning Megan at her job but didn’t want to cause any trouble for her with her boss, and no call was placed.

Despite the sisters’ view of Sheriff Fox’s shortcomings, he was nevertheless their local police. Moreover, he’d warned them to stay out of his way as he steamrolled over Sammi Jo before jugging her.

Over my dead body, fumed Isabel not feeling so whimsical as before. Her knee began to jiggle up and down.

Mo Garner rolled to the fore. Isabel thought Mo's temper, quick and hot as Mount Vesuvius, could ignite a killer's crime of passion. Isabel pictured the nervy Mo pacing at the Greyhound bus depot that morning in May. She'd emptied out the Garners' joint checking account the day before, Sammi Jo had said. Mo paid for a ticket stub and perhaps swiped a *Redbook* or *Cosmo* from the waiting area for reading later while in transit.

The brakes on the Greyhound bus hissed to a halt in front of her, the lone passenger, and its accordion-like door creaked open. Isabel was curious about what thoughts had tracked through Mo's fervid head as she ascended the steps, leaving town with just the party girl clothes on her back and her pocketbook in hand. She had no suitcase to stow in the luggage compartment in the bottom of the Greyhound. Had she left Quiet Anchorage feeling any morning sickness?

Did Mo also bundle off enough rancor to let it fester over the years until it welled up like a geyser, and she could no longer keep a safety cap on it? Had she snuck back to Quiet Anchorage like a thief in the night, ambushed Ray Burl, and slipped away again?

Isabel had learned the frugal Ray Burl liked to save his money. Rosie at Clean Vito's had said she once saw Mo shoplift. Once a crook always a crook could be the reason why she returned, this time to steal Ray Burl's pile of money. Had she grabbed it and left town? The nettlesome matter of his cashmere dress suit arose. Up until now, Isabel had admired a distinguished gentleman attired in cashmere, but now she held a lower regard for it.

All the funeral home director had to do was sew up or patch the bullet hole left in Ray Burl's cashmere dress suit, and he was good to go into the coffin. The gallows humor wasn't funny. She returned to their futile trip to Warrenton. Although Mr. Rhee had been of little assistance, she decided they should get together very soon for a game of Scrabble.

He'd been so cocky and full of himself.

She gloated since he'd never gone up against the pair of gray Trumbo sharks. He was in for a drubbing. Alma and she knew how to spell a few obscure words using the high scoring "Q" letter tile without the usual subsequent "U" letter tile. Sammi Jo had googled it and printed out the list of words, starting with the two-letter QI that had something to do with a force in Chinese philosophy. The smug but amiable Mr. Rhee would never think to do something that crafty.

A knuckle tapped at the door. "Isabel, are you in there?" asked Alma from the other side.

"Indeed," she replied. "Come in, if you like."

Alma also brought in her quizzical expression. "I thought you'd gone off and taken a nap, but I didn't find you lying down in your bedroom."

"On my way going there, I had a change of heart," said Isabel.

"Sleep is very overrated, I agree," said Alma. "Is this your calm eye in the storm like Sammi Jo's sandy nook is under the railroad bridge?"

"Alas, my secret has been exposed," replied Isabel.

"Then we'll have to share it because I already called dibs on it," said Alma.

Isabel smiled. "That's doable."

"Are you hard at work deciphering who killed Ray Burl?"

Isabel decided not to bring up her latest, but as of yet premature, theory about Mo having returned to Quiet Anchorage and done in Ray Burl. "He's been at the center of my attention, but I'm not much closer to putting it all together."

"Which clue of the two main ones we've uncovered do you find the most compelling?"

"Do you mean Ray Burl's shotgun or cashmere dress suit?"

"I do."

"I'd say his cashmere dress suit is the more promising," said Isabel. "The shotgun he purchased is out of character for him, but I'm certain a logical reason will eventually surface to account for it like he bought it for somebody else."

Alma sighed. "I was afraid you were going to say that since I also feel the same way."

"What mischief is Petey Samson up to?"

"He's asleep, barely curled up on your armchair since he's so tubby."

"He's a guileful one." Isabel smiled. "He snookers me into taking him outdoors when he doesn't really need to go. He enjoys the sunshine, fresh air, and exercise, but I've wised up to his canine tricks."

"What did we do before he came into our household?" asked Alma.

"He certainly keeps our lives more complicated," said Isabel.

Quiet Anchorage's columnar water tower reminded Isabel of an oversized barn silo. The chlorinated water drawn from their tap tasted a far cry from the quality of the sparkling branch water they drank on the farm. A recent brouhaha had kicked up over what color to paint the water tower that was rusting away. Such mundane details kept the town council feeling useful. Half of the council advocated chartreuse while the opposing half championed adding more pizzazz by using a magenta paint color.

The spat seemed petty to the sisters until Alma revealed how she liked magenta, and Isabel felt the opposite, being partial to the chartreuse. Petey Samson didn't give a woof either way as long as his meals got served on time, and his treats were forthcoming. In the end, the town council, lo and behold, uncovered a budgetary shortfall, so they tabled the decision for next year. Alma had been lobbying any townie she bumped into for supporting the chartreuse option. Isabel stayed mum.

Right now Isabel's suggestion had them returning to Barclay's Turf Farm and hoping to catch Mr. Barclay in his office this time. After accelerating out of town, they passed Mrs. Edwards' tidy place where they used to stop and buy their farm fresh eggs. The sisters enjoyed seeing a field of the turf farm's fresh tilled dirt, but neither missed the backbreaking chores required of running a farm.

Alma parked in the most convenient spot by the turf farm's office building. Next to them sat a sleek, shiny midnight blue Aston Martin speedster. No doubt it was Mr. Barclay's pride and joy since the rear vanity plates trumpeted, "SOD KING." Unlike their previous visit, this one caught the turf farm teeming with its normal daily activity.

Shirtless, bronze-skinned laborers, one jockeying around the forklift, loaded the pallets of sod onto the flatbed trucks. They'd tied bright yellow and blue bandanas and doo-rags on their heads. "*Andale! Andale! Hurry!*" yelled the tallest one carrying the electronic tablet like the bosses make a big deal to do. "*Ahora! Ahora! Now!*" The revved up diesel truck engines rumbled to rattle the windows and belched out the black plumes of exhaust. Even the sisters' jaded noses could detect their noxious fumes.

Once behind the closed office door, they were grateful to find the busy parking lot's din fell to a muted thrum because the acoustic panels soundproofed the interior. They noticed the calendar—it hadn't been flipped over since June—dangled at an angle on the knotty cedar wall paneling. A petite blonde in a short denim skirt looking to be near Sammi Jo's age was punching in numbers on an adding machine. She hopped up from behind the desk with a perfunctory greeting and escorted them into the inner sanctum of Ambrose Barclay, CEO.

Seeing them, he broke into a smile fake as a Saturday morning cartoon character. The skylight in the slanted ceiling illuminated him lounging with his overpolished boots propped up on the glass-topped desk. Only a cell phone cluttered it. He wore a poplin suit and flashed an expensive timepiece on his wrist.

Rolex, recognized Isabel.

The wall panels were gold birch while the plush gold carpet ran a shade darker. The pair of armchairs the sisters occupied at his inviting hand gesture felt stiff from nonuse.

As they got settled in their seats, Isabel could detect the soft undertones to classical music. She didn't recognize the piece since she never put on classical music. This slow, lackluster instrumental, however, could stand a dash of Charlie Parker and his up-tempo sax to enliven it. Mr. Barclay sat upright in the executive chair.

“Good day, ladies.” He used the unctuous delivery of an auctioneer taking buyers’ bids at an estate sale. His sun tan bore a long weekend’s burnish. “What brings you back to Mr. B’s empire? Karmine told him about your first visit.”

“Speaking of Karmine, where is she today?” Isabel found Mr. Barclay addressing himself in the third person more than a bit jarring if not pompous.

“Since she’s worked so much overtime to straighten out the books left in a big mess, she’s taking off a few days and returning to visit Hoboken,” replied Mr. Barclay. “The cupcake out front ushering you in is a temp the Warrenton agency sent down to me.”

“The young *lady* is efficient,” said Isabel. “I’m certain she’ll fill in admirably during Karmine’s absence.”

Mr. Barclay shrugged. “Meantime what’s on your minds?”

“Ray Burl,” replied Alma.

“Ah, Mr. B’s late foreman.” Mr. Barclay lost his bemused expression. “Rest assured Mr. B is going to miss him, one of his topmost employees, hands down.”

“Were you onsite when he was found dead?” asked Alma.

“No, Mr. B had a tee time,” replied Mr. Barclay. “Naturally he rushed back here when he got the bad news from Karmine.”

“Any idea who shot him?” asked Alma, dispensing with anymore pointless preliminary chitchat.

Folding his hands to rest them on the glass-topped desk, Mr. Barclay used the same fake smile. This time Alma thought it had a reptilian cast, putting her on her toes. “Mr. B is a little mystified,” he said. “Why are you parroting the same slate of questions Sheriff Fox has already asked him?”

Evidently Mr. B doesn’t read the local newspaper, thought Alma. They’d had several articles run on their senior sleuthing activities depicted as more of a lark than as a profession. They liked operating under the guise of doddering old ladies like the Snoop sisters, harmless and lightly regarded, while focused like a twin laser beam would be on the mystery.

“You know how it is for us dotty senior ladies,” replied Alma. “We get bored with baking fudge, knitting scarves, and playing

computer Solitaire all the time.”

Mr. Barclay displayed a condescending grin. “Is that a fact? Okay, Mr. B will play along and humor you little gals. To get your question, no, he doesn’t have a clue as to who’d want to take Ray Burl’s life. Mr. B had no motive. Ray Burl was Mr. B’s right-hand man. He practically ran the business, freeing Mr. B to take up nobler pursuits like shaving a few strokes off his golf game. Who could’ve asked for a better foreman?”

“Do you own a 12-gauge shotgun?” asked Isabel.

“Mr. B own a 12-gauge shotgun?” Mr. Barclay’s look of astonishment was genuine. “Why might you, of all people, ask Mr. B such a thing?”

Alma found Mr. B’s habit of fending off their questions with his own questions annoying. The Mr. B junk he kept using only doubled her frustration. She was primed to straighten him out when Isabel spoke.

“We Trumbos were raised on a small farm just west of town,” she said. “Firearms are hardly foreign or exotic objects to us.”

“But wasn’t Ray Burl murdered with a handgun?” asked Mr. Barclay.

“Corina at Lago Azul Florist Shop told us she witnessed Ray Burl exiting the hardware store with a shotgun,” said Isabel. “He wasn’t a hunter to speak of, nor was he a gun enthusiast. We thought maybe he purchased it for somebody else like you, for instance.”

“Not for Mr. B. He’s a lover, not a fighter. Sorry to say it, but you’ll have to take your magnifying glass and look somewhere else.” Mr. Barclay picked up his cell phone from the glass-topped desk, a gesture indicating he’d decided their interview had concluded. “You’ll have to excuse Mr. B’s getting back to work. Ray Burl and Karmine aren’t around to see that things get done, so Mr. B has to keep them moving.”

Alma parted her lips to insert one final question for the Sod King, but Isabel cut her off.

“Isabel says we’ve asked all our questions,” she said, mimicking Mr. Barclay’s third person affectation.

