



**sweet
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Ed Lynskey

SWEET BETSY

An Isabel and Alma Trumbo Cozy Mystery

Ed Lynskey

OceanofPDF.com

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Chapter 1

“You’ve dug up a dinosaur bone,” Isabel said. “That’s all there is to it.”

“I say it’s a human bone,” Alma said, shaking off the dirt crusted on the long, whitish object. “No dinosaur this dinky ever roamed the blue planet.”

Isabel frowned. “Alma Trumbo, you did not just dig up a human bone from our flowerbed. It’s got to be a dinosaur bone, dinky or not.”

“A dinosaur bone, eh?” The short, stout Alma gave her tall, slim sister the old up and down. “What then, are we the *Flintstones* living in Bedrock?”

“I hardly think so. Quiet Anchorage is a bit more sophisticated. You’ve read one too many whodunits involving buried bones.”

“You know how much I love to read our mysteries.”

“Even so, didn’t I warn you to curb your reading binge? I begged you to slow down, but you poohed-poohed me as you always do. Believe it or not, your older sister is also wiser, and she can still teach you a thing or two.”

“Help me think of whose bone it is, Old Wise One.”

“I just told you it belonged to the late Mister T. Rex.”

“No, it’s got to be to that young lady. You know the one I mean who went missing three summers ago. We used to see her at the IGA while grocery shopping. She liked to buy the black cherry Greek yogurt and kosher dill pickles. Who was she? Her last name rhymed with tweet and parakeet.”

“Betsy Sweet?”

“That’s her!”

“The Sweets live in the rose-colored stucco house next to Gandy Brothers Drilling and Pump Company.”

“They used to live there, but they moved away.”

“The hunt for Betsy went on for several days, and none of our search teams could find a trace of her. If we’d had Petey Samson back then, his supercharged nose would’ve tracked her down in a jiffy.”

Alma didn’t want Isabel to start singing the praises of their pet, a rescue beagle, or she wouldn’t shush until sundown.

“I’ve found the missing lady,” Alma said. “Say welcome home, Betsy Sweet.”

“Not so fast there. You can’t be holding part of her.”

“Not only that but I’m getting in touch with Sheriff Fox about it.”

“Sheriff Fox has better things to do than settle our bone dispute.”

“Then I’ll give Sammi Jo a jingle. She’s always our go-to gal.”

“She’s busy at work so don’t be worrying her.”

“Phyllis can set the record straight. Take a picture on your cell phone camera and send it to her for a look.”

“How would Phyllis know beans about bones? She’s the town bag lady, not a paleontologist.”

“What about checking with Uncle Jimbo or Eustis Blake or Miss Chen?”

“No to all of the above townies.”

Alma dropped the garden trowel from her other hand. “I’ll fetch the garden spade from out of the potter shed and rescue her other bones. Meantime, you can guard this.” Alma thrust out the bone.

Making no motion to accept it, Isabel wrinkled her upper lip in disdain. “I’m not laying a pinkie on it,” she said. “You’ve no idea where it’s been kept for the past ten thousand years.”

“It’s been right there in the Virginia dirt.”

“So you say. I just hope you don’t catch some exotic dinosaur ailment because Eustis probably doesn’t stock the right pills to treat it.”

“My medical shots are up-to-date. You should contact the Smithsonian and ask if they’d like a donation to their fossils collection. Wouldn’t you feel silly if they told you the bone is human like I say it is?”

Isabel, looking off, sighed.

Their yard work had begun normal enough. They put on their goatskin gloves and floppy straw hats before filing out of the brick rambler into the front yard to the flowerbed. The morning’s dewy coolness offered them enough respite to fit in a little flower gardening before the sun rose higher and turned the day into an oven.

They were planting the tray of marigolds Isabel had bought on a whim from Blaine Matthiessen at the hardware store. The passersby on Church Street would also delight in seeing the marigolds’ russet, orange, and yellow blooms.

“If the bone is Betsy Sweet’s, how did it wind up in our flowerbed of all places?” Isabel asked. “Riddle me that.”

“Ah, so a new mystery has bloomed,” Alma said. “Are you changing your tune and agreeing with me?”

“You’ve just aroused my natural curiosity.”

“You’re a nosy sleuth like I am because you can’t help it.”

“I can’t believe this madcap goofiness is repeating itself.” Isabel slipped off her goatskin gloves, removed her floppy straw hat, and used her wrist to wipe away the perspiration gathering on her brow. She’d give just about anything for a tall glass of iced tea. She also didn’t look at Alma, or she’d see how Isabel’s hazel eyes were blazing away.

Alma would know Isabel had slipped back into her sleuth mode where the thrill of the chase gripped her. She’d taken an earlier stand and sworn they’d pass on accepting any future mysteries. Isabel said she’d retired as a sleuth for good this time. Alma knew otherwise but kept quiet about it until now.

“Where’s our magnifying glass?” Alma asked.

“I haven’t carried it since my retirement,” Isabel replied.

“Is that so?” Alma made no effort to conceal her grin. “Then what’s the round object I can see in your hip pocket? The imprint resembles a magnifying glass.”

Isabel tried to hide her guilty look. “That’s not a magnifying glass.”

“Then what is it?”

“It’s the tin can to my snuff tobacco.”

“Since when have you dipped snuff?”

“It’s a secret guilty pleasure I recently acquired.”

“Show me one cuspidor in our house. Your cheek never bulges out. You haven’t pursed your lips and let a squirt of tobacco juice fly.”

“I’m still a snuff-dipping rookie. Reynolds is coaching me on the finer points like how to use the cuspidor with decorum.”

Reynolds was Sammi Jo’s rough around the edges boyfriend.

“He doesn’t even think about using tobacco, or he knows Sammi Jo will tear him a new one. Seriously, does it make better sense to think this bone is a couple of years old and Betsy’s? Or is it thousands of years old and Mister T. Rex’s?”

“All right, you win, Alma. I also suspect the bone is from Betsy. Moreover, I never go anywhere without our magnifying glass. Sleuthing is

a tough habit to break. If I'd known how addictive it is, I wouldn't have gotten us involved doing it in the first place."

Alma tapped the bone in her palm. "Murder is in the air. Are you ready to solve the mystery?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"The difference is Betsy's murder took place three summers ago. Solving a current murder case is a hard enough. How do we go back in time and pick up the killer's trail grown so cold?"

"Step one is to put away the gardening tools followed by our paying Sheriff Fox a visit. We haven't seen him in so long he's probably forgotten our smiling faces."

"I like the way you think. Don't we keep a few croker sacks in the mudroom?"

"Carrying Betsy in a clean pillowcase is more proper and fitting."

"Our last case was so long ago we may've forgotten how to solve them."

Isabel fell in line behind Alma striding to the door.

"Sleuthing is like canning yellow beans," Isabel said. "You never forget how it's done."

"Now aren't you glad you bought the marigolds from Blaine?"

"Sure, nothing gets the tired, old blood pumping like the discovery of a human bone," Isabel said. "Do we have time for taking an iced tea break?"

"Not right now we don't," Alma replied. "We've got too much work to do."

Chapter 2

Sheriff Roscoe Fox relaxed in his office enjoying a splendid Thursday. Matter of fact as he reconsidered it, he was enjoying a splendid *summer*. No murders had rocked Quiet Anchorage, Virginia, and he could let down his guard. He'd earned a well-deserved rest from the several homicides he'd investigated. He'd solved them all, and no fellow small town sheriff could touch his perfect record.

The townie voters had spoken and made him their sheriff in election after election. Of course, he was the only candidate on the ballot. Could he help it if nobody dared to pit their record against his and challenge him? He was at the top of his game, and everybody knew it.

He used his shirt cuff to polish the sheriff's badge pinned above his shirt pocket. Then he placed his hands behind his head as he lounged back in the reclining chair and propped up his black shoes with the mirror shine on the desk corner. Yes sir, he was feeling mighty full of himself. His boss, the mayor, should proclaim a "Sheriff Roscoe Fox Appreciation Day." He'd make a speech, and the townies would applaud him. He'd be the pride of Quiet Anchorage, all right.

The inter-office phone squawked, and, with a groan, he lowered his shoes to the floor. Duty beckoned. He leaned forward on the desktop and accepted the call.

"Hi, Sheriff Fox, Abigail here," the nasal voice said, grating on his eardrums because he'd never get used to hearing it.

Since he was alone and his admin Abigail Morgan Pierpont couldn't see him, he rolled his eyes while shaking his head. "Yes, Abigail, I know who you are since I hired you. Do you need something from me?"

"What other reason would I have to call you?"

"Then what's up?"

"Two visitors are waiting to see you."

"That's odd. I find nothing on my calendar. Do they have an appointment?"

"They said they don't need an appointment because they're like kinfolk coming to visit you."

Sheriff Fox had a sneaky feeling of who his two visitors were. There was a chance he was wrong. He crossed his fingers hoping he was. "Please tell me they aren't back," he said.

Abigail snickered. “Yes, Isabel and Alma are standing by me.”

“What in the blue blazes do they want this time?”

“Since you asked, I’ll send them in to tell you.”

He barked out his orders. “Tell them I’m doing the budgets, and I can’t see them until next week. Set up the appointment and send them on home.”

“We finished the budgets last Thursday,” Abigail said, delighted to let the cat out of the bag. “The file attachment I emailed to the mayor wasn’t good enough. Don’t you recall ordering me to take the hard copy to his office during the torrential downpour? Don’t you remember when I got back looking like a drowned rat you found it so amusing?”

Memo to self, Sheriff Fox brooded. *Paybacks always hurt*. “What do Isabel and Alma want to discuss with me?” he asked.

“Bones.”

“Bones? Do you mean B-O-N-E-S bones?”

“You get a gold star for spelling it correctly.”

“Is this a bad joke?”

“Do hear us laughing?”

“What kind of bones?”

“They brought in a *human* bone.”

“Who says it’s human?”

“Well, they for two say it is.”

Sheriff Fox shutting his eyes pondered where his good feeling had gone, and, more importantly, if he could ever get it back.

“It’s highly improbable,” he said.

“You’d better personally deal with this issue. I’ll usher them into your office.”

Sheriff Fox shouted into the phone handset. “My police cruiser is due for its oil change, and I’ll be leaving now to—”

His office door slammed open.

“Roscoe, get off Abigail’s back and the phone,” Alma said. “We’ve brought in something hot.”

“It’s red sizzling hot,” Isabel said.

He set down the phone handset. He took a breath before he let his eyes settle on the Trumbo sisters who’d squared off in front of the desk. He couldn’t remember when he’d last seen them, but it pained him to know how much help he’d gotten along the way from Quiet Anchorage’s pair of

Snoop Sisters. He remained on his toes. Isabel with her grandmotherly sweet smile didn't fool him.

"Hello, Isabel and Alma," he said, making his voice solemn and official. "How may I assist you ladies today?"

"We've brought in big-time evidence," Alma said.

She hoisted up the pillowcase in her gloved hand. Sheriff Fox didn't see anything alive and squirming inside it like a rattlesnake or polecat. Alma reached into the pillowcase. He watched as she drew out a long, whitish object, and she placed in the center of his desktop.

"Identify this object," he said.

"Leg bone," Alma said.

"To be precise, it's a *human* leg bone," Isabel said.

Sheriff Fox blinked at the bone then up at her. "I'm not a bones expert, but it bears the markings of, well, of a dinosaur bone."

"If you're not a bones expert, how do you know what a dinosaur bone looks like?" Isabel asked.

Sheriff Fox used the first reason popping into his head. "I've watched *Jurassic Park*, and your bone is a dead ringer for the bones in the movie."

"We've also seen *Jurassic Park*, but we're going to need a more authoritative identification," Alma said.

"I consider the matter closed," Sheriff Fox said.

Alma, nothing but stubborn, dug in. "Just for the sake of argument, let's accept your theory. How might a dinosaur bone have gotten buried in our flowerbed?"

"Obviously, the dinosaur perished on the spot eons ago." Sheriff Fox had a patronizing chuckle. "Human bone, indeed. You've been overindulging in those potboilers you like to read so much."

Isabel lost her grandmotherly sweet smile. "Are you mocking our mystery novels?" she asked.

"That's what it sounds like to me, Isabel."

"Wait a minute," Sheriff Fox said. "I was answering Alma's question, not making a judgment about your granny books."

"Granny books!" Isabel fixed her piercing hazel eyes on Sheriff Fox. "Now you've really gotten up my Irish dander."

Sheriff Fox barely suppressed the wave of fear sweeping through him. "Just take it down a notch and relax," he said.

"I'll tell you how this bone got where it did," Alma said.

“This should be good,” Sheriff Fox said. “Lay it on me, Alma.”

“The human bone goes to an old unsolved murder,” Alma said.

“Don’t even think of the M-word while you’re in my office,” Sheriff Fox said.

“You better get used to hearing it again,” Isabel said. “You have another murder on your hands to investigate.”

“Murder has no statute of limitations,” Alma said.

“I’m keenly aware of the legal fact,” Sheriff Fox said.

“No sheriff would ignore the new evidence of a murder,” Isabel said.

“You expect me to believe there’s been a murder based on this dirty bone you’ve dumped on my desk,” Sheriff Fox said.

“You better have the crime lab get busy analyzing it,” Alma said, folding up the pillowcase.

“The forensics will prove out our theory,” Isabel said.

“Do it,” Alma said.

“Today,” Isabel said.

“Okay, enough already,” Sheriff Fox said. “If it gets you two off my back, I’ll ship it to the crime lab. What are you planning to do next?”

“We’re getting the Over the Moon Tattoo Parlor to ink us up with gangster symbols,” Alma replied. “Then we’re taking off to do our version of Thelma and Louise.”

Isabel smiled. Sometimes her younger sister’s crusty sarcasm was over the top, but right now it sounded pitch perfect.

“Ask a stupid question and get a stupid answer,” Sheriff Fox said. “Of course, you’ll be snooping as you always do at a time like this. Just be sure to stay in touch with me, and I mean in close touch.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Alma said. “You’re going to be seeing a lot of our smiling faces from now on.”

“It’ll be just like old times again,” Isabel said.

“I’ve been so bored this summer,” Sheriff Fox said. “Everything was going just the lovely way I like it to go.”

“We’re thrilled we could spice up things,” Alma said. “Come on, Isabel. The busy snoops like us can leave no stone unturned.”

“Break out everything you’ve got on file about Betsy Sweet’s disappearance,” Isabel said.

“She went missing three summers ago,” Alma said.

“I remember but why should I to go all that hassle?” Sheriff Fox asked. “Do you know what became of her?”

“She’s back,” Isabel replied.

“Where is she?” Sheriff Fox asked. “I haven’t seen anything of her.”

“You’re looking at her lying in front of you,” Isabel said.

Sheriff Fox flinched away from the bone on the desktop. “So you think she’s the murder victim, and is this her bone?” he asked, staring down at it as if expecting to see it shine as a neon glow stick.

“Do we have to draw you a picture?” Alma asked.

“I can see the picture just fine,” Sheriff Fox said.

“Then saddle up, Sheriff Fox,” Isabel said. “Our posse is about to ride back into the homicide solving territory.”

“Yee-haw,” Sheriff Fox said with little joy. “I can’t wait.”

Chapter 3

Many towns count among their residents a handful of eccentrics, and Quiet Anchorage was no different, except its eccentrics were more cantankerous and wrinkled than most. The trio of octogenarians sat on a wooden bench in front of Lago Azul Flower Shop. Ossie Conger, Willie Moccasin, and Blue Trent spending many of their waking hours there had become a Main Street institution.

It was common to find them catnapping. However, one man always stayed awake and reported the new developments he'd observed to the others when they awoke. The townies called them the Three Musketeers, and very little got by them because they made everybody's business their business. Nobody was sure who first gave the men their colorful nickname, but Sheriff Fox at times cynically referred to them as the Mouseketeers after the 1950s Walt Disney TV program for kids.

Ossie was usually the first Musketeer to show up. He was the oldest although Willie and Blue disputed his claim. Ossie whipped out his plum-colored handkerchief and dusted off his spot on the wooden bench before he plunked down on it. He saved the other spots for his two compadres.

Willie was the next Musketeer who put in an appearance with a grin and wave as his greeting. Finally, Blue schlepped down the sidewalk and took his rightful place on the wooden bench. Today they dressed in matching Hawaiian shirts with an orange poppy print and chino pants. Ossie jangled the loose silver in his pocket.

"Did you spot any flying bedpans last night?" he asked Willie.

Blue repressed his snicker while he fiddled with the genuine army dog tags on the bead chain that dangled around his neck. The other Musketeers also wore their army dog tags with pride.

Willie sucked air between his teeth. "We sometimes refer to them as flying saucers but never as flying bedpans," he replied. "After a short dry spell, I did lay my eyes on a pair of them."

"Were they line dancing in the sky?" Ossie asked.

Blue's guffaws grew louder.

A look of annoyance pinched Willie's face. "If you're just going to razz me, I'll shut my pie hole. I sure don't have to put up with it."

"Aw, don't get so riled," Ossie said. "We haven't enjoyed the same marvelous experiences as you have. We envy you is all."

“It’s no big deal,” Willie said. “You just keep your eyes peeled on the Milky Way twinkling over the piney woods. Eventually, a UFO is bound to hover into your sightline. It’s quite a vision to catch for the first time.”

“I can’t wait to get out there with you,” Blue said.

“Meantime, I heard something you fellows might not be privy to,” Ossie said.

“Lay it on us,” Willie said.

Ossie peered up and down the sidewalk to ensure no bystanders overheard what he was about to divulge. “The big news is Alma dug up a dinosaur bone in their flowerbed,” he said an octave above a whisper.

“Doesn’t hearing that knock your socks off?”

“You’re behind the times, Old Timer,” Willie said. “Isabel and Alma have since determined the bone is *human*. Alma brought it in a pillowcase and shook out the bone to fall on Sheriff Fox’s desktop.”

“Did his mouth drop open like he was a bullfrog squatting on a lily pad catching flies?” Blue asked, savoring the humorous mental image.

“*Ribbit*,” Ossie said.

“Let’s just say he was none too pleased about it,” Willie replied.

“Gentlemen, it brings me no pleasure to say that murder has struck our town again.”

“You better strap in and hold on tight,” Ossie said. “The Murder Mystery Rollercoaster is about to careen off on another wild and crazy ride.”

“One thing about Isabel and Alma perplexes me,” Blue said.

“Anywhere they go, they turn up dead bodies. They can’t even do a little flower gardening without rooting up a human bone.”

“I’m not sure if I want to be around them, or I might keel over dead,” Ossie said.

“Maybe the scientists should conduct a field study on them,” Willie said.

“Maybe the scientists should conduct a field study on *you*,” Blue said.

“You’re always crowing about UFOs. If I didn’t know you any better, I’d say you’re tetched in the head.”

“Willie has watched one too many Rod Serling and *Star Trek* reruns,” Ossie said. “Nevertheless, our main concern is the new murder. Isabel and Alma are coming with their questions, and we better get ready for them.”

“Hot diggity dog,” Blue said, rubbing his hands together in glee. “It feels good to get my groove back on.”

“I never lost my groove whatever a groove is,” Willie said.

Blue grabbed the cell phone he wore on a neck lanyard. “Shall I break the good news to Isabel and Alma?”

“Cool your jets, Ace,” Willie said. “I already phoned and gave them our pledge of support.”

“That sure was presumptuous of you,” Ossie said. “You should’ve first consulted with Blue and me.”

“Have you got something better going on?” Blue asked. “All we ever do is stay glued to this wooden bench like a trio of crusty barnacles.”

“Be careful of who you call a crusty barnacle,” Ossie said. “I use a facial moisturizer daily, and my skin is baby soft. Here, feel my cheek. Go ahead, check it out.”

“Thanks for the offer,” Blue said, recoiling. “But I’ll just take your word for it.” “Isabel and Alma have already identified whose bone it is,” Willie said.

“Then tell us,” Ossie said.

“Betsy Sweet,” Willie said. “Do you remember her tragic fate?”

“She was the young lady who vanished a la D.B. Cooper,” Blue replied.

“I sometimes ponder what became of old D.B.,” Ossie said.

“Wasn’t there a rumor he sells used parachutes online?” Willie said. “But we’re discussing Betsy, not D.B.”

“It was said she had a torrid affair with a married fellow,” Ossie said.

“That’s one of the few juicy rumors I missed,” Blue said. “Quick, fill me in.”

“She was alleged to have been seeing Chad Jones on the sly,” Ossie replied.

“You mean the taxidermist?” Blue asked.

“Is there more than the one Chad Jones?” Ossie replied.

“Then Betsy needed eyeglasses,” Blue said. “Chad is homelier than a terrapin stuck in a mud hole.”

“He’s not handsome even by hound dog standards,” Willie said.

“Evidently, you old codgers have forgotten how blind love is,” Ossie said.

“We’re not as worldly as you are,” Blue said. “Anyway, was Chad suspected of perpetrating foul play on Betsy?”

“He participated in the hunt for her, and Sheriff Fox had a talk with him,” Ossie replied.

“If it were up to me, I’d be knocking on Chad’s door with some more questions in mind,” Blue said.

“Fat chance that’ll ever happen,” Willie said. “Not with the slipshod way Sheriff Fox performs his official duties.”

“If Isabel and Alma light a gas pilot under him, things will get done,” Blue said.

“Fire it up then,” Willie said. “I’d give three cheers to see Sheriff Fox get busy doing his job for a change.”

The door to the flower shop swung outward, directing the Three Musketeers to gaze over at it. A recently slimmed down and now head-turning gorgeous Corina Moccasin dressed in a powder blue sundress stepped out. Her usually smiling face showed a scowl. She paced around to the front of the men and stood there with one hand on her hip.

Ossie and Blue watched her with curious eyes, and Willie looked everywhere but at her. When she spoke, her voice was sharp.

“Uncle Willie, we need to talk,” Corina said. “Again, that is.”

“Uh-huh,” Willie said.

“You know what it’s about since this time makes it our third,” Corina said.

“Uh-huh,” Willie said.

“However, I can see you still haven’t taken any action,” Corina said. “Don’t say uh-huh again because I don’t like it.”

“What’s on your mind today, Corina?” Ossie asked.

“Since Uncle Willie has broken his promise to me, I’ll have to tell you myself,” Corina replied.

“How could you think to do such an ornery thing?” Ossie asked Willie. “Corina is like a granddaughter to Blue and me.”

“You bet she is,” Blue said.

“You might feel differently after she fills you in on what she wants from us,” Willie said. “Give Ossie and Blue what you told me, Corina.”

“Very well, I will,” Corina said. “As you gentlemen can observe I had the flower shop’s façade repainted this spring.”

Ossie and Blue nodded their heads.

“It’s a marvel of beauty to behold,” said Blue, sucking up big time. “What’s the lovely shade?”

“The paint manufacturer sells it under the label rose petal red,” Corina replied. “I own and operate a flower shop, after all.”

“Very appropriate,” Ossie said, nodding.

“You still haven’t told them what you want from us,” Willie said.

“The drab wooden bench you sit on every day has never been painted,” Corina said. “It’s become an eyesore, and that just won’t do.”

“Uh-oh,” Blue said. “I can see where you’re headed with this line of talk.”

“Your wooden bench should complement the flower shop’s new paint job,” Corina said.

Blue shook his head in disagreement.

Willie smirked. “What’s the matter, Blue? You just went on about how the rose petal red is a ‘marvel of beauty.’ You should be happy as a lark right now.”

“It is on the flower shop, but not for us to sit on daily,” Blue said. “I refuse to paint our wooden bench this rose petal red color.”

“It’s an outrage to consider it,” Ossie said.

“In that unfortunate event, you gentlemen will be sitting elsewhere starting tomorrow morning,” Corina said.

His eyes enlarging to the size of teacups, Blue gasped. “You wouldn’t think to do such a cruel act to three old men like us.”

Corina didn’t soften her resolve. “Watch me,” she said.

“But no other town merchant will let us loaf and nap outside their entrance,” Blue said. “Willie, isn’t there something—anything!—we can do about this crisis?”

“If there is, tell us,” Ossie said.

Willie stood up, his knees creaking. “Yes, there is. We can march down to Matthiessen’s Hardware Store and pick up the one gallon of rose petal red exterior paint along with three brushes. Then we can get busy slapping the paint on the wooden bench.”

“Thank you, Uncle Willie,” the once again smiling Corina said. “I knew I could count on you in the end.”

Meantime, Ossie and Blue exchanged silent groans and appalled faces. Their wooden bench with its rugged, weathered appearance was getting a makeover and not for the better.

Rose petal red? Had Corina lost her marbles?

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Chapter 4

Sheriff Fox thanked Isabel and Alma for bringing in their found bone so promptly. Otherwise, Petey Samson might have grabbed and gnawed on it. Alma wondered if Sheriff Fox might be tempted to do the same thing. Isabel told him goodbye and towed Alma out of the station house into the sunny day. Alma didn't like her sister's pushiness and reclaimed her wrist from Isabel's grasp.

"What's your hurry?" Alma said.

"We've got a mystery to get to the bottom of, and your wrangling with Roscoe isn't helpful," Isabel replied.

"The Three Musketeers are our usual first stop."

"I already contacted them, and they're eager to help us."

Alma glanced back at the station house. "I trust Roscoe about as far as I can throw him. Suppose he decides to forget where he put our bone. There's no more evidence, and no more homicide."

Isabel held up her cell phone. "I got it all recorded," she said.

"How did you take the snapshots without his knowing it?"

"Sammi Jo showed me a neat trick to use. I'll keep the digital photos handy in case Roscoe tries to pull a fast one."

"Sammi Jo is always thinking, Isabel. We taught her well."

"I take no credit for doing it. She's a natural born operative."

"She has moxie," Alma said.

"She has tons of moxie," Isabel said.

From the corner of her eye, Alma saw a flatbed truck with a backhoe secured to its trailer bed rumbling by them on the street. She narrowed her sight on the driver. Deputy Sheriff Bexley was one of Sheriff Fox's favorite toadies. She put two and two together.

"Where in the h-e double hockey sticks is Deputy Sheriff Bexley going with the backhoe?" Alma asked. "My first guess says he's off to plow up our flowerbed like Roscoe told him to do."

Isabel shook her head. "We no sooner get out of his office than he's sending out his minions to do his bidding."

"Will he excavate the rest of Betsy's skeleton?" Alma asked.

"I don't know but he'll carve up our lawn with moon craters." Isabel strode off, taking longer paces. "Step lively," she said. "We have to save our yard from the deputy sheriff going berserk on the backhoe."

“I’ll do the driving,” Alma said, staying up with Isabel headed for their parked car.

“I know a shortcut for us to take after you peel out of here,” Isabel said.

Deputy Sheriff Bexley was a medium height, roly-poly young man who liked to please people, especially his boss Sheriff Fox. Over the years, the sisters had had their run-ins with Deputy Sheriff Bexley when they discovered his mercenary streak. They could bribe him if they made it high enough. This time, however, Isabel hoped their scolding would be enough to discourage him from carving up their turf with the backhoe’s front bucket.

“I’m sorry, but orders are orders,” Deputy Sheriff Bexley said. “I’m to keep a sharp eye out for any bones while I scoop up the soil from your flowerbed. You can watch me work if you like. Just be sure to stand clear of the backhoe.”

“I’d like to see your signed authorization to excavate here,” Isabel said.

“Sheriff Fox said I don’t need any signed authorization,” Deputy Sheriff Bexley said. “I can proceed on his verbal say-so because he’s the town sheriff.”

Isabel laughed as she glanced at the backhoe still anchored to the trailer bed. Alma and she had breezed up in the driveway only minutes after Deputy Sheriff Bexley parked the truck and slid down from the cab seat. They’d confronted him measuring up the flowerbed.

“Far be it for me to tell you how to do your job,” Isabel said. “But if I were going to rip up a citizen’s yard, I’d get a court order to do it.”

“I’d get it signed off in triplicate and notarized,” Alma said.

The hesitant Deputy Sheriff Bexley also looked confused. “Call up Sheriff Fox, and he’ll tell you.”

“Why didn’t he come along with you?” Isabel asked. “Surely a town murder would bring the sheriff running fast.”

“I guess he’s too busy right at the moment,” Deputy Sheriff Bexley replied.

Isabel laughed.

“Listen, we just left his office,” Alma said. “Sheriff Fox was sitting with his shoes propped up on his desk while he twiddled his thumbs.”

“Meanwhile, he sticks you with doing the dirty work,” Isabel said.

“I don’t like getting stuck with doing the dirty work all the time,” Deputy Sheriff Bexley said.

“Of course you don’t,” Isabel said. “Who would?”

“Shouldn’t there be a CSI team here assisting you?” Alma asked.

“Sheriff Fox told me a murder occurring so long ago isn’t technically still a murder,” Deputy Sheriff Bexley replied.

Alma scoffed at Sheriff Fox’s explanation so wrong it was funny.

“Don’t you believe him for a minute,” she said.

“Then what do you want me to do with the backhoe?” Deputy Sheriff Bexley asked.

Isabel and Alma gave him a long gaze.

“Okay, I mean besides that,” Deputy Sheriff Bexley said.

“You can return to the station house,” Isabel said. “If Roscoe gives you any rubbish, tell him to get in touch with us, and we’ll be delighted to clear up the confusion.”

“Remind him Judge Redfern will be a part of any discussion we have with him,” Alma said.

“Judge Redfern.” Deputy Sheriff Bexley’s natural face color fell several shades paler. “She’s like Sheriff Fox’s worst nightmare.”

“They have a history of clashing over tough legal matters,” Alma said.

“Has he ever won any of their clashes?” Deputy Sheriff Bexley asked.

“I can’t think of him once coming close to a victory,” Alma replied.

“Isabel, do I have that correct?”

“Completely,” Isabel replied. “You best mosey along, Deputy Sheriff Bexley. Rest assured Sheriff Fox won’t give you any trouble about it.”

“Don’t you have better things to do than run a smelly, noisy backhoe on such a glorious summer day?” Alma asked.

“I’d love nothing better than to be off pole fishing,” Deputy Sheriff Bexley replied.

“Then why don’t you go ahead and do it?” Alma asked.

“If you can’t eat all the fish you catch, bring us back a few,” Isabel said. “We’ll make short order of them.”

“Don’t be waiting around with your frying pan,” Deputy Sheriff Bexley said. “I cook and eat every fish I bring home on my stringer.”

“We heard Uncle Jimbo was headed to fish below the railroad bridge if that’s your lucky spot,” Alma said. “He might catch all the fish before you get down there.”

“It’s my lucky spot, but I’m not worried,” Deputy Sheriff Bexley said. “Uncle Jimbo couldn’t catch a tan on a sunny beach. He knows his antiques like nobody’s business, but when it comes to fishing, he’s an amateur.”

“We’ve got a pitcher of iced tea and a box of bear claws if you fancy some refreshments with us before you take off,” Alma said, using a sly tone.

“Nice try at distracting me,” Deputy Sheriff Bexley said. “But I’ve got my heart set on fishing, and nothing can stop me.”

Alma looked at Isabel. “The man sounds like he’s serious,” Alma said.

Isabel nodded. “Then let’s not be the hold up.”

“Tell Uncle Jimbo we said hey,” Alma said.

“After he wakes up from his nap, I’ll be sure to do that,” Deputy Sheriff Bexley said with a friendly wave as he trotted over to climb up into the truck cab seat and rumble off.

Isabel and Alma traded smiles and nods over their having outsnookered Sheriff Fox again. They went indoors and celebrated their small victory over the iced tea and bear claws. Alma said they tasted like more, and Isabel agreed before refilling their tall glasses.

Chapter 5

“Isabel, we must be ditzzy,” Alma said. “Why can’t the chore wait until tomorrow after breakfast?”

Alma was down on her hands and knees. The smell of the fresh earth came from their scrounging in the flowerbed.

“No busybodies will see us digging for Betsy’s other bones under the cover of night,” Isabel replied.

“It’s probably already all over town we found the bone,” Alma said.

Isabel used the garden shovel to turn aside a new spadeful of earth. “Phyllis, shine your flashlight beam more this way, please.”

“If she does that, how can we see anything where you’ve already dug?” Alma asked.

“You don’t need as much light as I do to work,” Isabel replied. “You can grope for the bones in the loose dirt by using your fingers.”

“Isabel is spot-on,” Phyllis who was Sammi Jo’s aunt said. “Take the skull, for instance. We can rub our fingertips across the smooth pearly teeth. Or we can palm the hard roundness of its skullcap. Or we can poke our finger through its eye sockets and ear holes.”

“There’s no need for the anatomy lesson,” Sammi Jo said. “We get your point, and you’re giving me the creeps.”

“All right, ladies, let’s stop our fussing,” Isabel said. “My prediction is we’ll find nothing. However, I have to make sure that’s true before I can rest easy.”

“I don’t know about finding another bone here,” Alma said. “But I know I have a bone to pick with you.”

“Would you prefer to be the shoveler?” Isabel asked. “We can swap our jobs.”

“I’d prefer to quit doing this foolishness, make a mad dash to the refrigerator, and savor drinking a tall glass of iced tea,” Alma said.

“Think of it as your reward for completing this foolishness,” Isabel said.

Alma grumbled words to the effect she wasn’t a happy camper.

“Howdy there, ladies,” a different woman’s cheerful voice sang out. “How are you doing tonight?”

Alma stopped running her gloved fingers through the dirt and sat back on her haunches. She squinted up in the semidarkness at the big-hipped

Lotus Wang who was out taking a night stroll. Alma couldn't imagine a worse townie catching them on their hands and knees rooting around in the dirt. Lotus was Quiet Anchorage's biggest woman gossip, bar none, except for perhaps her friend, Rosie McLeod. The news would be all over town in less time than it took to split an atom.

"Have you taken up gardening by the moonlight?" Lotus asked.

"No, we're a gang of nocturnal grave robbers, Lotus," Alma said.

Phyllis chuckled.

"You'd have better luck plundering the town cemetery," Lotus said.

"Just watch out for the zombies hanging out there."

"We obviously prefer to work at night to avoid the day's heat just as you're doing with taking your walk," Alma said.

"It takes four of you to garden?" Lotus asked.

"What's it to you if it does?" Alma asked. "It's a free country, isn't it?"

"Well, I'm still waving the old red, white, and blue," Lotus replied with a wry tone.

"Pay no mind to Alma," Isabel said. "She's feeling snippy from the hot spell we've been under this week."

"I can relate," Lotus said. "The heat leaves me feeling a little snippy, too."

"Earlier today we unearthed a bone from here," Isabel said.

"A pterodactyl bone, I heard," Lotus said. "I got the update from Jumpy Blixt who heard it from Blaine Matthiessen who caught it from Eustis Blake."

"The townie gossip spreads as fast as tic-tac-toe three in a row," Alma said.

"Our leg bone is from a mortal, not an extinct flying reptile," Isabel said. "We took it to Sheriff Fox, and before you ask, yes, it's looking increasingly like we face another murder."

"Not again," Lotus said, taken aback. "Whose leg bone is it?"

"Betsy Sweet's name came up," Isabel replied.

"So that's what became of her," Lotus said. "I can remember it as clearly as if it happened yesterday morning. She didn't make it to her office job after she drove away from her parents' house."

"We heard the Sweets have taken up residence elsewhere," Isabel said.

“They moved down to Florida,” Lotus said. “Then Betsy’s dad Russell died in a construction accident.”

“Some families have all the bad luck,” Alma said. “Did she have any brothers or sisters?”

“Not a one, I’m afraid,” Lotus replied. “Betsy was an only child, so Doris is left alone to fend off the hurricanes and gators.”

“How awful for her,” Isabel said who’d lost her only child, Cecil, too soon. He’d smoked cigarettes since the day a teacher caught him lighting up in the boys’ restroom.

“Do you happen to stay in touch with Doris?” Alma asked.

Lotus nodded. “Rosie and I do fairly often since we graduated together.”

“Doris will return to Quiet Anchorage if the bone is Betsy’s as we suspect it is,” Isabel said. “We might also dig up her other bones tonight.”

“Not to state the painfully obvious, but it’d be a lot easier to search for them during the daylight hours,” Lotus said. “Or better yet, call Sheriff Fox to come and get them.”

Alma started to speak, but Isabel was quicker. “Something else occurs to me,” she said. “We added a layer of topsoil to the flowerbed. Remember the dump truck load of it that came earlier this spring, Alma?”

Groaning, she stood up along with Sammi Jo, and both brushed the dirt off their knees. Alma looked at Isabel.

“I remember the afternoon when the load arrived,” Alma replied. “Did we pay for it with cash or write a personal check?”

“I thought it came as a freebie,” Isabel replied. “Sammi Jo and Phyllis, help us to remember who it was that brought us the topsoil.”

Phyllis shrugged a little. “Sorry, but dirt isn’t my thing.”

Sammi Jo also shrugged. “I can’t say dirt excites me either.”

“Did the bone you found come in the delivered topsoil?” Lotus asked.

“There’s a good chance it did,” Isabel replied. “Alma and I used the wheelbarrow to cart the topsoil from the pile over to the flowerbed. How else could the bone have gotten here?”

“*Woof, woof,*” Alma said.

Using her wrist, Isabel felt Alma’s forehead. “There’s no raging fever, but you should go inside where it’s cooler,” Isabel said. “The night heat is making you delirious to bark like Petey Samson.”

“I believe Alma is suggesting he may have buried the bone in the flowerbed,” Sammi Jo said.

“How’s that possible?” Isabel asked. “We always keep him leashed when he leaves the house. Isn’t that our practice, Alma?”

“Well...,” Alma replied. “Sometimes when you go to Miss Chen’s Beauty Shop or the Avon lady’s house, I let Petey Samson out to romp around the yard and burn off some energy while he’s off the leash.”

“But you watch him the whole time,” Isabel said.

“Well...,” Alma said. “My afternoon soaps might be airing, and I can’t miss an episode, or I really would go barking mad.”

“I’m shocked to hear this,” Isabel said. “Suppose Petey Samson darted out into the street, and a vehicle rolled up too fast, and its brakes squealed too late.”

“Pancake doggie,” Phyllis said.

“Petey Samson only follows his nose, and the street has no alluring scents to attract him,” Alma said. “However, he may’ve gotten the bone from someplace else and buried it here.”

“Has he been out romping in the yard lately?” Isabel asked.

“Not since last summer, so I guess he probably didn’t bury the bone here this summer,” Alma replied.

“Betsy Sweet’s old murder is a lot for us to take on,” Isabel said. “I hope we can solve the mystery.”

“Don’t forget Rosie and I always stand ready to help you,” Lotus said. “Just give us a holler, day or night.”

“You can also rely on the Three Musketeers,” Sammi Jo said.

“That’s a great start,” Isabel said. “Sammi Jo, can we count on Reynolds if we need to get some heavy lifting done?”

“No question about it,” Sammi Jo replied.

“Shouldn’t you call him and ask first?” Phyllis said.

“If he refuses to help us, there’ll be consequences,” Sammi Jo replied. “And I’m saying dire consequences.”

“Then I expect he’ll be eager to pitch in if he’s asked,” Phyllis said.

“You got that right,” Sammi Jo said.

“Let’s not forget Sheriff Fox,” Lotus said. “He’s the professional homicide investigator among us.”

Alma burst out laughing that rose to a hilarious chorus as Phyllis, Sammi Jo, and Isabel joined in. Lotus was the final one to burst out

laughing as the levity also tickled her funny bone. At last, Isabel drew in a deep breath and got a grip first.

“Ladies,” she said, her hands motioning down as a signal to lower their noise. “Ladies, please. Let’s show a little restraint and decorum.”

“Aren’t we terrible?” Sammi Jo said. “It was just the snarky way Lotus said it that rang so true.”

“It’s getting late, and we’re obviously getting punchy,” Isabel said. “Let’s call it a day and start again tomorrow morning.”

“Don’t forget our reward of iced tea and bear claws,” Alma said.

“I hadn’t forgotten about it,” Isabel said.

“I’ll be moseying along, too,” Lotus said, holding her cell phone so she could share the latest news with her friend Rosie. They’d spend half the night dissecting it.

Chapter 6

The next morning Alma awoke to the snuffles, grunts, and snorts sounding like the zoo waking up. It came from the front yard. She wanted the noise to stop so she could shut her eyes, nestle into the pillow, and fall back asleep. The noise didn't cease, and, if anything, it grew louder. She figured if she held out long enough Isabel would be the one to get up and check on it. She'd always been the nosiest of the Trumbo sisters. Five minutes later, the situation hadn't changed except Alma's curiosity had grown. She had to know what or who was creating the disturbance.

She hopped up from bed and stubbed her big toe on the nightstand leg. Cursing silently, she hobbled over to the window mini-blinds, and parted the slats to peek outdoors. Her lower jaw dropped like a five-pound sack of potatoes.

"I don't believe what my eyes are telling me," she said.

The dirt once part of the flowerbed sat in a mound by where the compact, four-legged steam shovel operated. Alma couldn't see his head down stuck down into the cavity he'd sculpted out. Petey Samson, like all beagles, loved to dig holes.

"How did the bad dog escape?" Alma asked. "Isabel must've left the front door unlocked. Wait. That makes no sense. Dogs can't open up doors. But then Petey Samson is no run-of-the-mill dog."

Alma's cell phone beckoned. She had an idea of who her caller was, and she knew she'd nailed it when Isabel greeted her.

"Who's making the ruckus that woke me up?" Isabel asked, lying in her bed and too lazy to make the short trip to down Alma's bedroom to hold their conversation.

"I just looked outdoors," Alma replied. "Petey Samson has turned our flowerbed into a goldfish pond."

Isabel sighed. "I was afraid you were going to say that."

"If it makes you feel any better, it looks as if he's having a blast while he's doing it. His tail is wagging away like an airplane propeller."

"And here we feared Deputy Sheriff Bexley on his backhoe would do the worst damage. How did our furry mischief-maker get out?"

"He must've squirmed his way through an open window. Who's going to be the lucky lady to give him a bath?"

“We’ll both do it. Many hands make light work. Did you spot any more dug up bones?”

“So far, I still only have that dubious honor. Can you round up Petey Samson while I fill the utility tub with pet shampoo and water?”

“Consider it done right after I give him a dressing-down. His mistresses don’t appreciate their flowerbed left resembling a prairie dog village.”

“He’s just acting like the beagle he is. Would you rather have a lap dog for a pet?”

“I’d never sit still long enough to keep a lap dog.”

“What’s the weather forecast for today?”

“Today will be clear and sunny. It never rains in Quiet Anchorage while the Trumbo sisters are out with their sleuthing.”

“I’ve noticed the same meteorological trend,” Alma said. “I bet you have a theory to share on why that’s the case.”

“I don’t have the slightest idea why,” Isabel said. “It’s just so.”

“Betsy drove away, and nobody ever heard from her again,” Jumpy Blixt said. The brawny man with the single diamond stud earring operated the IGA grocery store on Main Street. His butcher’s apron looked starchy white. “It’s as if she dropped off the face of the earth,” he said. “It’s got to rank as one of our most baffling local mysteries.”

Alma shivered. She and Isabel had left their sweaters in the car. Standing next to the refrigerated meat counter didn’t improve matters. After noticing Alma’s shudder, Isabel also shivered.

“Are you ladies cold?” Jumpy asked.

“We’ll be leaving in a minute,” Isabel replied before Alma could crack wise about the parades of goose bumps marching down their backs.

“Are you set to go on another Easter egg hunt?” Jumpy asked.

“The kids go on the Easter egg hunts, Jumpy,” Isabel replied. “Alma and I are sleuths investigating a young lady’s troubling disappearance.”

“Of course it’s serious business, and I’m not making light of it.”

Jumpy squinted at them. “Could Betsy have met with foul play?” he asked.

“Did you hear any such talk making the rounds?” Alma asked.

“I just wondered,” Jumpy replied. “By all accounts, Betsy was a good kid.”

“Did she ever see you to apply for a job?” Alma asked. “Every kid at one time or another seems to ask you or Eustis at the drugstore for a summer hire.”

“She never came into the store and talked to me,” Jumpy replied. “I can only take on two kids at the most, and the smart ones line up their jobs months ahead of time.”

“Rumor had it Betsy and your friend Chad Jones were carrying on an affair,” Isabel said.

“You’d have to ask Chad that question,” Jumpy replied. “We don’t get into our personal lives with each other.”

“Jumpy, you must’ve entertained at least a suspicion if Chad was fooling around behind Esther’s back,” Isabel said.

“All I can tell you is he never mentioned it to me,” Jumpy said.

“If Betsy threatened to blow the whistle about it, Chad would’ve had a motive to stop her,” Alma said.

“How would he have done that?” Jumpy asked, getting defensive. “If you’re suggesting Chad is who killed Betsy, I say baloney.”

Isabel headed off any confrontation. “Nobody is suggesting anything of the kind,” she said. “If Chad had some hanky-panky going on with Betsy, Sheriff Fox will question him about the nature of their relationship.”

“I’ll give you my two cents about what happened to Betsy Sweet if you care to hear it,” Jumpy said.

“We always value your two cents,” Isabel said.

Jumpy nodded. “Betsy hopped into her car and pulled out of Quiet Anchorage on the morning in question. She drove to no particular destination, guided only by the wanderlust in her restless soul. She hit the open road, and she kept on moving. Who can blame her? She was a young, high-spirited lady who had few, if any, cares or responsibilities tying her down.”

“Where did Betsy go after she pulled out of Quiet Anchorage?” Isabel asked.

“I can easily picture Betsy seated on a counter stool in a bright, clean café somewhere,” Jumpy replied. “It serves gourmet coffee in white porcelain cups and sweet cinnamon scones on fancy napkins. The wooden countertop is shellacked. Pendant lights and a plate glass front help to illuminate it. I’ve stopped at a couple of such cafés on my travels, and I’ve encountered one or two Betsy Sweets sitting in them.”

“There’s one small problem,” Isabel said. “If Betsy sits on a counter stool in your bright, clean café, why did Alma dig up her leg bone in our flowerbed?”

Jumpy shrugged a shoulder. “Maybe it’s not her leg bone you found.”

Alma resisted the urge to jump in and disagree.

“You might have something there,” Isabel said. “The crime lab hasn’t made a positive confirmation yet.”

“There you go,” Jumpy said. “All of our speculations could be for naught.”

“Did you participate on the townies’ search teams after Betsy vanished?” Isabel asked.

“No, I was out of town that week,” Jumpy replied. “My niece Jan in Dubuque got married, and I flew out to attend her wedding.”

“Alma and I love going to summer weddings,” Isabel said. “Except the outdoor weddings held under the roasting sun can be taxing to endure.”

“How is Jan getting along?” Alma asked.

“She and Roger had triplets last summer,” Jumpy replied. “All of them girls, they’re named Sam, Pam, and Cam.”

“It sounds as if they have their hands full but in the best way,” Isabel said.

“No kidding,” Jumpy said.

“You got any pictures?” Alma asked.

“They’re on my cell phone, but I left it at home,” Jumpy replied.

“Are you flying back to Dubuque for a visit soon?” Isabel asked.

“Jan invited me to have Thanksgiving family dinner with them,” Jumpy replied. “I’ll be there, for sure.”

“Life just doesn’t get any better than that,” Isabel said.

“Boy, I’ll say,” Jumpy said. “Meantime, do you crave a mess of pork chops? You’ll find none tastier than the ones I sell at my meat counter. Fix ’em Southern fried or serve ’em with grits. My favorite recipe is to grill ’em with Tabasco or Worcestershire sauce. For you today only, they’re twenty-five percent off.”

“Thanks, but it’s far too hot to turn on the oven,” Alma said.

“Alma and I are also too busy sleuthing to do any cooking,” Isabel said. “We’ve even stopped clipping store coupons.”

“Pork chops are a powerful brain food for lady sleuths,” Jumpy said.

“We’ll stick with the smarts we’ve already got,” Alma said. “Thanks just the same for the offer.”

“Good luck then,” Jumpy said. “Well, time is money. If I can do anything for you, be sure to ask. You can always find me here selling my top quality pork chops to my customers.”

While your poor customers get frostbite, Alma thought with another shiver as they hurried from the IGA to thaw out in the summer warmth.

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Chapter 7

“Shall we stop at Matthiessen’s Hardware Store and buy our replacement marigolds?” Alma asked.

“Why is that? So you can dig up Betsy’s other leg bone?” Isabel replied.

“Petey Samson has given the flowerbed his scent of approval that no other bones are buried in it.”

“That’s encouraging to hear, but it also leaves us with the dilemma of where to recover the rest of Betsy’s skeleton.”

“It must be at some spot around Quiet Anchorage.”

“What did you first think of when you uprooted her bone?”

“After I realized it probably came from the result of a murder, I thought I’d died and gone to sleuth heaven.”

Isabel smiled. “Did you meet Saint Peter at the pearly gates?”

“Actually, Jane Marple was the greeter. She was handing out bear claws to the happy souls.”

“Fabulous, but I want to know if there was any iced tea.”

“What a question. Of course there’s iced tea in Heaven,” Alma replied.

Isabel laughed. “It sounds like a divine place.”

The sisters were tooling along in their four-door dusty blue sedan, a 1999 model with 26,000 miles on it. The third passenger rode behind them. Petey Samson stuck his head out the window, and his beagle ears flapped like pennant streamers in the wind. The comical sight tickled the spectators to nudge each other and chuckle as the car traveled down Main Street. Petey Samson lifted his nose and let out a series of raspy barks. Isabel, driving, gave him a puzzled glance in the rearview mirror.

“What pushed his noisemaker buttons?” she asked. “His barks are making the townies gawk at us.”

“They gawked at us long before he ever started barking,” Alma said.

“Be that as it may, why is he carrying on like he is?”

“He’s just a happy dog, Isabel. Haven’t you ever gotten up from bed with a song in your heart just bursting to come out?”

“Happy or not, he best hush up because I can’t focus on my driving.”

“Oh, let barking dogs bark.”

“Sheriff Fox will kick up a fuss. He’s already got a bull’s-eye painted on Petey Samson’s back.”

“Roscoe won’t hassle us when he’s got Betsy’s murder case looming over him. We are his best shot at getting it solved, and he’ll treat us like royalty.”

“Then let’s get back to solving it. Who was Betsy’s boyfriend?”

“We said he was Chad Jones.”

“No, Chad was her alleged lover. I’m talking about the guy who was Betsy’s age, and she dated on a steady basis.”

“She probably dated a boy from her high school class.”

“Something puzzles me. Where do today’s young couples go on their dates?”

“Do they go to the cinema?”

“Quiet Anchorage has never had a cinema.”

“Do they go to the roller skating rink?”

“Again, we have no such establishment.”

“They must go bowling then.”

“No bowling alley has operated here.”

“Since there are no fun places for the young folks, going on dates must pose a challenge.”

“Maybe the young folks eyeing their mobile devices and working their thumbs send each other emails and text messages.”

“That activity is popularly known as social media, Isabel.”

“Yes, Alma, I know that since I also watch the same TV news you do. The social part of social media is what throws me. How can a person be sociable if they’re giving the mobile device all of their attention? Why did holding a regular conversation as we’re doing go out of style? It’s becoming a lost skill because of this social media stuff.”

“We’re from an earlier generation that socialized differently. I’m sure the advent of social media doesn’t mark when the fall of Western Civilization begins.”

“All I’m saying is maybe this social media isn’t everything it’s cracked up to be.”

Alma sighed. “Suppose Betsy had been seeing the married Chad, and they got lax. They couldn’t be on their toes every minute while they traipsed around together. A nosy Parker caught a glimpse of them, and the gossip mill cranked up. Before very long, Betsy’s current boyfriend heard

about it. He got angry and plotted his murderous revenge, and that's why she drove off into the morning and was never seen again. We better learn her boyfriend's name."

"Since we're in town, we know where to go to ask our questions."

Alma nodded. "I hope none of the Three Musketeers slept in."

"Have you ever known a Musketeer to laze away the morning in bed?" Isabel asked.

"There's no accounting for taste," Ossie said. "Corina went behind our backs and ordered the paint."

"And we get absolutely no say in the color choice," Blue said.

"I told my niece in no uncertain terms how much I disliked it yesterday when we brushed on the first coat of paint," Willie said. "Guess what she did?"

"Shock us," Alma replied.

"She just pointed at the brush I held to keep on painting the bench," Willie replied. "We town elders don't get any respect nowadays."

"Ain't it the sorry truth?" Ossie said.

"I've never laid eyes on a tackier paint color," Blue said while he brushed on the rose petal red paint to the wooden bench. "It makes me dizzy just to look at it."

"What did Corina say about your whining, I mean your complaints?" Isabel asked.

"She gave us an ultimatum," Willie replied. "Either we painted our bench to go with her flower shop, or we found a different spot on Main Street to sit. The problem is nobody else will have us."

"I'm left beet-faced from the embarrassment," Ossie said. "Imagine us sitting on a wooden bench looking this garish."

"We'll become the town's new laughingstocks," Blue said.

Alma nodded, containing her smile, and Isabel looked amused.

"Or maybe we can prevent that from happening, Blue," Willie said. "I just thought of an idea."

"Then don't be bashful and speak up, my good man," Blue said.

"Isabel and Alma will march into the flower shop and plead our case," Willie said. "They'll ask Corina to reconsider her color choice. Sitting on a khaki green bench would make us look distinguished, and we'd win back some of that lost respect."

“They wouldn’t do it as a favor,” Ossie said. “It’d be an exchange. We’ll tell them who Betsy Sweet was dating, if they go inside and speak with Corina.”

“It’s a more than fair swap,” Blue said. “Do we have a deal?”

“No deal,” Isabel replied. “You know Corina never flip-flops after she’s made a decision.”

“Bummer for us,” Ossie said.

Closing one eye and stroking her chin with her finger, Alma appeared to turn thoughtful. “Say, Isabel, I just had a thought from back in the good old days. Didn’t Bogie drive a rose petal red Jaguar?”

Right off, Isabel followed Alma’s tactic. “He sure did. *Life Magazine* ran a cover photo of him posing in it,” Isabel replied. “His Rat Pack cronies said they could hear him roaring up from blocks away.”

“Bogie was the bee’s knees in the cat’s pajamas,” Alma said. “Isn’t that what you’re always saying, Willie?”

His scowl turning into a smile, Willie gave a thumbs up. “If Bogie drove a rose petal red Jaguar, it completely changes this situation.”

Ossie nodded. “Bogie was the undisputed king of cool.”

“Bogie was a man’s man who always got the girl and the money,” Blue said.

“We feel lots better now,” Ossie said, brushing on the rose petal red paint with new vigor. “Any color Bogie liked is fine by us on any day of the week.”

Isabel was certain Alma had fabricated the Bogie tale in order to get the Three Musketeers back on track. When she glanced Alma’s way, she slipped Isabel a wink. Then Alma kept a straight face so as not to tip off the Three Musketeers.

“Isabel and Alma might like to pitch in and help us paint the bench,” Ossie said.

“Ossie, they’re tracking down a desperado and don’t have the time to do any painting,” Willie said.

“You giving us the name of Betsy’s boyfriend will get us going again,” Isabel said.

“I can picture his face, but his name eludes me,” Ossie said. “Blue or Willie, it’s up to one of you to remember it.”

“His name was right on the tip of my tongue, and then you distracted me to forget it,” Blue said.

They trained their gazes on Willie, their last hope. “Thanks a lot,” he said. “There’s nothing like your friends putting a little pressure on you.”

“The first name Troy rings a bell in the back of my head if that’s any prompt,” Ossie said.

“Troy What’s-His-Name gets us halfway there,” Willie said. “Blue, dig way down and dredge up Troy’s last name.”

“Troy Raft,” Blue said. “That’s who her boyfriend was.

“Way to go there,” Willie said.

“Thanks,” Blue said. “I’d take a bow, but I might not be able to straighten back up.”

“I know the Rafts,” Ossie said. “They live in the two-story ramshackle firetrap by the Coronet River. The roofline is sagging in places like me, and the mailbox in the milk can is leaning at the foot of the driveway.”

“We’ve passed it dozens of times without really noticing it there,” Isabel said. “Is Troy living at home with his mother Valerie?”

“You should find him staying there,” Ossie replied. “He’s presumably seeking a livelihood, but how many job leads can you drum up while you’re playing online video games?”

“Have you ever talked to Troy?” Alma asked.

“No,” Ossie replied. “We’ve only spoken to Valerie when she comes to town to do her shopping.”

“She waits tables on the night shift at the truck stop,” Blue said. “It’s not one of the glamour careers, but it pays the bills and keeps food on the table.”

“Nothing is wrong with hard work,” Alma said.

“I say our painting this bench is too much like work,” Willie said. “Hurry up and finish it, so we can sit down and rest a spell.”

“This coat of wet paint will also take a few hours to dry,” Blue said.

“I forgot about that part,” Willie said. “Corina has a deacon’s bench in the back room, and I bet she’d lend it to us to sit on until our painted bench dries.”

“Should I let Troy know we’re on our way?” Alma asked with her cell phone out.

“I wouldn’t call him up if I were you,” Isabel replied. “Our dropping in will catch him unawares.”

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Chapter 8

“Where did you ever hear the story Bogie drove a rose petal red Jaguar?” Isabel asked. She was doing the driving as the sisters headed to see Troy at his mother Valerie’s house.

Alma chuckled. “I needed to come up with something to rescue us. For all we know, Bogie may’ve driven the Hollywood streets in such a Jaguar. He sure loved them enough.”

“I’ll ask Sammi Jo to google it the next time she’s online.”

“I just know Sheriff Fox has stashed away Betsy’s bone we gave him. Out of sight out of mind is the way he likes to operate.”

“She deserves better treatment than our wishy-washy sheriff trying to ignore her murder.”

“That’s why we are staying on top of it for her.”

Isabel nodded with a firm set to her chin. “I couldn’t agree with you more.”

Alma had a craving for a tall glass of iced tea from Eddy’s Deli. Their favorite server Tabitha kept a pitcher of it on hand just for the sisters who dropped by at all times of the day. They were generous tippers, and Tabitha was a sharp cookie who understood the business rule saying good service reaped good profits.

“Let’s swing by Eddy’s Deli for a tall glass of iced tea,” Isabel said.

The astonished Alma looked at Isabel. “That’s uncanny because I was just thinking of the same thing. You must’ve picked up on my thoughts.”

“No, I’m just thirsty like you must be on a hot summer day.”

“But shouldn’t we be doubling down on our efforts to solve Betsy’s murder?”

“I have an ulterior motive in mind. Your bone discovery has gotten things stirred up, and every diner has an opinion to share about it.”

“Each diner has discussed it with Tabitha, so she knows what the latest talk is.”

“I suggest we chat with her while we also grab a bite to eat.”

Alma’s eyes brightened like putting on their car’s high beams. “Bear claws?” she said.

“If you’d like a bear claw then order it,” Isabel said. “I might get extravagant and order one for myself.”

“Remember you only live once,” Alma said.

Eddy's Deli on the far end of Main Street offered its patrons tables (laminated tops) and booths (retro red Naugahyde). The townies agreed it was the top eatery in Quiet Anchorage. After her first shiver from the A/C blast, Isabel asked Alma to return to the car and fetch their sweaters. She did and, draping the sweaters over their shoulders, the sisters found their customary window booth. After a few minutes of window gazing at nothing in particular, Isabel looked at Alma.

"Do we ring the desk bell to get service?" Isabel asked.

"Isn't that just done in hotel lobbies for the bellhops?" Alma said.

"All I know is if I don't get my iced tea, I'm going to pop my cork."

"It sounds bad, Isabel."

"Oh, it's bad, and it's getting worse by the second, Alma."

"Suppose I pour a tall glass for each of us from the pitcher of iced tea at the kiosk."

"Go for it. Don't forget to add the lemon wedge to mine."

"Sugar?"

"I'm sweetened enough, thanks."

"How shall we handle making our payment?"

"Just sign an IOU and stick it in Tabitha's tips jar."

Alma got up from their booth, wrote the IOU, and brought over their iced teas.

"Thank you most kindly," Isabel said before she took a couple of sips and smacked her lips. "Nothing in the world hits the right spot on a hot summer day like an iced tea does."

"Well, I see you've seen fit to serve yourselves," a younger lady's disgruntled voice said.

Surprised, Isabel and Alma turned their heads to see Tabitha who'd sidled up to the booth from the kitchen.

Like the sisters, the dark-haired, pretty Tabitha also wore a sweater but with denim jeans and stylish black sneakers. She'd swept her hair back into a tight bun. "How long will Eddy pay me if the customers get their own orders?" she asked. "He'll turn Eddy's Deli into a cafeteria buffet line, and I'll go work somewhere else like to stock grocery shelves, clean motel rooms, or cashier at a big box store."

"Don't get miffed, Tabitha," Isabel said. "Nobody is trying to do you out of a job."

“I left a signed IOU in your tips jar, and you know we’re always good for it,” Alma said.

“We’ll pay off the IOU before we leave today,” Isabel said.

“That’s a different story then,” Tabitha said, losing the frown and her anger fading. “I’m sorry I snapped at you like I did.”

“We can understand the source of your consternation,” Alma said.

“It was perfectly natural,” Isabel said. “Just forget about it like we have.”

Tabitha cocked her head at them. “Didn’t you dig up a dinosaur bone while you were planting petunias?”

“The bone is human, and we found it while setting out marigolds,” Isabel replied.

“Human?” Tabitha’s mouth dropped as the realization dawned on her. “Murder has struck our burg again.”

“Sheriff Fox hasn’t confirmed it, but that’s how we view it,” Isabel said.

“Who was the poor victim this time?” Tabitha asked.

“Alma remembered Betsy Sweet disappeared three summers ago,” Isabel replied. “So, we’ve been thinking she’s the poor victim. Did you know her?”

“Betsy was a couple of grades ahead of Sammi Jo and me,” Tabitha replied. “I used to see her around town, and we exchanged pleasantries. She ate here a few times, and I waited on her, but we never chatted all that much.”

“Did you believe the rumor saying she had the affair with Chad Jones?” Alma asked.

“I heard the loose talk going around back then,” Tabitha replied. “I felt as if Betsy was too young for Chad who’d never cheat on Esther if he knew what was good for him.”

“We learned Betsy’s boyfriend was Troy Raft,” Isabel said. “Might you also know him?”

“I know enough about Troy to tell you I don’t like him,” Tabitha replied. “I tried to get Eddy to ban him from the deli, but we found no proof he’s the one who swiped my tips money. Are you gals on the case again?”

“I dug up Betsy’s leg bone, so the murder case found us this time,” Alma replied.

“Are you thinking Troy had something to do with Betsy’s death?” Tabitha asked.

“The possibility has crossed our minds,” Isabel replied. “Alma and I would like to ask him a few questions.”

“Don’t expect to get much satisfaction,” Tabitha said. “He’s turned into a surly boozier who is sponging off his mother Valerie and anybody else he can chisel money off.”

“Thanks for the advance warning,” Alma said.

“Did Sheriff Fox bring in Troy and question him about Betsy’s disappearance?” Tabitha asked.

“He must’ve passed with flying colors if Sheriff Fox decided to release and not arrest him,” Alma replied.

“Sheriff Fox has made his big blunders in the past,” Isabel said.

“I always thought Reynolds Kyle has the right stuff to be our town sheriff,” Tabitha said.

“You raise an intriguing idea,” Isabel said. “Sammi Jo might have a few qualms about him doing it. Law enforcement, even in a small town, isn’t a safe job.”

“If I were Sammi Jo, I would’ve tied the knot with Reynolds months ago,” Tabitha said. “Some brazen gal sporting a toothpaste commercial smile and come-hither gleam in her eye will snatch him away if she’s not on her toes.”

“I see it happen every day on my soaps,” Alma said.

“I love watching the soaps when things get slow here,” Tabitha said. “Are you also a soaps fan, Isabel?”

“Do I have a choice?” Isabel replied. “Reynolds will be marching down the aisle on Sammi Jo’s arm before he knows what hit him.”

“It’s like taking candy from a baby,” Alma said with a knowing chuckle. “The poor fellow doesn’t stand a chance.”

“We should be on our way,” Isabel replied. “Alma, settle our IOU with Tabitha.”

“No, this one is on the house,” Tabitha said. “I’ve enjoyed our talk. Just be extra sure to take it easy out there.”

“That’s our motto every time we go out sleuthing,” Alma said.

“At least we’ll leave the tip,” Isabel said. “We know you’re not waiting tables just for the fun of it.”

“I make a comfortable living, and I try not to complain too much,” Tabitha said. “As you say about Sammi Jo, I’ve also got out my tentacles to snag a certain person.”

Tabitha put her bright eyes on the kitchen entrance where Eddy staffed the grill. She chuckled, it sounding much like the knowing chuckle Alma had just made. Whether he realized it or not, Eddy’s days as a single man were probably numbered.

“Yep, it’s just like taking candy from a baby,” Tabitha said.

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Chapter 9

Sammi Jo was getting through a crummy day at work. Many new folks were moving into the local subdivisions that were sprouting up like mushrooms. The influx of new folks gave the self-storage rental facility lots of business. She'd been hustling like a soccer mom since she arrived at work. She had to postpone her day's first cup of coffee again because the next customer had pulled up and beeped his horn. What she saw as only rusty junk filled the bed of his pick up truck.

She didn't share her cynical opinion with the customer, or he might take his business to a competitor. Seeing what prized possessions folks paid to put into storage instead of tossing into the landfill never ceased to amaze her. She probably rolled her eyes a half-dozen times a day but only on the inside. She put on her friendliest smile and used her most cheerful voice when she dealt with the customers. By the day's end, she found being nice was hard to do when she felt so tired.

"Do you mind lending me a hand?" Cal asked her through his rolled down window. "There's ten dollars in it for you."

Sammi Jo almost laughed at him. "Cal, hang on to your money," she replied. "I just don't have the time."

"Isn't customer assistance part of your job?" Cal asked.

"I process the paperwork," Sammi Jo replied. "After that, you're on your own. Where did you pick up these rusty, old farm implements?"

"I salvaged the beauties while on my scouting trips," Cal replied. "I'm known in the artist community as a scrap metal sculpturer."

"Uh-huh, I see," Sammi Jo said, eyeing the rusty junk with a healthy skepticism. "Do you aim to peddle your, uh, artwork to the public?"

"Believe it or not, the art market for scrap metal sculpture is heating up. Folks are going nuts for rust. Can I interest you in buying a piece of my artwork?"

"Thanks, Cal, but I like to keep my artwork confined to the pretty pictures hanging on the wall. Besides, I don't have any place to put your scrap metal sculpture."

"You can surprise Wilbur by setting it on a marble pedestal out by the front gate."

"I better not. Wilbur isn't very good at taking surprises."

“Suit yourself. Did I hear right Isabel and Alma have done their own salvage operations?”

Sammi Jo shrugged. “They excavated a bone.”

“It wasn’t just any bone. Wasn’t it part of a human skeleton?”

“If you already know, why are you asking me about it?”

“I don’t know whose bone it is.”

“Isabel and Alma think it’s Betsy Sweet’s bone, and she was murdered.”

Cal shook his head. “That’s horrible. I always liked to think she hooked up with a cool dude she met online, got hitched in Vegas, and lived out the rock star’s dream.”

“Betsy had better sense. I knew her in high school, and she had a level head on her shoulders.”

“The Betsy I knew was a little different than yours. She had a wild streak making her the live wire at any party I ever attended.”

“Who did she come with to the parties, and who did she leave with? You must know if you were so busy checking her out, Cal.”

“If I saw who she came or left with, I kept no memory of it, but I can still see her radiant smile. I’d hear a husky laugh, and I knew it was hers without having to turn around and look. Don’t get me wrong. She wasn’t a floozy throwing herself at every man she met. I rather doubt if she ever ran around with Chad Jones or Esther would’ve shot them both. However, Betsy was young, and she liked to have her fun, so she did just that. You probably do the same thing when you’re not busting your hump to earn a paycheck here.”

“Actually, Reynolds and I are pretty laid-back.”

Cal smacked his palm against his forehead. “Duh. Why didn’t I think of Reynolds? I can drive out to the drag race track and ask him to return with me and help transfer my beauties into my rental unit.”

“Reynolds has enough work to do. Have you got an extra pair of work gloves?”

“I sure do.” Cal looked around them. “Have you got a forklift on the premises?”

“That’s an affirmative.”

“Can you operate it?”

“Did the dish run away with the spoon?”

“Say what?” asked Cal.

“Never mind,” Sammi Jo said. “We better get moving before things turn busy here again.”

“How goes the battle?” Wilbur Hathaway asked. He was Sammi Jo’s boss who left the day-to-day operation of his self-storage rental facility to her working at the on-site office. “Are you raking in lots of money for me? Talk to me, girl.”

Sammi Jo had just sat down in the office chair. It was her first break since she’d taken care of Cal and his truckload of rusty junk. She skipped making any coffee since it was so late in the morning, and the caffeine kept her awake at night.

“First, Wilbur, I don’t care to be addressed as a ‘girl.’ I don’t know how many times I’ve told you that.”

“You sure aren’t a boy, are you?”

“Right at the moment, I don’t have the energy to enlighten you about why it’s demeaning. Just know I don’t like it and don’t do it again. Okay?”

“All right, Sammi Jo. Jeez. You must be having one of those days.”

“You think?”

“What’s gotten you so out of sorts, young lady?”

“That’s better. Since I can’t clone triplets of me, we better hire a couple of brawny fellows to give me a hand this summer.”

“Ouch. That hits the old wallet where it hurts the most.”

Sammi Jo had a suspicion, and it left her with a scowl. “Where are you and what are you doing right now?”

Wilbur had no shame. “I’m pole fishing at the river. Deputy Sheriff Bexley and Uncle Jimbo are fishing on the other bank.”

“I thought you’d say that. Why aren’t you here giving me a hand if you’re not going to hire the extra help I requested?”

“Because when I do, you turn bossy, pointing your finger at me and telling me what to do and how to do it.”

Sammi Jo was confused. “So what if I do?”

“I’m the boss who signs your paycheck every other Friday.”

“You hired me to whip this place into shape, Wilbur. If I growl at you, it’s my way of getting it done. If you don’t like the job I’m doing, I’ll dump it back in your lap, stroll out the front gate, and I won’t look back.”

Wilbur sighed. “Okay, I’ll drop by as soon as I can get it together from here. Does that sound better?”

“It’ll have to do. Have you caught any fish today?”

“Truth be told, I haven’t even baited the hook. My ice chest filled with cold beer cans keeps getting in my way.”

“Wilbur, you’re a country boy of a mess. Do you know that?”

“He laughed. “Flattery will get you nowhere, young lady. Now it’s my turn to ask my question.”

“Fire away, boss man.”

“Deputy Bexley shouted across the river to me that Isabel and Alma dug up a leg bone from their flowerbed.”

“So they did.”

“Was it murder?”

“It’s looking that way.”

“Are our pair of gray-haired birddogs hot on the trail of the killer?”

“This one is their toughest mysteries yet because it’s an old murder, and many of them go unsolved.”

“I’m always pulling for them. Who got murdered?”

“Betsy Sweet is their leading guess.”

“Heavens to Betsy, you mean Sweet Betsy.” Wilbur’s voice fell flat and somber. “Here all this time we thought she’d hit the road, and we’d heard the last of her.”

“I never liked her nickname Sweet Betsy. It makes her sound like a tramp, and she wasn’t one of those by a long shot.”

“I thought her nickname came from the folk song ‘Sweet Betsy from Pike’ we sang as grade schoolers. Shall I hum a few bars of it for you?”

“Save your breath, Wilbur. I know the folk song you mean.”

“Getting back to our Betsy, if memory serves me, she had a romantic fling with Chad Jones.”

“Did you ever see Chad and Betsy go out as a couple?”

“I never did but then I’m something of a homebody.”

“God bless high def TV with the outdoorsmen and NASCAR channels.”

“Amen to that, sister.”

“I’ve seen Esther Jones in town. We’ve never held a real conversation since I get the impression she isn’t a Chatty Cathy.”

“Esther packs a short fuse. If she ever caught Chad cheating on her, there’d be plenty of you-know-what to pay.”

“Maybe she did get wise to it, and she went after Betsy. Did Esther kill Betsy?”

“How should I know such a thing? I’m just a country boy of a mess who loves to bend elbows and go fishing. Isabel and Alma are the ace sleuths, and you should be asking them your questions.”

“If you let me take off a couple of days, I could help them, and we’d have this murder case licked in nothing flat.”

“It’s gone this long unsolved, so it won’t hurt anything if it goes a bit longer that way.”

“Does that long-winded answer mean I have to play a sleuth on my own time?”

“Bright girl, er, I mean smart young lady.”

“Maybe I’ll take some of my vacation time.”

“Come on, Sammi Jo. You don’t have any vacation time left to take, and I’m not going to advance you any hours, so you can now save your breath.”

“It’s not right how you’re off fishing while I’m standing on my head to keep things running smoothly here.”

“All right, if you get on a hot streak, and you need a little time off to close out the case, come back and we’ll talk,” Wilbur said. “That’s the best I can do for you.”

“We’ll be chatting about it later,” Sammi Jo said.

Chapter 10

Isabel and Alma had taken the side trip out to the Raft home by the Coronet River for nothing. Despite Alma's pounding on the front door, nobody responded, and Isabel felt annoyed. She expected them to be making steady progress. All they'd accomplished so far was to drink iced tea, walk Petey Samson, and talk a lot. Returning to town, she sat with her lips tensed and her ankles crossed. Alma, the driver, read her older sister's pensive mood and offered her encouraging words.

"We might seem to be making no progress, but I bet we're actually collecting lots of good information," Alma said.

"I wished I'd never seen those cursed marigolds on sale," Isabel said.

"We've got a murder suspects list. That's better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick."

"Then which suspects appear on our list?"

"In no particular order, number one has to be Chad Jones, the older man she allegedly had the affair with even if it was a short-lived one. The second one is Chad's wife Esther who is known to be a hothead and jealous. Betsy Sweet's boyfriend Troy Raft is number three."

Isabel perked up as her hazel eyes shone. "Our suspects list isn't too shabby."

"There might be more names to add to it before it's all over with," Alma said.

"I certainly hope not if just for our sake," Isabel said.

A distinctive riff came from Charlie Parker's saxophone, and Alma imagined they were huddled at a candlelit table in a smoky club listening to a live bebop jazz band play until Isabel answered her cell phone's ring tone.

"This is Abigail Morgan Pierpont."

"Yes, Abigail," Isabel said, tilting her eyebrows at Alma. "How are you, dear?"

"I have a concern I want to pass along to you and Alma."

"It no doubt involves Sheriff Fox, or you wouldn't be calling me on your personal cell phone."

"It does. You brought in a certain piece of evidence to him."

"He's supposed to be sending it to the crime lab. Are you saying he hasn't done that? We've been waiting for the results."

"There's been no action taken, and he's sitting on it."

Isabel made a face at Alma. "It looks like we're going to have to light a fire under Roscoe," Isabel said.

"Just let me know when and where you're ready to do it," Alma said. "I'll bring the matches."

"Betsy went missing before we moved here, and I never had the pleasure to meet her," Abigail said. "Nevertheless, I believe she deserves a lot better respect than she's getting from our sheriff."

"Nobody should ever get away with murder, Abigail."

"That's what I think, and why I did what I did."

Isabel indicated with her fingers for Alma to keep watch out the windshield on the street as she drove instead of on Isabel.

"What did you do that's gotten you so upset?" Isabel asked.

"While Sheriff Fox was out loading up on more coffee and doughnuts, I spirited away the evidence from his office to my house."

"I assume you hid it there from him."

"He was sure to misplace it or lose it, so I wrapped it up and stashed it on the bottom of my deep freezer, and that's where it now rests."

"Goodness me, poor Betsy is getting passed around more than the Sunday collection plate."

"Am I being disrespectful with her remains?"

"Under the circumstances, I don't think Betsy minds because we're trying to do the right thing."

"Well, I've gotten myself into a pickle, and I'm not sure what I should do next. You and Alma are old hands at this type of thing. Can you advise me?"

"Just stand pat, Abigail."

"Pardon me?"

"I said leave it where you put it until you get further word from Alma and me. Hang loose, too, since it might take us a while."

"All right, I'll stop fretting so much."

"That's the right approach. I'd hoped Sheriff Fox would do the proper thing, but I can see he's just going to ignore an old murder. Where are you?"

"I stopped by Lago Azul Flower Shop. My mom's birthday is the day after tomorrow, and I want to order her something nice."

"Snapdragons are lovely this time of the year. Are the three elderly gentlemen parked on the wooden bench in front of the flower shop?"

“They’re sitting there jabbering away.”

“Isn’t it amazing what a fresh coat of paint does to men?”

“I don’t know them. Are they friendly? Can I trust them if I get into a bind?”

“Just tell them Isabel said they should give you any cover you need. They’ll do it, no questions asked. They look wrinkled as cabbage heads, but they’re smart as swamp foxes and tough as hickory sticks.”

“That’s handy to know if I need any help,” Abigail said. “I better head back to the office.”

“Don’t let on what you did. Let Sheriff Fox wonder about what happened. Bye for now,” Isabel said before hanging up. Thinking, she tapped her cell phone against her chin several times before updating Alma and finishing with, “Sheriff Fox figures we can’t prove Betsy’s murder took place because there’s no bone for evidence.”

“You’ve got the photos of when we brought in the bone to him,” Alma said. “They must count for something.”

“I’m hoping I only have to use them as a last resort.”

“He’ll fire Abigail if he finds out what she did.”

“That ill-advised move will bring the wrath of the Trumbo sisters down on his head.”

“Not only that but we’ll also sic Petey Samson on him.”

Isabel chuckled. “I like the devious way your mind works.”

“We sorely need an upgrade at our sheriff position.”

“That’s November’s election problem. Meantime, we’re stuck with having to use him as best we can.”

Alma snapped her fingers. “Topsoil, Isabel. You were speaking to Lotus at the flowerbed, and you mentioned we had a load of it brought earlier this spring.”

“Can you remember now who brought it to us?”

“Fats Browning dumped it in the corner of our yard.”

Isabel nodded. “Then where did Fats get the topsoil?”