“And Alma concurs,” said Alma, following Isabel’s lead. “Thanks, Mr. B.”

“Don’t mention it,” he said. “Mr. B always goes out of his way to assist our senior citizens.”

Alma gathered her pocketbook and followed Isabel back out into the ear-jarring noise and hothouse sun.

Returning to the state road, Alma, behind the wheel, had the first comment.

“Did you see his fancy Rolodex? That watch must’ve run him some serious coin.”

“His watch is a Rolex,” corrected Isabel. “Yes, he would have us to believe he’s quite well off.”

“Did you like Mr. B?”

Isabel shuddered. “Mr. B gives me the heebie jeebies, but we have to take him at his word that Ray Burl didn’t buy the shotgun for him.”

“Why he wanted to purchase it becomes troublesome again,” said Alma.

“The short answer is yes it does,” replied Isabel.

Chapter 29

Isabel and Alma had taken a break and browsed in the spic-and-span Uncle Jimbo's Vault, an antique and curios boutique catering to any inquisitive tourists meandering into their town. Louise's birthday loomed a week away, and Alma suggested they might run across an original gift Louise would enjoy.

Uncle Jimbo was a purveyor of patent medicine bottles, telephone pole glass insulators, and old showy glassware with tiny air bubbles trapped inside it. Squinting without her reading glasses on, Isabel was studying the embossed words stamped on the flat surfaces to a pair of glass (turquoise and amethyst) bottles, she held.

Dr. Kilmer's Swamp Root Kidney, Liver, and Bladder Cure (turquoise) in her right palm and the *Lydia Pinkham's Herbal Tablets* (amethyst) in her left palm vied for her attention. Between ingesting the doses of Dr. Kilmer and Lydia, you'd probably own a panacea to enjoy life for as long as the biblical Methuselah had.

Isabel didn't remember either Dr. Kilmer or Lydia Pinkham mentioned by their tough as shoe leather grandmother, Mrs. Ida Matilda Trumbo. More than likely she didn't place a high premium on the elixirs and relied on her old faithfuls: castor oil and bromide salts. Money had been tight, and she probably viewed the patent medicines as a frivolous novelty they couldn't afford to buy.

"What pirate treasures did you dig up there?" asked Alma.

Isabel brandished the pair of glass bottles. "Doc Kilmer or Ms. Lydia Pinkham. Take your pick of poison."

"Swamp root. Yuk."

"Have you tried it?"

"No, but I have an aversion to all swamp-related products."

"They're a colorful part of our town history. The pharmacist on Main Street back in Grandma Ida's day probably peddled the patent medicines for their alcoholic content."

"Well, Louise gets touchy with anything to do about her innards. Besides there might be glass breakage sustained during the

shipment to her house.”

“You told me before coming in you wanted to find an original gift. Well, Dr. Kilmer and Lydia Pinkham are as original as it gets in here.”

“I referred to a cute knickknack or clever tchotchke Louise might set out on the mantel or credenza. Would you display even an empty glass bottle of *Dr. Kilmer’s Swamp Root* with the family photos and ivory bookends?”

Isabel had a bland shrug. “He’d spark conversation. There’s no denying that.”

Alma scrunched up her nose. “Isabel, you’re just being a nincompoop about this, aren’t you?”

“I’m not either. Ring up Sammi Jo and ask for her opinion that we both value.”

“Sammi Jo is at work, and we shan’t bother her with our trivial disputes.”

“Then give Phyllis a quick ring. She’s not too busy.”

Alma started to dial on her cell phone when she froze her fingers. “Of course, kooky Phyllis will go along with you. She’ll squeal over how patent medicines are a hoot. If the drugstore still sold them, she’d be the first in line to stock up her medicine cabinet.”

Isabel smiled. “If you’re that dead-set against Dr. Kilmer and Lydia, I’ll also pass on them.”

“Thanks. Let’s get out before I begin feeling like I belong in here with a price tag attached to my big toe.”

“You’d fetch a better price than Uncle Jimbo’s wares,” said Isabel. Her returning the patent medicine bottles to the shelf conjured up the image of Ray Burl surveying the shotguns set out for sale in the new annex at the hardware store.

“Alma, since we’re backtracking, Matthiessen’s Hardware should be our next stop. I’d like to re-question Blaine and see how his previous answers measure up to those he gives us now.”

“You’ve got Ray Burl’s shotgun on the brain,” said Alma. “We’ve ruled it out for not having anything to do with his murder.”

“It was closer to we set it aside temporarily, but we’re in town, so just go along with me if just for grins and giggles.”

Alma nodded, giving a resigned sigh but no grin or giggle. "We sure are getting in our daily exercise today."

"Always a positive gain," said Isabel. "I'll have even more exercise waiting at home when Petey Samson greets us."

"Count me in on going, too," said Alma. "I'm a little curious as to where you both go for so long every time you leave the house."

"Sometimes we stop off at the corner billiards parlor, down our shots of tequila, and hustle a few games with the regular pool sharks," said Isabel, spoofing a tough guy's speech.

"Then how come I didn't get invited?" said Alma. "I can shoot a sensational stick of eight-ball."

"Let's go," said Isabel. "Just walk softly on your gumshoes and don't wake up Uncle Jimbo. I can hear him now snoozing behind the counter."

Sammi Jo was at work in the office of the self-storage facility erected in the past year, driven by the population growth spurt with the new subdivisions. Within its corporate limits, Quiet Anchorage thrived as a bastion of small town charm, but the hydra of sprawl, ingesting even the old Trumbo farm, threatened to squash the charm. On the other hand, the young townies like Sammi Jo and Tabitha were tenacious about protecting the town charm they held dear to their hearts. Quiet Anchorage might not succumb to a dismal future and wither away like a ghost town. It was still out in the dark country far away enough from the city's light pollution to catch the meteor showers putting on their shows.

Since her laptop with an internet hookup was turned on, she checked her emails, but she opened nothing exciting. Then she googled Mo or Maureen Garner (née Lionheart), but no worthwhile hits came up. Mo's vanishing act all those years ago had been complete if Google couldn't find her. The cell phone by the laptop shrilled.

"Wilbur and his brood took off for Cape Hatteras," said Sammi after their exchanged greetings. "I'm stuck here to hold down the fort. Not that there's a whole lot going on right now. August must be the slow time here like everywhere else."

Wilbur Hathaway, her good, ole boy of a boss, would be gone on his end of the summer vacation for over the next two weeks.

"Shout hallelujah, kick back, and enjoy your time with no boss around," said Tabitha. "Consider it as your own vacation."

Sammi Jo laughed. "How's Eddy treating you at the deli?"

"Eddy, I like. He's fair and honest as the day is long. He pays me a decent wage. He's also pretty flexible on my work times. What more could you want from a boss?"

"Benefits would be nice."

"Always. Maybe if I can talk him into swinging me a forty-hour weekly schedule, I'll bring up the issue of benefits."

"Husband material? That would solve your problem there."

"He's a hottie, and I sometimes dream of crawling through his bedroom window."

"I'm not Dr. Ruth, but that strikes me as a full-fledged case of love, or lust, to me."

"Before I forget it, tell Phyllis I bought her a new feather duster. I think she'll like it even more."

"Thanks. Phyllis has been laid up in bed for the past day with a bad headache from a sinus infection."

"I hope she gets better soon." Tabitha felt led to segue from feather dusters to death. "Sammi Jo, dear, I'm terribly sorry again about what happened to your dad. I'm just a phone call away if I can do anything for you."

"Thanks, Tabitha. I'll be sure to keep you in mind."

"Has Sheriff Fox made any progress?"

"I haven't gotten a peep from our lawman over the last couple of days, and I'd like to keep it that way, let me tell you."

"You can't be serious that he thinks you had anything to do with your dad's..."

"That's exactly what I mean. He always looks for the easiest way out. Believe me, I know firsthand how his brain operates."

"Oh snap, there goes Eddy bellowing like an angry bull moose at me to get my little fanny back up front."

"All right, I'll let you go to work. Thanks for calling."

"Talk to you real soon," said Tabitha. "Bye, honey."

Sammi Jo deactivated her cell phone. Quitting time at five o'clock felt a long hour and a half away. A suffering moan escaped her lips as she gave the column of manila folders on the nearest corner of her desk the stink eye. They went to the customers who were delinquent for three months or longer on their locker rentals. More than half of the lockers rented on month-to-month leases. Her assigned task was to sift through the pile and prioritize them, according to whom she evaluated would cough up their fees the quickest.

Yeah right, she rued.

All the deadbeats and freeloaders were long shots. She felt the ominous dread Wilbur would get the bright idea to instruct her next to do collections. She'd work the phone and "convince" the customers in arrears to make good on their debts. She had an ornery side, but her using it to try and squeeze blood from these turnips was expecting a lot. Too much, really. Since she liked to eat better than Ramen noodles on her dinner plate every night and to pay Eustis her rent on time, she'd swallow her dignity and do what she was told. But she didn't have to be happy about it.

Chapter 30

Sammi Jo ranged up from the office chair, ambled over the carpet she'd vacuumed minutes ago, and shoved her way through the glass door. Late afternoon brought the longer shadows, but the air felt only a few degrees cooler. Slouching on the concrete stoop, she let her eyes gravitate to the security gate with its key pad and chain-link perimeter fence to safeguard the renters' can't-live-without treasures.

She'd counted a whopping three customers tooling into the self-storage facility all day. Yeah, their business was booming. She decided to triple the number and call it nine customers when Wilbur phoned in and asked her for a status report. Keeping the boss pumped up and happy made her white lie permissible.

The self-storage industry, according to Wilbur who had a good reason to do his homework, began in Fort Lauderdale by the Collum family during the late 1950s. The industry was as American as jazz, baseball, and barbecue were, and Sammi Jo had smiled through Wilbur's history lesson. All she cared was her paycheck when deposited cleared at her bank, and she didn't get socked with the bank charge for his frozen account.

She turned around, shoved back into the stuffy office, and flumped down in the chair at the desk. She dragged over the column of manila folders. Her sore heart wasn't into it. She wetted her thumb and riffled through the column, checking the folders' tabs identifying the delinquent customers' names. Most of them she didn't recognize.

The newcomers moving into the area comprised Wilbur's largest customer base. Quiet Anchorage's old timers were shrewd to never part with their hard-earned money to store a rat's nest of junk inside a rental locker. They'd either auction off the junk, or they'd chuck it into the landfill on the other side of Warrenton.

"Whoa, hold the phone, Sammi Jo," she said. "What's this little bombshell I've unearthed?"

She pinched the manila folder and plucked it out of the column. She stared down at the folder's tab. Written in blocky letters was the name GARNER, RAY BURL.

She tapped the manila folder on her thumb knuckle while she delved into her recent past. Her father had never mentioned he'd rented a locker to stash his belongings. That was odd, considering he'd known she worked at the facility. What big secret did he keep from her? Or had he just been the same old close-mouthed dad?

Her pulse ramped up its throbbing excitement. She felt enthralled over how she'd stumbled upon what the Trumbo sisters liked to call the key clue. Sammi Jo's temptation was to grab her cell phone and spill the beans to them. On reconsideration, she held off. Suppose Ray Burl had just crammed the locker full of the cardboard boxes of his unfinished wood projects?