“He never told us after he showed up in his dump truck.”

“He didn’t get out of it but sat parked in the driveway honking the horn. With anybody else, that constitutes rude behavior. However, Fats gets a free pass because it’s so hard for him to move around.”

“He knew we wanted to fill in the sunken flowerbed and the low places in the yard. We told Eustis Blake who passed it along to Jumpy Blixt

who then just happened to mention it to—”

“Save it, Alma. I don’t need to hear who told whom what. The important part is Fats is who delivered the topsoil. Where do we find him?”

Alma consulted the time on her cell phone. “He’s usually at home right about now boning up on his bingo calling.”

Isabel had a quirky smile. “Stop it. Nobody does such a thing.”

“I’m not kidding you. The state government requires the bingo callers pass a written test and pony up a yearly fee.”

“The bingo callers need a license to operate like private investigators do. We let our P.I. license expire since we aren’t professional private detectives anymore.”

“Why hasn’t Mr. Oglethorpe phoned us? Remember when he used to call us about keeping our private investigator license current?”

“He also warned us to never snoop in murders because private eyes don’t touch them with a ten-foot pole.” Isabel laughed. “That’s one of the reasons why the private eye label no longer fits us.”

“We’d no idea about Quiet Anchorage before we moved back. Just when there’s a lull, I unearth a murder victim’s leg bone in our flowerbed.” Alma pointed at the next street intersection. “Make the turn on the road to Fats Browning’s house.”

“He shouldn’t mind us dropping by unannounced,” Isabel said. “He realizes solving a murder always trumps practicing bingo.”

“Or at least that’s the viewpoint you and I like to take,” Alma said.

Fats Browning, the bingo caller for the Quiet Anchorage Volunteer Fire Department’s tournaments held every Wednesday night, had been dedicated to his craft going back for several decades. On a few heroic occasions, he operated his post with a case of laryngitis and printed the bingo numbers he’d randomly selected on the whiteboard for the bingo players to see and mark on their cards. They’d always done it that way and saw no reason to update it.

Fats’ waistline had grown with his age, but neither change interfered with his boombox voice announcing the bingo numbers. The position of bingo caller entailed lots of responsibility, and the townie bingo players felt passionate about their game. Isabel and Alma had played bingo several times and won a denture cleaner. Neither one had a need for using it. Yet.

Playing the word game Scrabble thrilled Isabel and Alma. Their all-night marathon games held at the dining room table were the stuff of local legend. If an innocent newbie agreed to play “a game or two” with them, the newbie had better planned to stick around until daybreak. Neither sister ever so much as stifled a yawn during their long bouts of playing Scrabble.

Fats’ wife Jessie Pearl answered Isabel ringing the doorbell. Jessie Pearl now had more gray than brunette hair. Even so, she’d always been a striking looker, and she still was, only finer.

“Every afternoon at quarter-past one, Fats slinks down to his man cave,” Jessie Pearl said. “I don’t see him again until a minute shy of dinnertime, which he never forgets.”

“He takes his bingo calling too seriously,” Isabel said. “Has he mentioned any plans to retire? He’s got to be older than I am.”

“He vows he’ll soldier on and never quit,” Jessie Pearl replied. “Dying with his hand cranking the bingo numbers cage will leave a smile on his face. The funeral home attendants will have to lug him out feet first in a wheelbarrow.”

“He should get a hobby to take his mind off bingo,” Alma said.

“Tell him and not me,” Jessie Pearl said. “I’m at my wits end trying to save him from bingo. He swears nothing else gets him as fired up as it does.”

“Has Fats ever kept a pet beagle?” Isabel asked.

“He once pampered a parakeet he liked to call Okey-Dokey,” Jessie Pearl replied. “Before you ask me, I have no idea of why he gave it the corny name.”

“Pet owners are just corny about their pets,” Isabel said.

“Are you also big on bingo?” Alma asked.

“One bingo nut in our household is enough, so I knit and crochet while I’m watching TV,” Jessie Pearl replied. “I donate my afghans to the women’s shelter in Warrenton.”

“I’m sure they’re appreciative of getting them,” Alma said.

“Can I offer you anything cold to drink?” Jessie Pearl asked. “I’ve got soda pop, bottled water, and iced tea in the fridge.”

Isabel spoke before Alma could accept the offer for an iced tea. “We’re both fine, thanks,” Isabel said.

She and Alma filed downstairs while Jessie Pearl remained in the kitchen to finish preparing the potato salad for dinner.

“Isabel and Alma Trumbo, I haven’t seen you in a month of Sundays,” Fats said, greeting them. “I bid you welcome to our humble abode. It ain’t the Ritz or Carlton, but it does fine by us.”

Nodding, Isabel regarded the hulking man planted on the three-legged stool behind the wooden table. Dressed in the blaze orange tank top, he resembled a giant human pumpkin with a baldhead for the stem. He flipped a toggle switch and turned off the vintage desk microphone on the tabletop.

The only framed poster Fats had displayed was the popular kitschy one of the clever dogs seated at the card table playing bingo instead of poker. The beagle with the sly grin like Petey Samson’s was cheating. Isabel thought a red glass vase of yellow silk daisies and a few needlepoint wall hangings or a stunning crazy quilt would add a dash of hominess to his spare man cave. At least she didn’t spot a brass cuspidor in sight.

“Fats, you better get out into the sunshine and fresh country air,” Alma said. “If you stay cooped up down here, you’ll morph into a two-legged vampire bat.”

“Why, hello, and it’s so bloody nice to see you, too, Alma,” Fats said.

“Alma means no spite in offering her too often candid opinion,” Isabel said, giving her kid sister a sharp glance.

“Of course I know she doesn’t, and I’ll take her sage counsel under advisement,” Fats said. “Meantime, what brings you out to see us?”

“Murder,” Isabel replied.

“Huh?” Fats gulped while his eyes enlarged to the size of goose eggs. “Say it ain’t so, Isabel. Not again.”

“Yes, it most likely is so again,” Isabel said. “It’s time to put aside the entertainment. We’ve got a grim situation on our hands.”

“Does it tie back to the leg bone I heard you dug up?” Fats asked.

“Alma and I think it belongs to Betsy Sweet,” Isabel replied.

“Oh my gracious, I remember Betsy. She vanished like in a magician’s stage act.” Fats snapped his fingers for dramatic effect. “*Poof* and she left us just as fast as that.”

“The magician’s assistant reappears,” Isabel said. “However, Betsy never did come back.”

Fats nodded. “That’s a cold, hard fact,” he said.

“Earlier this spring, you drove over in your dump truck and deposited a load of topsoil in our yard,” Isabel said. “Where did you get it from?”

Fats connected the dots. “Are you thinking the bone you found came from my topsoil?”

“It’s becoming a distinct possibility,” Isabel replied.

“That’s not possible,” Fats said, folding his arms on his massive chest.

Likewise, Alma crossed her arms. “Then tell us why that’s so,” she said.

“The topsoil came from out of my back yard,” Fats replied. “I had a new patio built for Jessie Pearl. She wanted a propane fire pit, planting beds, and bluestone paving. I needed to offload the dirt excavated from the site, and you ladies were the recipients.”

“Why is it impossible the bone wasn’t in it?” Alma asked.

“I hired a backhoe operator, and the dirt got shaken and moved all around. Jessie Pearl and I watched it. Nothing like a human bone tumbled out, or one of us would’ve seen it.”

Isabel had a sinking feeling as she realized Fats was making a solid case. “Somebody may’ve come by and planted the bone in your dirt,” she said.

Fats grunted. “The same mystery person could’ve just as well planted the bone in your flowerbed.”

“The only folks who’ve dug in it are Isabel and me,” Alma said.

“Well, Petey Samson got out of the house and also dug a few holes.”

“Did he claw up any other bones?” Fats asked.

“Not a one,” Isabel replied. “Only Alma has done that.”

“I feel truly blessed and special,” Alma said with sarcasm.

“I hate to bust your bubble since I know how much you like doing this detective stuff,” Fats said. “But could it be there is no murder? Could it be the bone is just an old animal bone? Could it be you’re off on a wild goose chase?”

Fending off a rising pang of doubt, Alma cast a glance at Isabel who stood her ground. She tapped the side of her nose with her index finger.

“I can smell a murder,” Isabel said. “The nose always knows, and I’ve never been wrong.”

Fats chuckled. “Oh, come off it, Isabel. Nobody can be so good they’re batting a thousand.”

Her hazel eyes turned icy cold. “I can be and I also am,” she said.

“I was just making a general observation,” he said.

“That’s fine,” Isabel said. “But don’t make light of a murder.”

“Most certainly not,” Fats said. “You keep on sleuthing away like you do it.”

“In a way, it feels as if Betsy has reached out from beyond the grave and wants us to bring her killer to justice,” Alma said.

While arching his bushy eyebrows, Fats shifted his weight on the stool. “May I assume you haven’t been in communication with her ghost?” he asked.

“We’ve held no spiritual conversations,” Alma replied. “So far, that is.”

Fats coughed into his palm. “Excuse me,” he said. “The talk of spooky goings-on like ghosts and séances leaves me skittish and looking for the closest exit.”

“Alma means the guilty party has gotten away with murder, and everybody believes it’s unjust,” Isabel said.

“That’s where Isabel and I come in,” Alma said.

“You’ll need every bit of luck you can get this time,” Fats said.

“If anybody can find Betsy’s killer, Isabel and Alma are the right sleuths to do it,” Jessie Pearl said. She’d come downstairs from the kitchen and joined them.

“If I were Betsy’s killer, I’d be making travel plans right about now,” Fats said as he flipped on the microphone switch. “I sure wouldn’t be sticking around Quiet Anchorage waiting for the other shoe to drop.” He blew into the microphone to test it.

“You’re too kind touting our sleuthing abilities,” Isabel said.

“But we appreciate hearing it just the same,” Alma said.

“We’ll be off and leave you to your bingo practice, Fats,” Isabel said. “Sorry for the interruption.”

“Thanks for your invaluable help,” Alma said.

“Okey-dokey,” Fats said into the live microphone.

Jessie Pearl smiled at Isabel and Alma as they headed for the stairs.

Chapter 11

Wilbur finally made it in to the self-storage rental facility and gave Sammi Jo the rest of the day off as a peace offering. After thanking him, she didn't linger around in case he changed his mind. She stopped by the IGA grocery store on Main Street where Jumpy asked her if she'd like a mess of pork chops now reduced to half price, and she politely declined his offer. She paid for her groceries and left.

Despite a lot of deliberation over making the move, she still lived in the cozy apartment she rented over the drugstore. Reynolds often asked her why she hadn't resettled in her dad Ray Burl's old place, the quaint Cape Cod under the grove of honey locusts—their showy clusters of white flowers smelled like perfume—on the outskirts of town.

Sammi Jo liked having the advantages of living on Main Street. Foremost, she remained tapped into the town grapevine. Her main source of information was the Three Musketeers sitting outside the flower shop. She'd grown fond of Ossie, Willie, and Blue as if they were her real uncles. She liked also Eustis Blake, the town pharmacist and her landlord.

Eustis was the hybrid of a nerd and geek. Bald as a croquet ball and gangly as a scarecrow, he'd tried wearing the bird's nest of a toupee. Sammi Jo took one look at it and broke out giggling. He felt crushed. She apologized, but his new look had failed. He returned to his former bald-is-beautiful look.

On a recent occasion, he'd played a bit role in their detective work and fell in love with doing it. She assured him they'd be calling on his shamus services again. He bought a snazzy fedora, and he stood ready to wear it on his next caper with them. Alma said she hoped he didn't go so far as to adopt Sam or Phillip as his new private eye nickname.

"The Sweets had left before I moved here from Southern California," Eustis said. "I'm one of few newcomers who never left Quiet Anchorage."

"You're such a perfect fit I keep forgetting it," Sammi Jo said.

"My business plan is to get everybody to like me," he said. "I have to earn the townies' trust, or they'll drive to Warrenton to have their prescriptions filled. I'll lose my drugstore, and I'll have to go work behind the pharmacist counter at a big box store. Their pharmacists never laugh or even crack a smile."

“You’d also never see the likes of me there,” Sammi Jo said. “I never shop at a big box store on principle. Of course, if the prices are better, I’m flexible about my rule. I mean let’s be practical.”

Eustis was tempted to make a quip, but he didn’t. “How did Betsy act during her last days?” he asked. “Was she upset or depressed? Did she get into a fight with anybody?”

“I didn’t know her well enough to say. The high school boys used to rave over how drop-dead gorgeous she was. When she walked by, I laughed at how their eyeballs popped out from gaping so hard. She was a pretty girl, granted. But her eyes were a bit too close together, her smile a bit too crooked, and her nose a bit too beaky.”

“I suspect the boys weren’t gaping at her eyes, smile, or nose, Sammi Jo.”

She grinned. “No, I guess they weren’t.”

“My notion is Betsy was a lonely young lady.”

“What makes you say that?”

Eustis looked sad. “She probably didn’t have a real friend because she couldn’t trust anybody enough to let them get close to her. Maybe on that fateful morning when she vanished, she could’ve used a friend to confide in, but she didn’t have one.”

“That’s so sad. Was she a suicide then?”

“If Betsy took her own life, surely someone would’ve run across all of her physical remains by now.”

“On a different matter, did you receive my rent check I sent for this month?”

“Received and recorded. I thank you.”

“I’ve lived up there for so long, it feels like home.”

“How long has it been?”

“It’s been going on two years now.”

“Oh my yes, that is such a long time, indeed.”

Sammi Jo regarded him. “Are you giving me a hard time?”

“You know I’m only kidding you,” Eustis replied.

“I say hi Eustis and Sammi Jo,” the man’s voice said, interrupting their conversation. “How are you folks doing?”

Sammi Jo turned and saw the freckled face of the red-haired Chad Jones who’d lumbered into the drugstore and up to the pharmacist counter.

Standing too close to her, he smelled of an earthy aftershave, and he used an oily gel to comb back his carrotty shock of hair.

As on previous occasions, Sammi Jo took an instant dislike to Chad. She backed up a half step to insert a more comfortable buffer zone between them.

“If I were any better, I’d be twins,” Eustis replied.

Sammi Jo didn’t nod at or speak to Chad. His slit-eyed look was studying her as if she were a prized butterfly. He’d pin and label her in his butterfly collection if he pursued lepidopterology as a hobby. If he ever tried, he’d find he was tangling with a fiery scorpion and not a prized butterfly.

“Eustis, I need some relief from these itchy insect bites,” Chad said.

“What insect bit you, Chad?” Eustis asked.

“I believe they had to be chiggers,” Chad replied. “I sharpened my hand sickle and took it out to cut down the trumpet weed vines and blackberry brambles growing on my rear property line, and I believe that’s where the chiggers attacked me.”

“I can’t offer you any advice beyond what the local folks do by applying calamine lotion,” Eustis said.

“We’re plenty stocked up on that,” Chad said.

“You have my sympathy,” Eustis said. “I got my baptism of chiggers last summer.”

“Nasty little buggers, aren’t they?” Chad said. “Have you ever gotten a case of chiggers, Sammi Jo?” He stared down to soak up a full view of her tanned bare legs. She barely contained her angry impulse wanting to slap the smarmy leer off his face.

“I use a bush hog on a John Deere to mow down the tall weeds,” Sammi Jo replied. “It makes life a lot simpler for me.”

“Jumpy told me about Isabel and Alma,” Chad said. “Is their found bone from a dinosaur?”

“The bone is most likely human and not from a dinosaur,” Sammi Jo replied.

“You don’t say.” Chad turned and grinned at Eustis. “Those Trumbo sisters just have a sixth sense on where the dead bodies are buried.” Chad returned his attention to Sammi Jo. “It wouldn’t surprise me to hear they already know whose bone it is,” he said.

“Their leading guess is Betsy Sweet,” Sammi Jo said. She decided to prod him with her next pointed remark. “I heard tell you and her were having a clandestine love affair,” she said. “Is there any truth behind the rumor, Chad? Were you running around with Betsy behind Esther’s back?”

His smugness darkened into an indignant glare, but Sammi Jo kept a neutral expression.

“The rumor going around was a total lie,” Chad replied. “I’ve always been faithful to Esther.”

Sammi Jo shrugged. “It was just a townie rumor, and I never repeated it until just now when I asked you about it.”

“I deny it ever happened,” Chad said. “If Betsy stood here right now, she’d say the same exact thing. I only knew her to speak to if our paths should happen to cross. We sure didn’t meet for trysts in seedy motel rooms or discrete rendezvouses out on lovers’ lane. I’d swear to it on a stack of bibles if you had them out here.”

“My, such righteous words,” Eustis said.

“Righteous words are called for when I stand falsely accused of something I didn’t do,” Chad said. “Unlike a few of the townies who I could identify by name, I take my marriage vows seriously.”

His defense didn’t win over Sammi Jo. He had to know something about Betsy and her fate, but he didn’t want to share it. Sammi Jo had her sleuth’s eye on Chad Jones whether he liked it or not. He sensed her suspicion.

“Sammi Jo, don’t go around making inflammatory accusations,” he said in a low, menacing voice. “I won’t stand for it, and I’ll take any drastic steps to end it if it comes down to that.”

“That sounds as if you’re making a threat,” Eustis said. “Reynolds might hear it the same way.”

“He doesn’t scare me,” Chad said.

Eustis had a chuckle. “You talk like a dang fool, Chad.”

He gave Eustis a hard look.

“If the human bone turns out to be Betsy’s, it’s a game changer,” Sammi Jo said. “Her disappearance becomes a probable murder.”

“Murder, you say.” Chad glared at Sammi Jo. “You think I killed Betsy during a lovers’ quarrel or something.” His face turned a deeper shade of red almost blotting out the spray of freckles on his forehead and cheekbones. He quivered through his hands. “Why, I ought to—”

“Watch your temper, Chad,” Eustis said. “Now what you ought to do is walk out the same door you came in here through. Our conversation is closed.”

“Eustis is right,” Sammi Jo said. “Back off and don’t cause a scene.” She had out her cell phone. “I’m calling Reynolds’ number. Don’t force me to ask him to come over and get involved in our discussion.”

“I’ll leave without making trouble,” Chad said. “But you haven’t seen or heard from the last of me.”

“Then you can save it for later,” Eustis said.

The tin cowbell Eustis had attached to the door handle clanked as Chad exited the drugstore.

“Things grew a little heated there,” Eustis said. “Chad was seconds away from losing it.”

“He was seeing plenty of red,” Sammi Jo said. “He also seemed less than truthful with us.”

“Did he and Betsy have the affair he denies took place?”

“What other reason gets him so lathered up about it? We never suggested he was her killer.”

“I thought you said Reynolds is away in Richmond.”

“He’s in Richmond for the day,” Sammi Jo said, putting away her cell phone. “But I gambled on Chad didn’t know that, and my bluff worked out perfectly.”

“That was quick thinking, Sammi Jo.”

“I bet the news of our poking around in Betsy’s murder has left her killer feeling uneasy.”

“That’s good in that you’re making progress. However, that’s also bad because things have turned dangerous. Let’s be careful out there as the duty sergeant used to say on the TV cop show I can never remember the name of to save my life.”

“Do you mean *Hill Street Blues*?”

Eustis nodded yes.

“Isabel and Alma have the episodes on DVD.”

“I loved watching it. Maybe I can see a few episodes with them sometime if I can ever get away from the pharmacy.”

“Let me ask you something before you go visiting Isabel and Alma, Eustis. Do you know how to play Scrabble?”

“Scrapple?”

“No, Scrabble. Scrapple spelled with the two p’s is something Jumpy sells that you cook and eat for breakfast.”

“Then, no, I don’t know how to play Scrabble.”

“You’ll learn how if you ever go to Isabel and Alma’s house.”

“I don’t mind playing a game or two if it makes them happy.”

Sammi Jo laughed. “You better bring your toothbrush and plan on spending the night. Once they get on a mighty Scrabble roll, nothing short of a house fire will interrupt their play.”

This time Eustis laughed. “I hope and pray I’ll have their passion to enjoy life for as long as they have,” he said.

Chapter 12

“Isabel, did you finish the Lew Archer book?” Alma asked. “I’m in the mood for reading a private eye yarn.”

“I did and I returned it to our library,” Isabel replied. “I didn’t know you also wanted to enjoy Ross Macdonald. But then I’m not a psychic, so how would I have known?”

The sisters occupied their favorite armchairs at home.

“We usually read the same thing. Isn’t that our practice?” Alma asked.

“More or less, I suppose it is. Did you like reading the Christie Opara novel?” Isabel asked.

“I always get a kick out of reading Dorothy Uhnak’s crime fiction. She was a New York City cop, you know.”

“She was quite a gal.”

“Who else have you been reading this week?”

“*How Like An Angel* by Margaret Millar has been keeping me company in print. I read books written by husband and wife authors. However, I’ve noticed your tastes in books have started to diverge from mine.”

“I devour lots of different books to improve and broaden my mind.”

“Alma, how can you sit there and tell me something that’s so untrue?”

“Name one book I’ve read that doesn’t sharpen my intellect.”

“What about you with *The Cat in the Hat* by Dr. Seuss? Or *Green Eggs and Ham* I also saw you reading yesterday?”

“I bought the books at the Warrenton Public Library’s used book sale. I never got to read either title, and I wanted to see what all the fuss was about on them.”

“Were you left satisfied after reading them?”

“I got a few chuckles, so I wasn’t disappointed.”

“Are you planning to shelve the Dr. Seuss books in our library of adult mysteries?”

“I’ll put them both under the author’s name. You can easily locate them in case you get the same hankering I did.”

“I haven’t read Dr. Seuss, and I can see no reason to pick up his books now.”

“It’d do you good to read them. Pretend you’re a child again and delight in Dr. Seuss’ quirky humor.”

“I get more than my fill of quirky humor by living with you and Petey Samson.”

“As you wish then, but later I’m reading Dr. Seuss aloud for Petey Samson.”

“See if I give a toss. He’ll just fall asleep on you. Meantime, I’ll sit quiet as a church mouse and flip through the pages of my *Alaskan Outdoor* magazine.”

“If you’re going to act so snarky, I won’t tell you about Sammi Jo calling me.”

“Did she call you about our present case?”

“Part of our conversation was, but it was mostly about who wants to play Scrabble with us.”

Isabel vaulted up from the armchair. “All right, we’ve got a newbie!” She swallowed once, straightened her blouse cuff, and calmed her voice. “I mean there’s always room at our game table for adding another Scrabble player.”

“I thought you’d feel that way.”

“Who is it?”

“Sammi Jo said Eustis has never played Scrabble, and he’d like for us to teach him. I told her I’d check first with you.”

“Quick, call Sammi Jo back and tell her to send Eustis right over. I’ll set up the Scrabble game board with the wooden letter tiles. Let’s see now. We have a pitcher of iced tea chilling in the fridge, and the bear claws are in the breadbox. Oh yes, I’ll fetch the dictionary from the library since you like to make up so many words. Am I forgetting anything? It’s been so long since we last played I may well have.”

“Hang on to your dictionary and letter tiles, Isabel. As you may’ve forgotten, our new rule is we never play Scrabble if we’re at work on a case.”

“Even if I agreed to it, I still say it stinks. Fine then, our playing Scrabble will come the minute after we finish the case. What did Sammi Jo say about it?”

“Chad Jones visited the drugstore and spoke to Eustis and her. The topics of Betsy Sweet’s disappearance and murder came up, and Chad got

hot under the collar while maintaining his innocence over his having anything to do with either.”

“He couldn’t have missed hearing the rumors about their hanky-panky going around back then.”

“He said the rumors had no basis in truth. He claims he and Betsy Sweet had nothing more than a nodding acquaintance.”

“Who saw them running around together? I’d like to track down the eyewitness for a serious talk.”

“I’ve no idea, but does Chad with his bad temper get violent when he flies off the handle?”

“If he does, murder could’ve resulted from a heated argument between the lovers.” Isabel visualized the highly charged moments leading up to Betsy’s murder. “Perhaps the young, impressionable Betsy was foolish enough to assume Chad would leave his wife Esther so Betsy and Chad could be together as a couple. Blissful love makes a young person see things through a distorted prism. She kept nagging and cajoling him to break it off with Esther until he couldn’t take it any longer and decided to put a final end to Betsy’s badgering him.”

“Murder would accomplish that end. Where did he hide her dead body all this time?”

“I don’t know, but it was a good hiding place up until the moment you plucked her leg bone from the soil in our flowerbed.”

“It’s getting so bad we can’t even putter around in the yard without a human bone falling into our hands.”

“Murders do have a strange way of seeking us out.” Isabel sighed. “Is it a gift or a curse? That’s the question.”

“I expect it’s probably a little bit of both.”

“Life was so much simpler and easier back in our pre-sleuthing days,” Isabel said. “Playing a detective wearies the body and soul.”

“We were just a boring pair of fuddy-duddies until we took up our sleuthing,” Alma said.

Just then, Petey Samson came trotting into the living room, gave the air a careful sniff, and made a revolution while passing by Isabel and Alma before he marched out.

Isabel was puzzled. “What was that all about?” she asked.

“He makes the house rounds as if he’s on sentry duty,” Alma replied.

“What a silly trick you taught him to do, Alma.”

“I’d nothing to do with it. He does it all on his own.”

“Then how long has he been on his sentry duty?”

“He began after we closed out the Ladybug Miles murder case.”

“Petey Samson is taking his watch dog responsibilities too seriously.”

“He just wants to keep his two aunties safe and sound.”

“Of course he does. That’s what the ace pooches like him do.”

“Have you phoned Louise? She gets testy if we don’t keep her up on the latest news from Quiet Anchorage.”

“If her rheumatism didn’t keep her tied down, she’d pitch in to assist us more.”

“She was the quickest, nimblest sister while growing up on the farm. Go on and call her, and I’ll go relieve Petey Samson of his sentry duty.” Alma also left the living room.

Isabel got up from the armchair and stretched her legs. Louise picked up Isabel’s cell phone rings, and they exchanged greetings.

“Guess what Alma and I are doing right now,” Isabel said.

“Don’t tell me there’s been another murder,” Louise said.

“This murder is our first one in more than a few months.”

“It’s got to be a new record. Even so, Jessica Fletcher in Cabot Cove has got nothing on you Quiet Anchorage gals.”

“The difference for us is this murder isn’t a new one. We believe it took place three summers back.”

“Who was the unfortunate victim?”

“A young lady named Betsy Sweet left for work one morning from her parents’ house, and she never reached her office job. She went to high school with Sammi Jo. Flash forward to now, and Alma dug up her leg bone buried in our flowerbed.”

“How in the Sam Hill did Alma manage to...? Oh, never mind. She just did because she’s Alma. You were saying?”

“Sheriff Fox is having the crime lab confirm the bone is Betsy’s.”

“Do you have a main suspect yet?”

“Do you remember Chad Jones?”

“Isn’t he the red-haired weirdo who stuffs the dead critters?”

“Chad has red hair and is a taxidermist by trade. I don’t know if that qualifies him as a ‘weirdo’ or not.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but isn’t the weirdo Norman Bates in *Psycho* also a taxidermist?”

“Louise, could I get a little better focus here?”

“I’m just saying. Continue then. I’m listening.”

“The scuttlebutt says Betsy and Chad carried on a love affair in the days leading up to her going missing. Since he’s married to Esther, he insists no such infidelity ever occurred. She’d boil him alive in hot tar if the proof ever surfaces he did.”

“Maybe you should check out Esther. It sounds as if she had a good reason to bump off Betsy.”

“Esther is a strong-willed woman who’s certainly capable of murder.”

Louise chuckled. “Then she’d stuff Chad the Taxidermist to live with her. They’d hold their most interesting conversations in years, and he’d never leave up the toilet seat or dribble coffee on the carpet.”

Before reacting to Louise’s macabre sense of humor, Isabel heard the bleep signal indicating she’d another caller. “Somebody else is on the line,” she told Louise. “I better take their call.”

“I’ll let you grab it. Call me later. I haven’t enjoyed this much suspense with mystery and intrigue since J. R. Ewing was shot on *Galveston*.”

“I believe J. R. Ewing was shot on *Dallas*.”

“Well, at least I got it in the right state.”

“There goes the bleeping bleep again. I have to go. Bye, Louise.”

“Stay in touch and take care, Isabel.”

She greeted her impatient new caller.

“This is Sheriff Roscoe Fox speaking, Isabel.” His usual crisp and businesslike voice was squeaky, as he’d just inhaled a snort of helium.

“You sound squeaky. What has gotten you so wound up?”

“You’re not going to believe it when I tell you.”

Isabel had a quick laugh. “Well, try me. I’ve seen a lot of crazy things in my day.”

“Have you ever laid eyes on a human skeleton lying out in the middle of the woods?”

Isabel didn’t miss a beat. “You’ve got me there. That’s something I haven’t done, but I take it you have.”

“I’m gazing down at it as we speak. It’s buried in a shallow grave, and the soil eroded to expose the physical remains.”

“You have all the fun. Too bad the skeleton can’t speak to us.”

“Actually, in a way, it has spoken. Are you sitting down?”

“Just give me what you’ve got. I’m not that frail.”

“I’m looking at what’s left of Ms. Betsy Sweet.”

Stunned, Isabel decided she’d better sit down in the armchair as the blood rushed down from her face.

“Hello? Are you there, Isabel? Hello? Are you still with me?”

“I decided I better have a seat,” she replied. “How did you make the remarkably fast identification?”

“We recovered her pocketbook with her wallet inside it. The photo I.D. of her driver’s license goes to Betsy Sweet of Quiet Anchorage, Virginia. That’s enough proof until the DNA match makes it official.”

“Now you have no choice but to accept our contention this is a murder.”

“Indeed, but I’ve managed to misplace Betsy’s leg bone you brought to me.”

Isabel knew Abigail had cached Betsy’s bone in the deep freezer and left it there. “Don’t get hung up over that,” Isabel said. “You’ve got more important things to deal with now.”

Sheriff Fox let out a groan. “I’d hoped this summer would go by without any drama. Then the town snoops dump a bone on my desktop. It’s human. The next thing I know I get a frantic call to come running, and now I’m saddled with a skeleton of bones.”

“Try to see it as making progress. Who called it in to you?”

“The two Roberts kids, Charles and Earl, were scouting for old bottles and jugs to sell to Uncle Jimbo to keep his antique shop stocked.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m on the edge of the piney woods. Do you know the clearing?”

“All too well, I’m afraid. I’d better give Willie a holler. He knows the piney woods better than any other townie does.”

“Why is that the case?”

“He’s spotted scads of UFOs flying in the night sky while he’s searched for them out there. For some cosmic reason, they’re attracted to the piney woods like the bees are drawn to flower pollen.”

“Am I supposed to rely on an old codger who chases flying saucers to solve Betsy’s murder? Thanks, but I say no thanks. I see no reason to wake up Willie from his nap on the wooden bench.”

Isabel felt a jab of irritation since Willie was her friend. “Then why are we speaking over the phone?” she asked.

“Isn’t it obvious? I want you and Alma to hump over here and tell me who killed Betsy Sweet, so I can make the arrest.”

“I see. Well, I won’t come unless we can bring Willie. He’s smart as a whip, and his knowledge of the piney woods is invaluable.”

“Okay, you can pick up Willie. Just make it snappy.”

“If Willie comes with us, then Ossie and Blue will feel insulted if they don’t also accompany us.”

“Why don’t you hire a tour bus, Isabel, and bring all the townies? We’ll charge them an admission and offer a free door prize.”

“Is sarcasm a new police technique used in homicide investigations I haven’t heard or read about?”

“Fine then, bring along Ossie and Blue.”

“I also want Petey Samson there.”

“Come on and get real. This is the active crime scene of a homicide, not an off-leash dog park.”

Isabel sighed. “Okay, I guess I can’t have everything.”

“I’ll let you and Alma access the crime scene, but the Three Musketeers will remain outside the yellow police line tape. How quickly can you get over here?”

“As soon as I round up the old gang, I’ll drive us straight to the piney woods,” Isabel replied.

“I’ll be looking for you,” Sheriff Fox said.

Chapter 13

“Sheriff Fox has tied up enough yellow police line tape to hold a maypole dance,” Willie said.

“He said he doesn’t want us to set foot in his precious crime scene,” Ossie said.

“I find his snub insulting,” Blue said. “He won’t get my vote in the next election. I only put up with his rudeness out of deference to Isabel and Alma.”

“Let’s not forget we all play for the same team,” Isabel said.

“I want to be traded,” Ossie said.

“What team would have you?” Blue asked.

“Fellows, real Musketeers play nice and don’t squabble among themselves,” Isabel said.

“We’ve always got your back, Isabel,” Ossie said.

“And I always appreciate it,” Isabel said. “You gentlemen are our rock down on Main Street.”

“Does that mean you and I will go out on our first dinner date?” Ossie asked.

“Pigs will fly first, Ossie,” Isabel replied.

He looked at Willie. “Have you seen any airborne swine while searching the skies for UFOs?” Ossie asked.

“Not so far,” Willie replied. “But modern science has done marvelous things with cloning, so there’s hope.”

Isabel pulled up into the small clearing. Sheriff Fox’s police cruiser flashed the red and blue glints from its roof bar light. The driver’s door stood ajar. Jumping out of the cruiser after stopping, he’d ignored shutting the door. Alma compared him to Chicken Little as he scurried around the crime scene to get it under control. His two most capable deputies kept a watchful eye on him the entire time.

“Roscoe reminds me of Chicken Little,” Alma said.

“He’s like Chicken Little with his head chopped off,” Willie said.

Alma chuckled.

“Gross,” Isabel said.

Sheriff Fox stalked toward them. His necktie was loosened, and he wore a service weapon.

“Everybody just be cool and let me do the talking,” Isabel said.

“I bet you don’t get a word in edgewise,” Alma said.

The Three Musketeers murmured their agreement.

“We can do without the usual repartee, and I expect you to act like a proper lady,” Isabel said.

“Hey, I can be sweet as blackberry pie,” Alma said.

“I see you finally made it,” Sheriff Fox said after the five passengers had gotten out of the car.

“I told you I had to get the Three Musketeers,” Isabel said.

“We don’t have a police siren and flashy lights to whip around town like you big shots get to do,” Alma said.

There goes the sweet as blackberry pie Alma, Isabel thought.

“But you’re here, and that’s what counts,” Sheriff Fox said.

“Have you secured the crime scene, Sheriff?” Willie asked in mock innocence as he let his gaze take in the miles of strung up yellow police line tape. It fenced in a rectangular area with a loblolly pine towering over the center point.

“As you can observe, I’ve got things well in hand,” Sheriff Fox said. “There are a few ground rules to go over with you. Foremost, I’m in charge. What I say goes, no questions asked.”

“Should we fall down on our knees and kowtow before kissing the ring?” Blue asked.

“Zing,” Ossie said. “Score one for Blue.”

Sheriff Fox ignored the Three Musketeers guffawing. “The physical remains lie on the far side of the loblolly pine,” Sheriff Fox said, his nod in its direction.

“Is one of the leg bones missing?” Alma asked. “If so, it’s a dead giveaway the skeleton belongs to Betsy Sweet.”

“I didn’t tally up the bones to see if they come up one short,” Sheriff Fox replied.

“But you said you recovered Betsy’s pocketbook,” Isabel said.

Sheriff Fox unbuttoned his shirt pocket, removed a small memo pad of his written notes, and licked his fingers to riffle through its pages to find the right one. With his palm upraised for quiet, he reviewed his scribbles.

Ossie, Blue, and Willie flared their eyes skyward in unison. Isabel gave them a warning frown. Sheriff Fox just wanted to make certain to dot all the i’s and cross all the t’s in the case.

“One stylish pocketbook, pastel blue in color, lay approximately seven inches from the decedent’s hand,” Sheriff Fox said.

“The decedent has a name,” Alma said. “She went by Betsy. Let’s refer to her that way.”

Sheriff Fox checked his memo pad. “Correct,” he said. “Her first name is Betsy.”

“Was Betsy’s cell phone in her pocketbook with her wallet and driver’s license?” Isabel asked.

Sheriff Fox consulted his handwritten notes. “No,” he replied.

“So, presumably the killer took her cell phone,” Isabel said. “Did you find any money tucked inside her wallet?”

“No,” Sheriff Fox replied while reading from the memo pad.

“I might be going out on a limb by asking this, Sheriff,” Willie said. “Have you considered theft as the possible motive for Betsy’s murder?”

Sheriff Fox checked his notes. “If that’s so, then why did I find Betsy’s high school class ring made of solid gold?” He smirked. Old age didn’t always bring wisdom. The town sheriff—him—was smarter.

“It beats me,” Willie said. “You’re the one wearing the sheriff’s star while I’m just a grizzled Musketeer.”

“You better tread more carefully,” Sheriff Fox said. “I recognize grizzled Musketeer sarcasm when I hear it.”

“Age has its privileges,” Willie said.

“Not here, it doesn’t,” Sheriff Fox said.

“The killer probably couldn’t remove the ring from her finger,” Isabel said.

“Where are the two boys who reported it?” Alma asked.

Sheriff Fox flipped to the next page his written notes. “After questioning Charles and Earl Roberts, I had Deputy Sheriff Bexley run them home to their parents.”

“They won’t be searching again in this neck of the woods for any old bottles and jugs anytime soon,” Alma said.

This time Sheriff Fox didn’t have to consult his notes. “The boys were pretty shook up. That’s about all I have to report.”

“You’re doing a fine job,” Isabel said.

Ossie tilted his head and gazed up into the sapphire blue sky. “Tell me something, Willie, since we’re out here anyway,” he said.

“What is it?” Willie asked, his tone right away defensive.

Blue did his best to stifle his snickers. Even Isabel and Alma exchanged smiles. They knew what kidding Ossie had in mind for Willie.

“I wonder if your UFOs fly over the piney woods during the daylight hours,” Ossie said. “You know, like right now, for instance?”

Sheriff Fox also scanned the sky for any sign of the UFOs. His palm rested on the grip to his holstered service weapon, ready to draw down and protect them if any extraterrestrial danger flew up.

Blue couldn't resist getting in his comedic licks. “Do the little, green men really come up and say ‘Take me to your leader.’?”

“You both think you're being so witty,” Willie said. “Skeptics I can abide. Smart alecks I cannot. You'd better watch out. One of these nights, the little, green men will be paying you a bedside visit, and your life will never be the same. Trust me on this.”

“If any little, green men ring my doorbell, I'll send them your way,” Ossie said.

“If they ask me for your cell phone number, Willie, should I give it out?” Blue asked.

“Oh, just shush you both,” Willie said.

“Ossie and Blue are teasing you,” Isabel said. “It's all in good, clean fun.”

“I suppose it is,” Willie said. “But enough already, okay?”

Ossie nodded. “Whatever you like is fine, Willie.”

“Isabel and Alma, you may pass through the police line tape,” Sheriff Fox said. “Meantime, you gentlemen will have to wait here. I don't want you bulls in a china shop traipsing through my crime scene. This review shouldn't take us long to complete.”

“No thanks,” Alma said.

“Huh?” Sheriff Fox said.

“The same goes for me,” Isabel said. “I prefer to remember Betsy Sweet as the spunky young lady she was in real life and not as the pile of bones found moldering over yonder.”

“Then why did you drive all the way out here if you weren't going to inspect the crime scene?” Sheriff Fox asked.

“You probably got that last part wrong,” Isabel replied. “We're not standing at the crime scene.”

“Why is that?” Sheriff Fox asked.

“Betsy wasn’t killed on this spot,” Isabel replied. “The killer dropped her off over there only after she’d died.”

“To use your cop jargon, she was a dump job,” Alma said.

“Are you one-hundred percent certain of it?” Sheriff Fox asked, scratching the note on his memo pad.

Isabel shrugged. “So far as we know, Betsy had no conceivable reason to be here. Did your search turn up the murder weapon?”

“Nothing like that has come to light,” Sheriff Fox replied. “However, I hasten to add we’re not finished with conducting our grid search of the area. We’re searching under every rock and inside every hollow tree trunk.”

Back to his good-natured devilment, Willie pulled something from out of his hip pocket. “Here you go, Sheriff. You can borrow this to use if you like to, but I’d like it back when you’re finished with it.”

He regarded the article Willie held. “Why are you offering me your hand comb?” Sheriff Fox asked.

“So you can use it to go over the crime scene with a fine-toothed comb,” Willie replied.

Averting their faces, Ossie and Blue tried to smother their chuckles.

“Willie, it’s time for you to leave with your fellow Musketeers,” Sheriff Fox said. “Murder is a solemn business, and your cornball jokes are not welcome here.”

Willie put away the hand comb in his rear pocket. “Lighten up a little, Sheriff,” he said. “Humor is what keeps us sane at a grim time like this.”

“Thanks, but I’ll get my laughs by watching the *Seinfeld* reruns,” Sheriff Fox said.

“You know how to reach us if anything else noteworthy develops,” Isabel said.

“Where might you be going now?” Sheriff Fox asked.

“Well, I for one could go for a tall glass of iced tea,” Isabel replied.

“Don’t forget the bear claws,” Alma said.

“What a capital idea,” Ossie said.

“Come on, Isabel,” Blue said, turning to lead the way back to the car. “We’ll leave the pile of moldy bones in Sheriff Fox’s care.”

“Thanks for coming,” Sheriff Fox said.

“Don’t mention it,” Alma said.

“It was so much fun,” Willie said, being sarcastic.

“We all play for the same team,” Isabel said.

“I still want to be traded,” Ossie said.

“What team would have you?” Blue asked with a grin.

“Be careful and don’t laugh or smile,” Willie said. “Sheriff Fox doesn’t want any humor used around his crime scene.”

“Maybe he should write down that rule in his little notebook,” Ossie said. “Or he might forget it.”

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Chapter 14

“How did Betsy’s leg bone wind up out here?” Alma asked.

“Everybody is as befuddled as we are about it,” Isabel replied.

“Do you care to hazard making a guess?”

“I might have an idea or two about it.”

The sisters had gathered to stand beside the flowerbed in the front yard, the starting place of their present conundrum. They’d returned from the piney woods, dropped off the Three Musketeers to resume their bench warming on Main Street, and arrived at the brick rambler. After feeding and watering Petey Samson, Isabel had poured each of them a tall glass of iced tea.

Alma had rustled up the bag of bear claws they ordered by the dozen from the new Dolly’s Bakery always smelling of fresh baguettes just taken from the oven. Isabel was more partial to chocolate éclairs, but only a natural born fool would ever turn down the offer of a bear claw. Following their refreshments, they’d filed out the door into the front yard to the flowerbed.

“I’ve been thinking about one of my ideas,” Isabel said. “Did somebody move Betsy’s leg bone from the rest of her skeleton in the piney woods and bury it here?”

Alma’s face lit up as she thought over. “It’s as if somebody took the bone and buried it here on purpose,” she replied.

“They knew we’d be putting in the marigolds they saw me buy in town, and we’d unearth the bone. The bone discovery would send us into a frenzy of sleuthing. We’d connect the bone to Betsy’s disappearance and suspect she’d died of foul play.”

“Phoning us to ask for help would be easier and less stressful than planting her bone like an iris bulb.”

“Suppose they wanted to alert us while at the same time protect their anonymity? Perhaps they think we stand a better chance at identifying Betsy’s killer than Sheriff Fox does.”

“Not to sound too cocky, but we do have a better track record than he does.”

“Let’s take it a step further. The anonymous somebody has to be familiar enough with us to know we’ve solved the previous cases.”

Alma toed a rose quartz pebble back into the flowerbed. “Who is the anonymous somebody? Just about every townie has heard of or read about us.”

“We know Charles and Earl Roberts are who discovered Betsy’s skeleton and reported it. Who else among the townies also regularly goes to the piney woods?”

Alma smiled. “It’s so obvious I missed it. Willie Moccasin goes out there to look at the UFOs.”

“While he was tramping through the piney woods, perhaps with a flashlight, Willie first came across the skeleton. Unlike young Charles and Earl, he’s seen dead bodies from his war service, and he didn’t panic. Instead, he was careful to leave no fingerprints while he checked Betsy’s pocketbook and her driver’s license kept in her wallet. He concluded somebody had killed her, so he followed what he saw as his best plan of action. He removed her leg bone and put it here for us to dig up later.”

“Unorthodox for sure but it worked like a charm since here we are looking into Betsy Sweet’s murder,” Alma said.

“Willie had good intentions even if he tampered with the evidence in a homicide.”

Alma nodded. “The important thing is to keep pressing ahead.”

Just then, a two-door compact car the turquoise shade of a flower vase slowed its pace on Church Street crawling by the sisters. They saw the car bore rental license plates from Florida. The lady driver braked at the intersection, turned around, and circled back. She parked and got out. Alma recognized the driver as she approached them.

“It’s Doris Sweet,” Alma said in a low voice to Isabel. “She must’ve gotten the bad word from Lotus and Rosie.”

“Then it hasn’t been a pleasant homecoming for her,” Isabel said.

“You know it, too. Doris looks rode hard and put up wet.”

“Shush now, Alma. Here she comes.”

“I’m just saying—”

“*Sh-h-h*. Don’t be rude. She’s our guest.”

“Hello, there,” the lady driver said with a cordial wave and nod. She used a Southern drawl heavier than the dialect spoken by the natives of rural Virginia. “I’m glad I caught you while out in the yard. Maybe I should say I think I’m glad I did. Are you Isabel and Alma, the Trumbo sisters?”

“You got us right,” Alma replied. “And are you Doris Sweet?”

“I am although I’m grayer and heavier than when I lived here with my family,” Doris replied.

“Hey, aren’t we all, Doris?” Alma said.

Doris had a dry laugh. “I drove straight up from Florida after I got the gut-wrenching news from my friend Lotus. My baby girl Betsy has returned to Quiet Anchorage in a manner of speaking.”

“Please accept our condolences for your personal loss,” Isabel said.

“Thank you,” Doris said. “You found Betsy’s leg bone is how I heard it.”

Isabel nodded at the flowerbed “We think so. Alma dug it up from right there. We’d been out flower gardening before the sun rose too high. At first, we didn’t know what it was, and I speculated if it came from a dinosaur.”

“Had you dug up other dinosaur bones and fossils from your flowerbed?” Doris asked.

Alma didn’t like Doris’ sarcasm.

“If Betsy was murdered, nobody in this town feels as earnest as we do about finding her killer,” Alma said.

“I heard all about you,” Doris said. “The three old codgers on the wooden bench by the flower shop shower you with praise. Isabel and Alma are Sherlock Holmes’ smarter, older sisters, Blue Trent says. They’re the Snoop Sisters of Quiet Anchorage, Willie Moccasin says. They’re more curious and persistent than the Mars rover, Ossie Conger says.”

“We can understand how upset you must feel about this,” Isabel said with disarming ease. “I know it sounds a little ghoulish, but I assure you we treated Betsy’s bone with nothing but respect. Moreover, we only want to find out the truth of what happened to her and nothing more.”

“It’s unfair to vent my frustration and anger on you. I know you’re trying to help me, and I have to apologize for my rude behavior.” Doris drew in a breath and pulled back her shoulders. She brushed the blonde-gray hair away from her bloodshot eyes tearing up at the corners. “I should’ve stopped off at a motel, taken a shower, and gotten a little sleep. Let me tell you it’s a long, mean stretch of interstate pavement between here and where I now call home.”

“It’s a sensible idea now that you’re arrived,” Isabel said. “You should find using one of the chain motels on the bypass satisfactory.”

“I drove by them coming in,” Doris said. “Is there any decent place to eat in town now?”

“Be sure to give Eddy’s Deli a try,” Isabel replied. “Mention to Tabitha we sent you, and she’ll treat you right.”

“I remember Tabitha,” Doris said. “Nice girl.”

“She’s one of our favorite people,” Alma said.

“We’ll meet after while and talk again about Betsy,” Isabel said.

“She was a good kid with a full life ahead of her,” Doris said. “I don’t care what the townies say. She wasn’t a tramp who slept around. I don’t know who started that nasty rumor or why.”

“Alma and I put no stock in any gossip that comes our way,” Isabel said.

“That’s a refreshing change to hear,” Doris said. “The public scandal forced us to move after Betsy vanished. The gossipy townies cast her as a bad girl we didn’t raise the right way. What the H did any of them know about it? Russell and I did our best. We attended church every Sunday. If things got tight, we made do, or we did without plenty of times, too. We never took a single handout or accepted a dime of charity. But the mouths still ran, and we drew lots of dirty looks, and it was all too much for us.”

Alma jutted out her chin. “Nobody tells a Trumbo sister what or how to think. Am I right, Isabel?”

“Righter than rain,” Isabel replied. “We never passed judgment on Betsy. End of story.”

“You solving her murder should help to clear her name,” Doris said. “I’d love to make the gossipy townies eat crow, and Betsy can finally rest in peace.”

“You also deserve some peace of mind,” Isabel said.

“Wouldn’t that be so wonderful?” Doris said. “When Lotus phoned, I was sorely tempted to stay in Florida because I feel so angry about my last days spent in Quiet Anchorage. However, Betsy was my only child, and I wasn’t going to pass up the chance to see she got her due justice.”

“Go ahead and get settled in your motel room,” Alma said.

“You’ve given me more hope than I came here with,” Doris said. “After I get it together, I’ll call you. Do you have a business card?”

“We still have the landline phone that’s listed in the book,” Alma replied.

After giving them a tired wave, Doris returned to her rental car and left.

“Seeing Doris in that terrible shape is sad,” Alma said.

“She’ll look and feel better after she gets some rest,” Isabel said.

“The stakes for us to solve Betsy’s murder just grew,” Alma said.

“Her grieving mother has returned, and she’s looking at us to come through for her.”

“We won’t let Doris or Betsy down,” Isabel said. “I think we do our best sleuthwork while under pressure.”

Chapter 15

On Saturday morning, the approaching train whistle, deep-throated and piercing, cut loose well before the train clattered through the railroad crossing at the far end of Main Street. The trains' comings and goings were a regular occurrence, and the townies never gave them much thought. A few of the townies, Isabel one of the most passionate, still felt a spark of joy leap up in their hearts at the rumble of the oncoming trains.

The night trains shrilling out their whistles nudged her awake. She smiled, and once the locomotive noise faded away to quiet, she fell straight back to sleep and dreamed of riding on the passenger trains. They hadn't made any stops where the Quiet Anchorage depot had once stood in decades, and they nowadays flew right by the town.

"Are you sitting over there gathering wool?" Alma asked.

"I was indulging a bout of train nostalgia," Isabel replied. "We should book a trip on a passenger train before they stop running."

"Where might we go on our train journey?"

"What difference does the destination make? Riding on the train and savoring every minute of it is what I'm talking about."

"All aboard the Quiet Anchorage Express, and away we go," Alma said.

She drove the car across the tracks after the caboose clattered by them, and the crossing gate lifted. As she got older, she didn't share much of Isabel's train enthusiasm. Alma couldn't begin to count the nights the deafening train whistle had jolted her out of a restful sleep. The *clickety-darn-clack, clickety-darn-clack* of the steel wheels over the steel rails kept her awake.

Fed up with tossing and turning in bed, Alma flipped on the nightstand lamp, fluffed the pillow to sit upright, and read her current mystery until she grew drowsy. If she didn't feel sleepy again, she read on until the first red streaks of dawn appeared. Snoring away, Petey Samson lay sprawled out beside her. The train whistles didn't bother him. He was probably dreaming of the boxcars filled with pork chops and doggie treats.

Alma had a question. "Where do you think Betsy first died?"

"I've been mulling over that part, too," Isabel replied. "Maybe her dead body wasn't brought and left under the loblolly pine. Maybe instead

she drove out to the clearing where she met Chad. An argument broke out between them, it got out of hand, and murder was the grisly outcome.”

Alma nodded. “We haven’t heard a peep from Doris Sweet.”

“She’ll be calling us soon. Give her a little more time.” Isabel gnawed on her inner cheek before she brought up her new concern. “She told us something yesterday I find disturbing. Is Quiet Anchorage the hornets’ nest of gossip as she portrays it?”

“Our small town is no better or worse than any other small town. Maybe it was largely her perception the townies whispered behind her back.”

“That might be true. She’ll give us the details about the last morning she saw Betsy alive. For now, we’ll turn our attention to getting the lowdown from her boyfriend.”

“I can’t wait to hear what Troy Raft has to say for himself.”

“Bear in mind Tabitha’s warning he can be surly and unpleasant.”

“We’ve dealt with his unsavory type before,” Alma said. “Sammi Jo and Sheriff Fox are on my speed dial.”

“Valerie should also be there sleeping since she waits tables at the truck stop on the night shift,” Isabel said.

“You ladies are our local celebrities,” Troy Raft said to Isabel and Alma. “I saw your pictures run in the newspaper. You solved a murder that was giving our boob of a sheriff fits. Should I be asking you for your autographs?”

“That case happened some time ago,” Isabel said.

“A funny hobby for a pair of spinsters is what my old man said. Hank could always look through the smoke and see things for what they really are.” Troy laughed, his wheezes coming from his sunken chest.

“We spinsters take it more seriously than a hobby,” Alma said. “You can pass the fact along to Hank.”

“I’ll be sure to tell him if I ever see him again,” Troy said. “Didn’t I also read where Sammi Jo Garner is your sidekick?”

“Yes, she works closely with us,” Alma replied. “Do you know her?”

“I do from going to high school with her, and I’ve got to say she scares me,” Troy replied.

“Sammi Jo doesn’t suffer fools gladly,” Alma said. “Now that we know each other a little better, let’s get down to brass tacks.”

“You brought me a few questions,” he said.

“Did you take the day off from your job?” Isabel asked.

“I’ve been between prospects for the past few months because the economy is in the pits,” he replied. “Hank cut out with a woman who is as young as I am. The last I heard was they’re living in Sausalito and running a franchise motel. I wonder how that’s working out for them. Anyhow, Mom waits tables at the truck stop on the bypass, but she can’t get enough hours a week for the medical insurance. We keep our fingers crossed we don’t get sick or injured, or things will get sticky.”

“We’re sorry to hear about your troubles,” Alma said. “Is Valerie working at the truck stop?”

“She’s inside sleeping right now,” Troy replied. “So, let’s keep it down for her sake.”

“We’re looking into Betsy Sweet’s disappearance,” Alma said. “A new development has arisen.”

“You found her leg bone in your flowerbed,” Troy said. “Mom told me about it after getting home from her shift.”

“Sheriff Fox has recovered the rest of Betsy’s physical remains,” Isabel said.

“He assures us a positive identification will be made from her DNA and dental records,” Alma said.

“Whereabouts did he recover her skeleton?” Troy asked.

“She was buried in a shallow grave under a big loblolly pine in the piney woods,” Alma replied, watching him closely. “Do you have a need to be out there?”

“Heck no, not me,” Troy replied.

Isabel also took measure of the tall, lanky young man seated at the picnic table under the shade of the umbrella-shaped chinaberry tree. She observed the beaten-up chainsaw on top of the picnic table was one of the cordless electric models that Blaine sold at the hardware store. Somebody (Hank Raft?) with a lot more get-up-and-go than Troy had last put the chainsaw to good use.

“Tell us about the last time you saw Betsy,” Alma said. “When did it occur? Was she in an upbeat or downbeat mood? Did she drop hints about any trouble she was having at work or home?”

“First things first because I’m in dire need of a drink.” He put on an oily smile. “You see, it works like a memory aid for me.”

“Give us what you’ve got, and if we think it passes the litmus test for the truth, there’s ten dollars in it for you,” Isabel said.

“Double that amount, and you’ve got a deal,” he said.

“The terms are non-negotiable, Mr. Raft,” Isabel said. “That’s our best and final offer. Take it or leave it. Alma and I will turn around and drive away over ten dollars.”

“Then you won’t get to hear what I’ve got to say about Sweet Betsy,” he said.

Isabel had put up with enough of his impertinence, as her mother Gwendolyn would’ve called his smug attitude. “When Sheriff Fox comes out with his deputy sheriffs, are you going to ask them for money?” Isabel asked. “If we leave without getting straight answers, they’ll be coming and asking you the same set of questions as ours.”

Troy shrugged, giving them an aw-shucks grin. “I had to take a shot at trying my luck.”

“You did and it missed,” Isabel said. “I’ll repeat Alma’s question. When and where did you last see Betsy? Don’t be calling her Sweet Betsy either. We don’t like that name. She was a fine young lady with loved ones still grieving after her murder.”

“Did you just say murder?” He was no longer grinning.

“That’s right: murder,” Isabel replied. “Somebody took the life of Betsy Sweet, and we’re interested in knowing who it is. Obviously, that’s why you find us here asking you our questions.”

“Look, I did not kill Betsy Sweet,” he said. “If you’re trying to pin her murder on me, I’m not going to take it lying down.”

“You could go a long ways to convincing us by taking our questions,” Alma said.

“Since you want so badly to know the real Betsy, I’ll give you the inside skinny,” he said. “Just as there are two sides to every coin, there were also two different sides to her. She had the private side Betsy, and she had the public side Betsy. It was bad girl and good girl if you prefer to see it that way.”

“Troy, you’re not telling us anything we don’t already know,” Alma said. “It was a couple of generations before your time, but Isabel and I were once teenage girls. The only thing we’d like to know from you is the where and when you last had any contact with Betsy.”

“We had a date the night before she went missing,” he said. “I took her roller skating at the old Warrenton rink. She’d wanted to go for weeks, and she bugged me until I finally broke down and took us in my old man’s car.”

“Did she have fun while you went roller skating?” Isabel asked. “Was she happy that night?”

“We usually had a fun time if I went along on the trip,” he replied.

Alma rolled her eyes for both her and Isabel.

“Who covered your admission into the skating rink?” Isabel asked.

“Betsy had the idea, so she paid for it,” he replied. “I was having cash flow problems.”

Big surprise there, Alma thought.

“Did she frequently pick up the tab?” Isabel asked.

“I thought you only wanted to ask me a few questions,” he said.

“Well, I’ve taken care of answering them. Where’s my money? We had a deal. Pay up.”

“These follow-on questions are inevitable,” Isabel said. “Humor us and we’ll pay up and be out of your hair that much sooner.”

“Betsy had the money from the allowance her parents gave her,” he said. “I was our driver.”

Since Isabel had a little momentum, she decided to tackle asking the harder questions. “Rumor had it Betsy was fooling around with Chad Jones. I’m sure it must’ve come up during your conversations.”

“It only did the one time,” he replied.

“I find that odd to say the least,” Isabel said.

He shrugged. “Odd or not, that’s how it was between Betsy and me.”

“Were you upset when she went missing?” Isabel asked.

“Well, I wasn’t too thrilled by it happening,” Troy replied.

Isabel lifted an eyebrow at Alma. She took over running the interview, but she wasn’t hopeful she’d have any better success with doing it than Isabel had had.

“Was she seeing Chad while she was dating you?” Alma asked.

“I don’t know for flat-out certain,” Troy replied. “When I asked Betsy about it, she said she had old enemies from high school who had it in for her. They were the ones putting out the nasty rumors.”

“Chad swears up and down their affair never happened,” Alma said.

“If I were in his shoes, I’d claim the same thing,” Troy said. “If Esther found the evidence of his cheating on her, she’d nail his no-account hide to the barn door. No smart man ever crosses a hard woman like Esther Jones. Or if he does, he makes double sure he covers his tracks so she never catches him.” He stopped. “Are we about finished? My throat is getting bone dry, and I’ve given you everything I’ve got worth knowing.”

“Did you ever love Betsy Sweet?” Isabel asked him point-blank.

“She and I had very different ideas about us and what the future held,” he replied.

“Do you care to elaborate on that response?” Isabel asked.

“I’m a good-time Charlie who freely admits I’m after only that: a good time,” Troy replied. “Betsy thought the opposite and took things a lot more seriously than I did. She was making noises about marriage and family, but I never shared her cozy dreams. Take a look at me. Do I come within a country mile of being a family man? No good-time Charlie wants that millstone hanging around his neck, or the good times stop rolling. Is it so wrong for me to feel that way?”

“We’re not here to make any judgments,” Alma replied. “Our sole aim is to get at the truth behind what happened to Betsy. Somebody killed her and buried her out in the piney woods. Who was it?”

“All I know is it wasn’t me,” he replied. “I’ll swear to it until my dying breath.”

“Why didn’t you end your relationship with her if you didn’t agree with her life goals?” Isabel asked. “I should think a good-time Charlie would do better when paired with a lady who wanted similar things.”

“I already told you why,” he replied. “I’d no money, and she did.”

“In other words, she was your meal ticket,” Isabel said.

“Yeah, that and she was fun to be around at least most of the time,” he said.

“But she isn’t around now,” Alma said. “You had to find a new meal ticket to replace her.”

“I never found anybody who could take the place of Betsy Sweet,” Troy said. “She was one of a kind.”

“You don’t have to tell us that,” Alma said.

“You probably don’t appreciate hearing free advice from a young man like me, but I’ll put it out there anyhow,” Troy said. “Let Sheriff Fox do his job and stop your meddling like you’re doing now.”

“Evidently, you don’t know us very well,” Isabel said.

“You’re barking up the wrong tree here,” he said. “I’m a good-time Charlie and not a cold-blooded murderer.”

“We haven’t forgotten your claim,” Alma said.

He made an “ahem” noise, a reminder of the outstanding debt they still owed him.

Alma opened her pocketbook, fished out her wallet, and peeled out a ten-spot from it. “This payment fulfills our part of our bargain,” she said. “Now let me give you a little free advice.”

“What might that be?” he asked as he accepted the ten-spot and tucked it into his sock.

“Get cleaned up and go find a job,” Alma replied.

“You sound like my mother who is always nagging me about it,” he said.

“You should’ve learned by now that mother knows best,” Alma said. “Tell Valerie we said hey when she wakes up to return to her next work shift.”

Chapter 16

Sammi Jo flopped down on the sofa, kicked off her shoes, and rubbed her tired feet. As Isabel and Alma did to beat the heat, Sammi Jo had filled a tall glass to the brim with iced tea, no lemon or sugar. She pressed the cold glass against her sweaty forehead. “*A-h-h-h*,” she said. Sipping iced tea was a timeless Southern custom destined to last for as long as watching NASCAR, pitching horseshoes, and eating grits did.

She’d already checked to see Betsy Sweet had no Facebook page or other online presence. Not everybody did. Sammi Jo located her high school yearbook stuffed under the chamomile-colored sofa cushion. Since her yearbook had been a useful reference on past mysteries, she decided to use it again. Betsy had been a senior when Sammi Jo entered the tenth grade. She hoped poring over their old yearbook photos would jog her memory, and a new and useful detail about Betsy would come to the fore.

Sammi Jo flipped past the pages where her friends had signed her yearbook. Many of them had included the “never change” phrase in their comments, and she only hoped she’d changed a lot in her life since she was in the tenth grade. HATS (“Have A Terrific Summer!”) was a popular acronym used beside the hand-drawn smiley faces. She could never get into the smiley faces. *Too cutesy*, she thought.

Betsy hadn’t taken a flattering senior portrait. Her bad hair day (the frizzies) and scant makeup (no eyeliner) accentuated the brooding glower she trained on the camera lens. Something had angered or upset her. Had she just had a fight with Troy?

Sammi Jo skipped over the page showing her portrait. Nobody could make her crack a smile, not even when the bow-tied photographer told her to “say cheese.” However, she didn’t aspire to be a Hollywood celeb or a runway model. She noted Betsy had stayed busy with extracurricular activities while Sammi Jo had worked in an office when she wasn’t in class.

Betsy had gone to cheer camp, and Sammi Jo couldn’t imagine Betsy having anything but fun while she was there. The Spanish Club had appealed to her while Sammi Jo got by with speaking English. Overall, Betsy appeared to be a bright student with perhaps a streak of bad girl in her, as Cal had noted at the self-storage rental facility.

While Sammi Jo riffled through the yearbook pages one final time, she did a little imagining where she played Betsy Sweet leaving her

parents' house for her office job in Warrenton that fateful morning. She hadn't driven very far as demonstrated by her skeleton just recovered in the piney woods. What tumultuous thoughts had been going through her mind?

Had Betsy checked her rearview mirrors for any signs of danger? Had a creep stalked or followed her? Had she panicked and floored the gas pedal? Was she on her way to keep a private rendezvous? Suppose Betsy had decided to call off her fling with a married man like Chad she could see was going nowhere fast. Suppose he'd balked. Suppose they'd argued, exchanging harsh words leading to violence and murder. Or suppose Betsy had instead met Troy Raft. They could've argued about one of a half-dozen things, and only Betsy's murder could end it.

Feeling a bit disappointed, Sammi Jo put away her yearbook. She'd found out nothing worthwhile about Betsy Sweet, or why she'd been murdered three years ago. She certainly hadn't had a terrific summer. Sammi Jo was ready for a refill from the pitcher of iced tea she kept in the fridge.

Sammi Jo bounded downstairs and cut through the rear entrance into the drugstore. Eustis wore his marshmallow white smock as he used a broom to sweep the tile floor. While he was at it, he could tidy up her apartment. He probably would, too, if she asked him nicely. She just greeted him, and he stopped to lean on the broom handle.

"How goes the war, Sammi Jo?" he asked.

"Which one?" she replied.

"I mean your looking into Betsy Sweet's murder."

"There's not much in the way of progress to report, but we're still going at it. I was just looking through my yearbook about her."

"And...?"

"I saw that she was a busy student, and she took a lousy picture like I do."

"Did you go see her crime scene out in the piney woods with the others?"

"I didn't personally go with them. My day job keeps interfering with my sleuthing time. I didn't miss out on much if Isabel and Alma went since no important detail ever slips by them."

"Don't sell yourself so short, Sammi Jo. You're no slouch as a sleuth."

“Keep it coming, Eustis. I always appreciate hearing your flattery.”

Eustis laughed with her. “I met Betsy’s mother Doris who’s been making the rounds and talking to the townies,” he said.

“Alma told me Doris was back from Florida. How is she faring?”

“She’s doing as well as can be expected, and I have to say I like her. She’s personable and down to earth.”

“No kidding. I always thought she was a little stuck up.”

“Then I guess she’s changed. She said she won’t rest until she finds out what happened to Betsy. I feel sorry for Doris, and what she must be going through right now.”

Sammi Jo nodded. “Do you think Doris could’ve murdered her daughter Betsy and wants to make sure nobody finds out? Is that the actual reason why she returned to Quiet Anchorage, and why she’s speaking to all the townies?”

“Goodness no, I’d never wonder such a horrible thing,” Eustis said, looking aghast. “How could you suspect of her doing something that monstrous?”

“The murder victim’s family members are the first suspects to investigate and clear.”

“Don’t go down that rabbit hole, Sammi Jo. You’re wasting your time while you could be finding the real killer.”

“Did you hear Willie fessed up to planting Betsy’s leg bone in Isabel and Alma’s flowerbed?”

“I got the word. He should’ve reported finding the skeleton to the sheriff.”

“Ordinarily, I’d agree, but our town sheriff is a do-nothing buffoon.”

“Ouch. Tell us what you really think, Sammi Jo.”

“You know me, Eustis. I always tell it like it is.”

“Your refreshing candor is just a part of your considerable feminine charm.”

“Are you buttering me up to nick for a favor?”

“Well, since you want to know, I’ll come right out with asking it. Will you marry me?”

She knew he was teasing her. “Eustis, if I weren’t already happily taken I might say yes and accept your proposal,” she said.

Eustis smiled. “I’m going to hold you to that if you and Reynolds ever part ways.”

“You’re just a glib-talking Don Juan in your nerdy white lab coat.” Eustis laughed. “I’m delighted to know you finally noticed me,” he said.

She picked up the dustpan lying on top of the counter stool and handed it to him. He crouched down and used his broom to sweep the pile of trash into the dustpan.

“Who have you developed as your murder suspects?” Eustis asked.

“Talk about your coincidences,” Sammi Jo replied. “I see one of our murder suspects is walking across Main Street this way.”

“Is it Chad? The last time he was in here, things turned hostile.” Eustis emptied the dustpan contents into the wastebasket.

“You’re close, but this time it’s his better half Esther.”

“Is she breathing fire and smoke like a dragon? She’s a worse hothead than he is.”

“Relax, Eustis. I’ve got your back if she tries any rough stuff.”

“Let’s try and be nice to her. I’ve got my drugstore to run and my bills to pay.”

The drugstore door swung wide to admit the lady who stood a half-head shorter than Sammi Jo. Esther’s pageboy hairstyle included long bangs, and her jet-black hair matched her eyes. They darted about, taking in everything. Esther came smartly dressed in snug black jeans with a sleeveless cranberry red top. Being so near a possible killer left Sammi Jo wary, and she realized for the first time she didn’t like Esther.

“Is my prescription refill ready for pick up?” Esther asked. She spoke in a clipped cadence that went perfectly with her flinty personality. “I phoned it in to you yesterday.”

“Yes, I filled it straight away this morning,” Eustis replied. He rang up her medicine, and she paid him for it.

“How’s Reynolds getting along, Sammi Jo?” Esther asked.

“He’s ornery and mule-headed, as ever,” Sammi Jo replied.

“I haven’t seen him light up lately,” Esther said. “Did he kick the bad habit?”

“Yeah, he did after I gave him a choice,” Sammi Jo replied. “It was either nicotine or nookie but not both. He’s no dummy when he made his decision.”

“Men, I swear.” Esther shook her head. “They’re so predictable.”

“Usually, that’s true, but there are notable exceptions,” Sammi Jo said. “Take Eustis here. From all outward appearances, he’s our mild-mannered, self-effacing town pharmacist dispensing pills, but he’s also a thrill-seeker wrapped in a daredevil that few realize about him.”

“Is that a fact?” Esther regarded him in a new light. “What sort of extreme adventures rock your world, Eustis?”

“Sammi Jo is telling my story, so I’ll let her fill you in on it,” Eustis replied.

“He’s up for just about anything you can throw at him,” Sammi Jo said. “Bungee jumping, flying paragliders, and white water kayaking are his daring ideas of weekend entertainment. He’s even been up skydiving several times.”

Eustis stayed quiet about Sammi Jo’s colossal exaggerations. The private detective instincts in him figured she was angling her remarks to get some kind of reaction out of Esther.

“I should’ve married Eustis instead of Chad,” Esther said. “He’s turned dull as the stuffed animals in his taxidermy studio. I can’t get him to do anything fun with me anymore.”

“There goes his reputation as the dashing man about town,” Sammi Jo said.

“You must refer to his reputation before we met and got married,” Esther said. “After we did, he knew he’d better walk the straight and narrow.”

“Did he now?” Sammi Jo paused as if she were conjuring up something from memory. “Correct me if I’m mistaken, but wasn’t he rumored to be involved with Betsy Sweet?”

“He most certainly was not seeing her,” the indignant Esther replied.

“So then, you and Betsy were always cool with each other,” Sammi Jo said. “You never got into any arguments or fights with her over Chad.”

“I didn’t know Betsy Sweet except by face and name,” Esther said. “We only spoke to say hello and little more than that. Chad stays faithful to me. If he ever steps out of line, he knows I’ll lower the boom on him.”

“Do you get into physical altercations with Chad?” Sammi Jo asked.

“We have our differences, but nobody has ever called the cops on us,” Esther replied.

“But they would have to call the cops if you caught Chad messing around, and you lowered the boom on him,” Sammi Jo said.

“I wouldn’t put up with it anymore than you would if Reynolds cheated on you,” Esther said.

“Fair enough,” Sammi Jo said. “But I’d just break up with him rather than lower the boom on him.”

“Being married is a different situation, Sammi Jo,” Esther said. “You’ve got a lot more time and sweat invested in it as you’ll come to understand some day all too soon. I sure wouldn’t throw in the towel, walk away, and file for a divorce.”

“Would you think he was still worth keeping and salvaging your marriage over?” Sammi Jo asked.

“Let me put it this way,” Esther replied. “I’d never let a young chippie like Betsy Sweet flutter along and wreck our marriage we’ve struggled so long and hard to build it.”

Sammi Jo glanced at Eustis who gave her a single eye flick as she wondered just how far the volatile Esther would go to stop the “young chippie” Betsy from wrecking the Joneses’ marriage.

“Do you know anything about her vanishing?” Sammi Jo asked.

“No more than what I read about in the same newspapers you saw,” Esther replied. “Naturally, if we knew anything, Chad and I would’ve contacted Sheriff Fox about it.” She flipped her long bangs from out of her eyes. “Are we finished with discussing my personal business?” she asked.

“Nobody forced you to stay and talk to us,” Sammi Jo replied. “You started the conversation with me.”

“Then pass along what I said about Chad never cheating on me, especially with Betsy Sweet,” Esther said. “Maybe the gossip townies will decide to move on and rake somebody else over their hot coals.”

“You better grow a thicker and tougher hide,” Sammi Jo said. “I’ve gotten so I don’t give three toots in the hot place below what any townie thinks or says about me.”

“Thanks for your free advice,” Esther said. “I’m sure it’s worth every penny.”

She snatched up the paper bag with her prescription in it, turned on her heels, and shoved her way out the drugstore door.

Eustis looked at Sammi Jo. “What just happened in here?” he asked.

“Esther told us she and Chad are innocent as the driven snow and didn’t murder Betsy Sweet,” Sammi Jo replied. “Do you believe any of what she said?”

“Frankly, I believe there’s some truth behind the rumor Betsy and Chad had the affair.”

“Did either or both of them murder Betsy over the affair?”

“I’m not willing to make the call on that question. You’ve got some more detective work to do first.”

“Then my next step is to update Isabel and Alma.”

“Don’t forget I keep my lucky fedora hanging on the hat rack in my office.”

“We haven’t forgotten about you. We may call on your private eye services anytime now, so keep your lucky fedora handy just in case we do.”

“Should I purchase a handgun, too?” Eustis asked.

“Just stick with the fedora,” Sammi Jo said. “I already have the handgun covered.”

Chapter 17

“I’ll never forget that morning for as long as I live,” Doris said, her low voice husky with emotion. She was under so much strain her hands were shaking. Grief from over her daughter Betsy’s murder had etched the new craggy lines mapping Doris’ face.

“Of course you won’t forget it,” Alma said.

Isabel nodded once.

The three ladies had gotten together to meet at Eddy’s Deli. They sat at the sisters’ customary window booth letting in the loads of sunlight. They had the deli to themselves after the only other patron squared his tab, took a couple of the complimentary toothpicks, and shuffled out the door.

“Do you know what the saddest part is?” Doris asked.

“Betsy and you said you loved each other before she walked out the front door,” Isabel replied.

“That’s it on the button,” Doris said, surprise flashing in her eyes. “How did you know that?”

“Don’t forget I was also once a mother, and I remember the important family things,” Isabel replied.

“Your son was Cedric,” Doris said.

“Cecil was his name,” Isabel said. “Can we assume Betsy would’ve confided in you if something major had been troubling her?”

“We had a fairly open relationship,” Doris replied. “So, yes, she would’ve come to talk to me if there was major trouble in her life.”

“Doris, please be candid with us,” Isabel said. “It’s important to establish the truth. Was Betsy having the rumored affair with Chad Jones?”

Doris winced, the question that painful. “At the time, I refused to believe she was seeing him, but later I didn’t feel as strongly about it. Sometimes Betsy’s passions clouded her good judgment. At any rate, she knew it was wrong if she did, but she’d cut the apron strings, and I had to let go of my little girl who’d grown up.”

“She was still living at home with you and Russell,” Isabel said.

“She was looking to buy her own small place,” Doris said. “She helped out on the groceries and paid us a nominal rent.”

“What can you tell us about her boyfriend Troy Raft?” Isabel asked. “Did you like him?”

“Troy is a piece of work,” Doris replied. “He has a sleazy charm to go with a laid-back demeanor that Betsy found irresistible. But he’s bad news.”

“He’s bad news in what way?” Isabel asked.

“Where do I even start?” Doris replied. “He’s always broke, and Betsy was paying their way everywhere they went. That really frosted my pumpkin. I tried to talk to Betsy about it, but she refused to hear me criticize him, and it became a sore sticking point. Has Troy gotten a nine-to-five job since I moved away?”

“He’s still allergic to gainful employment,” Alma replied. “We expect it will remain a lifetime condition with little or no cure.”

“Did you hear Blaine Matthiessen fired Troy for stealing money from the cash register?” Doris asked.

“Blaine told us about it,” Isabel replied.

“Valerie paid Blaine back, and he never made any waves,” Doris said. “I wished he’d gone ahead and filed the criminal charges. Maybe Troy’s arrest and trial would’ve opened Betsy’s eyes to his faults.” Doris paused for a breath. “She could’ve done so much better, but she’d fallen crazy head-over-heels in love with the boy, so she followed her heart while it broke mine.”

“Did she hold out the hope she could reform him?” Isabel asked.

Doris nodded once. “I believe you might be right about that. When the world is your oyster, anything, even the far-fetched stuff, seems within your grasp.”

“We’ve all been there as starry-eyed teenagers,” Isabel said. “Why did she have the affair with Chad Jones if she was so nuts about Troy?”

“Her affair with Chad is only alleged,” Doris replied.

“But assuming she did have it, would she also be seeing Troy at the same time?” Isabel asked.

“Maybe she would if she wanted to find a way to make Troy jealous and pay closer attention to her,” Doris replied. “He was never in love with her like she was with him. It was clear from the get-go to almost everybody except her. Or perhaps she understood it but couldn’t bring herself to accept it.”

“Or maybe she was in the process of accepting it, and their breakup was inevitable,” Isabel said.

She glanced at Alma who hadn’t asked any questions. She used her fingertip to pick up the crumbs on the napkin spilled from the bear claw

she'd eaten. She was finding it difficult to follow the conversation because her eyes kept gravitating to the pastry display case. Eating the one bear claw was never enough. Closing her eyes didn't help sharpen her concentration since she just pictured the delicious bear claws.

"Alma, surely you can't be ready for another bear claw," Isabel said.

"It's been more than a fleeting thought," Alma said.

"If I can't play Scrabble before Betsy's case is finished, then you can't have seconds on the bear claws," Isabel said.

"I wouldn't refuse another bear claw if it was offered to me," Doris said.