The key clue became another letdown. She bit her knotted lip, mulling it over. She took out a lock pick kit—she didn't want to reveal its origins—to undo the padlock any customer used to secure their locker. She darted from the office, pacing off to go track down Ray Burl's locker number she'd picked off his manila folder.

Security cameras mounted on poles aimed down each aisle between the rows of storage lockers. The aisle widths between the lockers permitted the customers enough room to maneuver their vehicles up to their lockers for loading and unloading their possessions.

Ray Burl's unit sat near the front of the third row. She turned off the security camera so as not to record her act of nosiness and jimmied open the padlock he'd installed.

"Piece of cake," she muttered.

She hoisted up his locker's door like one does to open the garage door. She flipped on the light switch, hesitant to inspect the locker's contents. She placed her hands on her hips, giving a slow nod, but no smile accompanied it.

"Well, well," she said to nobody in particular. "I've found the window into perhaps the clandestine side of my father's life."

He'd squirreled away the usual men paraphernalia she found cached when she went to vacate a default locker. She'd retain the

decent swag to be put up for bids and sold at the public auctions Wilbur held in order to recoup their losses. The steel weightlifting set of the bench, weights, and bar were odd. Ray Burl had never pumped iron. Also throwing her was seeing the used motorcycle – a Kawasaki 600 cc – parked on its kickstand in the center of the locker.

She drew in a breath to sniff, and only the typical musty air like from old newspapers pervading the lockers filled her nose. Did he drain the gasoline from the Kawasaki's fuel tank per the lease terms he'd signed? She doubted it. Few customers thought of doing it, and the lockers blew up in smoke and flames.

Wilbur and she had yet experienced no locker fires or explosions. Any day now, she expected to smell the smoke or cringe at hearing the kaboom. That would be the last straw. She'd update her résumé and go knock on other employers' doors again. Such pyrotechnics were only good in the dudes' action movies.

Her father storing his stuff in here perplexed her. She wondered if he'd guarded the other facets of his life. He'd been a cards-kept-close-to-the-vest man, and perhaps the personality trait gave him the cover to carry out certain other activities undetected. Thinking the worst things about him dismayed her. He'd been a stand-up guy.

Steeled by her newfound resolve, she marched into the dimmer locker space. The Kawasaki indicated where a portion of Ray Burl's money had gone. The Kawasaki carried a dead inspection sticker and, its license plates had also expired. He'd probably intended to use it for an off-road dirt bike. Why his sudden interest in the dirt bike sport?

Well, she mused, guys and motorcycles went together like horses and carriages.

She stopped at the column of stacked cardboard boxes marked with a Florida grapefruit growers' logo. She tilted her head while sizing up the cardboard boxes. Busting her bottom lifting the filled boxes wasn't in her job description, and Wilbur wasn't here to lend her a hand. Investing in or renting a forklift was getting to be a more desperate need.

He'd resisted for as long as she didn't balk at their doing the heavy lifting by hand. She wasn't built like a muscle-bound

stevedore and decided he was in for a few jarring surprises after he returned all relaxed and full of wisecracks. His “girl Friday” (she’d corrected his first usage of the slur) was going on strike for better working conditions like getting a forklift.

She noticed Ray Burl had left a larger-than-usual space of a crack between the cardboard boxes and locker wall. She stepped around the column and craned her head forward to eyeball in the narrow gap left behind there. She gasped, no words spoken out loud, at what she observed.

She reached her hands into the narrow gap and grabbed the long, heavy artifact. It was a 12-gauge shotgun, a Mossberg pump model, she read from the inscription stamped on its steel barrel. She figured she’d laid her hands on the shotgun Corina had seen Ray Burl take from the hardware store. Just what that added up to eluded Sammi Jo.

Repulsed by holding the shotgun, she returned it to its original hiding place when she noticed something else. A new hacksaw still in its shrink wrap packaging lay on the concrete floor.

She recalled Isabel’s remark on how gun owners used hacksaws to crop off their shotguns, and Sammi Jo wondered if Ray Burl had intended to create a defensive weapon from the shotgun. Perhaps he’d felt threatened. She didn’t know.

Further speculation seemed pointless. She exited and resecured the locker. She had a phone call to make. The ladies were, she gleaned, at last getting somewhere. The new adrenaline release she felt convinced her now was the right time for them to make the final push.

Chapter 31

Isabel and Alma's return trip to chat with the lackadaisical Blaine at the hardware store proved uneventful since he'd closed up for the day. They were out walking Petey Samson, or it was more like he walked them by tugging on the leash Isabel grasped doubled over in her fist. He'd been waiting for them, the leash clutched in his teeth and blocking the doorway when they arrived home. His tail thumped on the floor like Alma did while tapping her toe in impatience.

Isabel pealed out a jovial laugh, but Alma suspected Isabel had taught Petey Samson the latest trick. She was teaching him a lot of questionable habits.

This suspicion was verified when Alma saw Isabel slip Petey Samson a doggie treat taken from the baggie kept in her pocketbook. He was getting more spoiled rotten by the day. At least this time Isabel didn't play hide-and-seek with him, concealing herself by standing in the bathtub and counting off to ten. Petey Samson trotted into the bathroom and barked at his finding her. He also earned another treat to wolf down.

"Oh, holy mackerel, Isabel," Alma said in mock disgust. "You're just ruining him more than he already is."

"Don't get so out of sorts," said Isabel. "Next time I'll let *you* be the one who hides from Petey Sampson."

"That's more like it," Alma had said.

As a cooling summer breeze blew, they trooped by Mrs. Black's white picket fence with a cluster of red-orange tiger lilies and lavender peonies blooming off-season this late in August. Mrs. Black was the oldest still living Quiet Anchorage townie. She refused to acknowledge her true age, but she did allow three digits wasn't all that far away from it.

Entering her distinctive timber-framed house was like stepping into the nineteenth century. Though she relented to use indoor plumbing, she outlawed turning on the electric lights. The soft glow

of the kerosene lantern soothed her old, irascible nerves. She ruled as the grand dame at the Senior Folks' Center. As far as Isabel and Alma were concerned, she could keep the tiara until its diamonds fell out. Neither of them had any desire to wear it any time soon.

Observing the lavender peony flowers poking out the gap between the white pickets nudged Alma's memory.

"We haven't gone to the cemetery and raked up the leaves and clutter around the family gravestones," she told Isabel.

"Labor Day is our scheduled time to drive out there," said Isabel. "The recumbent Trumbos as well as Max and Cecil won't complain if we don't hit it on the exact right day."

"Do you have something in mind for doing on Labor Day weekend?"

Isabel shrugged as much as she could manage with Petey Samson yanking at the dog leash. "Maybe we'll round up the usual suspects, fix some microwave popcorn, and throw a Scrabble Fest. How does doing that sound to you?"

"Like a goat in a briar patch," replied Alma. She stooped down and moved aside a kid's razor scooter with pink tassels on its handlebars left on the sidewalk. Today's kids have the neatest toys to play with, she thought, almost wishing she was a kid again. "Ray Burl and his murder have been on my mind a lot as I recalled the different things from the past."

"You mean since we've moved back to Quiet Anchorage?"

"Sure, that time period but also the years we lived away from town. Every once in a while, we'd return and visit, catching up on old times. Coming home made for a nice change of pace and welcome diversion from the city's rat race."

"I felt likewise," said Isabel. "What point are you making?"

"Did you remember if Ray Burl was ever mentioned?"

"Now that you bring it up, no, he wasn't the topic of many conversations I had with the townies. He never garnered a lot of attention, so he must've went about his personal business in his low-keyed manner."

Alma nodded as they stopped at the intersection. The dynamo of energy Petey Samson tugged away on the leash, but Isabel

restrained his exuberance to dodge out in front of an oncoming farm use truck.

"Here's a different take I've been mulling over," said Alma. "Ray Burl's low-keyed manner may've been done to shield his leading a second criminal life that he kept hidden from his family and friends. Even Sammi Jo wouldn't know what the chameleon was up to while she was growing up in the same house."

"Criminals can lead second lives," said Isabel. "It's done in many our read mysteries, but we're talking about small, tame Quiet Anchorage, not a hotbed of criminal activity like New York City or Las Vegas."

"Small towns harbor their share of crooks," said Alma. "I don't like to badmouth Sammi Jo's dad or speak ill of the recent dead, but what if he wasn't the stand-up fellow he wanted us to believe he was?"

"As distasteful as I find it to consider, I suppose Ray Burl could've been killed by one of his criminal associates," said Isabel.

"It's still just a possibility at this point," said Alma.

The intersection clear once again, Petey Samson towed them across the street to its sidewalk. The school-age kids had drawn a hopscotch grid in blue chalk, the left behind Mexican peso coin had been used as their tossed marker.

On this hot summer afternoon school-age kids swam at the community pool, not the Coronet River as the young Trumbos had done when not working on the farm. Either place for either generation made for good, clean fun.

"Are you up for playing a game of hopscotch?" asked Isabel.

"No, I believe I gave up my hop, skip, and jump when I lost half my foot," replied Alma.

"Of course you did. Sorry."

They headed downtown on Main Street instead of making the turn around the block and returning home.

"What bad stuff might have tempted Ray Burl?" asked Isabel.

Alma didn't want to speculate. "I'm not sure, but I'm leaning toward it tells us why he got murdered, and who did it to him."

“Oh drats, Petey Samson drawing us along like a kite made us miss taking our turn.” Isabel halted, pulling on the leash, and refused to let Petey Samson advance another step.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw his mistress had a different way in mind than to keep on following his keen beagle nose. She reversed their field, and they found the right street for making the home stretch.

The white sequentially numbered hash marks they passed on the street pavement marked where the entrants in each firemen’s parade lined up. It was held on the first night the annual carnival hit town, always a big festive ado, climaxing with a well-attended drawing for a new car giveaway.

Alma and she only lived two houses down from the parade route. They along with their guests Phyllis and Sammi Jo cheered and clapped on the front stoop by the American flag. Shiny red fire trucks, high-stepping blonde majorettes, and brassy marching bands playing Sousa from the neighboring towns like Warrenton, Culpeper, and Colonial Beach composed the parade’s procession.

Alma realized their gait had picked up steam with Isabel now in front of the reluctant Petey Samson who trailed along behind them. Elms and oaks lining the street offered the walkers some welcomed shade.

“Here’s a different question for us to bat around. Why did Ray Burl feel compelled to work so many hours?”

“I’ll bite. Why did he?” said Alma.

“Maybe because he found it a convenient excuse to use while he was off living his second shady life. Do the foremen usually stay late and work on weekends by themselves? Yes, and Mr. Barclay didn’t care how many hours Ray Burl slaved away. It could’ve been his perfect cover story.”

Isabel scrounged inside her pocketbook, found a doggie treat, and tossed it ahead of them.

Petey Samson, seeing it, loped to their front and gobbled it down. He got with the new program they were now homeward bound. Alma heard a blue jay scolding them and saw it was in a pyracantha

bush. Petey Samson's ears perked up until he realized he was on a leash, making any pursuit of the blue jay impossible.

"Let's assume our theory is correct," said Alma. "Let's say Ray Burl was off doing these bad deeds when everybody thought he was so diligently working. We're forced to find the evidence of his bad deeds."

"The evidence gathering is too often exasperating, and my least favorite part when I read an old time mysteries," said Isabel.

"That's the easy part," said Alma. "The tough sledding comes when you have to tell Sammi Jo her late father was a criminal. I don't envy you doing that task."

"Funny, sis, but here all along I thought this was a joint venture you and I had undertaken. Now I'm hearing this malarkey from you."

Alma had to laugh. "Sammi Jo is a big girl who might take it better than we fear she will."

"Remind her she's her own person, and whatever bad guy he was is no reflection on who she is." Isabel renegotiated Petey Samson's wrong turn at the foot of their driveway, and he understood their adventurous walk had reached its end until the next time. He wagged his tail for his reward, and she accommodated him.

"No reminder will be needed because I'm certain the well-grounded Sammi Jo knows who she is," said Alma.

Chapter 32

The quarter-moon hovering in the hazy Monday night sky over Quiet Anchorage had assumed a tangerine orange hue. Sammi Jo couldn't recall ever previously seeing it that offbeat color, but their night had also veered off on a strange course. She along with Isabel and Alma were returning to the Cape Cod under the honey locusts where Sammi Jo had grown up, and her father Ray Burl had still lived.

She'd chronicled for the sisters how she came to discover his shotgun. It was stashed behind the column of cardboard boxes inside the storage locker he'd rented at the facility where she worked. Astonishment was also their initial reaction. They sat in the living room with Petey Samson who, after his recent escapades, lay dozing on the carpet remnant Isabel had just put in the corner. He was growing too pudgy to sleep curled up in their armchairs.

"So he did purchase the shotgun," said Alma. "What did you do with it?"

"I put it back and resecured his locker door with my own padlock," replied Sammi Jo. "Nobody can get back in there without going to a lot of fuss and bother."

Isabel swiped a gray curl away from her forehead. "We're dealing with a desperate enough character who'd go to a lot of fuss and bother."

Nodding, Alma went on. "Had the shotgun been recently fired?"

"Its bore looked clean as a whistle, and I didn't get a whiff of gunpowder off it," replied Sammi Jo. "It wasn't loaded, and I didn't see any ammo lying around. I saw a few flecks of rust on its new-looking barrel, so he probably hadn't oiled the shotgun's surfaces since he bought it last winter. Oh, and I should also add I also found a new hacksaw with the shotgun."

"Ah." Alma hiked up an eyebrow. "Had Ray Burl used it to shorten the shotgun?"

“He never took the hacksaw out of its original packaging,” replied Sammi Jo.

“It leads you to think he bought the shotgun for his self-defense, but then he decided against using it,” said Alma.

“Was he fearful Mo would return to Quiet Anchorage and do him serious harm?” asked Isabel. She looked at Sammi Jo who didn’t react.

“Or somebody like a boyfriend or a hired thug would do her bidding,” said Alma.

“You mean to do her violent bidding,” said Isabel.

“Isabel and Alma, I’m a little amazed at how you’re sitting here so calmly talking about shotguns and their violence,” said Sammi Jo.

“I’ll show you a little something about that,” said Alma.

Isabel felt her breath stall in her chest. Surely, Alma wouldn’t dare, would she?

Alma untied her shoelaces and removed her right shoe customized with its weighted toe, and raised her foot, or rather her half-foot, for Sammi Jo’s inspection. The front portion, including all of Alma’s toes, was missing, as if she’d undergone an amputation that, in effect, brought about her graphic disfigurement.

“I had a mishap when I was a few years older than you are. I was out squirrel hunting—I never bagged any game and just liked being out in the fresh air—with a few of our cousins when it happened. Isabel wasn’t there on that hunt. Somehow I managed to snag the muzzle of my shotgun inside my trouser cuff.

“Like the amazing klutz I am, I accidentally tripped the trigger as I drew back the shotgun. I screamed at the blinding flash and then deafening thunderclap. You can imagine the tremendous pain I felt when I almost passed out from it.

“So, to address your point, yes, I am well-acquainted with firearms and their destructive power. Needless to say, I turned plenty gun shy, fixed the offending shotgun to sell for just scrap parts, and took up safer pursuits like Scrabble.”

Sammi Jo knew about Alma’s hunting mishap but had never witnessed the harrowing results. She didn’t walk using any

discernible gimp. At a loss for the appropriate words, Sammi Jo also didn't impolitely gape at Alma's misshapen foot.

"Alma, put your shoe back on, please, since show and tell is over," said Isabel. "I just now glimpsed out the window the lit roof bar lights to the deputy sheriff's cruiser trawling by on Church Street."

"Sheriff Fox has sicced his merry henchmen to spy on us," said Alma, retying her shoelaces.

"I get the sense things are starting to boil," said Sammi Jo.

"Exactly!" Hands clasped behind her back and her eyes downward, Isabel was out of her armchair and on her feet. She took to pacing the floor like while at a taxi stand impatiently waiting for a late pick up. "Alma, this mystery has gone on for long enough. We must keep missing the key clue in front of our noses." She glanced over to be sure her sister was following her. "What in the blue dickens could it be? Help me suss it out."

Petey Samson opened one eye on them, but otherwise he didn't stir a muscle.

Alma leaned forward in her armchair, rubbing her palms together, creating a dry rustling noise. "I'm also racking my brain, Isabel, but I've got nothing to offer you."

Sammi Jo picked up on the dire urgency straining the sisters' voices. Her pulse also increased to pound away. "My discovery of Daddy's shotgun didn't give us any real advantage."

"Aw, that blasted shotgun is nothing more than a blue herring, just sending us down the wrong rabbit hole," said Alma. "I wish a thousand termites had eaten up its wooden stock."

"Red herring is the correct usage, Alma."

"It is red herring. I know that. The tension is getting so thick in here I can't think straight."

"Since we're stuck like we are, is it worth our while to return to the starting place?" asked Sammi Jo.

Isabel stopped pacing and snapped up her chin with a pleased smile. "Starting place. I like it, so keep going. Where should that be, Sammi Jo?"

“The Cape Cod,” replied Sammi Jo. “This time I’ll tear apart Ray Burl’s bedroom and root out any safe deposit box keys that he may’ve concealed in there.”

“The Cape Cod is as good a place as any to search again,” said Isabel. “Alma, what about it?”

“Taking a second look can’t hurt anything,” she said no longer as agitated and rubbing her palms together. “Just be extra careful and keep the lights to Roscoe’s cruisers out of our rearview mirror.”

“Sammi Jo, since we’re laying our cards on the table,” said Isabel. “There is one more issue we should take up before we leave.”

“Oh?” said Sammi Jo.

Alma who as a rule didn’t mind being blunt this time was reluctant to say anything that might hurt Sammi Jo. Alma soft-pedaled articulating their suspicions. “Ray Burl may have been up to no good, and for his troubles, he was fatally shot,” she said.

Sammi Jo’s mouth tightened. “Are you suggesting he was involved in some illegal shenanigans?”

Isabel and Alma nodded in unison.

“I’ve prepared myself for dealing with that probability,” said Sammi Jo never in a solemn tone. “Look it, Daddy and I talked, but we didn’t get into the big things going on in our lives. That worked out fine. I grew up with a father who guarded his secrets as if he didn’t wish Quiet Anchorage to know what he did. That’s why he rented the secret locker I saw by sheer chance for the first time today. I can’t see any other reason for it except he was ashamed or afraid of getting caught.”

Isabel breathed out in a gush of relief. She smiled. “I’m glad to hear you can take into account all of the possibilities that might come true here.”

Chapter 33

Sammi Jo's keener eyes first spotted the yellowish glare to the interior light shining out from the Cape Cod's front pair of windows. She doubted if they'd gone off earlier and left the lights turned on. Ray Burl's snarky ghost, even if he took a contrary mind to return and haunt the Cape Cod, didn't have the mortal's ability to toggle on electric light switches.

She blinked twice and used her index finger to rub one eye and then her other eye. However, the windows didn't fall dark but remained bright, and her blood raced a little fiercer. A mystery intruder had to be up to some monkeyshine inside the Cape Cod. Who was it?

Driving the sedan after she volunteered to do so, she didn't thumb on the directional blinker but elected to maintain their current speed and do a flyby of the Cape Cod to perform their first surveillance. She let Isabel and Alma in on the proposal.

"I can make out light in the windows." Sammi Jo pointed her finger out the windshield. "Peer carefully that way, or better yet, wait until we're closer to it...all right, can you see it there?"

"Now I can." Isabel's attention centered on the Cape Cod.

"Me, too," said Alma, then, "That's odd. I'm certain we cut off the lights before leaving earlier."

"My identical thought," said Sammi Jo. "A mystery intruder has invaded the Cape Cod. There might be a car parked in the driveway, or it's been left to hide in the backyard."

"No car is visible out front," said Isabel.

Sammi Jo didn't ease up her foot pressure off the gas pedal and slow their engine noise to spook the mystery intruder that he'd aroused the passersby's curiosity.

"Did Sheriff Fox return to pick up the memorandum he left us in the foyer?" asked Alma while they cruised out of sight of the Cape Cod.

"The line of goose bumps parading down my back warns me Roscoe isn't the mystery intruder," replied Isabel.

"I've got a few goose bumps myself," said Alma. "Sammi Jo, do you care to cast your vote and make it unanimous?"

"My adrenaline rush has left my mouth dry." She swallowed and reset her hands' grips on the steering wheel. An inconvenient attack of the hiccups stirred in her diaphragm.

Good grief, she thought. "What should we do? Contact Sheriff Fox on my cell phone?"

Alma kiboshed that idea. "All we've got here is the house lights turned on, nothing approaching a criminal act to prod a small town sheriff into taking action."

"Do we return to the Cape Cod? Or not?" asked Sammi Jo. She hiccupped.

"Hold your breath, dear," said Isabel. "It works nearly every time for me."

"Isabel? What do you say?" said Alma. "Do we go inside again?"

"Was there ever any question about it?" replied Isabel. "Turn this coupé around."

"I'd like to know what they're doing in my house," said Sammi Jo before her next hiccup came. She held her breath.

The sedan's high beams caught the scarlet glare to a reflector nailed to the white mailbox post planted inside an antique milk can. Beside it ran a ruddy farmhouse driveway, and she swerved into it, shifted into reverse, and then backed them out.

When she toed the gas pedal, they sputtered off in the direction of the Cape Cod. She held the steering wheel and squeezed it like a shopping cart's handle while she stood in a slow-moving queue at a rookie cashier's checkout lane.

"Who'd have any interest to break into the empty Cape Cod?" asked Isabel.

"Vandal, cat burglar, vagrant, junkie, thrillseeker, or arsonist," replied Alma. "Take your pick from the standard gallery of rogues."

"None of the above." Isabel gnawed on her inner cheek as she gathered her thoughts made while deliberating in Siberia concerning

Mo's possible homicidal tendencies. "I'm inclined to think it's a lot more personal than just a rogue."

"Is it one of Ray Burl's old workers from the turf farm?" asked Sammi Jo. "Is it his boss Mr. Barclay?"

Isabel was reluctant to share who they might encounter in the Cape Cod, but she thought it best to practice caution. "Pull around back. No sense in advertising our presence to Sheriff Fox."

"I'd like to go to sleep tonight in my own bed," said Alma. "Not wide awake on a hard prison bunk."