"No, Isabel is right on the money," Alma said. "We pledged to get the truth behind Betsy's murder, and I can't slack off until then."

"How did Betsy get along with her father?" Isabel asked.

"Russell is the one who first called her Sweet Betsy," Doris replied. "She was daddy's girl, and he never got over her disappearance. At first, he turned blue and mopey, but then he grew despondent and withdrawn. He no longer cracked his jokes or laughed all that much. Before long, I lived with the empty hull of the man I'd married. We—or I should say I—hoped the change in scenery would give us a chance at making a fresh start.

"We sold the rose-colored stucco, pulled up stakes, and moved south to Florida. Russell had family living and working down there so he could hire on with the construction boom. In 20/20 hindsight, I can see how delusional I was with my optimism, but I was desperate to keep our marriage together after we lost Betsy, and he was all I had left. I would've tried anything short of dying to save it."

"I'm sorry I feel compelled to ask this, but was Russell's death a suicide?" Isabel asked.

"Russell took one false step and tumbled off of an I-beam seven stories high and landed headlong on a concrete pad," Doris replied. "It was a clear, still day with a sky as blue as today's sky. He'd always been surefooted as a puma walking on the high steel, and he tied off with a safety harness. That day he did neither. You tell me whether his fall was accidental or intentional."

"Given the two choices, I'd say it was an accident," Isabel replied.

"It's a pity our life insurance company didn't rule it the same way," Doris said. "Well, it's too late for shedding anymore tears, and I've cried them all out. If he'd reached way down and found the grit to hang in there,

he'd be sitting here with me. But as things stand, I'm left to pick up the pieces and go on alone."

"And you're doing a fine job of it," Isabel said.

She glanced at Alma no longer distracted by the bear claws. She was looking at the distraught features—teary eyes, taut lips, and knotted jaws—to Doris' face.

"Do you remember what happened that last morning?" Alma asked.

"Betsy got up a little earlier than usual," Doris replied. "I fixed her eggs—scrambled because she didn't like them fried sunny-side up with the yolk runny—and set down the plate on her placemat. She smiled in the chipper way she always did, but there was something troubling I saw in her face."

Alma hiked up an eyebrow. "What was it, Doris?"

"Her blue eyes didn't sparkle like they usually did," Doris replied. "Looking closer, I sensed she was anxious. She tried to cover it up with a laugh phony as a three-dollar bill, and I just wrote it off as a work-related problem. She was a clever, quick girl, so I figured she'd get it straightened out in short order."

Doris paused as if to steady her composure. Alma felt as if she should be taking notes since Doris was giving them so many personal details. Perhaps she'd been keeping it pent up, and she felt ready to talk at length to somebody in Quiet Anchorage like Isabel and Alma.

"Don't stop there," Isabel told Doris. "Give us the rest of your story."

"Next thing Russell came into the kitchen, and he didn't act like he thought anything was bothering Betsy. He made a joke about how late she was staying out at night, and she tried to laugh it off. However, as I said, her laugh sounded strained and flat. He asked her if her employer—she had a desk job at the concrete plant just outside of Warrenton—had any positions open that Troy could apply for, but there were none."

"Did Russell get along with Troy?" Isabel asked.

"Russell always thought Troy needed a haircut and shave," Doris replied. "We hoped he'd drop Betsy when he was ready to move on to his next conquest. You know how the good-time Charlies do. Love 'em and leave 'em."

"Been there done that not once but twice," Alma said.

"Holy mackerel," Doris said. "The one time is bad enough."

A big fan, Alma used a baseball metaphor. “It takes three swings to strike out, and I’ve still got one swing left.”

“Are you still waiting on the right pitch?” Doris asked.

“Not this old gal,” Alma replied. “I’ve retired from the game.”

“Is either of your exes still living?” Doris asked.

Alma shrugged. “Don’t really know, don’t much care.”

“Continue your story,” Isabel said to Doris.

“Betsy finished eating her breakfast, grabbed the brown bag I’d packed for her lunch, and kissed us goodbye. The front screen door slapped shut, and I heard Betsy start up her car engine. The tires crunched over the driveway’s pea gravel, and then she accelerated away. Forever, as it turns out now.” Doris sniffed back her sob of anguish.

“Take all the time you need,” Alma said. “We’ll stay for as long as it’s necessary. Isn’t that right, Isabel?”

“Of course, we will,” Isabel replied. “Which direction did Betsy go in when she left?”

“I can’t say for sure,” Doris replied. “Russell and I remained in the kitchen until it was time for him to also leave for work.”

“Did she carry the same pastel blue pocketbook Sheriff Fox recovered at the crime scene?” Isabel asked.

“Her pocketbook was the same one,” Doris replied. “She’d bought it the week before from a consignment shop.” Doris looked at each of the sisters. “I’ve been talking a lot. Do you have a reaction to any of it?” she asked.

Isabel let Alma handle the inquiry.

“I’ll be frank with you as you’ve been with us,” Alma replied. “We think Betsy’s murderer may very well be still living in Quiet Anchorage.”

“Then who did it?” Doris asked.

“It’s still too early to make any speculations,” Alma replied.

“Everybody who knew Betsy gets our attention,” Isabel said.

“That makes sense,” Doris asked.

“How about ordering that second bear claw, Doris?” Isabel asked. “We deserve a treat to lighten the mood.”

Doris smiled. “Let’s go for it then,” she said.

“Do you like your home in Florida?” Isabel asked.

“I’ve grown to like it a lot more than when I first arrived there,” Doris replied. “After Russell died, I downsized and bought a cute flamingo pink

—it’s my favorite color—bungalow just outside of Daytona Beach. I have a professional job with decent benefits including my vacation, which I’m on now, at a law office. My next-door neighbor Jamie is also my friend, and we talk almost every weekend.”

“It’s good to have friends,” Isabel said. “You can never have enough of them in your corner.”

“Sort of like the bear claws on your plate,” Alma said.

“I haven’t forgotten about our ordering more bear claws, Alma,” Isabel said. “You can relax.”

“Who killed Betsy Sweet?” Alma asked Isabel who drove them from Eddy’s Deli to the hardware store on Main Street. Doris had returned to her motel room on the bypass.

“I suggest it was the yellow piece who’s Colonel Mustard, and he did it in the billiards room with the lead pipe,” Isabel replied.

Alma burst out giggling. “You’re awful.”

Isabel scowled as she often did when she was stuck. “When this murder case is finished, I swear I’ll never plant another marigold in this lifetime. They’ve brought us nothing but a lot of bad luck.”

“If it makes you feel any better, we’ll hire a gardener to tend our flowers,” Alma said. “Or we could try our luck with planting shamrocks.”

“Shamrocks might be a suitable replacement to change our luck,” Isabel said.

Chapter 18

Brawny Blaine Matthiessen dressed in bib overalls swept the oak plank floor to his hardware store every morning before he opened the doors for business. On this particular morning, however, he'd overslept because he'd stayed up late to watch the Washington Nationals lose a heartbreaker to the San Diego Padres on TV. He wished again he wasn't such a baseball nut, but he could never watch enough of it. He'd followed the sport he still considered the national pastime since he was in elementary school.

This morning Blaine ran late—two hours, he cringed to think—before he unlocked the door and flipped around the OPEN FOR BUSINESS door sign. He drew in a breath and likened the musty hardware smell to the scent of money.

He'd heard the latest news of Isabel and Alma playing snoops again. It befuddled as much as it amazed him how they stumbled over so many corpses. He was leery when they entered the hardware store, and he kept a close eye on them. Who could tell? Alma might find a skeleton dangling behind the wall of nail bins. Isabel might lift a large flowerpot to reveal a skull flashing its pearly whites up at her. Right now, he was taking up the topic of murder with Alma.

"I've been in the hardware trade for going on twenty-six years," he said. "I don't recall one instance of another customer digging up a human bone in their flowerbed, or anywhere else for the matter."

"Isabel and I were setting out the marigolds she purchased from you," Alma said. "So, in a way, you bear some of the responsibility for our making the discovery."

"Hey, don't be pulling me into this big mess," Blaine said.

"Blaine, one of our own was killed," Isabel said. "Alma and I came in seeking information. Can we have your cooperation?"

"Ask me anything you like," Blaine replied.

"You're the only licensed firearms dealer operating in Quiet Anchorage," Isabel said.

"As far as I know, that's a true statement," Blaine said.

"Did Betsy see you about making a handgun purchase?" Isabel asked.

"She never did such a thing," Blaine replied. "Did she need that much personal protection?"

“We know an evil person killed her,” Isabel replied. “It wasn’t a random act or freak occurrence. Her killer must’ve had a plan in mind. Did anybody buy a handgun from you in the days before she vanished?”

Rubbing his chin, Blaine gave Isabel’s question careful thought. “I can’t say they did. Look, I’m not going to get rich from my firearms sales. Most of the business I do is with the local hunters. I grew up with many of them, and I do it as a convenience. All of my firearm sales are for new weapons only.”

“We heard you hired Troy Raft one summer,” Alma said. “How did that work out?”

“It was a bust.” Blaine hooked his thumbs under the bib overalls shoulder straps. “Troy comes across as a laid-back dude, but I know what he really is.”

“It sounds as if you’ve got a story for us,” Alma said.

“Sure I do so pull up a nail keg and have a listen,” Blaine said. “Troy ripped me off because he’s a crook. I know it, and he knows it, but not enough folks know it because I decided to cut him a break, and I didn’t report his crime. In hindsight, I can see I was a wimp not to press criminal charges.”

“Did he steal merchandise from you?” Alma asked.

“He would’ve had to fence any stolen merchandise for the money,” Blaine replied. “He went straight for the green stuff. Quite by accident, I caught him doing it red-handed, and he admitted it wasn’t the first time he’d dipped his sticky fingers into the till.”

“He’s good at taking other people’s money,” Alma said, remembering the ten dollars they’d given him.

“Why didn’t you have Troy arrested?” Isabel asked. “Theft is a serious infraction.”

“I went to high school and played varsity football with his daddy Hank, and that counted for something,” Blaine replied. “I didn’t want to get his kid into trouble with the law while he was a teenager. Even so, I blew my top, and I ordered Troy to clear out of my hardware store, and I banned him from returning.”

“I take it when he wasn’t stealing your money, he wasn’t a satisfactory employee,” Isabel said.

“He’s a loafer,” Blaine said. “Anytime I had something for him to do, he made himself scarce. He liked to hang out on the loading dock and talk

on his cell phone.”

“What can you tell us about his demeanor?” Isabel asked. “Does he have a fiery temper?”

“I never saw it on display if he does,” Blaine replied. “He’s an only child and a brat. I suppose that’s why Valerie hasn’t thrown him out on his ears. I would’ve done it years ago if he were my kid.”

“We heard Troy dated Betsy Sweet,” Isabel said.

Blaine reacted with a disapproving grunt. “What a bright, pretty girl like Betsy saw in a fellow like Troy is beyond me.”

“We remember how our first love was so blind and forgiving,” Alma said. “Did you go out with the search parties organized after she was reported missing?”

“I shut down my hardware store while I did my part,” Blaine replied. “I never walked so dang far in my life, but I never felt tired. Like the other searchers, I wanted so badly to find a sign of Betsy, but it was not to be.”

“We drove out and had a chat with Troy,” Alma said.

“I bet that was a productive meeting,” Blaine said. “How much did he gouge you for?”

“We gave him ten dollars for his trouble,” Alma replied.

“You probably got off cheap,” Blaine said.

“We’ve been told Chad Jones is a skirt chaser,” Alma said.

Blaine shrugged. “He regards himself as a Casanova, or at least he did back in his single days.”

“His wife Esther keeps a close watch on him,” Alma said.

“That she does like a hawk,” Blaine said.

“Even so, the circulating rumor said he and Betsy were involved in an affair when she went missing,” Alma said.

“I heard as much at the time,” Blaine said.

“Do you see any truth behind it?” Alma asked.

“Put it this way,” Blaine replied. “I don’t disbelieve it.”

“Somebody must’ve seen them together, perhaps while they were out of town,” Alma said, pressing the point. “Have you any idea who that person was?”

“It beats me, Alma,” Blaine replied. “Chad may’ve been fooling around with Betsy. If he was, he knew it was in his best interests to keep a tight lid on it, or he’d have to deal with Esther’s fury.”

“She’s insanely jealous,” Alma said.

Blaine nodded. "Being so young and idealistic, Betsy might've taken it as something more serious and meaningful than the frivolous fun as Chad did."

"If he wanted to get out of their relationship, he may've resorted to murdering Betsy if she refused to end it," Alma said. "Murder was the only way he could see to do it."

"It's a cold-blooded but effective move," Blaine said. "Of course, he also figured on not getting caught afterward."

"Chad failed to get rid of her physical remains," Alma said. "My finding Betsy's leg bone is what has stirred the pot again."

"If he's guilty, he must be shaking in his boots with you and Isabel on the case," Blaine said.

"He should be if he's the killer," Alma said. "How well do you know Esther?"

"I'll be frank with you. I don't like her," Blaine replied.

"Is there another story behind why you don't like her?" Alma asked.

"I'm spilling over with my personal stories this morning," Blaine replied. "However, I'll spare you from hearing my Esther story. I'll just say Chad got the girl, and I didn't, but I'm not complaining about it."

"Is she capable of murdering Betsy Sweet?" Alma asked.

"Out of the three suspects we just discussed, I'd pick her every time," Blaine replied.

"Thanks for your help," Alma said.

"Good luck," Blaine said. "This time I believe you're going to need loads of it."

"You're not telling us anything we don't already know," Alma said.

"Are there some mornings when you wake up and just want to chuck this whole sleuthing nonsense?" Blaine asked.

"It never happens to us," Alma replied. "I always say it's like this raging fever in our bloodstream. Each mystery we take on just makes it burn that much hotter and brighter."

"Wow," Blaine said.

"What Alma in her gaudy way means is we feel a profound passion and deep commitment to what we do," Isabel said.

"Thanks for the clarification," Blaine said. "I was getting a little worried you'd caught a tropical disease that might be contagious."

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Chapter 19

Alma smiled. "I know what should come next for us."

Driving down Main Street, Isabel also smiled. "What's on your mind?"

"We should return to the scene of the crime and take a closer look at it."

"What's left there for us to see?"

"If I knew what the clue was, we could skip having to go search for it."

"Okay I'll go back to the piney woods, but only if Sammi Jo is able to go with us."

"That shouldn't be a problem."

"Hold on because I also want Petey Samson there. His unerring nose will detect any useful scents."

"Petey Samson is always a big help to us. Is that all on your list?"

"Since you ask, no, it isn't. Willie should also accompany us."

"We'll need a bigger vehicle if you include anybody else."

"Willie, Ossie, and Blue are practically joined at the hip. We'll ask Blue to drive us in his late nephew Ralph's old taxicab. It should be roomy enough to accommodate everybody with comfort. Blue will have to activate the Off-Duty sign on the taxicab's roof."

"Aren't you leaving out the most important person?"

"No, I don't think so. Who can that be?"

"Sheriff Fox is the official in charge of the homicide investigation."

"Not this time, he isn't," Isabel said with an emphatic headshake. "He already took a crack at examining the crime scene, and this will be our turn without him breathing down our necks and grumbling about the people tramping through it."

"He won't much like our going behind his back," Alma said.

"Then he can go pound sand as Max used to say," Isabel said.

"Sheriff Fox took down his maypole of yellow crime scene ribbons," Blue said. He'd driven the taxicab carrying everybody to the piney woods. The mid-afternoon sun beamed down on them, including Petey Samson panting and straining on the leash Isabel held. Ossie pecked a finger on

Willie's shoulder and he looked over. Ossie had a digital camera he wore on a neck strap.

"Are you photographing the crime scene for Isabel and Alma?" Willie asked.

"In a minute I will, but first I hope to take a few pictures of your UFOs," Ossie replied. "You can point them out in the sky so I can aim my shutter and click away."

"Why are you so interested in photographing UFOs?" Willie asked.

"I'm creating a scrapbook titled 'Snapshots of Willie Moccasin's Flying Bedpans,'" Ossie replied.

When Blue snickered, Ossie couldn't help but smile.

"You'll have a long wait, my good man," Willie said. "The UFOs only appear at night."

"Aren't we sticking around until after sunset?" Ossie asked.

"There's no way that's happening for this gal," Sammi Jo replied. "The piney woods are no spot to be near after the sun goes down."

"Are you superstitious?" Willie asked.

"I am when it comes to being here," Sammi Jo replied.

"Since our return was your idea, Isabel, what comes first?" Blue asked.

"Actually, I can't take credit for making this trip," Isabel replied. "Alma first thought of it."

"But Willie is who found Betsy's skeleton and secretly moved her leg bone to our flowerbed," Alma said. "We'll direct the question to him."

"I better fess up and come clean with you all," Willie said, looking sheepish.

"What are you talking about?" Alma asked.

"The leg bone you dug up isn't a part of Betsy's skeleton," Willie replied. "It's an old pig bone that resembles a human leg bone."

"You say the bone I found is a pig bone," Alma said.

"Correct," Willie said.

"Unbelievable," Alma said.

"Why did you use the masquerade?" Isabel asked.

"I couldn't think of a better way to get Alma and you intrigued enough to take up solving what was only a possible murder," Willie replied.

"The next time you find evidence of even a possible murder, notify Sheriff Fox," Alma said.

“Ordinarily, that’s the right thing to do,” Sammi Jo said. “But we’re talking about our sheriff who isn’t the swiftest.”

“Very true,” Alma said with a nod.

“Sorry for the trouble I put you through.” He dropped his chin. “I feel bad about it.”

“I wish you’d let Blue and me in on it,” Ossie said.

“Right, I know,” Willie said.

“No harm was done, and frankly I’m relieved to know it wasn’t Betsy we carried around,” Isabel said. “This goes no further than us. Willie can’t get into trouble over a pig bone. Are we straight?”

“We know how to keep our lips buttoned,” Sammi Jo replied.

“The Three Musketeers never snitch,” Ossie said.

Still a bit stunned, Blue just nodded.

“What about my pig bone you gave to Sheriff Fox?” Willie asked.

“Don’t you worry about it,” Isabel said, remembering it still lay on the bottom of Abigail’s deep freezer. “Alma and I will take care of it.”

“Sheriff Fox will never see it again,” Alma said.

“How did you find where Betsy’s remains were half-buried?” Isabel asked.

“I chalk it up to chance,” Willie replied. “I like to park on the edge of the clearing. That night I strolled around it to scope out the best UFO vantage points, so I walked toward the loblolly pine, and as I did, I tripped over something that was sticking up. After shining down my flashlight beam, I saw it. I recognize a human skull when I see one.”

“Didn’t your finding it there surprise you?” Alma asked.

“Well, I forgot about I was here looking for UFOs,” Willie replied. “After I determined it was Betsy Sweet, I decided to leave her and go with my pig bone plan. Later on, the Roberts’ boys discovered her and called Sheriff Fox.”

“That’s a humdinger of a story,” Ossie said.

“Ossie, I meant what I just said,” Isabel said. “You can’t repeat a word of this story, humdinger or not.”

“I hear you, Isabel,” Ossie said. “Mum’s the word.”

“We’re burning daylight with all our yammering,” Alma said.

“Then stand back and let our four-legged friend do his thing,” Blue said.

“Isabel, tell Petey Samson it’s show time,” Alma said.

Isabel did. Petey Samson had been the hero dog of the hour on a previous murder case. She watched his every move. His nose sniffed over the carpet of pine needles, and within a minute, he hit on the scent of something that excited him.

He looked at her and barked. She signaled him to continue his search. Nose lowered close to the ground, he circled them with his stubby legs waddling like a penguin as he tracked down the scent.

“Look at Petey Samson in action,” Isabel said. “Isn’t he the greatest? Snoopy, move over. There’s a new beagle in town.”

“Just don’t overdo it, Isabel,” Alma said. “Praising Petey Samson too much will make him swell-headed.”

Sammi Jo smiled. Isabel and Alma had nothing but heaps of love to bestow on their pet. If he were half as clever as Isabel said he was, he’d sniff out the clue they needed to jumpstart their stalled out investigation.

“Your hound dog is heading the wrong way,” Willie said, raising his hand to point in the right direction. “I found Betsy’s skeleton lying over there by the loblolly pine.”

“Petey Sampson has a unique way of doing things,” Isabel said.

He hurried in a zigzag pattern between the pinecones and toadstools as he ran his nose over the terrain. He stopped once and sneezed. His tail wagged faster.

What a ham, Alma thought.

Petey Samson flopped down and used his rear paw to scratch behind his ear. He yawned. Alma didn’t miss noticing the Three Musketeers trading askance glances. Isabel was the only one left not losing confidence in Petey Samson’s detective talents.

“We should return later and try again,” Alma said. “Petey Samson has lost interest.”

“He’s entitled to take a short break if he feels tuckered out,” Isabel said.

“If he takes his nap in the sun, I’m leaving,” Alma said.

“Give him a fair shake,” Isabel said. “Some hound dogs take longer to get revved up.”

Petey Samson got up and stretched his legs. He clawed away the pine needles and scraped into the red clay from the spot where he’d sat. He proved he was as adept at digging as he was at sniffing. He enlarged the hole as he flung back the clumps of red clay. Isabel held her breath as her

hopes soared. Were they seconds away from finding their next valuable clue?

Petey Samson stepped back from the ankle-deep hole he'd opened in the ground. He barked twice at Isabel, but he'd have to wait since she carried no doggie treats for his reward. He turned and yapped at Alma, but she'd also neglected to bring any doggie treats in her pocketbook. His pulling a long face almost broke their hearts.

"What's down in the hole?" Ossie asked. "Why is he barking?"

"He's saying it's up to us now," Blue replied.

"Then have at it and start digging away," Ossie said, motioning toward the hole.

"How do I do that?" Blue asked. "You got a pick or shovel?"

"You got a Learjet?" Ossie replied.

"I just might have a Learjet at my disposal," Blue replied. "You never can tell about us eccentric Trents."

"Gentlemen, please, enough already," Isabel said. "We can put our heads together and hash out a solution."

Never afraid to tackle a chore head-on, Sammi Jo crouched down and poked her fingers like pitchfork prongs through the loose red clay at the bottom of the hole. She hit an object and smiled. Then she plucked it out and held it up for everybody to see.

"All that trouble was just for a rusty horseshoe," Blue said.

"For sweet mercy's sake," Ossie said. "I feel like a dumbbell for standing out in the hot sun and finding rusty junk."

"Horseshoes aren't just rusty junk," Sammi Jo said. "They're said to bring good luck, and we could use some of it."

"Probe a little deeper if you can and see if our luck changes any for the better," Isabel said.

Sammi Jo tossed aside the rusty horseshoe and continued to rake her fingers through the loose red clay. With the drops of sweat dribbling down her forehead, she wanted a tall glass of iced tea. She stabbed the dirt with her fingers and struck another object.

"I've got something else," she said.

"Is it another creepy skull?" Blue asked.

"This item is made of steel and not bone," Sammi Jo replied as she brandished it.

“That’s the most lopsided handgun I’ve ever seen,” Alma said. “What type is it, Isabel?”

“The type of handgun that goes bang-bang when you pull the trigger,” Isabel replied.

“Well, even I know that much,” Alma said.

“It’s called a Luger,” Blue said.

Alma glanced at Blue. “English, please,” she said.

“Blue is saying the handgun Sammi Jo dug up is an old German handgun known as a Luger,” Willie said. “Their officers carried them during the big war we fought in.”

“I’ve got a couple I brought home as war souvenirs,” Blue said.

“Did one of your Lugers go missing?” Ossie asked.

“Both of my Lugers are locked inside my gun safe,” Blue replied.

“Could this Luger be the murder weapon?” Ossie asked. “Did Betsy’s killer use it on her then bury it near her and the loblolly pine?”

“No, Ossie,” Willie said. “The Lugers sprout up out here like the wild mushrooms and ferns do.”

“Save your lame jokes for our bench sitting time,” Ossie said. “My question is a legitimate one.”

“We’re thinking along the same lines, Ossie,” Isabel said. “Shall we take the Luger along with us?”

“I don’t know if our doing that is a good idea or not,” Alma replied. “Ossie, what’s your thinking?”

“Let’s put it to a vote where I’ll abstain since I’ll be the votes counter,” Ossie replied. “All in favor of taking the Luger with us please raise your right hand.”

Isabel, Sammi Jo, and Blue did so.

“Blue, that’s your left hand,” Ossie said. “My instructions clearly stated to use your right hand, so I have to disqualify your vote.”

“I have no time for the nitpickers like you,” Blue said. “Alma and Willie are the only nays, so the Luger goes with us.”

“It’s fine with me,” Alma said.

“I can put the Luger in my gun safe with my pair of them,” Blue said.

Willie gave Blue a warning. “Just make sure it stays there in case we need to produce the murder weapon,” Willie said.

“When the need arises, I’ll get out the Luger as fast as it takes me to spin the combination dial,” Blue said.

“Can you remember the combination numbers?” Willie asked.

“I have them written down on a note magnetized to the fridge,” Blue replied.

Willie and Ossie exchanged looks of doubt.

“We’ll take the Luger to Sheriff Fox,” Isabel said. “That way it becomes his problem and not ours to deal with.”

“I don’t know about how the rest of you feel, but I believe our work here is completed,” Ossie said.

“Then let’s make a beeline to Eddy’s Deli for refreshments,” Willie said.

“Bear claws,” Alma said.

“Along with iced tea,” Isabel said.

“That’s one suggestion we don’t need to take a vote on,” Ossie said.

Chapter 20

Saturday was the one day out of the week when Sheriff Fox could sleep in if he wanted to, and more times than not, he felt so inclined. Before the murder of Betsy Sweet had disrupted his summer, it'd been an easy ride. Then Isabel and Alma had put the brakes on his coasting so merrily along. He was fuming, and his blood pressure shot up, reaching a dangerous level.

His breathing turned bullish while his nostrils flared. Just the once, he wished a fiery meteor would pierce the earth's atmosphere and strike Quiet Anchorage. If the hit vaporized a certain brick rambler on Church Street with the bad hound dog also living there, he'd dance a jig down the middle of Main Street.

By the next moment, Sheriff Fox reined in his dark fantasy and felt a little ashamed for wishing something dire as a falling meteorite to wipe out his problem. Maybe some day the Trumbo sisters would move back to wherever they'd lived before coming to Quiet Anchorage.

The buzzer startled him, and it was Abigail working on Saturday. There was a murder investigation going on, and all hands were on deck. She spoke in that gravelly voice he grimaced at hearing.

"There's a lady here to see you, Sheriff," Abigail said.

Sheriff Fox figured it was either Isabel or Alma. He looked around for the nonexistent rear exit to duck out of his office. "Schedule an appointment for her to return during our regular business hours," he said.

"No can do, Sheriff. She told me in emphatic words, which I won't repeat, where you can put that idea."

The fiery meteor doing its damage blazed into Sheriff Fox's thoughts again.

"Can't you take care of her concerns, Abigail?" he asked.

"Sorry, but homicide is above my pay grade. I'll usher her in, and I want you to be nice to her. I mean extra nice. Do I make myself crystal clear?"

Sheriff Fox wondered if Abigail had forgotten who the boss was at their office. Then he realized the same thought crossed his mind several times each work day. His office door opened, and he groaned as he lifted his eyes up to see the lady. He was astonished to observe she wasn't Isabel or Alma.

"Sheriff Fox?" she asked in a Southern drawl.

“Speaking,” he replied.

“We need to talk.”

“May I first ask who am I addressing?”

“Doris Sweet.”

“I see. Are you Betsy Sweet’s mother?”

“You bet your grits I am.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, ma’am.”

“Skip the condolences. How are you doing on catching and locking up her killer?”

“Well...on that matter...you see...I’ve put my best deputy sheriffs investigating her homicide case.”

“The only folks I know investigating her murder are Isabel and Alma and their young helper Sammi Jo. Do you consider them your best deputy sheriffs?”

“To hear them tell it, yes, they are all that and a bag of cookies.”

“Say what?”

“Look, Mrs. Sweet, it takes a little time to get ramped up to conduct a full-blown homicide investigation.”

“All Isabel and Alma have to do is grab their pocketbooks, hop in the car, and they’re off. How much time do you need to ‘get ramped up,’ as you like to call it?”

Sheriff Fox leaned forward and propped his elbows on the desktop. “The Trumbo sisters aren’t the town sheriff. I still am in case they’ve forgotten it, which they tend to do when it’s convenient.”

“Then are you making any headway? Have you identified any murder suspects?”

Sheriff Fox leaned back, the chair squeaking as he let his narrowing eyes bore into the lady. “Before we undertook the hunt for Betsy three summers ago, I asked you if you had any idea about where your daughter went in her car.”

“And I remember I told you I had none if she didn’t go to work.”

Sheriff Fox didn’t let up his studying Doris. “Betsy never mentioned the piney woods in her conversations,” he said. “She never drove out there for any reason to the best of your knowledge.”

“Is there a question in any of that for me?”

“Here’s the deal, Mrs. Sweet. Quiet Anchorage was rife with the rumors Chad Jones was romantically involved with Betsy. I heard it

whispered about everywhere I went on Main Street. You would've had to been deaf as a turnip not to have overheard the same thing. I didn't ask you anything at the time because I didn't want to drag Betsy's good name through the mud. But murder is now part of the picture, and I'm forced to consider every angle."

"The same hurtful gossip reached my ears. Betsy was a good girl."

A wise smirk crossed Sheriff Fox's face. He knew from his professional experience the "good girls" were often the wildest, craziest ones. He didn't share the insight with Doris. Yet.

When the desk phone buzzed, Sheriff Fox answered it with a crisp, "What is it now, Abigail?"

"Uh, is that you, Sheriff Fox?"

"Of course it's me," he replied. "Who else would be answering the desk phone in my office?"

"You failed to identify yourself per our office protocol, so I wasn't sure who'd answered."

"I'm sorry, Abigail. From now on, I'll identify myself on my desk phone, and you'll know who it is."

"That's the right way to do things."

"What's on your mind?"

"You're a popular man today because you now have *two* visitors."

"It's like Grand Central Station around here. Who are they?"

"Here's a hint. They have the sweetest smiles you'll ever see."

Sheriff Fox winced as if he had a sudden case of heartburn. "It's got to be those two Trumbo sisters. Why are they even here?"

"When I phoned Isabel, I may've dropped the suggestion."

"Did they come alone and without their dog?"

"It's just Isabel and Alma. Petey Samson is at home."

"Well, I'm in a meeting, and I can't see them."

"You're with Doris Sweet because I sent her into your office."

"What if I am?"

"Isabel and Alma should be a part of your meeting."

"Abigail, in case it's slipped your mind, I'm the boss who makes those decisions around here and not you."

"Okay, I'll go ahead and send them in to get with you."

"Are you going deaf or daffy? Didn't you hear what I just told you?"

"Would you like cream or sugar, Sheriff?"

“Like cream or sugar for what? What are you talking about?”

“Wait, Isabel and Alma say they’re iced tea and not coffee drinkers. Why didn’t you tell me that? I could’ve made a pitcher of iced tea to keep in the break room’s fridge. They must think we’re the rudest folks. We’re going to have to work on sprucing up our public image.”

“Abigail, you’re coming dangerously close to getting fired.”

“That’s a super idea, Sheriff. I’ll scoot down the street to Dolly’s Bakery and pick up a half-dozen doughnuts.”

“You better make it a baker’s dozen,” Sheriff Fox said instantly losing his irritation. An order of fresh doughnuts always lifted his dour mood.

“A baker’s dozen it shall be then. Bye now.” Abigail disconnected.

Meantime, Sheriff Fox, shaking his head, awaited Isabel and Alma’s entrance.

“Who’s coming in to join us, Sheriff?” Doris asked.

“Double trouble carrying pocketbooks and AARP membership cards,” Sheriff Fox replied. On days like this one, he wished he’d been hired as the town dogcatcher instead of the sheriff.

Chapter 21

Sheriff Fox noticed right away Alma toted a croker sack. *Oh great, what goody has she brought me this time?* he wondered. The ladies exchanged greetings before Isabel and Alma occupied the other two chairs in front of Sheriff Fox's desk. His curiosity got the better of him.

"What have you got in the croker sack?" he asked, pointing at it.

"We brought you more possible evidence," Alma replied.

She lifted the croker sack and upended it to spill out its contents on the desktop. The rusty object falling out made a heavy clunk, and Sheriff Fox looked as if he'd just swallowed a spoonful of cod liver oil.

"Identify this handgun," he said. "Then tell me why it's lying on my desktop."

Alma smiled. "What you have before you is called a Luger." She turned to Isabel. "Do I have the pronunciation correct?" Alma asked.

Isabel nodded. "I'm pretty sure that's what Ossie called it."

"I thought so but I want to keep my gun trivia straight," Alma said. "We found it no more than an hour ago just a nickel's toss from where your yellow police line tape was tied up in the piney woods."

"Horse feathers," Sheriff Fox said. "I pored over every square inch of the crime scene personally, and I overlooked nothing."

"Petey Samson used his keen nose to zero in on the Luger and then dug it up," Alma said.

"He must be a smart dog," Doris said.

"That's a matter of opinion if you ask me," Sheriff Fox said.

"Yes, he is a smart dog, thank you," Isabel said, giving Sheriff Fox a frosty glance.

"Are you maintaining the murderer used this Luger?" Sheriff Fox asked. "It's in pretty rough shape."

"Only if we can prove it beyond a reasonable doubt," Isabel replied.

"We assume you've gotten the medical examiner busy analyzing the other evidence," Alma said.

"You assume correctly," Sheriff Fox said. "I told Dr. Coe to step on it, and I hope to get something from him within the next twenty-four hours."

"Even that's taking too long," Alma said. "We needed the results like yesterday. Tell Dr. Coe we need a quicker turnaround time."

“Waiting is the hardest part to conducting a homicide investigation,” Sheriff Fox said.

“I guess we have no other choice then,” Alma said.

“Blue told us he owns a pair of Lugers,” Isabel said. “They’re war souvenirs he brought back from Europe. Every G.I. must’ve picked up something as a memento of his military service while he served over there.”

“Blue Trent admits he owns a pair of German Lugers. That’s very interesting to hear.” Sheriff Fox gloated over how he’d found his main suspect to arrest and book for the murder of Betsy Sweet.

At seeing the devious wheels turn inside his head, Alma jumped to Blue’s defense. “He says he keeps them locked up in his gun safe,” she said.

“If you believe that story, I’ve got some unclaimed fortunes waiting in the Nigerian banks,” Sheriff Fox said.

“Then snap to it and go arrest Blue,” Doris said. “He killed my baby girl Betsy, and I returned to see he gets punished for it.”

“I’m ending this meeting to go do it now,” Sheriff Fox said.

Alma cut her angry eyes to Isabel. “Blabbermouth,” Alma said.

Isabel wasn’t perturbed. “Blue didn’t shoot and kill Betsy,” she said.

Sheriff Fox didn’t let up on his gloating. “The Three Mouseketeers will be down to the Two Mouseketeers as soon as I slap the handcuffs on Blue and toss him into jail.”

“Dwight Holden had better get busy defending Blue,” Alma said.

“And it’s Musketeers, not Mouseketeers.”

“I’m so scared because you’re going to sic your big, bad lawyer on me,” Sheriff Fox said.

“Blue didn’t shoot and kill Betsy,” Isabel said with quiet but firm insistence. “I can back up my assertion with solid proof.”

“What white rabbit are you going to pull out of your top hat to save Blue?” Sheriff Fox asked.

“Have you taken notice of his hands?” Isabel asked.

“I do every time I see Blue,” Sheriff Fox replied. “He gripped and fired the Luger to kill Betsy Sweet.”

“You’ve got the second part wrong,” Isabel said.

“What are you saying?” Sheriff Fox asked.

“Blue’s hands shake like a leaf,” Isabel replied.

“What if they do shake like a leaf?” Sheriff Fox asked.

“He’s physically unable to aim much less fire a Luger with enough accuracy to hit the broad side of a barn,” Isabel replied.

“Well, he must have his good days and bad days like we all do,” Sheriff Fox said. “He shot Betsy on one of his good days.”

“At his golden age, Blue no longer enjoys any good days in that regard,” Isabel said. “Trust me, Roscoe. As an older and wiser head, I can tell you Blue is as innocent of committing Betsy’s murder as you are. I want to be sure you know that in case you hear any talk about his war souvenir Lugers and get the bright idea to go arrest him as the murderer.”

“Isabel is spot-on, Roscoe, and you know it, too,” the relieved Alma said. “We’re back at square one, and we’ll have to continue our sleuthing.”

“Isabel, leave it to you to ruin my day,” Sheriff Fox said.

She shrugged. “As you just said, everybody has their good days and their bad days.”

“Get on with it then,” Sheriff Fox said.

“What about the two boys?” Doris asked. “Are Charles and Earl Roberts good kids? Do they have juvie records?”

“They’re just young boys full of restless energy and harmless mischief,” Sheriff Fox replied. “Neither has ever been in trouble with the law.”

“They look around in the woods for old bottles and jugs to sell to Uncle Jimbo,” Alma said. “He runs a kitschy antique shop he set up after you moved to Florida.”

“Does he sell Depression glass and pretty porcelain knickknacks?” Doris asked. “I’ve got a keen thing for that old kind of stuff.”

“He offers a smorgasbord of collectibles,” Alma replied.

“We’ve bought lovely small gifts from him,” Isabel said. “You should like browsing at his antique shop, too.”

“Does Uncle Jimbo ever assist you with your sleuthing stuff?” Doris asked.

“Yes,” Alma replied.

“No,” Sheriff Fox replied.

“I got two answers,” Doris said. “Do I get to pick which one is correct?”

“If we need a hand with something, Uncle Jimbo gladly lends it, evidently much to Sheriff Fox’s chagrin,” Isabel replied.

“I am the sheriff of Quiet Anchorage, and I am in charge, and I run a tight ship,” Sheriff Fox said.

“Uh-huh, I can see that for myself,” Doris said.

A oft rap came at the door before Abigail stepped inside the office balancing the iced teas (for Isabel and Alma) on a cardboard tray along with a white bakery box filled with doughnuts.

Sheriff Fox’s eyes lit up like a pair of Fourth of July sparklers, and he lunged from the chair to snatch up a doughnut from the box she’d opened.

Isabel laughed. “Don’t break a leg, Roscoe. Abigail has brought plenty of doughnuts for everybody.”

“I want to make sure I get everything I’ve got coming to me,” Sheriff Fox said before taking a chomp out of his doughnut.

“Abigail, please pull up a chair and join us if you like,” Isabel said. “Roscoe’s mouth is too full of doughnut to invite you so I will.”

“Why, thank you, Isabel,” Abigail said. “I don’t mind if I do being as how I’m the one who paid for the doughnuts.”

Chapter 22

Early Sunday morning found Main Street deserted except for the young lady strolling along the shady portion. Her pace was unhurried and deliberate even. The discovery of Betsy Sweet's physical remains in the piney woods angered Sammi Jo. The killer moved at will in Quiet Anchorage, and that was wrong as could be. She checked the time on her cell phone, and it was too early for civilized folks to be visiting. Just the same, she had a hunch Alma was already up, and Sammi Jo phoned her.