Sammi Jo hiccupped. Isabel's remedy hadn't worked all that well. *What else could go wrong tonight?* thought Sammi Jo.

On their second approach, she braked to slow them before their tires rolled off the state road's pavement and crunched over the graveled driveway. She continued to crawl around the corner then behind the Cape Cod to shield their parked sedan. After she came to a stop, she extinguished the luminous cones to their headlights.

She hiccupped while staring at the Cape Cod.

"No parked cars are anywhere in sight, so nobody is still hanging around."

"Our going inside shouldn't be dangerous," said Alma. "I hope."

"No guts, no glory," said Sammi Jo.

"I couldn't have put it any better myself," said Isabel.

Sammi Jo was the first one to pull up on her door latch and enter the night's sultry murk. Peering skyward, she could take in the tangerine orange quarter-moon blazing through the foliage to the honey locusts standing sentinel over the Cape Cod. Things felt more and more like they were coming to a head.

All around her, the night bugs played their buzzy songs, and she hit on a whiff of the fresh hay cut in the field across the road. She saw Isabel, then Alma, now twin silhouettes, emerge from their sides of the sedan, and they convened where the front headlights had just shone.

Isabel asked Alma to go back and retrieve the flashlight kept in the glove compartment. She also left the sedan doors unlocked in the unlikely event they had to make a hasty exit driving away from the Cape Cod.

Sammi Jo grabbed with a hand to massage away the pinch in her lower back where her lumbar muscles tensed up, causing the wave of fury to course through her frame. This Cape Cod now belonged to her, and she refused to let any trespasser intimidate or frighten her. A calming bravery fortified her skittish nerves, and she also lost her case of the hiccups.

Meantime Alma, back with the flashlight, felt stomach-churning anxiety building inside her. They made their careful but quick and quiet way to the front of the Cape Cod. The pair of luminous windows glared back at them like a jack-o'-lantern's rectangular eyes.

Isabel took the lead as they filed over the flagstone pavers, up the porch steps, and grouped at the front entrance. She stepped aside, inviting Sammi Jo to be the one who unlocked the door, opened it, and entered the Cape Cod.

She closed the door with quiet care behind Alma, the last one to stand in the foyer beside the table with Sheriff Fox's now prophetic memorandum calling the Cape Cod his crime scene.

Their collective groans went up over what they confronted, and Alma didn't need to switch on her flashlight beam. Isabel didn't need to dig out the 3X magnifying glass from her pocketbook to search for clues.

The living room was cast in bright relief over a human figure lying on the floor just before the entrance to the kitchen. The scene wasn't pretty. But it was there just the same. Blood pooled on the floor. Sammi Jo broke their silent spell.

"We found our mystery intruder," she said with her wry wit. "And she's deader than a dodo bird at the disco."

Chapter 34

“Who is the poor lady, Isabel?” Alma hadn’t stirred since their entrance into the foyer.

Isabel, hurrying over to the corpse sprawled out on the floor, spoke over her shoulder. “My hunch tells me it’s none other than Mo Garner, Sammi Jo’s mom.”

Alma reacted with horror. “Oh my god.”

“Exactly,” said Isabel.

Sammi Jo, a short pace behind Isabel, gasped, but she didn’t miss a step.

Alma, a little annoyed, began muttering to herself. “Of course it’s Mo Garner, Alma. Who else would dislike Ray Burl the most? It’s been obvious from the git-go. Why, if it had been a snake, it would’ve bit you on the nose.”

Isabel knelt down with Sammi Jo beside the corpse. It didn’t smell coppersy as the mystery novels often describe the conditions at a murder scene. But the horror of murder they got right. Mo had been a winsome lady who’d given up the ghost while dressed in a denim shirt with the pink roses embroidered across the shoulders and denim shorts. Her closed eyes suggested her death had been mercifully instant. Isabel didn’t miss seeing the irony of Mo’s dying in the place where she’d vowed never to return to.

Her tussled hair was the same brunette shade as her daughter’s except for the gray hairs that streaked it. Isabel didn’t miss observing how the hard-traveled miles since Mo’s self-imposed exile showed in her craggy face. Mo appeared to be in about the same age range as her late ex, Ray Burl. Now in death, they were reunited, and Isabel hoped to God their second pairing was more harmonious than when they’d lived under this same roof. At the moment, Isabel felt more concerned over Sammi Jo’s welfare after confronting this latest traumatic event.

“Are you bearing up?” asked Isabel in a caring murmur.

"I don't feel like turning cartwheels, but I'm hanging as tough as can be expected," replied Sammi Jo. "I can also confirm she's my mother. I haven't seen Mo since I was six in grade school, but I'll never forget how her face looks."

"Age changes ladies' faces to grow jowly and leathery," said Isabel. "Are you certain beyond any doubt she's your mom? Is there a chance she isn't?"

Sammi Jo's voice fell flatter. "She has the same face as the portrait in her high school yearbook we looked up at the public library."

"I'd have to go along with you there," said Isabel.

Alma crossed the living room, approaching them. "Shot?"

"Once," replied Isabel. "Chest."

"We've got the picture," said Alma, stopping beside her older sister and young friend. "Are you okay, Sammi Jo?"

"She's still treading water," replied Isabel.

Alma fell back into her private eye mode. "Spread out. Keep your eyes sharp. Look for anything unusual that's been left behind."

Isabel grasped Sammi Jo by the forearm and guided her to stand up on her rickety legs. "Shall we get on with it?" asked Isabel. "Do you need another moment?"

Sammi Jo raised her limp shoulders. "Don't stop on my account. What we seen done in here can't be undone."

"The main question facing us is who was it that killed Mo," said Alma and as an afterthought she tacked on, "And Ray Burl, as well."

"Hey, Isabel and Alma." Their saucer-eyed looks intersected on Sammi Jo. "I'm headed back out to the car," she said. "And have one of my big cries. Don't offer to go with me. It's something I have to do right now, but it's better if I'm alone when I do it. Thanks for your understanding."

"We keep the tissues in the glove compartment," said Isabel.

Alma was more demonstrative. "Come and give me a big hug, Sammi Jo." Alma spread out her arms as an invitation to embrace.

Sammi Jo felt torn. She had a lot of dark stuff to process, and she preferred the solitude, at least here in the very early going.

"Sammi Jo, the car is all yours," said Isabel. "Its doors are unlocked. We'll give you a few minutes and be right along, too. For

obvious reasons, sticking around here will get us into a pack of trouble if we're caught."

Alma lowered her arms as Sammi Jo turned for the foyer and hurried through the front door. Its latch snapping closed cued Alma to share a stern expression with Isabel.

"We better get to the bottom of this murder not tomorrow but tonight," said Alma.

"Murders," corrected Isabel. "There are two of them now."

"Right you are. Has the killer flown the coop?"

"Not quite yet is my guess. The killer has a compelling reason to be in Quiet Anchorage than to just take off willy-nilly tonight."

"Where is Mo's pocketbook?" Alma's eyes swept the floor's perimeter. No errant pocketbook had been spilled during the shooting. She considered it an unusual detail. "Mo's killer had to have made it a point to take Mo's pocketbook unless she doesn't carry one like Sammi Jo does."

"Would only another lady think to do something like that?" asked Isabel.

"Quite possibly," replied Alma.

Isabel pointed out an observation in the foyer. "I can see Roscoe never picked up his memorandum he left out for us."

"It just goes to show how gullible he is. As if it and shaking his finger at us would ever stop us."

"Two murders now raise the ante from bad to worse. Is it the right time for us to hand this case off to him?"

"Bite your tongue." Alma snapped her eyes on Isabel. "We'll keep going on this tonight if just for Sammi Jo's sake. End of any further discussion."

Isabel smiled with renewed confidence. "I'm just making sure you're still all in with me on this matter."

"You already know I am." Alma cracked a sardonic smile. "Look on the bright side. We'll be imprisoned in adjoining cells at the women's detention center. We can swap reading material Louise and Megan bring us on visiting days. The downside is the macaroni-and-cheese dinners served every night, and the prison warden

probably won't allow them to bring Petey Sampson to lick our faces."

"Ouch!"

"You know it, sister."

"What laws on the books have we technically broken? We'll claim our cell phones couldn't scratch up a signal here to report Mo's death to the police."

"It sounds just credible enough to be accepted as the truth. Ray Burl doesn't use a land line phone."

"Here's what jumps out at me." Isabel lowered her eyes to appraise the late Mo expired on the floor. "What is the big allure that brought Mo inside here?"

Alma gave it a few beats of reflection. "Since we theorize Ray Burl was a bad guy, I'll assume that he was a thief. Whatever of value he ripped off, Mo somehow learned of it. She decided she was entitled to partake of his ill-gotten gains."

"Then did Mo shoot and kill Ray Burl?"

"I'd be tempted to throw my support behind such a possibility, but one thing gums it up."

Isabel read Alma's next thought. "The cashmere dress suit with the hole in it he wore to the morgue."

"Bingo and I'm so fed up with the suit," said Alma. "I wish a thousand moths had eaten it up with ragged holes before Ray Burl went to wear it. He'd've thrown it out and maybe still be with us tonight."

"Skipping the moths and getting back to the late Mo," said Isabel. "Play another round of the what-ifs with me. What if Mo knew Ray Burl had robbed a bank or armored truck? What if she suspected he'd hidden the loot somewhere? What if she thought he'd recorded its location and kept the map or directions in here? That was her incentive to kill Ray Burl and break into the Cape Cod."

"All that dovetails neatly, but who interrupted her search and shot *her* to death?"

"You just beat me to asking the same thing."

"No more hunches are forming in you?"

"I've hit rock bottom on them, I'm afraid."

“Let’s shake a leg. We’ve given Sammi Jo enough time to recover from her meltdown.”

“Will she be okay, Alma? Or will our steel magnolia break down and turn hysterical on us?”

“God only knows. Either way, it’s moot since she’s getting our full support. Should we cover up Mo with a clean sheet?”

“It’s too late for doing that. Sammi Jo has already seen Mo in this horrid shape,” replied Isabel before her cell phone’s ring tone demanded her attention.

Her caller was the trooper Phyllis reporting in for the evening.

“I’ve been calling around for the latest, and I finally got something for you,” she told Isabel. “Fats Browning and I got to jawing over our cell phones. Anyways, he swells up like an old banty rooster does and tells me that he’s seen Mo Garner right here in Quiet Anchorage. He was making a truck delivery to one of the subdivisions.”

Isabel lifted her eyes to see the late Mo’s remains on display before them on the floor. “Fats has it right, Phyllis. Mo was murdered earlier this evening. We just found her dead body in Ray Burl’s Cape Cod with nobody else here. We’ve no idea who the killer is.”

Phyllis groaned from the shock of hearing about her ex-sister-in-law’s violent death. “I might also be able to help you out on that part.”

“Please do and hurry.”

“Fats said the word he got is Mo has been living in the same house with a roommate.”

Isabel lifted both eyebrows while looking at Alma. “Interesting. Has the roommate got a name?”

“Fats makes for a crummy detective, Isabel. He doesn’t know anything more than what I just told you.”

“Thank you so much, Phyllis. You’ve been an invaluable help. Feel better. Good night, dear.”

Isabel closed her cell phone. “Mo lived with a roommate.”

“Ah, the plot thickens even more,” said Alma, her eyebrows also raised. “Too bad we don’t know who the mystery roommate is, or

where he or she might be found right now.”

Isabel smiled as if she had thought of a place.

“Do you have in mind where we should go next?” asked Alma.

“Back to the first scene of the crime,” replied Isabel. “It’s on to the turf farm for us.”

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Chapter 35

Alma said she'd gladly assume their driving duties, leaving Sammi Jo free of the hassle.

Sammi Jo sensed how Isabel and Alma were growing anxious over her precarious mental state. She had also weathered a few qualms over whether she could power through rest of the night without giving out. She had the blubbering, sobbing cry under her belt. Shedding tears while sitting inside the sedan parked on the Cape Cod's driveway had been a liberating release. She'd retaken control of her emotions and put back on her game face.

The trio of lady shamuses, a force to be reckoned with, rolled back into somnolent Quiet Anchorage. Their sedan's tires clattered across the twin railroad tracks, and they proceeded down the main drag left dim as at a parlor séance. A pair of bats chased after mosquitoes under the street lights. Isabel espied a cat black as Mr. Poe's top hat scampering across their front and down the alleyway beside the Lago Azul Florist Shop. She kept her lips zipped. Superstitions held no sway, not tonight. Besides, the black cat also had a white tipped tail and socks that negated the curse of bad luck it was supposed to bring.

Alma might not agree with Isabel.

"Do you mind stopping at my apartment for a quick minute?" Sammi Jo asked Alma. "I've got to pee something awful, and I'd like to change my blouse if I can find a clean one to wear. This one is smeared with my runny mascara. I appreciated your tissues, but they weren't big enough for all my sobs."

"Use either rubbing alcohol or ammonia to blot out the mascara stains," said Isabel.

"But you can do it later. Right now, give Reynolds Kyle a poke," said Alma, nuzzling their front tire against the drugstore's curbstone. He was the only able-bodied man she could think of to back them up.

Sammi Jo nodded. "I also thought of doing that. He can meet us over at the turf farm's office."

"Be sure to tell him our suspect is armed and dangerous," said Isabel.

Sammi Jo chuckled but not with humor. "He's got the right things at his man-cave to come prepared for dealing with armed and dangerous."

After she scooted out of the seat and shut the sedan door, Alma turned back to address Isabel sitting in the rear seat. Only her vague facial details were visible in the grainy light.

"I heard that sigh emptying from you," said Alma. "Do you want to tell me what's going on back there?"

"In perfect candor, I'm getting tired of doing this," said Isabel. "You must be getting near the breaking point, too. What is it that bedevils us like so, Alma? Are we off our rockers? That's what triggered my heavy sigh. Take a long, hard look at this situation. Two murders are too much. At our ripe, old ages, we belong planted in our armchairs, laughing at *The Dukes of Hazzard* playing on DVD while gorging on Godiva Chocolate Truffles."

Alma determined Isabel was overstressed, but this was not the right time to be losing any will. "We're still young at heart, and we're still younger than dirt, and your mind is still a steel trap."

"We're barely younger than dirt, and steel rusts, mind you."

"Fine then, call it luck, serendipity, or whatever you like, but we haven't done half-bad tonight, if I don't say so myself."

Isabel didn't have the heart to bring up the cameo appearance of the black cat only minutes ago and rattle Alma's confidence.

"What about Sheriff Fox?" asked Isabel.

A shrug was Alma's response. "He's probably fast asleep. We'll deliver the bad news to him when we get around to doing it."

"He won't be thrilled about our delay in reporting Mo's homicide to his office."

"Isabel, nothing we've ever done since moving back to Quiet Anchorage has thrilled Roscoe Fox. We're always in his doghouse for one reason or another."

Isabel nodded.

Alma went on. "We'll stick close together, so we can help guide and steer each other around all the quicksand pits."

Isabel sent her gaze out the side window. "The wooden bench looks forlorn when it's vacant."

"Willie, Ossie, and Blue have gone home," said Alma. "That's what the normal folks in villages like ours do at night. If we did phone them, what might we tell them?"

"Don't let anything slip about tonight's investigation, or they'll gang up and have us certified crazy as two betsy bugs. We'll be shipped off wearing straitjackets inside a rubber-paneled van to spend the rest of our days at the state-run nuthouse."

Alma surveyed Isabel in the rearview mirror. "They're probably not far from the bull's-eye truth there." Alma noticed Sammi Jo darting out from the stairway entrance while fixing the last buttons to her clean blouse. She didn't rub her eyes or nose as if she'd gone through another crying spell while alone in her apartment. That was a good sign. "Take heart from our own third musketeer who is back with us."

"Hit the road before Roscoe flies up and slaps his pairs of bracelets on us," said Isabel.

Alma cranked the ignition key, and the sedan's engine turned over to purr under the hood. She waited as Sammi Jo sprinted to the sedan and climbed into the passenger side. The younger woman slammed the door shut with a confident force.

"Reynolds is on his fast horse, a V-8 Mustang," she said. "He'll escort us while searching the turf farm's office and buildings."

"Is he coming prepared to deal with armed and dangerous?" asked Isabel.

"Very prepared," replied Sammi Jo.

Chapter 36

When Alma was a small farm girl, she'd played with a hard plastic Kewpie doll. Its skin hue was a fleshy bisque, and it flashed a pair of jeweled blue eyes. She had a vague recollection of somebody, perhaps her father Woodrow or a cousin in town, acquiring the Kewpie doll as a prize from a carnival game of darts tossed to pop the balloons. She loved the Kewpie doll to pieces and hauled it everywhere with her. It was her security blanket to clutch and hold tight.

Tonight she could use that Kewpie doll with its comforting reassurance. A tough guy accompanying them to the turf farm would be good, too. Take the dark-haired, tall, and lean Robert Ryan, for instance. Isabel also had had a major crush on the late film star, not that Isabel and Alma had compared notes. It was just they both sat riveted to their seats when they watched his motion pictures. Alma shook his memory from her thoughts. She saw the pair of bats still performed their acrobatics under the street lights.

"Your Aunt Phyllis called me while you were in the car," said Isabel.

"How is she doing?" asked Sammi Jo.

"She sounded fine."

"Then why did she call you?"

"She informed us Fats Browning picked up a rumor."

"About Mo?"

"Yes. She's been living in a nearby subdivision."

Alma interjected her two cents. "Hiding is more likely."

"Evidently," said Isabel. "There is more."

"Mo had a roommate," said Alma.

"Why?" asked Sammi Jo.

Neither sister hazarded a guess although they knew it was probably for nefarious purposes. Again, the ladies clattered over the railroad crossing. The trains didn't zip through Quiet Anchorage with the same frequency or urgency as once upon a time. Alma was

old enough to have seen the last run of the steam engines wheeling to their final halt in March 1960. Where were they now? Had any steam engines survived as museum pieces? Everything felt ephemeral, never seeming to last for very long, even in the sleepy hamlets such as theirs. She pined for the steam engines so hard she kept on driving and sailed right by their turn.

Isabel was alerter. "Uh, Alma, you missed taking our left."

"I realize that, Isabel. At the next appropriate place, I'll turn around and go back and rectify it. Am I forgiven?"

"Always but where is your mind at tonight?"

"I was mulling over Kewpie dolls, Robert Ryan, and steam engines, if you must know. They are a darn sight pleasanter to dwell on than a pair of gruesome murders."

"Well, I can't do all of our thinking for us while you're daydreaming," said Isabel, annoyed. "We need your undivided concentration for another hour. Can we count on that from you?"

"You've got it, so let's move on, shall we?" said Alma.

"All right, you both, cool it," said Sammi Jo. "Let's not be so cranky with each other. We're all feeling a little stressed out, and it's been a long, trying night. By the way, who is this Robert Ryan you just mentioned?"

"I'll fill you in later all about him," said Isabel.

"Be ready for a doggie treat, too," said Alma. "Think Brad Pitt only with more soulful eyes. Can I get an amen on that, Isabel?"

"A big amen even. He gave your heart palpitations, and your stomach butterflies while you watched him act in the classic films."

"Awesome," said Sammi Jo.

When the realtor's "Home For Sale" sign rose up in their headlights' beams, Alma executed a nifty turnaround like a real pro in the graveled driveway and retraced their way to the narrow lane where they branched off the state road and made for the turf farm's office.

Clipping along in the dark, she gritted her teeth as they jounced in and out of every chuckhole gouged by the heavy eighteen-wheel trucks laden with the pallets of commercial sod.

This time they didn't phone ahead, but the melodic strains to Charlie Parker's solo break blown on his alto sax from "Night in Tunisia" graced their ears.

"Dear Lord, there goes my ring tone." Isabel checked her cell phone's caller ID. "What has put Dwight in such a dither to be calling me this late after his office hours?"

"One big thing pops into my head," said Sammi Jo. "Are you taking his call?"

Isabel chuckled. "No, but I might call him later from the station house."

"Don't be making light of that stuff," said Alma. "Or you'll hex us to land there. Keep your fingers crossed on both hands for our luck to hold a little while longer."

Centering on the black cat back in town already jinxing them, if indeed there was a jinx to be guarded against, Isabel withheld making any reference to it.

At last, the lane ended, voiding to the turf farm's illuminated parking lot with the brick office and three varisized sheet metal outbuildings. Alma had possessed the awareness to flip off their headlights before rounding the lane's final bend. She could do little, however, to muffle their low engine noise and keep their approach any stealthier than it was. She steered the sedan to nose it into the same parking spot Isabel and Alma had used on their previous two visits.

"Reynolds hasn't arrived yet," said Sammi Jo. "I guess his fast horse isn't so fast. We can't afford to wait around for the slowpoke."

"The engine noise has already given us away," said Alma.

"Probably not so much," said Isabel. "The office is soundproofed."

Her 360 didn't key on any parked vehicles, including Mr. Barclay's Aston Martin, just the three flatbed trucks, one flatbed loaded with a cargo of palletized sod bound for market.

She had a new appreciation for the catchphrase "adrenaline rush." Hers ignited her pulse like a gas stove's pilot light to fire her jets of blood through her veins. She feared her old ticker would quit

ticking away before she finished cleaning up this mucky state of affairs.

"Are you leaving your clunky pocketbook in the sedan?" Alma asked Isabel.

"Yes, and just bring along your cell phone," replied Isabel.

"Seeing another bright window leaves me frowning," said Alma. "Somebody is either in or has been in the office."

"I believe we've reached our quota of dead bodies for tonight," said Isabel.

Famous last words, thought Alma. Her reserves were running low, and she felt as if she was growing punchy. She threw off her mantle of fatigue, at least for the next few minutes while they poked around inside the office.

Isabel wished it was a dark office with unlit portals for windows. She wished nobody except they were present at the turf farm. She wished she was curled up in bed with an entertaining novel, but it shouldn't even be a cozy murder mystery. She was finished with reading even about fictional murders until her frayed nerves had an ample opportunity to mend.

"It's rock-and-roll time, ladies." Sammi Jo, the youngest was the first to spring out of the sedan. She saw the tangerine orange quarter-moon hadn't moved by much above them.