"I'm so glad you got in touch because I was set to call you," Alma said. "We have a long list of things to finish today, and I can't do a thing with Isabel."

"I don't understand you," Sammi Jo said. "Isn't Isabel busy getting ready?"

"She's been gallivanting around the manor in her PJs and housecoat playing hide-and-go-seek with Petey Samson who's barking nonstop. It's like the lunatics have seized control of the asylum, and I'm the only sane person who's left here."

Sammi Jo, forming a funny mental picture, laughed. "Isabel can't be acting that daffy. It isn't like her at all."

"I've never been more serious in my life. You'd better ask Eustis to send over a strong sedative, and I'll try to tranquilize her with a dart gun or do something that radical. It sure isn't a laughing matter."

"I'm sorry, Alma. I didn't mean to kid you. All right, let's try and fix this."

"Lots of luck is all I can say."

"Where is Isabel right now?"

"She's standing in the bathtub behind the shower curtain to hide, but Petey Samson isn't duped for one second. He just follows his nose to find her. She does her fist pumps and squeals with delight, and they're off playing it again. She just laughs and waves me off when I try to interrupt their antics."

"Has Isabel ever acted this crazy way before today?"

"Yes, she has but it wasn't nearly this bad."

"Has she been nipping from the little brown jug of elderberry wine Uncle Jimbo gives his customers at Christmas?"

“Isabel woke up in one of her what I call dingbatty moods. It usually wears off by breakfast, and she’s back to normal, but this morning she hasn’t improved, and I’m getting worried. I think she’s lost it for good. There goes Petey Samson barking again like a banshee on laughing gas. Can’t you hear him? He must’ve sniffed out her new hiding spot in the hall linen closet. What am I going to do, Sammi Jo? Another minute of this crazy commotion, and I’ll snap my cap and join the league of nutcases.”

“Just stay calm and don’t panic, Alma. That’s the important thing.”

“I’ll do my best. Just tell me what comes next.”

“I better give Isabel one of my talks. Put her on the phone if you can find her.”

“Hold the line while I go try to round her up.”

After a few minutes, a breathy Isabel greeted Sammi Jo. “Where are you?” Isabel asked.

“I’m standing in the shade of the pharmacy,” Sammi Jo replied. “Are you finished with entertaining Petey Samson?”

“He’s the supreme guilty pleasure of my life,” Isabel replied. “Is Alma in a dither over our high jinks?” Isabel laughed. “Her getting so worked up is half of the fun. Do you know what? We’re all going to be okay.”

“Don’t forget we’ve got a murder still unsolved.”

“It never left my thoughts. I have to let down my hair and get in a little playtime. How fast can you get over here?”

“Give me ten minutes.”

“You better make it five. Alma is raring to go.”

“Five minutes it is then. Do you have any iced tea and bear claws on hand?”

“Did the Tin Man need a heart?”

“That’s great to hear. Do we have time for eating them?”

Isabel laughed. “If not, then we’ll take the time. I tell you what let’s do. I’ll slip Alma a bear claw, and she’ll be back to her regular cranky self by the time you arrive here.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Sammi Jo said. “See you in five minutes.”

“Have you ever watched a dog chase its own tail?” Alma asked.

“I must’ve seen one at some time or the other do it,” Sammi Jo replied. “Why do you ask us such a question?”

“Because that’s what I see us doing on this murder case,” Alma replied. “Around and around we go, and we’re not getting anywhere on it.”

Isabel clucked her tongue in disapproval. “*Tut-tut*, I’ll have no more of that negative talk,” she said. “I won’t stand for it.”

“Sometimes the hard truth hurts,” Alma said.

“Nonsense,” Isabel said. “We’re holding our own and staying strong.”

The trio of ladies sat on the swivel stools at the drugstore’s marble soda fountain with the back mirror. None of them had ordered anything since they’d tanked up on iced tea and bear claws while they were at the sisters’ house.

They were holding their Sunday morning summit. Eustis in his marshmallow white smock also attended it. He’d locked the drugstore entrance and put out the SORRY, WE’RE CLOSED door sign. He didn’t want to miss a thing when it came to the sleuthing. That explained why he also wore his snazzy fedora at a rakish slant on his baldhead.

“Why did Betsy leave her parents’ house and drive out to the piney woods?” he asked. “Who in the dickens was she meeting out there?”

“Was she killed there, or was she dropped off after she died?” Alma asked.

“Did the bad guy ambush her after she arrived?” Isabel asked.

“I’m hearing more questions asked than when I tune in an episode of *Jeopardy!*,” Alma said.

“Do we know if either Troy or Chad has an alibi for the time of Betsy’s death?” Sammi Jo asked.

“Troy’s mother Valerie will probably swear he was at home with her,” Alma replied.

“Likewise, Chad will also say he was with Esther,” Isabel said. “She’ll give him the necessary cover if he needs to account for his whereabouts. He’ll do the same thing for her if the spotlight of suspicion lands on her.”

“The Joneses will play it cozy rather than turn on each other,” Alma said. “Esther lives for sinking her talons into Chad to ever give up doing it.”

“I’d love to get a man’s perspective on how Troy or Chad thinks and acts,” Sammi Jo said.

Eustis looked crestfallen. “Excuse me, but what am I over here, Sammi Jo? Just an empty pill bottle?”

“That was wrong of me, Eustis,” Sammi Jo said. “I just blurted out whatever dumb thing popped into my head.”

The diplomatic Isabel smoothed things over. “Eustis offers us his valuable insights, or else we’d be holding our meeting elsewhere this morning.”

“Thank you for saying that,” Eustis said. “I no longer take any offense at Sammi Jo’s off-the-cuff remark.”

“Then let’s get on with it,” Alma said.

“The most recent development intrigues me,” Eustis said. “How did the Luger get where Petey Samson dug it up?”

“Bear in mind the Luger may be unrelated to Betsy’s murder, a red herring if you will,” Isabel replied.

“Somebody had to bury the Luger,” Alma said. “The last time I checked the *Old Farmer’s Almanac*, Lugers don’t grow underground like carrots and peanuts do.”

“Quite so,” Isabel said. “Thanks for the gardening trivia.”

“We haven’t found enough clues,” Sammi Jo said. “We’ve got Betsy’s bones and the Luger, and that’s about it.”

“What a pity we can’t buy the clues like the vowels sell for on *Wheel of Fortune*,” Alma said.

“With our shoestring budget, we couldn’t afford to buy the clues even if they were up for sale,” Isabel said.

“Sheriff Fox told us he’ll soon have the autopsy results back from the crime lab,” Alma said.

“We’ve been able in the past to solve the mystery without having the forensics available,” Isabel said. “We may have to do it again.”

The ring tone of Blake Shelton singing let everybody know it was Sammi Jo’s cell phone. She checked who was calling her.

“Reynolds Kyle,” she said with a grin. “I don’t have to be a brainiac to know what he wants on a Sunday morning.”

“You may as well go to the drag race track with him,” Isabel said. “We’re stuck in place for doing anything else on our mystery.”

“It’s like my dog chasing its own tail,” Alma said.

Isabel had to laugh. “Your analogy is spot-on, Alma.”

“I’ll duck outside to find a phone signal,” Sammi Jo said. “Then I’ll get back with you, and we’ll collude on what we should do next.”

“Go take care of your business with Reynolds,” Alma said. “Meantime, we’ll order some banana splits to tide us over until Sunday brunch.”

“What’s going on with you, girl?” Reynolds asked, his country speech poured on rich and sweet as King Syrup over a stack of blueberry hotcakes scooped up fresh off the griddle.

“Reynolds, how many times do I have to tell you not to call me a girl?” Sammi Jo stood just inside the exterior alcove to the drugstore entrance where no pedestrians could eavesdrop on her phone conversation.

“It’s just my pet name, and I don’t mean anything by it. I could just as easily call you snookums, sweet cheeks, or baby cakes if you prefer any of those endearments.”

“Let’s just stick with plain Sammi Jo. To answer your question, I’m still working on the case with Isabel and Alma.”

“Yeah, so I heard from Eustis. Sweet Betsy has returned from the dead.”

“Let’s stick with calling her Betsy.”

“Sure, she’s Betsy, and you’re Sammi Jo. I got you there. No problem.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Why did you call me up?”

“You should know why. It’s Sunday, and we’ve got a standing date to be at the drag race track.”

“No, we *had* a standing date.”

“Can’t you ladies wind up solving Betsy’s murder before the Sunday races start?”

“In a word, no, we can’t.”

“I knew Betsy pretty well. Maybe I can help you.”

Sammi Jo’s voice turned stern. “Just how ‘pretty well’ did you know her, Mister Reynolds Kyle?”

“I’m just saying I went to high school with her. We never dated or anything. You can stop turning jealous. Green doesn’t become you.”

“That sounds much better, and I look fine in green as I do in all colors but polka dot and tie-dye. Did she carry on the affair with Chad Jones like the gossip ran?”

“I don’t know it for a fact. My personal read is they messed around at least once, which gave rise to the rumor. Somebody probably saw them out catting about together. The word got around, and we know how the gossip spreads in our small town.”

“The cell phones were ringing everywhere at once.”

“Exactly. Anyway, Chad fancies himself a ladies’ man.”

“I suppose in his way Chad is a charming fellow.”

Reynolds spoke angrily. “Say what, Sammi Jo?”

“I mean a few ladies would find him appealing, but I’m not one of them since I’m already in a swell relationship with my boyfriend Reynolds.”

“That’s better, and don’t you forget it.”

“It was a joke. Where’s your sense of humor? Have you got anymore information to give me on Betsy?”

“Right off, I can tell you she was built like a—”

“Uh, let’s keep our attention centered on her personality, quirks, and details of that nature.”

“Betsy had the book smarts to make the honor roll, and she did a bunch of cool stuff after school. She dressed nicely, nothing too flashy or provocative. She always had a smile with a cheerful word to offer you. All told, she was a stylish, classy young woman I was proud to call a classmate. What else can I say?”

“It sounds like to me you’ve already said a mouthful about her.”

“Hey, you asked me the question.”

“So I did. Does anything else striking come to mind?”

“At one time I remember she lugged around a pocketbook big as a postal carrier’s mailbag.”

“Many women like to do that. I can’t be bothered with keeping up with one, but that’s just me. What made you think of her pocketbook?”

“Herbie O’Malley told me she carried a handgun inside it.”

“How would Herbie know something like that? Was he a purse snatcher?”

“They dated for a short while before she started going out with Troy, and she joked about it with Herbie.”

“This story is starting to get interesting. Did Herbie see her handgun?”

“She took it out and flashed it around. It wasn’t a lady’s peashooter.”

“It was probably a toy cap pistol she used as a prop in case she got into trouble, and she had to bluff her way out of it.”

“Herbie thought so, too, until she pulled the trigger. The loud bang left his ears ringing for days. The bullet hole she shot in the floorboard of his car freaked him out. Needless to say, it wasn’t too long after her crazy gun stunt they broke up.”

“Betsy Sweet was just too much woman for Herbie O’Malley to handle.”

Reynolds had a throaty chuckle. “Even so, Betsy Sweet couldn’t hold a candle to you.”

“You ain’t seen nothing yet. I just got warmed up, and the best is still to come.”

“Be easy there, Sammi Jo. I’ve got no plans to be anywhere else because I like it fine right where I am.”

“That’s good to hear. Thanks for the helpful information. I’d better go now. Isabel and Alma are probably wondering if I forgot them. Before you ask, I’ll be sure to give you a ring the minute after we wrap up Betsy’s murder mystery.”

“The handgun she had was a Luger. It just flew into my head.”

Sammi Jo’s heart skipped a beat. “Where did she get the Luger, and why did she feel it was necessary to carry it in her pocketbook?”

“She could’ve picked up the Luger at a gun show or pawn shop. The nicest ones become collectors’ items, but the odd one turns up now and then for sale even on Craigslist. They aren’t cheap, but she could negotiate the price down if the seller needed the money really bad.”

“That still leaves us the why part unanswered.”

“I can only speculate. Was Betsy Sweet a gun lover? Did she feel threatened or in danger? Did she get a thrill from packing the Luger? Who knows except her, and she’s not going to tell anybody from where she is now.”

“I reckon not.”

“Hey, I’m running late. I’ll be seeing you.”

“Bye,” Sammi Jo said.

Sammi Jo rejoined Isabel, Alma, and Eustis at the soda fountain where she reported the new information she’d gleaned from Reynolds.

Isabel cast a glance at Alma. “Your dog chasing his tail might well have stopped and is back in the hunt,” Isabel said.

“Woof,” Alma said.

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Chapter 23

“I admit to carrying just about everything in my pocketbook,” Alma said. “But a loaded handgun is too much. If Betsy thought going to the piney woods was that dangerous, she ought not to have driven out there alone.”

“Maybe she felt like she’d little choice but to go there alone,” Isabel said.

“Why did she feel so threatened?” Alma asked.

“I only wish I knew the answer to your question,” Isabel replied. “Something terrible happened after she parked and got out of her car.”

“Nobody would hear her screams for help that far away from civilization,” Sammi Jo said.

“We’ll ask Doris if she knew her daughter was armed,” Isabel said.

The three ladies stood in a cluster outside the locked door of the hardware store. Standing in the shade on Main Street felt warm but not muggy and hot. Eustis had had to remain behind to keep the pharmacy open since the townies got sick even on Sundays.

“What did Betsy’s killer do with her car?” Sammi Jo asked. “It along with her was never seen again.”

“Alma, how does a villain dispose of an unwanted car if pressed for time in one of the mysteries we read?” Isabel asked.

“Drive the unwanted car to a deep quarry lake or swamp,” Alma replied. “Put the car in neutral; give it a shove from a cliff or embankment; and stand clear. Kerplunk and there’s no more unwanted car.”

“The professional divers searched in those places,” Sammi Jo said.

“They weren’t thorough enough because her car is probably still submerged somewhere within driving distance of Quiet Anchorage,” Isabel said.

“Blaine must’ve stayed up late watching the ballgame and overslept this morning,” Sammi Jo said.

“I’ve been thinking about this,” Isabel said. “Blaine told us he deals almost exclusively in *new* firearms. We don’t need to see and talk to him again because he wouldn’t have sold the *used* Luger to Betsy. She must’ve gotten it from a different source.”

“Are there any pawn shops or gun stores that sell Lugers near us?” Sammi Jo asked.

“I haven’t been inside a pawn shop since Max and I lived on the boulevard,” Isabel replied. “Cecil had taken an interest in playing the alto sax, so we visited a pawn shop and bought him a secondhand instrument.”

“How did that gig turn out for Cecil and you?” Sammi Jo asked.

“Don’t ask,” Isabel replied.

“I’ve also been thinking,” Alma said. “Is it so important to trace down where Betsy got the Luger? Do we really care about knowing its source?”

“It’s a substantial lead we found, and I don’t want to give up on running it down,” Isabel replied.

“Our discovery Betsy carried the Luger opens up other avenues to explore,” Alma said.

“What’s your theory on why she carried the Luger?” Isabel asked.

Alma lowered her voice to a guarded murmur. “Blackmail,” she replied.

“What sort of blackmail have you got in mind?” Isabel asked.

“The old-fashioned badger game found in our mysteries only Betsy gave it a modern twist,” Alma replied.

“How might it work then?” Isabel asked.

Alma glanced back and forth along the sidewalk. “We should go where it’s more private than here on Main Street.”

“My apartment is right across the way,” Sammi Jo said, motioning with her hand. “You’re welcome to hang out there if you like.”

“I adore your ginger red gingham curtains,” Isabel said. “They’re so perky and lend your kitchen just the right homespun touch. Where did you get them?”

“Aunt Phyllis and I saw them on display at Walmart for thirty percent off,” Sammi Jo replied. “I broke my pledge to never buy anything there and bought the curtains because I also fell in love with them.”

“Nobody will hold it against you,” Isabel said. “Alma and I shop there all the time. Whether you like it or not, it’s the way it is now, so the frugal shoppers like us have to adapt to the modern times.”

“Reynolds poked fun at my gingham curtains, saying they look too frilly and girly,” Sammi Jo said.

Alma shook her head with a *tsk-tsk*. “The poor lad just doesn’t get it.”

“It’s been a struggle to train him, but I haven’t given up hope,” Sammi Jo said.

“That’s the right spunk to have,” Isabel said. “He’ll come around. Just give it a little more time.”

“How long did it take you to break in Max?” Sammi Jo asked. “Was it also like pulling teeth with him?”

Isabel laughed. “No, I had an easy time with Max. We exchanged rings when we made our engagement official. I received the sparkly diamond ring from him to glimmer on my finger.”

“Aw, that’s so sweet and romantic,” Sammi Jo said. “What ring did Max get from you?”

“Why, the big, shiny brass ring I put in his nose,” Isabel replied.

The ladies shared a conspiratorial laugh. Alma had a different memory about Isabel and Max’s engagement, but Alma said nothing and let Isabel enjoy the lighthearted moment.

Sammi Jo had served them each a tall glass of iced tea, but she’d no bear claws with Reynolds always raiding her kitchen. They sat around her kitchen table at the sunny window overlooking the drugstore entrance. As much as she loved having Isabel and Alma over, Sammi Jo nudged them back on the serious topics—blackmail and murder—they’d been discussing.

“Let’s say Betsy was playing the badger game. Who was her most likely mark?” Sammi Jo asked.

“We know Chad as the married fellow would be the perfect mark to blackmail,” Alma replied.

“How did the scenario work out as you envision it?” Isabel asked.

“After their one-time fling, Betsy confronted Chad with her blackmail demand,” Alma replied. “Either he paid her the money, or she ran and tattled to Esther. Maybe Betsy had some physical evidence like digital photos taken of them to hold over him. Anyway, she’d no way of knowing how he’d react, so she took along the Luger when they agreed to meet in the piney woods for his making the payoff.”

Her unsmiling face bleak, Isabel took a sip of the iced tea. “All right, give us the rest of the sordid business,” she said.

“Well, just suppose things didn’t go as Betsy planned,” Alma said. “Chad didn’t cave like she hoped, and he wasn’t ready to open his wallet. Instead, they exchanged harsh words. He threatened her with bodily harm, so she took out the Luger. He made a grab for it, and they tussled. The gunshot rang out, and she took the fatal bullet and died on the spot. Then he

carried out his methodical cover-up, beginning with burying Betsy's Luger where Petey Samson found it in the clearing."

"You make Betsy Sweet out to be a femme fatale straight out of a film noir," Isabel said.

"We're talking about blackmail and murder, Isabel, and not baking chocolate cupcakes or apple pies," Alma said. "We read all the time about how things can turn ugly and violent in our mysteries."

Isabel looked at Sammi Jo. "Betsy was a young woman like you are. Could she have done something as brutal and devious as Alma just described to us?"

"Under the right set of circumstances, I'm sure she could have," Sammi Jo replied. "What may've started out as a lark or game to Betsy quickly escalated into a far darker thing. Chad stood to lose more than she did. His professional reputation and marriage were at stake, and he wasn't just going to roll over for her. He knew she'd be returning to demand more blackmail money, so he realized he better nip it in the bud rather than let it go on and fester."

"Solving Betsy Sweet's murder—any murder, actually—is a ghastly affair," Isabel said half-aloud and perhaps more to herself than to Alma and Sammi Jo. "It's absolutely ghastly."

"We don't have to do everything by ourselves," Sammi Jo said. "There's plenty of help available, and we just have to ask for it."

"Don't forget I'm just putting out a theory," Alma said. "I might be off base, and something else entirely happened to Betsy."

"I've heard more than enough about murder theories," Isabel said. "Let's go check on Petey Samson back at the house."

"Count me in, too," Sammi Jo said. "I'll spend the day hanging out with you. Tomorrow I have to go back to work."

"Reynolds won't like that," Alma said.

"He'll be so busy whooping it up at the drag race track, he won't miss me," Sammi Jo said.

"You just can't compete when it comes to his race cars," Alma said.

"Oh, I'm still strapped into the driver's seat," Sammi Jo said. "And we go where I steer us."

Chapter 24

Blue, Willie, and Ossie, all wearing matching sunflower yellow Aloha shirts, sat on the wooden bench. It was several ticks shy of high noon on Sunday. Ossie hawked and spat on the sidewalk.

“Uh, Ossie, didn’t you see Corina’s new rules of etiquette sign?” Willie asked, pointing at it behind them.

Ossie turned and reviewed the new rules on the etiquette sign posted on the flower shop wall. “No spitting, no cussing, and no whistling are permitted,” he read. “Offenders will be banished from sitting on the rose petal red bench.” Ossie looked at his two friends. “Well, darn, gents, we can’t have any fun now,” he said.

“You just broke rule number one,” Willie said.

“You’d better watch your step, Blue,” Ossie said. “Willie is the new hall monitor.”

“I can see that,” Blue said.

“I’ve been curious about something since Betsy’s skeleton turned up,” Ossie said, looking at Willie. “If you’re such an observant fellow, why did it take you so long to observe it during all the time you were rambling around in the piney woods?”

“UFOs,” Willie replied.

“You’re going to have to do a lot better than that,” Ossie said.

“My eyes are always turned up scanning the dark heavens for the UFOs and not peering down at the ground looking for a pile of human bones,” Willie said.

“Now I’ve got my question for you,” Blue said. “When do you find the time to sleep if you’re up all night scouting the starlit skies for UFOs?”

“I’ll tell you but you can’t repeat it to anybody,” Willie replied. “Promise me?”

“Cross our hearts and hope to die we’ll never tell a living soul,” Ossie said while making an X-mark over his heart with his fingers.

“Okay, lean in closer before I whisper it to you,” Willie said.

Ossie and Blue did as asked.

“I am actually a space alien in a human guise,” Willie said with a straight face. “And we don’t need to get any sleep.”

“Yeah, and I’m Charles Atlas the bodybuilder,” Blue said, sitting back up. “On a serious note, Isabel and Alma are endeavoring to track down

where Betsy acquired her Luger.”

“I can’t speak to that but let’s consider the condition of the Luger,” Ossie said. “It’s so creaky and old I wonder if it even works.”

“You’re pretty creaky and old,” Willie said. “Do you still work?”

“On my good days, I work passably enough,” Ossie replied. “Blue, you should know all about Lugers since you own a pair of them.”

“My Lugers are strictly collectors’ items,” Blue said. “I even had the firing pins removed from them some years ago.”

“Have you accounted for them?” Ossie asked.

“My pair of Lugers are still snug as a bug in a rug inside my gun safe,” Blue replied.

“Okay, gents, who killed Betsy Sweet?” Ossie asked. “Who has her blood on their hands? Isabel and Alma will be coming to ask us.”

“My vote says the boyfriend did it,” Blue replied. “Troy Raft killed Betsy Sweet as certain as the Sparrow knocked off Cock Robin.”

“What motive did Troy have to murder Betsy?” Ossie asked.

“Maybe they got into a heated lovers’ quarrel that got out of control with deadly consequences,” Blue replied.

“Corina is working behind the counter,” Willie said. “Ask her if she heard whether Troy and Betsy had been fighting around the time she vanished.”

“No, just leave Corina alone,” Ossie said. “She might get the bright idea we should repaint our wooden bench. Painting it with this hideous rose petal red was traumatic enough.”

“We know a Luger handgun packs a lot of firepower,” Blue said. “An unloaded one weighs close to two pounds. Can a young woman like Betsy was grip much less fire a Luger with enough accuracy to defend herself?”

“I recently watched a film noir where Gloria Grahame holds a Luger,” Ossie replied.

“Yep, I remember seeing her with a Luger in *A Woman’s Secret*,” Blue said. “It also starred Maureen O’Hara.”

“Words fail me when it comes to describing Gloria Grahame,” Ossie said, wiping his wrist across his brow.

“She was hot as...well, I have to say words also fail me,” Willie said with a delicious shiver while fanning his flushed face with his hand.

“She was a glamorous actress, but the ravishing Maureen O’Hara was in a league of her own,” Blue said.

“You’re nuts, plains and simple,” Willie said.

“Those are fighting words,” Blue said. “Put up your dukes, Flash.”

“Hold on right there,” Ossie said. “I’m not getting into another scuffle with you two old birds over whom the best-looking actress was. Suffice it to say, the ladies were all beautiful and talented in their own special and unique way.”

“Hear, hear, I’ll raise a glass to toast that noble sentiment,” Blue said.

“What sort of a guy is Troy?” Willie asked. “Is he a violent, mean cuss?”

“Isabel reminded me that he worked for Blaine one summer, but he fired Troy,” Ossie replied. “He took a shine to the money in the register, and it’s hard to turn a profit when your employees are robbing you blind.”

“How long did Troy work for Blaine before he got wise to Troy’s theft?” Blue asked.

“If memory serves me, it was no longer than a fortnight,” Ossie replied.

“Fortnight,” Willie said, grinning at Ossie. “Where’s that found? Is it located near Fort Riley in Kansas?”

“Fortnight means two weeks for you high school dropouts,” Ossie replied. “At any rate, if Troy did murder Betsy, he kept it under wraps and hasn’t bragged about doing it. Does that sound like something he’d do?”

“No sir, not to me, it doesn’t,” Blue replied. “Troy likes his liquor, and he likes to brag about himself after he’s knocked back a couple.”

“On the other hand, he isn’t stupid enough to admit to committing murder even while he’s drinking in a bar,” Willie said.

“Didn’t Troy’s great-grandfather Armistead serve in the war?” Ossie asked. “Maybe he brought the Luger back when he shipped home and later it got passed along to Troy.”

“Armistead was a windbag,” Willie said. “I never believed half the claims he made. I’m certain he never saw any live combat as we did. He probably bought the Luger off a G.I. who’d picked it up while in Europe. I remember the Parisian street vendors were trading such war souvenirs for nylons and chocolates.”

“Getting back to Troy Raft, if he brought the Luger to the meeting with Betsy, why did he bury it after he shot her?” Ossie asked.

“He had to get rid of the incriminating Luger,” Blue replied. “Getting caught with it on him would’ve spelled his doom.”

“No defense attorney, not even one as whip-smart as our Dwight Holden, could get Troy off a murder charge with that kind of evidence against him,” Willie said.

“Were any ear witnesses nearby when the shot rang out?” Ossie asked. He and Blue looked at Willie.

“Don’t be looking at me,” he said. “I never go near the piney woods except after sunset. You don’t think I was close by on the morning when Betsy vanished. If I’d seen or heard anything, I would’ve reported it to Sheriff Fox back then.”

“You were tardy arriving here a few mornings,” Ossie said. “You told us you were just getting out of the piney woods from your previous night’s excursions.”

“So I have but I wasn’t out there the morning Betsy vanished,” Willie said. “You’ve got to believe me.”

“I think Willie is telling us the truth,” Blue said. “I remember the night before Betsy vanished we had thunderstorms.”

“So what if it did rain?” Ossie said.

“The UFOs never fly during inclement weather, so I couldn’t have been out in the piney woods,” Willie replied. “Don’t you listen to me when I tell my UFO stories?”

“I have a tendency to tune you out,” Ossie said. “It’s nothing personal, Willie, but the older I get the more my attention wanders.”

“I can relate,” Willie said. “I’m experiencing the same kind of mental drift.”

“Just eat your spinach, and you’ll be fit as a fiddle again,” Blue said.

Chapter 25

Sheriff Fox had an open murder case. He'd no idea on the culprit to arrest for it, and he was frustrated over how he should proceed. In the past when the homicides occurred, he'd identified who made for the most plausible suspect and arrested them. He often got it wrong after Isabel and Alma stepped in and proved the killer was somebody else. Their meddlesome habits got on his nerves, but they had the talent he lacked to ferret out the truth and solve the murders. He bemoaned how he was more deserving of their sleuthing smarts since he was the elected sheriff, and they were just a pair of retirees.

"You know what sticks in my craw?" he asked, peering at the row of three empty office chairs positioned in front of his desk where he sat. "Well, I'll tell you. Why did Isabel and Alma Trumbo wind up as the ace sleuths and not yours truly? It just isn't fair."

The empty office chairs did not attempt to reply.

"I know, I know," Sheriff Fox said, shifting in his chair. "I shouldn't sit here and complain about it since who'll listen to me if I do?"

Gaping at the empty office chairs, he let a span of silence go by and ended it with a sigh.

"Alma has a sharp tongue, and she doesn't mind when or where she uses it."

The empty office chairs remained mute as ever.

"I've got another beef with them since I'm airing out my grievances. They pamper an ill-mannered beagle. I keep forgetting his real name—I call him Cujo for obvious reasons—but he doesn't like me, and I sure don't like him either."

As before, the empty office chairs had no opinion to offer.

"I warned Isabel and Alma I enforce the town's leash law. The brute once tried to take a chunk out of my calf, and I won't stand for it. The next time it happens, I'm not letting them off with just a warning. I'm set to arrest Cujo and throw him in jail. That is if I can nab him."

The empty office chairs held their counsel.

Sheriff Fox continued his musing. "Isabel and Alma had better get it straight how I'm the town sheriff." He tapped his fingernail on the tin badge pinned above his shirt pocket. "The Quiet Anchorage voters have entrusted me to keep the law and order, and I aim to do just that."

The empty office chairs had only a silent response.

“Have I got clues on the Betsy Sweet homicide, you ask.” Sheriff Fox snorted. “All I have is a bag of moldy bones and a rusty, old Luger. They are useless as my pushing the crosswalk button at a street intersection.”

The empty office chairs stayed mum.

“What do I think of Sammi Jo Garner?” Sheriff Fox snorted even harder. “Don’t get me started. Just between you, me, and the coffeepot, I’d also like to lock her up and throw away the key.”

The door swung open, and Abigail entered the office. She had a bemused expression as she saw he was the only person in there.

“Yes, Abigail?” Sheriff Fox asked. “Is there something you want?”

“I overheard you talking in here, and I thought you were calling me,” Abigail replied.

Sheriff Fox pointed his finger at the cell phone lying next to his desk phone. “I just got off the line with Deputy Sheriff Bexley, and we were discussing the Betsy Sweet homicide.”

“You speak with a forked tongue, Sheriff. You didn’t have a phone pressed to your ear when I just now came through the door. Is the Betsy Sweet homicide making you act squirrely? Are you stressing out? I can understand why. You’re getting a lot of pressure from her mother Doris Sweet, the townie voters, and your boss the mayor.”

“I’m handling my official duties just dandy. There’s no reason for you to concern yourself about it.”

“But I am worried, Sheriff. I’m getting very worried. You need help, and I’m talking about lots of intensive help.”

Suspicious, Sheriff Fox’s upper lip twitched like a rabbit’s nose does. “What ‘intensive help’ do you mean?” he asked.

“You know full well who I’m talking about.”

“No.” Sheriff Fox wagged his head. “No.”

“They’re your only hope.”

“No.”

“They’re your only salvation at this point.”

“I can’t deal with them, not today. Do you hear me, Abigail?”

She’d already turned to exit the office. “Just take a deep breath, Sheriff. Everything is going to be all right.”

“Isabel and Alma are banned from my office. I will put my directive in writing if it’s necessary.”

“Judge Redfern has already put it in writing Isabel and Alma may visit you at the station house anytime it’s necessary. Shall I get her on the line for you to iron out this dispute?”

Hearing Judge Redfern’s name spoken rattled Sheriff Fox to the core. “That won’t be necessary,” he said. “Just get Isabel and Alma down here at their earliest convenience.”

“I’m right on it, Sheriff.” Abigail from the office entrance waved her hand out at the waiting area. “Please come in, Isabel and Alma. I apologize for the wait. Sheriff Fox was busy talking to his empty chairs and hasn’t been himself today.”

Before Sheriff Fox could react, Isabel and Alma strode in, closed the door, and occupied two of the three office chairs.

“Why are you talking to the empty chairs?” Alma asked.

“What’s bedeviling you so much?” Isabel asked.

“Murder,” Sheriff Fox replied. “Are you any closer to identifying who killed Betsy Sweet?”

“No, and we can see you aren’t either,” Isabel replied.

“We hoped you’d found something useful to give us,” Alma said.

“Nothing different or new has transpired since we last talked,” Sheriff Fox said. “It’s Sunday afternoon, and nothing will be open until tomorrow morning.”

“How convenient that is for the killer,” Alma said.

“And how inconvenient it is for us,” Isabel said.

“Let’s face it,” Sheriff Fox said. “This case might be the one you get skunked on. You shouldn’t feel too bad. Your winning streak was bound to be broken sometime.”

“Never,” Isabel said. Her hazel eyes flared at Sheriff Fox. “Alma and I keep on going, and we never give up,” she said.

Sheriff Fox stood up, went to the filing cabinet in the corner, and tugged out the top drawer. He removed a clear plastic envelope and laid it with care on the desktop. He flopped down in the chair.

“You brought me this Luger from the piney woods,” he said. “Even if it is the murder weapon, it isn’t worth a lick. Your taking it from the crime scene broke the chain of evidence gathering. The judge will toss it out before the murderer’s trial gets under way if we ever make it that far.”

“Oops,” Alma said.

“When Betsy went missing, did you bring in her boyfriend Troy Raft for questioning?” Isabel asked.

“I sent a deputy sheriff to Valerie’s place,” Sheriff Fox replied. “Troy said the stuff you’d expect to hear from him. He was just a kid, and they went out on dates as the kids do. We uncovered nothing indicating he had any involvement with Betsy’s disappearance, so we moved on in our police work.”

“Which deputy sheriff interviewed Troy?” Isabel asked.

“I sent Bexley to take care of it,” Sheriff Fox replied.

Mouths agape, Isabel and Alma gave Sheriff Fox incredulous looks.

“He’s taking criminal justice classes at the community college to get better as a cop,” Sheriff Fox said.

Isabel and Alma still couldn’t believe it.

“Look, I didn’t have anybody else available, so Deputy Sheriff Bexley went and handled it,” Sheriff Fox said.

“But we know he couldn’t find his cell phone if it had a blinking beacon on it,” Alma said.

“That’s not a nice thing to say about him,” Sheriff Fox said.

“It isn’t but Alma’s point is well taken,” Isabel said. “Let’s go over his police report, and maybe something new will surface from our review.”

“He didn’t write up a police report,” Sheriff Fox said.

“Was he too lazy or careless to do what’s so basic?” Isabel asked.

Sheriff Fox coughed to clear his throat. “Deputy Sheriff Bexley isn’t a Shakespeare when it comes to writing reports. He sometimes has trouble spelling his own name.”

“I’d love to insert a sarcastic comment here, but I’m too dumbfounded to think of one,” Alma said.

“It’s not a showstopper, Alma,” Isabel said, halfheartedly. “We’ll have to think of a way to work around it.”

“I can let you speak to Deputy Sheriff Bexley,” Sheriff Fox said. “He should remember what material he covered while he interviewed Troy.”

“Memories turn fuzzy and unreliable with the passage of time,” Isabel said.

“Nonetheless, it’s better than nothing,” Alma said. “Summon Deputy Sheriff Bexley to your office and let’s pick his brain.”

“Sure, I remember going out and questioning Troy,” Deputy Sheriff Bexley said. He’d sat down in the last empty office chair. Nobody brought up his aborted attempt on the backhoe to dig up the sisters’ flowerbed for the other bones before he went off fishing. “Troy acted pretty shook up about Betsy’s disappearance,” Deputy Sheriff Bexley said.

“Something doesn’t add up right,” Alma said. “Troy told us their relationship was a casual one at least as far as he was concerned.”

“My impression was he liked Betsy quite a bit,” Deputy Sheriff Bexley said. “They made for a handsome couple when I saw them together. I wish I had a girlfriend as nice as Betsy Sweet was. We’d pack an ice chest of root beer, buy us a box of nightcrawlers or a bucket of minnows, and go fishing every day I had off.”

“You sure know how to show a girl a good time,” Alma said.

“You’ll find yourself a nice lady who does that, I’m sure,” Isabel said as she gave Alma a warning glance.

“Did you ask Troy if he had any idea where Betsy might have gone if she left Quiet Anchorage?” Alma asked.

Deputy Sheriff Bexley furrowed his forehead as he dug back into the recesses of his memory bank. “No, because we only spoke for a few minutes about Betsy. After Troy said he had nothing to give me, we talked about other stuff.”

“That was it?” Sheriff Fox glared at his deputy sheriff. “A young lady goes missing, and you only give it your cursory attention. What are they teaching you in those criminal justice classes?”

The chastised Deputy Sheriff Bexley said nothing.

“What topics did you discuss with Troy after you completed your official business with him?” Isabel asked.

“You know, just the usual guy things,” Deputy Sheriff Bexley replied. “Let’s see, we covered baseball, cars, and hunting.”

“Hunting, you say.” Isabel glanced at Alma. She caught the signal. Her older sister had something. “Does Troy like to go hunting?” Isabel asked.

Deputy Sheriff Bexley shrugged. “He told me he went squirrel hunting down the road from Ray Burl’s Cape Cod. Doesn’t Sammi Jo own it now?”

“Yes, she does,” Isabel replied. “Does Troy own any firearms?”

Deputy Sheriff Bexley shrugged again. “I didn’t think it was important to ask him. He uses a small gauge shotgun or a .22 rifle with a

scope if he's bagging squirrels.”

Sheriff Fox looked down at the Luger on his desktop. “Are you also growing curious if Troy owns this Luger?”

“Very much so,” Isabel replied. “Troy should know how to shoot a Luger if he's an experienced hunter who is familiar with handling firearms.”

“I'm surprised he feels enough get-up-and-go to be a hunter,” Sheriff Fox said. “He's never moved out of his mom's house.”

“Why should he move out?” Deputy Sheriff Bexley asked. “He's an only kid, and his mom Valerie gives him everything he's ever wanted on a silver platter.”

“In other words, Troy is spoiled,” Isabel said.

“That's a fair characterization,” Sheriff Fox said. “But it doesn't make him a murderer. If I can tie this Luger back to him, I'll have all the proof I need to arrest him.”

“You already said the Luger is tainted evidence based on how we collected it,” Isabel said. “Which means, Alma, there's the likely chance of Troy getting away with murder, and it's our fault.”

“But only if he killed Betsy, that is,” Alma said.

“Hang on to the Luger,” Isabel said. “You never know. It might still come in handy. Meantime, Alma and I will get cracking again.”

“Where are you off to next?” Sheriff Fox asked.

“Eddy's Deli,” Alma replied. “I'm thirsty for another tall glass of iced tea. Isabel, are you also ready?”

“No, I'm good,” Isabel replied. “We'll have to postpone taking our iced tea break, however. The sleuthwork is piling up on us.”

“Fine with me,” Alma replied, looking anything but fine about it.

Chapter 26

Monday dawn broke over Quiet Anchorage with the splendid sunrise painting a picture worthy of putting on the front of a postcard. The night insects shrilling their jittery noise had given way to the jazzy birdsong at daybreak. The quarter moon, pearly white, had slipped from the sky as quietly as Betsy Sweet had vanished from Quiet Anchorage on one such morning three summers ago.

Alma was just back from having walked Petey Samson. He'd barked for no apparent reason. Every three or four paces, he stopped, raised his muzzle, and barked. She felt as if she'd gone out on a foxhunt with the barking hounds leading her on the chase. His disruptive behavior left her muttering indelicate language. She resolved tomorrow morning would be Isabel's turn to walk him, and she could deal with the angry townies awakened by his barks.

Isabel had gotten up. They wanted to get a jump on what looked to be a long Monday since their Sunday hadn't yielded any results. They'd sleuthed all day and even missed attending church worship. Their tubby pastor with the sweet tooth would be dropping by their house out of concern to see if everything was okay. He timed his knock on the front door to coincide when they sat down to iced tea and bear claws.

Alma saw where Isabel had taken out the Scrabble game box and set it on the tabletop. She knew they'd agreed not to play it until after they'd finished up with solving Betsy Sweet's murder case. Before Alma could deliver her lecture, Isabel put up a hand telling Alma to halt.

"It's necessary to take a time out and play Scrabble," Isabel said. "I couldn't sleep worth a flip last night, and I need the distraction."

"We haven't eaten breakfast," Alma said. "I worked up an appetite from walking the noisy Petey Samson."

"Was he woof-woofing at the songbirds again? I thought I heard his cute bark."

"Is that his problem? The dog likes to bark at the songbirds chattering away. That's easy to fix. Just go out with him extra early before the songbirds have awakened. That way it'll be no songbirds singing, and no bad dog barking."

"I'll get up early and take him out tomorrow morning."

“Now if we have even the slimmest hope of smoking out the killer, we better stay focused and don’t slack off for one minute even for playing a game of Scrabble. If we blow it on this case, we’ll have to live with it for the rest of our lives.”

“Since you put it that dramatic way, I’ll have to agree. Playing Scrabble will come after we score our victory.”

“Most folks toast their victories with champagne but not us. We do it over Scrabble.”

“Since I was wakeful as a hoot owl last night, I’m rereading an Agatha Christie oldie. Where are your bookmarks found?”

“I’m alternating between reading a Dorothy B. Hughes and Dolores Hitchens paperback.”

“Pass them along to me because I want to read them, too. Who have you got on deck to read?”

“I’ve got Leslie Egan and more Dr. Suess lined up.”

“Just pass along the Leslie Egan to me then.”

“I noticed the books in the library are dusty.”

Isabel glanced at Alma. “Then why don’t you use the feather duster and give them a going over?”

“I can’t do that, Isabel. The first thing you know I’ll run across a mystery I’m interested in and pull it out to start reading. I won’t stop until I get to the end.”

“Well, I’ll do the same thing, so the library will remain dusty for the time being.”

Isabel’s cell phone played a Charlie Parker sax riff. She identified who it was from the caller I.D. display and whooped out in surprise.

“Is the Virginia Lottery calling us?” Alma asked, hopeful.

“No, it’s Mr. O,” Isabel replied.

“There’s a blast from the past. What could he want this time?”

“Money: what else?”

Isabel greeted Mr. Oglethorpe from the Richmond office. He was the state bureaucrat responsible for licensing the private investigators in the Commonwealth of Virginia, and he was a stickler where everything had to be done by the book.

“Isabel, we haven’t communicated in so long, and I thought I’d take out a few minutes before I leave for the office to catch up,” Mr. Oglethorpe said. “Are you and Alma staying busy as bees in your retirement?”

“Quite happily, yes, and thank you for asking. We’re just planting marigolds, eating bear claws, and sipping iced tea.”

“Good, good. You haven’t dug up any new murder cases, have you?”

Well..., Isabel thought. Since she rarely told a lie, she did her best to tap dance around his question. “Of course, we know private eyes don’t touch murder cases as you’ve reminded us I don’t know how many times,” she replied.

“I’m just doing my job. Moving on to my second reason for calling, I noticed from our database you let your private investigator license lapse. How did that happen?”

Isabel decided to pass the buck. “Alma will cover the matter with you since it’s her department and not mine. Hold on, please, while I get her.” Isabel took down her cell phone from her ear.

“I don’t want to spar with Mr. Oglethorpe anymore than you do,” Alma said, her voice kept low.

“It’s too late for singing that tune,” Isabel said. “I already told Mr. O you’ll speak to him.”

“Stop mincing words,” Alma said. “You know I’m a smoother liar than you’ll ever be is why you’re foisting him off on me. You just don’t want to tell him we’re up to our necks with investigating a murder.”

“It’s called teamwork, Alma,” Isabel said.

“Oh, shush up and hand me the phone, Miss Goody Two-Shoes,” Alma said. “I’ll take care of doing it like I always have to do.”

Isabel gladly relinquished the cell phone to Alma.

“Hi, Mr. Oglethorpe,” Alma said on the cell phone.

“Hello, Alma,” Mr. Oglethorpe said. “I should first tell you I just overheard every word you and Isabel said.”

Alma made an “oops” face. “These cell phones are more sensitive than we realized,” she said. “We’ll have to be more careful when we’re using them.”

“I have to tell you I’m terribly disappointed. I thought I’d cured you of your bad habit to investigate murders. That’s a big no-no.”

“We just can’t avoid doing it, Mr. Oglethorpe. Our town sheriff is a boob, and he needs a lot of oversight from us.”

“Nevertheless, the rules expressly forbid you from offering anybody your professional investigative services on a homicide case.”

Alma perked up with a relieved smile. “What you just said lets us off the hook.”

“I said no such thing, and I cannot permit any exceptions to the rule, even for the boob sheriffs.”

“But we aren’t professional private investigators.”

Mr. Oglethorpe scoffed. “Don’t be handing me that malarkey again, Alma. Of course by this time you must be professionals. Nobody with a sane mind would be a private eye for the fun of it. The profession is too demanding and grueling. Most of the private eyes burn out after a year or two on the job and move on to less stressful careers like becoming firefighters or rodeo clowns.”

“Isabel and I can’t get enough of sleuthing.”

“Stop pulling my leg.”

“I’m being nothing but serious with you. We’re the happiest when we’re out with our noses poked in somebody’s business.”

“Nobody else I know in the private eye profession feels that way. I urge you to seek mental counseling at once.”

Alma laughed. “It’d do us no good. Isabel and I are too set in our ways. We’ll remain a pair of snoops until we’re pushing up daisies.”

Chapter 27

Sammi Jo was having one of those Mondays where her mossy brain refused to cooperate so she could get on with her work. She'd spent the weekend sleuthing on the Betsy Sweet murder case, and Sammi Jo thought it was a lot more exciting and rewarding than her day job. She sat stuffing the monthly bills she'd printed out into the business envelopes to mail out later when she made her daily run to the post office.

She had Mary Chapin Carpenter belting out "Passionate Kisses" on the radio. The up-tempo county song brought a lump to Sammi Jo's throat because Mary's heartfelt lyrics about love, luck, and life hit the nail square on the head.

A knock came at the office door. Dreading having to deal with another disgruntled customer, Sammi Jo looked up from the sealed envelopes she'd neatened into a stack. Her visitor wasn't a customer. She turned down the radio volume.

"Hey there," she said. "Long time no see. You must be slumming by coming to this side of town."

The tall, lanky young man had stopped at the self-storage rental facility. He'd also shaved and gotten a haircut since the last time she saw him.

"Hey there, yourself," Troy Raft said, giving her a tight-lipped smile and a curt nod. "What's up with you?"

"You just rapped on my office door," Sammi Jo said. "I should ask you that question. Did you come to see us about renting a storage unit? Is it for your mom? I have a few clean empties I can take you out to show. We'll return to the office and fill out the forms. Pay me the fees, and you'll be good to go. Does sound like a plan to you?"

"Me rent a storage unit?" Troy laughed a little. "No, I'm all set, thanks just the same. I'm keeping my stuff at my mom's place. She's letting me stay there until I can get back on my feet."

"I heard you hit a rough patch. It happens to the best of us."

"You can help me turn things around by doing me a favor."

Sammi Jo had an idea where Troy was taking their conversation as she noticed he wore clean jeans and a fresh shirt. His footwear was the construction boots like the ones Reynolds wore when he was doing the maintenance work at his drag race track.

“How exactly do you figure I can help you, Troy?” Sammi Jo asked.

“I’m after landing a good paying job with benefits,” Troy replied.

“Well, they don’t just grow on trees to pick like apples, you know.”

“I’ve got references if you need to check them and a reliable car.”

She doubted if his references were legitimate since she knew he’d never worked anywhere for more than a couple of weeks.

“You’re speaking to the wrong person,” she said. “Wilbur Hathaway is the owner, and I’m just the worker bee around here.”

“Wilbur must put a lot of trust and confidence in you. Are you responsible for locking and unlocking the front gate?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a key to the front gate.”

“Then I must be talking to the right person. I’m good with my hands, and I don’t mind getting them dirty the first thing in the morning.”

“How serious are you about finding a full-time job?”

“I’ve been going around and putting in job applications at the different places. I don’t have a résumé completed yet, but I can field any questions you may have. I’m a jack of many trades from my having done a lot of different things during my career.”

“Let’s cut to the chase. Didn’t Blaine fire you for stealing money from his cash register?”

Troy put on a gosh-darn smile. “That was just a misunderstanding. I thought I’d asked him if it was all right if I *borrowed* the eighty dollars, and he said okay. Next thing I know, he’s giving me a hard time, and so I quit and walked away with my chin held up. If he was that unhappy with my work, I decided it would be the best for us both if I found a change in scenery.”

“Your story differs considerably from the way Blaine tells it,” Sammi Jo said. “Blaine and Wilbur are fishing buddies.”

“I don’t know why Blaine has got it in for me. Mom paid him back the money, so that should have ended it.”

“Color me curious. Why are you so ambitious all the sudden? What motivation prodded you to get cleaned up and go job hunting?”

“I’m looking for a job and that’s what counts.”

“Did Valerie threaten to boot you out if you didn’t earn a paycheck? Is that what she did?”

“We had a hearty discussion, and the topic came up.”

“Honestly, Troy. Somebody is always there for you. They bail you out when you mess up, and you don’t learn a thing from it when you go back and do it again. Look at me. I lost both of my parents, and I got on with my life.”

“Skip the lecture. Either you’ve got a job for me, or you don’t.”

“You were looking when you stepped in here, and you’ll still be looking when you step out.”

“Thanks for nothing, Sammi Jo. Here I thought you and I were from the same side of the tracks, and that counted for something.”

“Was Betsy Sweet also from the same side of the tracks?”

“How did she become part of our conversation?”

“I just made her part of it. You got a problem with that?”

Troy raised his chin. “Betsy and I had a good thing going until she fouled it up.”

“Murder has a funny way of fouling up people’s lives.”

“I’d no reason to want Betsy dead. I’m not ashamed to admit she paid our way since I was between prospects.”

“Did you own any firearms when Betsy disappeared?”

“You mean like the Luger I heard you dug up in the piney woods?”

Troy brayed out in a wheezy laugh. “If I own anything of value, I either pawn it or sell it. I sure don’t go out there and bury it in the ground.”

“Somebody told me Betsy carried a Luger in her pocketbook.”

Troy laughed again. “Who told you that tall tale? Betsy never had a Luger. She wouldn’t have known what to do with it if she had it. She’d never hurt a fly.”

“Who killed her, Troy? A thinking fellow like you must’ve formed a notion based on your suspicions.”

“If I were the town sheriff, I’d go after Chad or Esther Jones. He’s the womanizer, and she’s the bat crazy jealous wife. If I had to pick one or the other, I’d say it’s Esther. I can tell you this much. I never saw or spoke to Betsy on the morning she went missing or had anything to do with her death.”

“Did you know she was also seeing Chad while she was dating you?”

“That’s what I heard everywhere I went in town.”

“Did you ever ask Betsy about it?”

“We talked once or twice, naturally.”

“And...?”

“And I didn’t come here to get this third degree. I need a job. Let me fill out an application, and you can give it to Wilbur.”

“He’ll just reject it out of hand. We’re finished speaking. I’ve got lots of fun tasks to wind up before I can leave for the day.”

“You should feel lucky you even have a job to go to everyday.”

“Before you turn around and walk back out the front gate, I have some parting words of advice. Between putting in your job applications and working on your résumé, you’d better get your story straight about your relationship with Betsy. I’ve got a feeling Sheriff Fox will be asking you about it very soon.”

“Read my lips: I did not kill Betsy Sweet,” Troy said.

“Yeah, I got you the first time,” Sammi Jo said. “You were deeply in love with her, especially when she had the money to spend on buying you a good time.”

“Speaking of which, can I borrow a sawbuck from you for gas? I’ll pay you back when I get my job.”

“Goodbye, Troy.”

“You’re a hard woman, Sammi Jo.”

“I’m just a hard-working woman who’s got no more time for the likes of you.”

“Adios, Sammi Jo. I’m going home where I’ll wait for the callbacks on my job offers,” Troy said.

“Yeah, that sounds like a nifty plan,” Sammi Jo said. “Just don’t hold your breath while you’re waiting at home.”

Chapter 28

“Isabel, you’ve got to come and see this,” Alma said who stood at the picture window in the living room.

“What out there has gotten you so excited?” Isabel asked as she drew up beside Alma.

Her raised arm indicated out the glass pane into the yard. “Take a look out by the flowerbed,” Alma said.

Isabel peered outdoors. “The sparrows are using where we dug in the dirt for their dust bath.”

“Don’t you feel rewarded for your endeavors?”

Isabel laughed. “I’m delighted we could be of service to them.”

“We do what we can even if it’s for the birds.”

“Sammi Jo just called me up.”

“What’s doing with her?”

“Troy came to her office and said he was looking for a job.”

“Something or somebody has spurred him to act. The young man we spoke to would never get up enough gumption to go job hunting.”

“She said Valerie had read her son the riot act about finding a job. Anyway, Troy swore again he didn’t kill Betsy, but his protests of innocence didn’t win over Sammi Jo.”

Alma turned back to the window and watched the sparrows whipping up a miniature dust storm. “I’m now more inclined to believe Troy is telling us the truth. He’s a few disreputable things, but a murderer isn’t one of them.”

“Why do you feel that way?”

“We know the planning and carrying out a murder like Betsy’s requires a lot of initiative and energy Troy simply doesn’t have.”

“I grant you he doesn’t seem to be a ball of fire.”

“He’s just what he told us: a good-time Charlie panhandling for the money to buy his booze. Who else might be the killer besides Troy?”

“Esther strikes me as a suspect. She has the right fiery temper and steely resolve to plot and pull off a murder. I’ve read a few mysteries where the jealous wife slays her husband’s lover.”

Alma nodded. “The jealous, enraged wife—Esther—reaches her breaking point and decides she’s not going to take it anymore. She acts on her savage passions and lashes out to murder her husband’s mistress—

Betsy—to salvage what’s left of their marriage. I can see those dynamics playing out in this case.”

Isabel deliberated over it while she also watched the energetic sparrows churn up their little dust bowl.

“Then let’s take it one step further,” Isabel said. “Did husband and wife conspire to do in Betsy after Esther learned about his cheating on her?”

“Esther and Chad may’ve been in cahoots. If she thought he could stay quiet and keep his cool, she might approach him with the idea to do in Betsy.”

“On the other hand, if she thought he’d easily crack under pressure from the police, she’d leave him out of her plotting Betsy’s murder.”

“We don’t know enough about Chad’s personality to make the call.”

“Then let’s do something more practical. We need to go to the grocery store.”

“Have you drawn up the grocery list of what we need like butter, milk, and eggs?”

“The grocery list is magnetized to the fridge door.”

“Did you remember to add Petey Samson’s doggie treats? We’re going through them at a pretty fast clip.”

“I always write down his doggie treats at the top of every grocery list.”

Alma smiled. “We’ll also be sure to make a stop at Dolly’s Bakery for an order of her bear claws to go.”

“We’re getting to be her two best customers,” Isabel said.

Chapter 29

“Fancy our bumping elbows with the Trumbo sisters at the grocery store,” Chad said. “Isn’t that something, Esther?”

“Their lives are almost as exciting as ours,” Esther replied.

“Enough with the sarcasm, dear wife,” Chad said. “We agreed to call a truce during the week of our vacation.”

“My apologies, dear husband,” Esther said. “It comes from the force of habit.”

Alma traded raised eyebrow glances with Isabel. They’d stopped with their shopping cart at the refrigerated eggs display case. Isabel held the opened gray cardboard egg carton while she and Alma checked each egg for cracks. Isabel had already rejected the leaky eggs in one egg carton. She thought if the store used see-through egg cartons, it’d save them a little shopping time.

Chad and Esther had turned the corner of the aisle. He pushed their shopping cart. One or both of them liked diet root beer, celery, and cottage cheese as seen among the grocery items.

“The Trumbo sisters are our whip-smart lady sleuths,” Chad said.

“Why, I bet they’re investigating the Betsy Sweet murder,” Esther said.

“No bet since I already know for a fact they are,” Chad said.

“Could they be in search of clues at the eggs display case?” Esther asked.

“Not unless Betsy’s murderer is a laying hen,” Alma replied.

“Nonetheless, you are correct,” Isabel said. “We’re looking into Betsy’s homicide.”

“You dug up her leg bone while you were planting marigolds in your flowerbed,” Esther said. “My flower gardening is never as eventful as yours turns out to be.”

“That’s because you never work in our yard,” Chad said. “I take care of the mowing, raking, and weeding.”

“You’re such a Boy Scout, Chad,” Esther said. “Would you like a merit badge for your meritorious efforts?”

“Just winning a little respect from you would do me nicely,” Chad replied.

“We’ve got some more shopping to do,” Alma said. “And it sounds as if you have a few issues to get sorted out.”

“How astute of you to notice,” Esther said. “No wonder you’re such sharp-eyed detectives.”

Isabel closed the egg carton with a snap and looked at Esther. “We also notice you got up on the wrong side of the bed, Esther,” Isabel said.

“I was also going to point that out,” Alma said. “You stopped to speak to us in case you don’t remember.”

“Yes, so we did,” Esther said. “It’s boorish to be sniping at you like I’ve been doing, and I should apologize for it.”

“This bloody business about Betsy’s murder has gotten under everybody’s skin once more, and everybody is left on edge,” Chad said.

“The worst part is Sheriff Fox never exposed and arrested her killer,” Alma said, gazing at the Joneses to gauge their reactions.

“After all this time, her physical remains have come to light,” Chad said.

“The tale I heard was creaky, old Willie Moccasin tripped over her bones out in the piney woods,” Esther said. “He was probably so stunned he almost swallowed his set of false teeth.”

“No, Willie is a tough old bird,” Alma said. “Plus, he still has most of his original teeth.”

“He’s one of our most loyal friends in town,” Isabel said.

“I ran into Doris Sweet while I was coming out of Clean Vito’s,” Esther said. “Did you know she returned from Florida? Anyway, she told me about Russell’s death from his construction accident. Life down there hasn’t treated her any kinder than it did here. First, she lost Betsy, and then it was Russell. Tragedy comes in threes, as the old adage goes. I just hope it doesn’t get to Doris the same way.”

“Did she bring up Betsy’s murder?” Isabel asked.

“She just told me she’s putting her faith in Sheriff Fox to make it right,” Esther replied.

Chad laughed. “She’s in for a letdown if that’s what she’s banking on. Sheriff Fox doesn’t have the bloodhound instincts to track down the killer.”

“That remains to be seen, now doesn’t it?” Isabel said. “Have either of you had any reason to go out to the piney woods?”

“I never have any cause to be anywhere near the desolate spot,” Esther replied. “I have a contact allergy to pinesap that gives me big, ugly

rashes like poison ivy does and itches like crazy.”

“I haven’t been over that way in I don’t remember how many years,” Chad replied.

“Why do you think Betsy went there on the morning she was last seen alive by her parents?” Isabel asked.

“Oh, come off it, Isabel,” Esther replied. “Don’t be so naïve about it. You must know why Betsy made the trip to the piney woods.”

“Why don’t you fill us in on what you think you know?” Isabel asked.

“The twisty gravel road leading into the piney woods has always been a popular lovers’ lane,” Esther replied. “Maybe your generation didn’t use it, but every generation since your day knows what goes on out there, especially on the summer nights when the moon is full, and the ripe honeysuckle is blooming on the fence.”

“Are you speaking as somebody who has parked on the moonlit lovers’ lane?” Alma asked.

“We’ve never done such a tawdry thing,” Esther replied.

“Chad had a rumored affair with Betsy,” Alma said.

“That old rumor is nothing but a big, fat lie,” Esther said before Chad could deny it again. “Look, if I thought for one second Chad was unfaithful, we’d be talking about a second murder, and I’d be left as the new widow standing here.”

“Why did Betsy’s physical remains turn up in the piney woods?” Isabel asked.

“Elementary, my dear Isabel,” Esther replied with a haughty smirk. “Her sleaze of a boyfriend Troy Raft met her there, killed her, and buried her dead body.”

“What motive did he have to take her life?” Isabel asked.

Esther shrugged. “Who can say except him? It may’ve begun as a young lovers’ quarrel that heated up, their emotions ran high, and the next events went terribly wrong.”

“Is that what you shared with Sheriff Fox?” Isabel asked.

“We told him we never had any contact with Betsy aside from the occasional random encounter around town,” Chad replied. “Regardless of what the rumors accuse me of doing with her.”

“Why should Chad and I be worried?” Esther said. “We’ve done nothing wrong to keep hidden.”

“You have no secrets to keep then,” Alma said.

“Well, I know there’s no credible evidence of any infidelity or a murder found in our lives,” Esther said.

“We’re so squeaky clean the townies can hear us coming and going,” Chad said.

Isabel smiled as she put the egg carton into their shopping cart with the bananas and doggie treats. “We should be running along now,” she said. “It was nice seeing and talking to you both. Have a safe and fun vacation.”

“Good luck on helping Sheriff Fox track down Betsy’s killer,” Esther said, her pitch-black eyes riveted on the sisters. “You’ll have your hands full while you’re doing it.”

“Just the same, we’ll be successful,” Alma said.

Isabel and Alma left the Joneses. After the sisters turned several aisles over at the one lined with the shelved soup cans, Isabel kept her voice at a confidential murmur.

“Which of the Joneses do you think is Betsy’s killer, Chad or Esther?” she asked.

Slowing their shopping cart, Alma didn’t hesitate to respond. “If I was a card player, I’d bet the house limit on Esther.”

“I know her penetrating black eyes are the right match for a killer’s,” Isabel replied.

“She does have scary dark eyes,” Alma said with a shudder. “I won’t forget them anytime soon boring into us.”

Chapter 30

“Aren’t my flowers breathtaking marvels?” Mrs. Chisholm said.

“Uh-huh,” Alma replied, her tone the irritated one.

“I swear I’m a natural born green thumb.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Not everybody has the talent to grow such dazzling flowers as I do.”

“Uh-huh.”

Isabel could tell Alma was reaching the limit of her patience with their octogenarian neighbor Mrs. Chisholm who resided on the next block. They’d been out walking Petey Samson who tugged on the leash in Isabel’s hand to chase after the blue jays and chipmunks when they stopped to chat. Slightly stoop-shouldered but her eyes sharp and alert as ever, Mrs. Chisholm smiled.

“How are your flowers faring this summer?” she asked Alma.

“We’ve had the worst possible luck by planting our marigolds,” Alma replied.

“I don’t wonder. The marigolds are just dainty flowers,” Mrs. Chisholm said. “However, my zinnias make a bold floral statement.”

“Did you hear my cell phone go off?” Isabel asked, pawing through her pocketbook for it.

“I was too engrossed discussing flowers with Mrs. Chisholm to notice if it did,” Alma replied.

“Here it is,” Isabel said. She greeted her caller and beetled her eyebrows at Alma. “Hello there, Sheriff Fox,” Isabel said before he told her what he wanted. She said goodbye and hung up.

“Roscoe just received the preliminary results on the Betsy Sweet autopsy,” Isabel said. “He wants to see us at our earliest convenience.”

“We’ll take Petey Samson straight home and go hear what he has to say,” Alma replied. “It’s been a treat talking to you, Mrs. Chisholm.”

“Thank you,” Mrs. Chisholm said. “Don’t forget to keep your marigolds watered throughout the summer.”

“Thanks for the flower gardening tip,” Alma said. “I knew we had to be doing something wrong.”

“Is Roscoe in his office?” Isabel asked Abigail seated at her workstation with her laptop turned on. Isabel and Alma had just seconds

ago hurried into the station house after parking their car on the front street.

“Yes, he is,” Abigail replied. “He’s been expecting you.”

“Has he been talking to his chairs anymore?” Alma asked. “Isabel and I are a little concerned about him.”

Abigail frowned. “He’s been chattering nonstop all morning behind his closed office door. I ask him if everything is okay in there, and he shouts at me to mind my own beeswax. Something has sent him into a sky-high tizzy.”

“He told us he received the preliminary results on the Betsy Sweet autopsy,” Isabel said. “They must be what have gotten him so churned up.”

“Please do whatever you can to calm him down,” Abigail said. “I can’t get any of my work done if he keeps yelling at me to get him stuff.”

“You can rest easy,” Alma said. “Roscoe knows better than to raise his voice to Isabel and me.”

“You’re the only folks he doesn’t growl at because he does it all day long,” Abigail said. “I’ll let him know you’ve arrived.” She arose from the desk chair.

“Just stay in your seat, honey,” Alma said. “Nobody has to announce us to Roscoe Fox. We’re like family to him.”

Alma threw open the office door, and the sisters marched into his inner sanctum. He was a frightful sight. His hair was mussed, and his necktie undone. He sat at the desk while chewing on his thumbnail. He looked up from squinting at the computer monitor screen.

“Where in the devil have you ladies been dillydallying?” he asked. “I phoned you twelve-and-a-half minutes ago. You simply have to act quicker when I tell you it’s ASAP.”

“Don’t start in on us,” Alma said. “We got here, didn’t we?”

“Roscoe, let’s get right down to business,” Isabel said.

“Dr. Coe emailed me his findings,” Sheriff Fox said. “But first, you’d better sit down. What I’m about to say might leave you lightheaded, and I don’t want to have to carry you out lying flat on gurneys.”

“Alma and I are tough farm girls,” Isabel said. “Will you please get to whatever you want to say?”

“I’ve been growing moss on me while I’ve been waiting,” Alma said.

Sheriff Fox picked up the sheet of paper he’d printed out with the email message on it. He licked his lips. “Betsy Sweet’s cause of death was *not*—and I repeat was *not*—from a fatal gunshot wound she sustained. The

report makes no mention of a gunshot wound. Therefore, the Luger you pulled out of the ground in the piney woods does not pertain to this homicide case.”

“We’re no longer in trouble for tainting the evidence since the Luger isn’t evidence,” Isabel said.

“Should I return the Luger to you?” Sheriff Fox asked.

“That’s okay,” Isabel replied, shaking her head. “You can keep it.”

“What am I supposed to do with it?” Sheriff Fox asked.

Isabel and Alma just looked at him.

“Right, well, I most certainly am not going to do that,” Sheriff Fox said. “I’ll have Deputy Sheriff Bexley recycle it as scrap steel. Moving right along, can you guess how Betsy died?”

“Roscoe, we didn’t come here to play ‘Button, Button, Who’s Got the Button?’ with you,” Alma replied. “Just tell us what you’re reading in Dr. Coe’s remarks.”

Sheriff Fox coughed to clear his throat. “Betsy Sweet was stabbed to death,” he said, using his official sheriff voice. “Dr. Coe indicates the perpetrator used a thin, sharp bladed instrument such as a knife for the murder weapon.”

“You’re kidding us,” Alma said.

Sheriff Fox puffed out his chest, trying to appear authoritative but came off as self-important. “I never jest when it comes to murder, Alma Trumbo. I consider it the most heinous of crimes.”

“Oh, stuff it, Roscoe,” Alma said. “Everybody feels that way.”

“Where’s the knife?” Isabel asked.

Sheriff Fox set down the sheet of paper on the desktop. “Maybe it’s still up in the piney woods where I recovered Betsy’s physical remains. I have a suggestion to make. Why don’t you and Alma take Wonder Dog back out there and see if he can sniff out and track down the knife?”

“Are you poking fun at our pet again?” Alma asked.

“Have you taught him any better manners since the last time I visited your house?” Sheriff Fox asked.

“Petey Samson, not Wonder Dog, only growled at you,” Alma replied.

“I have to say I like Sheriff Fox’s suggestion we should return to the piney woods,” Isabel said. “Moreover, since he thought of the idea, he

should go with us. Having more eyeballs along will help during our search for the murder weapon now that we know what it is.”

“I’d love to join you, but I’ll be tied up in meetings for the rest of the day,” Sheriff Fox said.

“Roscoe, we’re in this stew together,” Isabel said. “Abigail is a capable admin, and she can hold down the fort while you’re away.”

“Besides, you’ll have your cell phone turned on,” Alma said.

“All right, I say enough of your browbeating me,” Sheriff Fox said. “Are you also bringing along Cujo?”

“You’re brimming over with good ideas,” Isabel replied. “You can ride in the rear seat with him. It’ll give you some much-needed bonding time. He’s a sweetie pie once you get to know him better.”

“I appreciate your kind offer,” Sheriff Fox said. “Just the same, I’ll drive my police cruiser and meet you out there. Our taking another look at the crime scene can’t hurt anything.”

“Sammi Jo is at work today,” Alma said. “Who can we get to pinch hit for her?”

“The Three Musketeers will go again if we ask them,” Isabel replied.

“We don’t need anybody else on our search team,” Sheriff Fox said. “The three of us should be enough to cover the search area adequately enough.”

“Actually, that’s the four of us,” Alma said. “You forgot to include Petey Samson in your head count.”

“If only I could forget him,” Sheriff Fox said. “You don’t know how much I wish I could.”

“Be nice to Petey Samson,” Isabel said. “You’re going to need him a lot more than he’s going to need you.”

Chapter 31

Isabel looked somber. “I don’t like the piney woods. Betsy didn’t realize the danger she was facing when she stopped in the clearing where her killer lay in wait. I believe she knew him or her, so she didn’t feel any fear until the chilling moment when the killer’s knife flashed into view.”

Alma shuddered as she also reimagined the horrific scene. “Is it safe for us to go out there now?”

“Sheriff Fox who is armed will be with us. Is he enough protection?”

“I’d feel a lot safer if Sammi Jo also went along like she did the last time.”

Isabel gave it a moment of reflection. “So would I. Give her a quick call and ask if she can break away for a couple of hours. Surely, Wilbur won’t mind it as long as she returns to work later.”

Alma contacted Sammi Jo and filled her in on their latest plan. “So, can you take a short break and go with us right now?” Alma asked.

“Give me ten minutes to finish up this job and get with you.”

“We’ll be seeing you then.”

“Don’t go anywhere without me,” Sammi Jo said.

“Remember to bring your pocketbook with your handgun you keep in it,” Alma said.

Sheriff Fox’s second visit to the piney woods left him grumpy. He now thought it amounted to a fool’s errand. They’d parked their respective vehicles well off the gravel road in the clearing. Lunch was less than an hour away, and his rumbling stomach made sure he didn’t forget it.

He pictured a foot-long chilidog heaped with pickle relish, hot brown mustard, and fresh chopped onions. The vision left his mouth drooling. He’d soon be ravenous enough to swap his sheriff’s badge for the chilidog. To make matters worse, each time he edged over too close to Petey Samson, the beagle growled, baring his fangs and raising his hackles. Alma gave Isabel an amused wink as he snarled again at the sheriff.

“Petey Samson is saying how much he likes you,” Alma said.

“Yeah, I can feel the love radiating off him,” Sheriff Fox said.

“Regardless, just keep him away from me.”

“I’ll be your bodyguard, Sheriff,” Sammi Jo said.

They gathered at the same spot where they had on their previous visit. The towering loblolly pine tree under which the bones of Betsy Sweet had lain partially shaded the clearing. Nobody had refilled the hole where Petey Samson had dug up the now irrelevant Luger. He stopped at the hole, gave it a disinterested sniff, and loped off toward the loblolly pine.

Sheriff Fox cursed the sweltering humidity and stifling heat under his breath as he used his wrist and wiped off his sweaty forehead. His office, where he'd be sitting right now if he weren't stuck out here, offered the comfort of air conditioning.

If he'd seen one crime scene, he'd seen them all. His gaze swept around them as he deliberated over their next step to take. He'd already released the crime scene after thoroughly processing it. There was no hiding place left to search for the knife. He drew a blank on how to proceed, but he knew Isabel and Alma were never short on ideas or shy about sharing them. He shooed away the black fly pestering his ear.

"Everybody put on their thinking caps," Isabel said. "First off, let's begin by pretending we're Betsy's killer."

"Let's pretend nothing of the sort," the irritable Sheriff Fox said. "I didn't leave my bug-free, cool sixty-five degree office to play charades with you ladies out here in the middle of the godforsaken boondocks."

"Roscoe, grin and bear it for a little while longer," Alma said. "Can you manage to do that?"

"It tries my soul and taxes my patience, but I can give you a few minutes of my time," Sheriff Fox replied.

"That's all we're asking from you so pipe down," Alma said. "Press on, Isabel."

"Let's further pretend we hold the knife, but we can't be doing it for a long time because somebody might drive by and see us with it," Isabel said. "Gazing about us in the clearing, where might we go and hide it that isn't a too obvious place?"

"Isabel, there's no knife to find here," Sheriff Fox said. "The killer either took it or returned later and retrieved it."

"More likely, the killer stuffed it under a rock or inside a hollow tree trunk," Sammi Jo said.

"Or the killer buried it like we found the Luger," Alma said.

"Or how about if the killer hid it under a mushroom or pine cone?" Sheriff Fox said.

“Roscoe, your cynicism while mildly entertaining isn’t constructive,” Isabel said. “Let’s start having you act more like a sheriff instead of a grumpy pants.”

“We should’ve left you at the station house and come out to do this alone,” Alma said.

Petey Samson’s excited barks got their attention. He sprinted around, circling the loblolly pine tree and yapping as he looked up the gnarly-barked trunk into the tree branches.

“He’s got something,” Alma said.

“He’s just barking at another rusty handgun he found,” Sheriff Fox said.

“Watch it,” Alma said. “Isabel doesn’t take kindly to people making fun of her dog.”

“Did you collect all of Betsy’s bones?” Sammi Jo asked.

“We bagged and tagged every bone and the other evidence recovered here,” Sheriff Fox replied. “Deputy Sheriff Bexley supervised it.”

“Hearing you say that doesn’t leave me with a warm and fuzzy feeling,” Sammi Jo said.

“Call off your dog,” Sheriff Fox said. “We can investigate what’s over there and leave all the sooner.”

Isabel gave the “sit” command, and Petey Samson ignored her. She spoke again, this time sharper. He stopped barking, looked at her, and knew he’d better obey her, or he wouldn’t get any doggie treats for an entire afternoon. He fell silent, flopped down on the pine needles, and took the opportunity to scratch his rear paw behind his floppy ear.

The foursome stood by the loblolly pine and surveyed the area. Sheriff Fox saw nothing, not even a crushed soda can or Popsicle stick left discarded on the ground. The black fly returned to torment him. Waving it away, he realized why he employed the deputy sheriffs to take care of the fieldwork. He was the boss man who stuck around the station house close to the coffee urn and doughnut trays. Hunger pangs for the coveted chilidog gnawed at him again.

“Isn’t it time to take our lunch break?” he asked, consulting his cell phone.

“You look as if you can safely afford to skip a lunch or two,” Sammi Jo said. “Just hang in there with us.”

“Petey Samson, what is it?” Isabel asked. “Why are you barking up into the branches of the loblolly pine? Are we after another clue? Talk to me, Baby.”

Sheriff Fox stared at Petey Samson as if expecting the beagle to respond speaking in the King’s English but with perhaps a Southern drawl. He yawned, and Sheriff Fox was on the brink of calling off their mission. Their follow-up search in the piney woods was a big flop.

“How does he know there’s something up there?” Sheriff Fox asked.

“His canine eyes must’ve spotted something that’s out of place,” Sammi Jo replied.

“Then one of us will have to scale the loblolly pine for a closer inspection of whatever he sees,” Sheriff Fox said.

The three ladies gave him the same expectant look.

“Since I’m in uniform with a badge, I’m not expected to be the tree climber,” Sheriff Fox said. He set his eyes on Isabel and Alma.

“You can’t be serious,” Isabel said. “Alma and I stopped climbing trees before you were in diapers, Roscoe.”

“We don’t do trees,” Alma said. “Plain and simple.”

“Then what about Rin Tin Tin there?” Sheriff Fox asked, nodding at Petey Samson. “Does he do trees?”

Petey Samson growled at Sheriff Fox.

“Allow me to translate for you,” Alma said. “No, he doesn’t do trees.”

“Then I guess by default that leaves it up to me,” Sammi Jo said.

“I can radio the station house and ask Deputy Sheriff Bexley to bring out his ninja grappling hook,” Sheriff Fox said. “He’s been practicing his throws. Just stand well back of him when he gives it a wild fling.”

“Thanks, but I prefer doing it on my own,” Sammi Jo said.

Isabel was studying the tree branch knobs left on the trunk, and one detail seemed odd. “Somebody came here, pruned off the lower tree branches, and left the knobs almost flush with the trunk,” she said.

“Who bothers with any pruning in the piney woods?” Alma asked.

“Maybe the person wanted to keep the kids like Charles and Earl from using the branches to climb up the loblolly pine,” Isabel replied.

“You raise an intriguing observation,” Sheriff Fox said as he appraised the trunk’s higher elevation. He raised his hand as a pointer. “See the crook formed by the three large tree branches?”

“The crook is twenty-five or thirty feet above us,” Sammi Jo replied.

“I’d check out that area for the murder weapon,” Sheriff Fox said.

“We don’t even need a search warrant to do it,” Sammi Jo said.

“All we need is our curiosity,” Isabel said. “We brought that along with us in spades.”

“Hopefully, running this search won’t take us too much longer,” Sheriff Fox said.

“We won’t let you starve, Sheriff,” Sammi Jo said. “You’ll get your lunch. Scout’s honor.”

“Okay, Sammi Jo, I’m still here with you,” Sheriff Fox said.

Chapter 32

“I’m going to need a boost to reach the lowest tree branch,” Sammi Jo said, looking at Sheriff Fox.

“I can handle that part,” Sheriff Fox said, forming his hands into the shape of a stirrup for her to use.

Sammi Jo pulled her way up to the first tree branch. Resting at a crouch there, she was breathing hard. She was no longer the agile, surefooted tomboy who would’ve scrambled right up the loblolly pine. Isabel and Alma would tell Sammi Jo it was just a natural human process called getting old. She wasn’t ready to admit how age had slowed her down even a step.

“Have you rested enough?” Sheriff Fox asked her.

“You’re doing fine,” Isabel said. “Just take your time.”

“Let’s not push things despite the lunch delay,” Alma said. “All of us want to get home safely with no bad cuts or bruises.”

“That goes double for no broken nails,” Isabel said.

“I hope I get lucky and find something good,” Sammi Jo said.

“There’s not enough gas left in my tank to take on another tree.”

“Boy, I’ll say,” Sheriff Fox said, rubbing his arms left sore from giving Sammi Jo the boost. “The rigors of law enforcement take their physical toll.”

Alma sent an “oh-brother” look to Isabel who nodded in agreement.

“Hang in there with us, Roscoe,” Isabel said. “It’s got to be all downhill from here on.”