Less enthusiastic but nonetheless game, Alma followed her lead. Without the reassuring weight of her pocketbook carried by its double strap on her forearm, she felt incomplete. She could be standing up at the church lectern to read from scripture but without the aid of her bible opened before her.

Isabel used a stage whisper. "If the door is locked, somebody went off and forgot the light was turned on. If the door is unlocked, we might greet the mystery intruder inside the office."

"If it's a multiple choice, I pick the former over the latter," said Alma.

"That only lengthens our already long night," said Isabel.

"That's just swell by me because I'm not a bit sleepy," said Alma.

"Could the mystery intruder be Mo's roommate?" asked Sammi Jo.

“Most of the signs are tracking that way,” replied Isabel.

Just then, the mournful lick of the whippoorwill’s yelps wafted over the humid night air from the nearby shadowy treeline. Isabel knew it was one of the rare bird species with short, bristly whiskers from having stalked them on the farm. She felt a resounding emotional pang to be back on the Trumbo family farm where only natural human deaths came, and never mortals slaying mortals. Her knees had turned weak, but she still held up and slogged on.

Sammi Jo guided them to the office door where she was careful as a beekeeper at the hives as she rotated the doorknob.

She froze, placing her ear as close as an inch away from the door to listen in, but she detected no alien sounds made from inside the office.

She pushed the door inward and away from them, the clearing slot affording them a sightline into the bright front room. Again, they noticed the calendar hanging askew on the wall. A pair of hardback chairs along with the desk rounded out the furnishings. The one thing not encountered as they grouped at the closed door was any sight of the mystery intruder.

They knew the outspill of light through the next entry gave to Mr. Barclay’s inner sanctum.

Sammi Jo sent Alma, then Isabel, meaningful glances, and they swerved their eyes to the bright outspill. Then a rustling noise came as if the mystery intruder was making haste.

Sammi Jo was the first to skulk wary as a cat stalking its prey through the bright outspill and into Mr. Barclay’s inner sanctum. She noticed how she’d stuffed her breath in anticipation.

This time they hit the jackpot.

The mystery intruder kneeling beside Mr. Barclay’s glass-topped desk had put his, or her, back to them. A square section of the plush gold carpet had been removed from the office floor and set aside, creating a dark square hole.

The mystery intruder was intent on reaching a hand deep into the opened floor safe and scooping out its riches. The unzipped currency bag the other hand clutched was stuffed half-full of banknotes.

The plush gold carpet also muffled Isabel and Alma's tread venturing up to stop within a pace behind Sammi Jo. Trading nods, they also recognized the mystery intruder from the rear.

Her voice flinty, Sammi Jo gave their greeting. "Do you need any help with counting up the stolen loot?"

Barking out in shock, the thief stood and twisted around, her eyes broadening. Her looks by this late hour's light had turned from plain and mousy to a femme fatale's brittle and savage mask. Her denim jeans and red sneakers were how she dressed as a thief and killer. The vigilant Sammi Jo was interested in one thing about Karmine Meriwether: she lacked her pocketbook.

Two of them, no doubt the smaller one belonging to Mo, lay on Mr. Barclay's glass-topped desk. Sammi Jo moved fast, scooping them up by their loopy straps in a single swoop. The second black Aigner handbag was the pocketbook Karmine had carried during their first visit here.

Just like when Sammi Jo had picked it up after Karmine dropped it back then, the handbag this time felt heavy as if it contained a loaded handgun. She was certain of what she had. While she regretted they'd missed the first clue, she would ensure it no longer dispensed its destructive power. The killing spree had ended.

The second before Karmine broke out of her stance, Sammi Jo had taken a glimpse of Karmine clutching the currency bag along with a second handgun. It had to be the spare one Mr. Barclay kept planted inside his floor safe. She was pointing the handgun, aiming it straight at her three unwelcome lady guests.

Staring down the dark, business end of a handgun ticked off Sammi Jo who'd had enough hassles for one night. Flying into a demon's fury, she lunged, her slicing fist striking Karmine's wrist.

Yelping, her grasp of the handgun and currency bag loosened, and both sailed through the air and struck the plush gold carpet with thuds.

Alma had the presence of mind to fetch the handgun that she gave to Isabel to hold and train on Karmine.

But the thief sprang ahead, charging at Sammi Jo.

Sammi Jo didn't yield an inch of ground, and Karmine ran into solid muscle like she was hitting a brick wall.

Wrapping her arms around the smaller, slighter lady, Sammi Jo pinioned Karmine in a bear hug.

Karmine kicked her feet, screaming to be turned loose, and Sammi Jo liked the idea. So, she gave Karmine a fling, and the thief also landed on the plush gold carpet.

She climbed up from her sprawl to stand. Like a rabid animal, her eyes glared at Sammi Jo, who laughed.

"Nice try, Karmine," said Sammi Jo. "I can't say I blame you for making a break for it, especially in light of all the trouble you're in tonight."

As Mr. Barclay's office manager, Karmine turned imperious, asserting her authority in her job's domain. "How did you get inside here? This is private property, and you're trespassing."

"In your rush, you got sloppy and left the door unlocked," replied Sammi Jo. "We invited ourselves into the office."

"I order you to leave," said Karmine.

"Soon but not quite yet," said Sammi Jo.

"If you don't, I'll fetch the sheriff on you," said Karmine.

"That's also in the works," said Sammi Jo. "For the time being, we'll chitchat. Did you feel us closing in on you? Is that why you're in a hectic dash cleaning out the floor safe like at a fire sale?"

"I have nothing to say to any of you. Get out. Before I—"

A righteous smile tugged at Sammi Jo's lips. "Before you what exactly?" She brandished the handbag. "Your second mistake was not keeping your purse close by. Your heavy-as-lead handgun is in here, and I'm holding it. Be smart. You've got no bullets left and have run out of angles to play. The killing has stopped, and you've met your Waterloo."

The tousled Karmine darted her eyes to each side of her captor. She could be peeling out in her fast car that she'd parked behind the office. She could be making good on her getaway.

"Why are you acting so hostile?" she said, trying for a more rational tenor and pulling a different ploy on them. "Let's everybody take a breath and relax. I'm just working late when you sneaked up

behind me. Of course I reacted like I did to protect myself." She stooped down and grabbed up the currency bag she'd dropped.

Sammi Jo was hardly duped. "Is your working late why you're carrying the valuables you've taken from Mr. Barclay's floor safe in your currency bag?"

"I routinely handle all the money," replied Karmine, her last grasp to keep her cover story intact.

"Can the bull," said Sammi Jo. "You killed my father Ray Burl and then you went after my mother. She was Maureen you left shot dead at the Cape Cod."

Karmine laughed as unsettling and baleful as it was unconvincing. "You're crazy because I did neither such heinous thing."

Sammi Jo's tight smile showed off her dimples. "The jig is up, Karmine. I've got your murder weapon with your prints all over it. Ballistics will prove you fired it to leave the death slugs in my parents. Whatever big payoff plans you hatched with Mo just went south fast. We've stopped you cold in your tracks."

Karmine's face blanched to an unnatural gray as she stared daggers at Sammi Jo. "And here I came so close. Just a few more piddly minutes and I'd've been gone from your crummy town."

Sammi Jo zeroed in on what she foremost wanted Karmine to clarify. "Why?"

"Mr. Barclay is loaded, and I saw the ripe opportunity for my plucking."

"That's it, the root of evil: money. It figures. Was Ray Burl in on it? Did you collude with him to rip off your boss? You must've concocted the scheme and approached Ray Burl because I know my father was never a crook."

"He was a man. He yearned for the same good things I did out of life." Karmine sounded close to petulant over how her bid for the good things in life had fallen short.

"I hate to break the newsflash to you, Karmine, but nothing is good about scamming somebody or, even worse, murdering them. Why did you kill my mother Mo? Out of greed?"

Karmine said nothing.

Isabel stepped up to stand at Sammi Jo's side. "Sheriff Fox can sort out all the ins and outs. Alma has called him at his house. We can wait until he gets those answers and passes them along to us."

"What's the hurry, Isabel?" asked Sammi Jo. "There's time now, and Karmine over there wants to unburden the rest of her soul to us."

"I demand to see a lawyer," said Karmine. "I have nothing further to say to you tonight."

Sammi Jo gave Isabel a slight tilt of her head. "Sheriff Fox will take it from here then. We've gone as far as we can go. We'll be here when he and Reynolds finally make the scene." Sammi Jo pointed her finger at Karmine. "You can put down the currency bag. You won't be taking it where you're going next. I'm pretty sure the Commonwealth provides your room and board for free."

However Karmine went on clutching the currency bag like a life vest in a sea of troubles. But she was sunk.

"I can hear the faint siren peals to the sheriff's cruiser," said Alma. "Roscoe will have a cow over finding us inside here."

"We only make him look bad, something he doesn't want to hit the newspapers," said Isabel.

"Is that the leverage we can hold over him if we need to use it?" asked Alma.

Isabel nodded once. "How sweet it will be, too."

Chapter 37

“Remember the sunset postcard I told you Mo had mailed to me?” said Nita over their cell phone connection.

“The one you had the dickens to find,” replied Isabel in the laundry room. “Did you dig it out?”

“As luck would have it, I did. It was stuck inside of my old bible. Maybe I should’ve prayed harder and longer for Mo. She chased after enjoying Saturday night’s sins without getting any of Sunday morning’s redemption. That’s no way to live.”

Isabel didn’t comment on what might have been but wasn’t. “What did Mo write you on the postcard?” she asked.

“I’ll read you her entire scribbles. ‘Hi, Nida’ – that’s spelled with a ‘d’ and not a ‘t’ – ‘I think I’ve found my pot of gold at the rainbow’s end. Pinch me! Cheers, M—. P.S. I’ll call you soon.’”

Isabel didn’t see much to make of the late Mo’s cryptic message. “Why did she take a sudden notion out of the blue to write and mail you the postcard?”

“For old times’ sake is all I can think.”

“She never called you, or vice versa, I take it.”

“The postcard was all I ever heard from her. I guess by then she was in deep cahoots with that evil-minded lady.”

“Karmine Meriwether, if that is her actual name or one of her several aliases.”

“I live right in town, but I never bumped into or set eyes on Karmine.”

“She had other matters occupying her attention than mingling with us locals.”

“So it would seem. This episode has been nightmarish, Isabel. I wished I’d seen Mo just once more. I believe I could’ve talked her out of what crimes she was scheming to do. We were that close at one point in our lives.”

“It’s a nice wish to indulge, Nita, but don’t you believe it for one second. Mo was a train wreck when she returned to Quiet

Anchorage. She was committed one hundred-percent with Karmin to pulling off the heist on Mr. Barclay. Nothing shy of the Second Coming, much less your earnest counsel, would've disrupted their plans."

"They would make off with slim pickings. The scuttlebutt I hear says the Sod King is in debt up to the hilt. I feel sorry for his wife Elsie Denise and the two kids."

"Then Mo and Karmin aimed to bag up whatever they could grab and make fast tracks out of town. You know Sheriff Fox might consider Mo's postcard as evidence."

Nita was uncooperative. "I'm calling it a sentimental keepsake, and he'll never get his grubby paws on it."

"Your sentimental keepsake secret is safe with me," said Isabel. "Thanks for calling, Nita."

They hung up.

So, in a way the dead really do speak from beyond the grave, mused Isabel. She left the laundry room to fill in Alma on the latest development.

Chapter 38

“Watch this, Alma.”

Isabel, sitting in her armchair, extended her right hand. Also seated with his purplish tongue panting with glee, Petey Samson lifted his right forepaw, and they shook as if they were sealing a business deal.

“Slick, Isabel,” said Alma.

Isabel beamed with immense satisfaction over the new trick she’d taught the clever Petey Samson. She reached into the baggie, fished out a doggie treat, and slipped it to him as he thumped his tail even harder on the floor.

Then, after licking his chops, he turned, his tail still wagging, and sauntered over to Alma seated in her armchair. He flumped down before her and lifted his right forepaw to shake hands with her.

Isabel clapped with a delighted whoop. “He also wants to make a deal with you, Alma.”

“He’s just a big ham mooching for another treat. Why can’t you just teach him how to fetch sticks, or better yet, our newspaper?”

“Be a sport and humor the furry dear.”

“Give me a doggie treat first so I can spoil him rotten the right way.”

After Isabel did, Alma went through the same machinations as Isabel had with Petey Samson before Alma shooed him away. She sought a chance to converse with Isabel without any interruptions like the fun-loving Petey Samson further panhandling them. She’d already turned off her cell phone. After receiving the news from Nita about Mo’s postcard, Isabel and Alma felt ready to do the final wrap up on the case.

“Since Sheriff Fox is in a big hissy snit to share anything with us, when do you think Karmine Meriwether cooked up her turf farm caper?”

Isabel settled back in her armchair, took a deliberate sip of her iced tea, and looked at Alma. “I’ll give you my best conjecture of

what transpired leading up to the murders of Ray Burl and later on of Mo.”

“Let’s pick up the main action at Mo’s leaving Quiet Anchorage on the Greyhound,” said Alma. “Where did she drift to next?”

“Her impulses led her to wherever suited her. She fell in with the riffraff element and learned robbery on a grander scale than shoplifting toys at the town drugstore was a lucrative trade. While in New Jersey, she bumped into the grifter Karmine Meriwether.

“Mo and Karmine were peas in a pod and hit it off. Mo had never forgotten how Mr. Barclay was reputedly worth more than Fort Knox. She probably obsessed over it. They found out he needed office help through the job ads he posted on Craigslist. They plotted, and Karmine ginned up a bogus résumé. Evidently she has some bookkeeping skills to complement her computer smarts to run the financial software package Mr. Barclay had bought.”

“Our Sammi Jo would find using it as easy a day spent at the beach,” said Alma.

“Probably. Karmine dazzled Mr. Barclay, and he pitched her the job offer, and she grabbed it. She moved from New Jersey along with the murderous roscoe she kept tucked away in her Aigner handbag. Did you notice how fidgety she acted in the business suit jacket on our first visit? I did but it didn’t register as a clue.”

“Now that you mention it, Karmine did look uncomfortable,” said Alma. “What about Mo?”

“She just hung loose out of sight so nobody would recognize her until their big move on Mr. Barclay came.”

“But not thoroughly enough since Fats spotted her and told Phyllis,” said Alma.

“Karmine and Mo probably saved up enough money for a stake,” said Isabel. “I asked Phyllis to keep her ears open for any further rumors she might hear.”

“Did Mo know Ray Burl was the foreman at the turf farm?” asked Alma.

Isabel shrugged. “Anyway, hardworking Ray Burl fell in love with the younger Karmine, and discounting him as just a harmless

rube, she did nothing to discourage it. Since they worked together, they kept their assignation a secret from the rest of us.

“Mo probably wasn’t thrilled with the tryst, but they were more interested in fleecing Mr. Barclay, so she didn’t make too many waves. Avarice makes it a lot easier to overlook your dislikes. Meantime Karmine gained Mr. Barclay’s confidence enough that he entrusted giving her the floor safe’s dial combination.”

Alma posed a more cynical but likely shamus thought. “She slept with the boss, and he gave her the combination during their pillow talk. Big mistake. Anyway, Ray Burl perhaps overheard Mo and Karmine talking on their cell phones, but he discovered what theft they’d in mind to do, so he threatened to blow the whistle to Sheriff Fox.”

Alma beamed. She’d read the same mysteries as Isabel had and knew the ins and outs to executing a heist.

“Right. They went ahead as they’d planned,” said Isabel. “That’s why Karmine wasn’t at work on our second visit where you and I talked to Mr. Barclay in his office. Mo or Karmine murdered Ray Burl at the turf farm to keep him quiet. She’ll claim it was Mo, of course. Always an opportunist, Karmine then figured why not keep all the money for herself. Or perhaps she planned all along to rub out Mo.

“Too late, Karmine realized she’d made a cardinal mistake by committing the second murder in our small town. The outraged townies would be up in arms, clamoring for a rigorous investigation, and her fake résumé and cover story couldn’t withstand that level of scrutiny. She panicked and was emptying out the floor safe to skedaddle when we overtook her in the nick of time.”

“Why did Mo take a cab out to the Cape Cod?” asked Alma.

“Karmine must’ve set it up that way to ambush Mo. Perhaps Karmine hoped it would throw the suspicion about Mo’s killer on Sammi Jo.”

“What do you make of Ray Burl’s uncharacteristic purchase of the shotgun?”

“Varmints, quite possibly. Sammi Jo heard the beavers have built pond dams on the neighboring farm to the Cape Cod. They’ve

gnawed down every tree with a leaf in sight. Ray Burl may've feared they'd next bring their voracious appetites and level the saplings in his prized honey locust grove."

"I'm glad he didn't turn out to be crooked as Petey Sampson's hind leg."

Isabel nodded. "For Sammi Jo's sake, me, too."

"Okay, that brings us back to Ray Burl's cashmere dress suit. How does it fall in line with everything else?"

"My pet theory is he simply put it on earlier Thursday evening because Karmine and he had made plans to go dine at a nice restaurant requiring a jacket. The cashmere was probably the only decent suit he owned. Quiet Anchorage has no fancy eatery – Eddy's Deli hardly qualifies – but Warrenton touts three steakhouses that are definitely dress up places."

"Do any of the steakhouses take reservations?" asked Alma. "Maybe the maître de took theirs phoned in, and kept a written record of it."

"I asked Sammi Jo to scout at the restaurants, and none of them accept reservations, so that lead disappeared," replied Isabel. "Helen Redfern correctly said Ray Burl's dress suit was his cashmere shroud as he'll probably be buried in it."

Chapter 39

“Moving on to a less intense but more important subject, is Sammi Jo done with dating Reynolds Kyle?” asked Alma.

“They’ve patched up things since his tardiness of getting to the turf farm,” replied Isabel. “Tonight she told me they’re rewatching *Beaches* on DVD.”

“That’s a classic three-hanky tearjerker.”

“Reynolds prefers to see it with his beverages.”

“Ah, yes, I can take his point. Cigarettes?”

“None smoked since she lowered the boom. He’s on the patch, four of them, according to Sammi Jo. He has plenty of incentive not to light up a cigarette, she added.” Isabel dished a sly wink at Alma who understood her drift.

“Has Cupid’s arrow yet found its mark?” she asked.

“Straight to the heart, I’d say. She told me how she might drive race cars, and the young turks will eat her dust.”

“Shotgun.”

Isabel laughed. “You can have it, sister. Scrabble is as exciting as it ever gets for me.”

“I hope she doesn’t get hurt driving the race car.”

“Alma, she’s always got everything under control. Maybe she’s going to bring down Reynolds a peg or two by trouncing him in a race.”

“Her parents’ murders haven’t left her too visibly upset.”

“I suspect she’s doing most of crying in her heart where it hurts the most. Tulip’s Funeral Home is busy getting her parents ready. She’s going to see Darby Sinclair who keeps the cemetery books about buying two burial plots and granite markers. She’s also having Ray Burl a coffin built custom-made from his favorite honey locust wood. My guess is she’ll break her apartment lease with Eustis and move into the Cape Cod with her good memories still found there. Has she brought up the murders with you?”

“Not even a peep about them, Isabel.”

"Maybe she'll approach us when, and if, she's ever ready to talk. Other than lending a sympathetic ear, I don't know what better we can offer her."

"Knowing the steel magnolia Sammi Jo like we do, we'll probably never hear another peep about them from her."

"Time will tell, I suppose." Isabel picked up her *Alaskan Outdoor* and flipped through its pages. She stopped at an article written about the eye-catching Aurora Borealis, the pulsating globs of psychedelic red, yellow, and violet also known as the northern lights. "We'll have to testify at Karmine Meriwether's trial," she said.

"We'll be meeting with Dwight to go over all that. Of course he better get that haircut before court is ever gaveled into session. Will Judge Redfern be hearing the case?"

"Helen recused herself, which is the smart thing to do being as she knew Ray Burl. That leads us to something else. I've had my fill of all this mischief and mayhem. Therefore as the eldest sister, I officially disband the Trumbo Sisters Detective Agency and bar its doors shut forever. Should you or I call Mr. Oglethorpe at his Richmond office and cancel our license?"

Alma was rolling her eyes so hard they hurt. "Uh-huh. That's a rash statement to be making point-blank. Our license might be valuable, especially if this recent crime wave continues. Why don't we play it by ear and see what happens?"

"If you think it's for the best, then I won't raise a fuss over it."

"I didn't think you would. Have you seen my Craig Rice mystery? I thought I left it inside the medicine cabinet to prevent Petey Samson from chewing it up."

"Petey Samson doesn't chew up mysteries, just old mules, and, no, I haven't seen it lying around the house. Or perhaps I inadvertently mailed it off to Megan. She's taken a shine to reading mysteries."

"That's our niece for you. Have you decided what to get Louise for her birthday?"

"I ordered her Charlie Parker's *Yardbird Suite* on CD."

"She'll love it more than the Doc Kilmer's swamp root bottle."

Alma noticed Isabel kept rolling around a small object inside her loose fist. It was proving to be disconcerting, and Alma had to know what Isabel was fiddling with over there.

“What’s that in your hand?” asked Alma.

“Oh, nothing much.”

“Don’t give me that evasion. Come on, let me see it.”

Isabel looked sheepish. “What? This talisman?” She held up a wood tile slightly larger than a piece of Chiclets gum pinched between her index finger and thumb.

Squinting without her bifocals on, Alma could just make out the letter “Z” worth “10” points, both items stamped on the wood tile’s surface.

“Scrabble,” said Alma, smiling. “I should’ve known it. You’re a maniac. Let’s play, shall we?”

“We’ve got plenty of iced tea with lemons and microwave buttered popcorn. Hit up Blue, Willie, and Ossie and invite them if they’re not too busy napping on their sunny bench. We’ll pair off and compete as partners.” Isabel ticked off the list of players again on her fingers. “Wait. That only makes five. Who did I leave out, Alma?”

“Mr. Rhee,” she replied.

“How could I overlook Mr. Rhee? Tell him to drop his tailor’s measuring tape, grab his pork pie hat, and come right on from Warrenton.”

“We’ll have a smashing time.” Alma had out her cell phone.

Petey Samson, back in the living room with all the excitement, woofed and wagged his tail at them. Isabel slipped Alma a doggie treat to spoil him the right way.

Everything was back to quiet in Quiet Anchorage, Virginia. For now, anyway.

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