“Eustis stocks Bengay and heating pads at the drugstore for your aches and pains,” Alma said.

“That’s good stuff to know, but I’m not that bad off,” Sheriff Fox said.

“Yet,” Alma said. “Give it a few years, and we’ll see where you are.”

“Can you see the bottom of the crook?” Isabel asked.

“Give me another second, and I’ll reach it,” Sammi Jo replied.

Using the tree branches, she had little difficulty climbing higher and stood in the loblolly pine’s crook, which resembled a ship’s mainmast crow’s nest.

“Okay, so what’s the story up there, Sammi Jo?” Sheriff Fox asked.

“I found the neatest candle-lit treehouse,” she replied. “Shinny on up and join me for a spot of tea and scones with raspberry jam.”

Isabel and Alma smiled.

“What’s that?” Sheriff Fox asked. “Come again?”

“I’m just kidding you,” Sammi Jo replied. “I haven’t found anything.”

“Dang it all to heck,” Sheriff Fox said. “I felt sure we’d found the right hiding place.”

“Scoot on down, Sammi Jo,” Alma said. “Just be careful. Making the descent is probably more dangerous than going up the tree.”

“Our coming up empty-handed doesn’t make any sense,” Isabel said. “Petey Samson has never once blown making a call.”

“He’s having an off-day,” Alma said. “He’s allowed to once in a while. He’s a dog, you know.”

“Or maybe he felt a dog’s fancy to bark, so he did,” Sammi Jo said.

“It sounded more serious than just a dog’s passing fancy to bark,” Isabel said. “He did it while he stood next to the loblolly pine for a definite reason.”

“Shall I shinny up a little higher?” Sammi Jo asked. “I don’t mind, and I’d rather search while I’m already up here than come back and do it later.”

“Would the killer go beyond where you’re standing now?” Isabel asked.

“Not unless the killer was Jack climbing the beanstalk,” Sheriff Fox replied. “We’ve hit another dead end, and I’ve got to return to the office. By now, Abigail is pulling out her hair and calling me every name in the book.”

“You better treat her with respect,” Sammi Jo said. “She’s the glue that keeps your department from falling apart.”

“That’s the reason why I snapped her right up,” Sheriff Fox said. “My shrewd judge of character zeroed in her competence during our job interview.”

“Uh-huh,” Sammi Jo said.

The striking detail Isabel had observed kept nagging at her. She looked closer at the tree branch nubs crusted by the dried pinesap. Somebody had used a chainsaw as proven by the chainsaw marks. She gazed straight ahead into the pine forest. The nearest pine trees didn’t show any tree branch nubs. Only the loblolly pine had its lower branches removed.

She put it together. The killer had left the knife where it'd have little or no risk of discovery. Later, the killer returned with the chainsaw and used it to lop off the lowest branches. Just now, the sharp-eyed Petey Samson had spotted the hidden knife.

"The object of our search is the knife," Isabel said. "Now it's up to us to find its hiding place."

"Isabel, the crime scene is spotless," Sheriff Fox said. "We just double-checked it, and there's no knife."

She leveled her cool gaze on him. "I won't be leaving here until I've searched high and low."

"You're more stubborn than Alma is," Sheriff Fox said.

Alma chuckled. "And you're just finding that out?" she asked.

"You've got me for an additional five minutes," Sheriff Fox said. "Then I'm out of here."

"That should be enough time for us," Alma said, hoping it was.

"Sammi Jo, think of the snow and rain that has fallen over the past three years," Isabel said. "The steel blade will appear dull and rusty, not new and shiny. The handle will look weathered and worn, not fresh and bright as if it were brand spanking new."

"I follow your thinking about it," Sammi Jo said. "I've been picturing the knife being like the new ones Blaine sells at the hardware store."

"The knife might be stuck in the pine tree under a branch," Isabel said.

"There goes my stomach rumbling again," Sheriff Fox said. "Isabel, don't you carry a roll of peppermint LifeSavers in your pocketbook for emergencies like right now?"

"Sorry, but I don't have any LifeSavers with me," Isabel replied. "I forgot to add them to our grocery list."

"Surely, you won't let me down in my time of need, Alma," Sheriff Fox said.

"I'd gladly offer you a LifeSaver if I had a roll of them," Alma replied.

"Boom," Sammi Jo said.

"Hold on, it sounds like we've got a winner," Sheriff Fox said, his yearning for the chilidog forgotten that fast.

"What've you found?" Isabel asked.

“I see a small-sized hunting knife no larger than the length of my hand,” Sammi Jo replied.

“Fabulous going but don’t touch it,” Isabel said. “Sheriff Fox will take over from this point.”

Sammi Jo climbed back down, lowered herself from the tree branch, and let go of it to land on the ground.

“Thanks, everybody, for your assistance,” Sheriff Fox said.

“How could you omit Petey Samson?” Alma asked. “He got us started going down the right path.”

“I haven’t forgotten him,” Sheriff Fox replied. “But since you insist, I’ll also include him in my official commendations.”

“You’re most welcome,” Isabel said.

“Now all I need is the name of whom the knife belongs to so I can make the arrest,” Sheriff Fox said.

“You’re not quite ready for doing that,” Isabel said. “We still have a little more sleuthwork to do.”

“It’s got to be Esther Jones,” Alma said.

“Why do you say it’s Esther?” Isabel asked.

Alma pointed at the loblolly pine. “Esther’s slim physique is a close match to Sammi Jo’s. Both ladies would have an easier time of climbing the loblolly pine than a heavier man would.”

“Even so, the tree branches look sturdy enough to support a man’s weight,” Isabel said. “Is there anything else we should consider?”

“We know Esther’s passions run the hottest of the suspects,” Alma replied. “Jealous rage drove her to destroy the woman she saw as posing a threat to her happiness. Betsy was stealing her husband Chad, and Esther thought she had to do something about stopping it.”

“Could a woman like Esther Jones handle using a chainsaw?” Isabel asked.

“If she could wield a knife, I bet Esther was as proficient with a chainsaw,” Alma replied.

“I need the right name,” Sheriff Fox said. “I don’t want to arrest the wrong suspect again.”

“You’ll get your name soon,” Alma said. “As you can see, it’s in the works.”

“Then excuse me while I go make some phone calls,” Sheriff Fox said. “Will you stand guard until my troops arrive on the scene? There’s

coffee and doughnuts at Eddy's Deli in it for you, my treat."

"Make it iced tea and bear claws, and you've got a deal," Alma replied.

"That works even better," Sheriff Fox said.

Petey Samson barked at them.

"We haven't forgotten about you, Sweetie Pie," Isabel said. "You'll get your doggie treats the first thing when Alma and I return home."

"You've spoiled that dog worse than any other pet owner I've known," Sheriff Fox said.

"Thank you for noticing," Isabel said. "He's our furry bundle of joy."

Petey Samson barked again.

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Chapter 33

“Sammi Jo, where’s the can of coffee?” the burly Wilbur asked as he rummaged around on the shelves in the alcove they used for the coffee-making station. He knocked off the stack of coffee filters that fell to the floor. “I can’t find it anywhere over here. Didn’t you buy a new can at the IGA?”

Her well-intentioned boss was driving Sammi Jo a little nuts. She’d returned to work from the piney woods where she’d found the knife lodged high up in the crook of the loblolly pine. Wilbur’s offer to come into the office and pitch in had sounded like a good idea at the time. Now she wasn’t sure how much longer her patience would last. He was testing its limits.

“Should I stop at a good place and brew a pot of coffee?” Sammi Jo asked. “I don’t mind doing it if you’ll relax and settle down a little.”

“Aw, I’ll just skip taking my coffee break,” Wilbur replied. “I think drinking too much of it leaves me antsy.”

“You might be on to something there,” Sammi Jo said. “You dropped the coffee filters on the floor.”

Wilbur retrieved them and then sized up the stack of customer file folders she’d put out on her desk corner.

“I’ll grab half of these folders to work on,” he said.

Sammi Jo eyed the number of folders Wilbur had picked up.

“I’m not trying to be a nag,” she said. “But your concept of half differs from mine. You only took about a third of the folders.”

Wilbur put on his charming country boy grin. “I’m exercising what’s called the boss’ privilege, Sammi Jo.”

“Right, how could I forget that detail?”

“Besides, I’m not as experienced and efficient as you are at whipping through this task.”

“I reckon it can’t be any other way then.”

“It’s good you can see it like that.” Wilbur sat down at the empty desk. “So, what’s new going on with you?”

“I’m about the same, thanks. Are you going to talk while you and I try to get some work done?”

“Would you prefer I whistle my favorite country music tunes? You can hum along and tap your toe to my versions of Garth Brooks and Toby

Keith.”

Sammi Jo shook her head. “No, our talking isn’t so bad. Just don’t ruin Garth or Toby like that.”

“Your loss, not mine.”

“My sore back feels like I’ve been run through a wringer.”

“How did you manage to throw it out?”

“I climbed a loblolly pine where I found the hunting knife probably used as the murder weapon on Betsy Sweet.”

The amazed Wilbur whistled. “Who owns the hunting knife? Who did in poor Betsy?”

“Your guess is as good as mine at this point.”

“Haven’t you lady sleuths narrowed it down any?”

“We suspect a few townies, but I can’t divulge their names right now. What’s say you and me knuckle down and do our work?”

However, Wilbur wanted to discuss the juicy topic of the murder. He overlooked how Sammi Jo was trying to tally up a column of figures on the adding machine.

“I recall the idle talk circulating at the time,” Wilbur said. “As you well know, I’m not plugged into the town grapevine, and I certainly never repeat any morsel of gossip I happen to overhear, but everybody I ran into said Betsy had a thing going with Chad Jones. Did you hear it told that way?”

“I did but he now denies the affair ever took place.”

Wilbur chuckled. “If I were Chad, I’d make the same claim. If Esther gets the goods on him, she’ll run him through the wringer two or three times.”

“I’ve heard Esther swear just as fiercely she doesn’t believe the rumors are true. She insists somebody who’s got it in for Chad spread the ugly gossip.”

“Does the hunting knife you found stuck in the loblolly pine belong to him?”

“You’re the big sportsman here. I’ll put the question to you. Have you ever known Chad to go hunting?”

“Not with any hunter I know, he hasn’t. Did he fatally stab Betsy?”

“If Chad was involved with Betsy, he may’ve had a motive to do it.”

“I never saw them out together. Chad has a handful with trying to keep Esther happy, and she seldom lets him out of her sight for long.”

“You seem to know a lot about the Joneses. Are you friends with them?”

“Chad and I went to high school together, and we keep up since we’re always running into each other. You know how that goes. Somebody or other is shopping at the same time you’re in town. It’d be rude if I ignored them, or I just nodded my hello. Plus which, they might need to rent a storage unit down the road, and I’m a businessman always looking to grow my profits.”

Sammi Jo could see she wasn’t going to get any work done as long as the chatty Wilbur hung around to “help” her. She wondered if she could think of a tactful way to tell him to either stuff a sock in it or buzz off and go fishing again.

“Doris Sweet flagged me down outside of Miss Chen’s Beauty Shop, and we caught up,” Wilbur said. “It’s a low down dirty shame what happened to Betsy and then Russell. Doris is a stand-up lady who deserves a lot better from life.”

“She’s been through a lot of bad stuff for one lady.”

“She got to talking about Betsy, and the morning she disappeared, which now appears to be a murder.”

“That’s how it’s shaping up, Wilbur.”

“Murder, what else is new in Quiet Anchorage, right?”

“If you’re making a point, I wish you’d get to it.”

“I think Betsy went off that morning to the piney woods to see her lover boy.”

“Chad?”

“No, I’m talking about her boyfriend Troy Raft. He’s the one who killed her.”

“You give him too much credit. He’s just a party boy and a thief on top of trifling lazy.”

“I know Troy is a bad apple. I also went to school with his no-account daddy Hank, and the apple didn’t fall too far from the tree. Hank ran off with that young thing to California and left his family high and dry. Valerie is the salt of the earth, but Troy only inherited Hank’s rotten genes.”

“Troy just came by the office job hunting, and my flesh still crawled after he left.”

“You want to run that by me again.”

“I told Troy we had no job openings, and I sent him on his way.”

“Did you check to see if he ripped us off?”

“Troy stole nothing.”

“Did you help in the search after Doris and Russell reported Betsy missing?”

Sammi Jo nodded. “Isabel, Alma, and I along with Aunt Phyllis and Judge Redfern on our search team looked under the railroad bridge and on both sides of the Coronet River. We combed the area twice. The only things we ran across were cat briar, stinging nettle, and poison ivy. Did you also go out with the search teams?”

“I took off a couple of days and drove over the back roads because I’m not a big walker. I went everywhere I could think of she might’ve gone. I saw lots of townies searching out there, and I even ran into Troy Raft on the gravel road into the piney woods.”

Sammi Jo snapped a look at Wilbur. “Say that again about Troy,” she said.

“I thought I already told you I met him while I was out driving around the countryside.”

“I’m pretty sure I would’ve remembered if you did. What happened?”

“It was nothing much to speak of. I’d rolled down my windows so I could peer out from both sides of my pickup truck cab. I drove up on Troy who turned around to face me on the shoulder of the road. Naturally, I did the neighborly thing and stopped to offer him a lift.”

Sammi Jo didn’t know where the bright spark came from, but it set her pulse to beating harder.

“Did Troy tell you why he was out on the road?” Sammi Jo asked.

“He said he was also looking for any sign of Betsy,” Wilbur replied.

“What had he found?”

“He said he’d gotten nothing, and I told him to join the club.”

“But he was out looking for her alone and not with any of the search teams.”

Wilbur shrugged. “I was, too. So what?”

Sammi Jo reined in her runaway heartbeats and used an even voice. “Tell me everything you can remember about Troy from that day.”

“What’s left to say? He was dressed like the bum he is. He needed a haircut and shave.”

“Did his hands show any cuts or abrasions? Were they stained or muddy?”

“Who looks at a guy’s hands? All I remember is they were dirty.”

“That doesn’t buy us much. Did he take you up on your offer of a lift?”

“He said he preferred to walk over riding.”

“That tells us something right there.”

Wilbur looked at Sammi Jo. “Sawdust,” he said. “I recall seeing the flecks of sawdust stuck to Troy’s sweaty forearms and wrists. It speckled his uncombed hair.”

“Then he must’ve been sawing wood.”

“He didn’t carry a chainsaw if he had been.”

“But he could’ve heard your truck engine—you have those noisy glass pack mufflers—before you drove into sight. He could’ve just tossed the chainsaw into the woods before you even saw him.”

Wilbur nodded. “That would’ve been easy enough to do.”

“He’d returned to the clearing in the piney woods and sawed off the lowest branches to the loblolly pine he’d used to climb up and hide the knife. He’s tall and could reach the tree branches over his head.”

“His doing that would account for the sawdust I saw stuck on him.”

“Did you tell Sheriff Fox you ran into Troy?”

“I didn’t give it another thought until just now. I figured he was probably up to no good, but it isn’t illegal to walk on the public road. Besides, almost every townie was out searching like we were doing.”

Sammi Jo stood up from her chair. “I better get a move on, Wilbur.”

“You just took off some time when you went to the piney woods earlier today. Where are you heading now?”

“I’m going to finish the job of getting the killer arrested and off the streets.”

“We haven’t made any headway on the stacks of folders.”

“You told me I could take off a little time if our case started to break,” Sammi Jo said. “I believe it just broke wide open, thanks to you remembering your story about Troy.”

“Running my big mouth leaves me stuck with all this work to do.”

“I’ll be with Isabel and Alma if you need to get ahold of me,” Sammi Jo said. “Wish us good luck, and I’m off.”

“Yeah, I wish you good luck, break a leg, and all that jazz,” Wilbur said. “Just remember to be here tomorrow morning at your usual start time.”

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Chapter 34

“Is Esther the one who did in Betsy?” Alma asked. “Did Esther the jealous wife fix the problem her two-timing partner Chad had?”

“You know I share your suspicions of Esther,” Isabel replied. “Before we accuse any townie of murder, we better have our ducks in a row. We’d be mortified if we called it wrong, not to mention how the falsely accused townie would feel about it.”

Isabel and Alma sat in their favorite window booth at Eddy’s Deli after returning to town from the piney woods. They’d dropped off Petey Samson who after wolfing down his doggie treats had to take a nap to recover from his physical exertions.

Isabel and Alma had taken refills on the tall glasses of iced tea and each consumed a bear claw with the option to eat more. Tabitha stuck their charges on Sheriff Fox’s tab. She found it odd he was so generous, but she didn’t ask the sisters why he was acting out of character.

Tabitha also didn’t forget to tack on her twenty-five percent gratuity since he was footing the bill. Fifteen percent was her standard tip, but the sheriff hadn’t treated her nicely of late. He’d paid his lunch tab but stiffed her on the tip, and she’d given him prompt service. The next time he chowed down at Eddy’s Deli, he’d be sure to remember to leave the tip for her.

“You saw how Esther looked when you brought up Betsy’s name at the eggs display case,” Alma said. “If Esther had been Catwoman, she would’ve clawed our eyes out.”

“She looked plenty steamed, all right,” Isabel said.

Alma checked around the dining area for Tabitha. “I’m ready for another iced tea. Are you?” Alma asked.

“No, I’m all set for now, thanks. You know Esther and Chad aren’t the only suspects we have in mind.”

“Troy Raft is the only one left who’s on our list.” Alma gave a headshake. “If he can’t hold down a full-time job and just plays online video games all day, I don’t see him as ambitious enough to hatch an intricate murder plot much less carry it out and get away with it to boot.”

“My sneaky suspicion about Troy is growing. He’s a clever and devious lad who’s far more capable than he lets on to the rest of us, including Valerie.”

“Then what clue suggests he killed Betsy?”

“We took note of how somebody had sawed off the lower tree branches from the loblolly pine.”

“That’s why Sammi Jo had to use Sheriff Fox as a human stepladder to reach up and grab the first tree branch for making her climb.”

“Betsy’s killer first used the lower tree branches to make the same climb. After sticking the knife in the crook, her killer had to make it hard as possible for anyone else to climb the loblolly pine. We know the Roberts boys search for old bottles and jugs in the piney woods. That’s why the killer returned later with a chainsaw and did the necessary pruning on the loblolly pine. Now think back with me. Where have we seen an old chainsaw during the course of this investigation?”

Alma paused to find the fact. “I remember seeing an old chainsaw on the picnic table when we talked to Troy at Valerie’s house,” she replied. “The chainsaw looked as if it’d been left out in the weather for a good while.”

“He probably left it there when he returned home from the piney woods three summers back. The cordless electric chainsaws are easier to start and quieter to run than the gas-powered models. Nobody would’ve heard him operating it out in the piney woods. The trouble is we’re tossing around a theory based on our observations, and we lack the right evidence to back it up.”

“We’ve got the beaten-up chainsaw.”

“However, it’s largely circumstantial, Alma.”

“It’d be poetic justice to arrange a clever trap to catch the less clever Troy.”

Isabel smiled at the satisfying mental image. “I doubt if we can pull off a convincing enough ruse to trick him.”

“How are my favorite customers doing?” Tabitha asked as she drew up by the booth. “More iced tea?” Her voice softened to a seductive tone. “Or can I fetch you more bear claws from the pastry counter?”

“Even munching on more bear claws won’t cheer us up,” Alma said.

“Why are you feeling so bummed?” Tabitha asked.

“Isabel and I are stuck on trying to solve our mystery,” Alma replied.

Isabel nodded. “Every time we get some traction, our progress slips, and we stop moving forward.”

“We can’t have that happen to you,” Tabitha said. “Let me see now. The last time you came in we discussed Troy Raft.”

“We now believe he must be Betsy’s killer,” Isabel said.

“But our proving it is an entirely different matter,” Alma said.

Tabitha gasped, her mouth made the shape of an “O.” “So, it is Troy, and you tell me the con man is getting away with murder. Well, butter my grits and call me Flo. That plain stinks to the high heavens.”

“You sure got that nailed, Flo,” Alma said.

“Things are slow right now before the lunch crowd hits us,” Tabitha said. “Scoot over there, Alma. I can figure out stuff better when I’m off my feet.” Tabitha slid into the booth seat and sat by Alma. “We’ll put our heads together and hatch a sure-fired way to land Troy behind bars where he belongs,” Tabitha said. “Did you discover how he took Betsy’s life?”

“He fatally stabbed her with a knife,” Isabel replied.

“Did you get lucky enough to find the knife he used?” Tabitha asked.

“Sammi Jo climbed up a big loblolly pine and found the hiding spot where he’d stuck the knife deep into the trunk,” Isabel replied.

“Sheriff Fox was there with us,” Alma said. “He’s got the knife as the evidence, but only if we can prove Troy is its owner.”

“What you told me is exciting,” Tabitha said. “Did you give the knife a close going-over?”

“It’s just a regular hunting knife,” Alma said. “Blaine sells them in the display case at the hardware store.”

“The knife is now grungy and rusty from its exposure to the elements,” Isabel replied.

“Do you have your magnifying glass with you?” Tabitha asked.

Isabel brought up her pocketbook and set it on the tabletop. She undid the kissing clasp and rooted through the various items she could not go anywhere without having. She could never tell when she might need a bobby pin or Band-Aid. Emergencies cropped up all the time. She stopped pawing around in her pocketbook and addressed Alma.

“You better also search in your pocketbook,” Isabel said. “If memory serves me correctly, you used our magnifying glass the last time.”

Alma rooted about in her pocketbook. “You know, it wouldn’t hurt to buy an extra dozen magnifying glasses,” she said. “After we get home, I’m adding it to our buy list.”

“You can’t find our magnifying glass either,” Isabel said. “That’s jim-dandy, Alma. A cracking pair of sleuths we make. We can’t even keep from losing the basic tools of the trade.”

“Our magnifying glass is temporarily misplaced and not lost,” Alma said.

“I think Eddy has one he keeps in the kitchen,” Tabitha said.

“Does he use it to read the recipes on food packages?” Isabel asked.

“Oh, Eddy never follows the recipes,” Tabitha replied. “He likes to create new dishes through trial and error. He prides himself as a self-taught chef wearing a gimme NASCAR hat instead of the tall bouffant hat.”

“Max was the same way,” Isabel said. “For some reason, men just can’t be troubled to read the given directions.”

“Why did you ask us if we have our magnifying glass?” Alma asked.

“I was going to suggest you use it to reinspect the knife blade,” Tabitha replied.

“What are we looking for when we reinspect it?” Alma asked.

“TBR,” Tabitha replied.

“That means nothing to us,” Alma said.

“TBR are the initials to Troy Buford Raft,” Tabitha said.

The electrifying news made the hair on the back of Alma’s neck stand up while her heart skittered over a few beats. “We might have just experienced what’s known as an ‘aha’ moment,” she said to Isabel.

Her hazel eyes blazing up, Isabel nodded. “Aha,” she said.

“Did Troy etch his initials TBR on the knife blade?” Alma asked.

“The knife was a birthday gift from Valerie with his initials she paid to have engraved on its blade,” Tabitha replied. “I saw him showing it off and bragging about it while hanging out here with his high school friends. The turkeys skipped out, leaving me a three-cent tip. Can you believe they did something that juvenile? They probably thought it was hilarious. Anyway, that’s how I came to know about Troy’s initials are on the knife, and the lousy tip he left me is why I’ll never forget it.”

“You just gave us the key clue we’ve been searching for,” Isabel said.

“After he’s locked up, maybe I’ll visit him and return his three pennies,” Tabitha said.

“Will Eddy mind if we borrow his magnifying glass?” Isabel asked.

“Not at all,” Tabitha replied. “We’d consider it an honor if we played a small part in helping to catch the cold-blooded son of a biscuit eater Troy.”

Should I get it from Eddy?"

"Please do," Isabel replied. "Then we'll leave here to follow up on your suggestion."

"How about also getting us two bear claws to go?" Alma said.

"I'll make it three and enjoy eating one myself," Tabitha replied.

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Chapter 35

“Thanks for your offer,” Sheriff Fox said. The fresh mustard stain on his necktie showed he’d eaten the chilidog for his lunch. “But our department budget is sufficiently large enough for us to purchase our own magnification devices.”

“I like to follow the Boy Scout’s motto to be prepared,” Alma said. She returned the magnifying glass Tabitha had lent them to her pocketbook.

“That’s sensible advice I recommend you always heed,” Sheriff Fox said. “Well, are you all set for the big unveiling? May I have a drum roll, please?”

“Roscoe, you can skip the fanfare,” Isabel said, raising her eyebrows at him. “Might we just get on with it?”

“There’s no fanfare in my station house,” Sheriff Fox said as he flipped on the light to the 10X loupe magnifier. “You know I’m all-business and no-nonsense when it comes to murder.”

“I know it but the suspense of waiting right now is getting unbearable,” Isabel said.

“Then without further ado, I shall check for the initials TBR engraved on the possible key piece of evidence,” Sheriff Fox said.

Wearing white cotton gloves, he picked up the discolored hunting knife Sammi Jo had found in the crook of the loblolly pine. None too happy, she had returned to work at the rental self-storage facility. Isabel and Alma hadn’t updated Sammi Jo on the latest development. They first wanted to determine if the knife was the one Tabitha had described to them as belonging to Troy.

Sheriff Fox centered the knife under the bright loupe, squinted, and took his time examining every square millimeter of the steel blade surface. He closed one eye then the other eye while he scrutinized it further. He stuck out his tongue while he concentrated harder on his making inspection.

Getting impatient, Isabel tapped her toe. Alma had to smile because her older sister was usually the calmer one.

“Isabel, double your dosage of chill pills,” Sheriff Fox said. “You’re more fidgety than my Grandma Luanne was after she quit smoking her Cuban cigars, may her soul rest in peace.”

“We’ve got to solve this mystery,” Isabel said.

“What’s behind this sudden urgency?” Sheriff Fox asked.

“I can answer that one,” Alma replied. “Isabel can’t wait to set out the Scrabble board and play a game after we’re finished.”

“My big secret is now out,” Isabel said.

“It’s hardly a big secret,” Alma said. “Almost every townie knows you’re a Scrabble junkie, and there’s no cure for your addiction.”

“The correct term is passion, not addiction,” Isabel said. “I’m also a Scrabble fan, not a Scrabble junkie.”

“Then I stand corrected,” Alma said.

“Roscoe, why are you grinning like the Cheshire Cat?” Isabel asked.

“Didn’t you just hear we hit—*ka-ching*—the jackpot?” Sheriff Fox replied. “The initials TBR appear engraved as a block script on the knife blade. They’re located a half-inch below the knife handle. Would you like to look through the loupe and verify my finding?”

“You’re the voice of authority,” Isabel replied. “If you say it’s so, then it’s just that.”

“I’m glad you’ve finally acknowledged it,” Sheriff Fox said, returning the knife to the clear plastic envelope used to preserve and store evidence. “The town sheriff is always the one in charge and not the town elders.”

“Don’t push your luck, Roscoe,” Alma said. “Or we’ll sic Petey Samson on you.”

“Be sure to keep a tight leash on him when he’s around me,” Sheriff Fox said as he turned off the light of the loupe.

“Now that you’ve scored the jackpot, what are you going to do with it?” Isabel asked.

“I’m driving out to Valerie’s house and read Troy his Miranda rights while I arrest him for the murder of Betsy Sweet,” Sheriff Fox replied.

“He should be finished with his job hunting, and you’ll find him there,” Isabel said.

“Should Isabel and I tag along with you?” Alma asked. “We don’t know beans on how to fire a handgun or any nifty judo moves, but we’ve read about the dozens of arrests made in our mystery novels.”

“I better make this arrest strictly official,” Sheriff Fox said. “I’ll take Deputy Sheriff Bexley with me.”

“He might not be advanced enough in his police training to handle performing a serious task like arresting a killer,” Alma said.

“You’re probably right,” Sheriff Fox said.

“Alma, we can’t be with Sheriff Fox when he arrests Troy,” Isabel said. “It’s time for us to bow out and give professional law enforcement the room they need to do their jobs.”

“What are we going to do next?” Alma asked.

“We’ll return home to play Scrabble,” Isabel replied. “The Betsy Sweet murder mystery is a wrap as far as we’re involved. There’s nothing left for us to do on it.”

“Then we’ll exit stage left,” Alma said. “Until the next time a mystery comes our way that is.”

“Oh what happy days when it does,” Sheriff Fox said as he frowned.

Chapter 36

“You old biddies have been messing around in my personal affairs,” Troy said. “I warned you to stay out of my way. You couldn’t let it alone and had to keep plugging away.” He tapped his finger on his sunken chest. “It’s a good thing I played it smart, and I’ve kept my eyes on you.”

“Do you collect knives the way philatelists do stamps?” Alma asked.

Troy held up the knife he clutched in his knobby fist. Its steel blade gleamed shiny as the steel blade Betsy had stared at in horror during the final moments of her young life.

“A beauty, isn’t it?” Troy said. He barked out an unnerving laugh. “Does it look familiar?” he said. “It should.”

Her pulse running fast as a Waring blender, Alma just shrugged. “Seen one knife seen them all,” she said.

Troy went on. “You old biddies, nosy Sammi Jo, and stumblebum Sheriff Fox removed a knife just like it from up in the loblolly pine. I spied on you from behind a pine tree where I even fooled your hound dog I kept upwind from me. You didn’t know I was hiding there, did you now? I’ve fooled everybody, even Betsy on her last morning alive.”

Isabel nodded once. “We know you pretty much just confessed to the murder of Betsy Sweet,” she said. “We heard you say it.”

“Yeah, I killed Sweet Betsy,” Troy said with his chilling leer. “What if I did?”

“You’ll be arrested, tried, and punished for your crime,” Isabel replied.

“We’ll see about that,” Troy said. “But first I’m curious. What gave me away?”

“Your using the old chainsaw to cut off the tree branches and leaving it on the picnic table was one final piece to fit the puzzle,” Alma replied.

“I should’ve sold the chainsaw back then,” Troy said. “But Mom would’ve asked me where it went, and more of her nosy questions would be coming.”

“And then there was your knife monogrammed with your initials TBR,” Alma said.

Troy shook his head. “I’d forgotten she had my initials engraved on the knife blade.”

“There’s no such thing as the perfect murder,” Isabel said.

“Well then, almost perfect will be good enough for me,” Troy said.

Isabel with Alma driving had returned home from the station house after their having watched Sheriff Fox stop at the doughnuts tray before he roared off in his police cruiser. He and his two rugged deputy sheriffs were en route to pick up Troy Buford Raft—TBR—at Valerie’s house along the river.

The sisters had remained quiet as they got out of the car, Isabel unlocked the front door to the brick rambler, and Alma closed the door behind her. Isabel was set to call out Petey Samson’s name since he hadn’t come romping out to greet them. He always wagged his tail and barked with delight at seeing them again even if they’d just been gone for a few minutes. Isabel slipped him a doggie treat, and it made them both happy, so why not?

However, the cadaverous Troy was the one who’d sauntered in from where he’d been lurking out of view. Isabel had the shock of her life, but she displayed no emotion. She was too busy thinking of a way to get them out of their latest jam.

“See, the way I’ve got it figured is I’m not quite done with my killing before I leave town on my fast horse,” Troy said.

Isabel caught her breath as her knees turned into bowls of Jell-O. The young man was mad and even worse, dangerous.

“Where’s Petey Samson?” Alma asked, looking around them. “What have you done with our dog?”

“Your dog is certified nuts,” Troy replied. “He leaped out the bathroom window I’d jimmed open to break in here and tore off like he was on fire.”

“You let our dog get out of the house and run away.” Alma, her face reddening with anger, turned to Isabel. “We’ll probably never see Petey Samson again,” Alma said.

She thought she saw a look of relief flash across Isabel’s face before she also put on an angry expression. She gave away nothing else about what she was thinking, leaving Alma to wonder.

“Where did you dig up the now famous bone?” Troy asked.

“Betsy was buried in our front yard,” Alma replied. She didn’t bring up Willie had planted the pig bone there. “We’d bought a tray of marigolds to plant in the flowerbed.”

“How did her bone manage to get there?” Troy asked.

“Don’t ask,” Alma replied. “It’s a long story.”

“Time is running short for the long stories,” Troy said, brandishing the knife.

“Only the one question remains,” Isabel said. “Why did you kill Betsy?”

“Did I need a special reason to do it?” Troy replied.

“There must have been something,” Isabel replied.

“Betsy was turning into a big nag,” Troy said. “She wanted a serious commitment, and I didn’t. Things got tense between us, so I ended our disagreement. More questions?”

“How did you lure her out to the piney woods?” Alma asked.

“Betsy’s mother Doris got so she couldn’t stand the sight of me,” Troy replied. “She didn’t like it when I came around to the house, so Betsy and I hooked up at the loblolly pine.”

“You hid the murder knife by jabbing it into the trunk high up in the loblolly pine,” Alma said.

“I got the idea on the spur of the moment, and at first I thought it was too far-fetched and outlandish,” Troy said. “But the more I thought about it, the better I liked the idea. Who would think to look up in the loblolly pine? It was a brilliant hiding spot.”

It was only almost a brilliant hiding spot,” Alma thought. We found it and recovered the murder weapon.

“How did you get rid of Betsy’s car?” Isabel asked.

“The abandoned riprap quarry on this side of Warrenton has a deep lake at the bottom,” Troy replied. “I drove her car down the access road to near the lake and gave it a nudge. Her car rolled downhill from me and plunged into the murky lake, and it sank from view. It was the most thrilling sight I’ve ever watched next to seeing Betsy die.”

He once more displayed the chilling leer. Alma idly wondered if he practiced making it in the mirror each morning.

“Yeah, that’s what we pretty much figured you did with it,” Isabel said. “Why didn’t you throw away the knife in the lake, too?”

“Doing that would’ve ruined the fun I’ve had with it hidden in plain view, and everybody searching for but not finding it,” Troy said.

Oh goodness, we’re in a heap of trouble, Alma thought. Except I just noticed Isabel had the look of relief cross her face. What did it mean? What is she up to this time? What trick does she have up her sleeve?

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Chapter 37

“Petey Samson Trumbo, what are you doing out here?” Sammi Jo asked.

He barked at her.

“Are you being a naughty dog?” Sammi Jo asked.

He barked again at her.

“I’ll take that for a no,” Sammi Jo said.

She’d left Wilbur at the self-storage rental facility and had been hurrying down the sidewalk on her way to see Isabel and Alma. Sammi Jo decided to walk over—she could stretch her stiff leg muscles—and help Isabel and Alma on the final push to close out Betsy’s murder case.

Sammi Jo observing the chubby, floppy-eared beagle hustling over the concrete sidewalk left her confounded. He panted, his tongue dangling from his mouth. Isabel and Alma had never let him leave the boundaries of their yard unattended. As far as Sammi Jo knew, he’d never been off his leash to roam as free as he was doing now.

He still wore his dog collar. Her command brought him over to stop and sit beside her. She reached down and scratched him behind the floppy ears.

“You must’ve found a way to escape from the house,” Sammi Jo said. “Isabel and Alma would never leave a window or door open. I also know you’d never just up and leave since a panhandler like you sticks close to his territory. You would have to have a good reason to run away like this.”

Petey Samson, wagging his tail, barked twice at her.

“I don’t know canine lingo, but your bark has to be Lassie’s quick-follow-me one,” Sammi Jo said.

Petey Samson turned around and struck off in the direction he’d just trotted over the sidewalk. His interruption of her petting him proved it was an urgent matter. He stopped, looked around over his shoulder, and gave her a glare, translating to mean she better get the lead out. She doubled her gait to stay up with him.

Her charged thoughts flew off in all directions. Drawing in a breath helped her to control her thoughts enough so she could review the possibilities. It didn’t make a lot of sense that Isabel and Alma had both fallen ill or suffered a terrible accident. What other serious danger, then, might they be facing right now?

Then Sammi Jo knew what it was. The danger was the most logical one. Her fear gave way to her rising anger.

Troy Raft was in for the rudest shock of his life. He wouldn't know the time of day after she got finished cleaning his clock. Her second insight keyed on the knife he'd used to murder Betsy.

Might he own additional knives to harm his defenseless victims? Might the coward have one now? She'd left her purse with the .38 handgun tucked inside it hanging on the back of her chair at work. Sighing, she wasn't even sure the .38 handgun was loaded. She'd just have to improvise.

Sammi Jo and Petey Samson drew up within sight of the brick rambler on Church Street. She spotted no police cruiser and, more to her relief, no ambulance with the roof bar light flashing its bad news.

"Where did you jump out of the house?" Sammi Jo asked Petey Samson. "Show me."

Likewise, Petey Samson couldn't understand her people lingo. All he knew or cared about was his two mistresses were in peril. It was up to him to spring them from the trap and make them safe again. Dinnertime was in a couple of hours, and he was already feeling the hunger pangs. He gave Sammi Jo the over-the-shoulder look again. Further talking was a bad idea. They had to take direct action.

Sammi Jo remembered Isabel and Alma kept a spare house key. The villain Troy hadn't known where they hid it, but she did. Just a step behind Petey Samson, she scrambled around to the back yard, knelt down to pop apart the fake lawn sprinkler, and retrieved the spare house key. She added a dab of spit to it and slipped it noiselessly (she'd seen the trick done while watching *The Rockford Files* on Isabel and Alma's DVD) into the door lock before she opened the rear door just wide enough to allow her easing through the crack. She took in a breath while surveying her surroundings.

The country kitchen was in its usual spic-and-span order. Heart pounding and ears alert, Sammi Jo listened up. The male voice out front sounded like Troy's while he'd been speaking to her at the office. While her eyes scanned the kitchen in the quest for a weapon to grab, a cheery image popped into her mind.

Isabel and Alma, pie maker extraordinaires, stored their wooden rolling pins in the cupboard under the counter with the coffeemaker and toaster on its top. Sammi Jo had watched them flattening the dough for the crusts to their specialty pies—Isabel's pie was persimmon and Alma's pie

was cherry—on the kitchen table. Sammi Jo prowled about the kitchen quiet as a big cat.

Sammi Jo failed to locate the wooden rolling pins, but she found two different sized pressure cookers and selected the largest one's lid also featuring the longest handle. It was made of heavy stainless steel, and she took a couple of practice swings with it. Unless Troy came wearing a crash helmet, he was getting an egg-shaped lump and a giant headache to go with it. She didn't care as she crept into the living room, tiptoeing to avoid stepping on a squeaky floorboard.

Troy, his back turned to her, was saying he wasn't done with his killing before getting out of town on his fast horse. Sammi Jo didn't appreciate hearing such talk. She also took a dim view of the knife he clenched in his fist. Knives belonged in the kitchen and not out here.

Isabel and Alma saw Sammi Jo materialize through the doorway and though overjoyed, they did nothing to give her away. Isabel in her calm manner spoke to divert Troy while Sammi Jo closed in.

"You'll never get away with it," Isabel said. "The police will set up a dragnet, and they'll capture you."

Troy put on the chilling leer. "Well, I'm much smarter than the cops, so I'll—"

Bap!

Sammi Jo used both hands to swing the pressure cooker lid to clobber Troy on the back of the head. One blow was all it took. Knocked unconscious, he toppled to the floor as if a powerful earthquake had jolted him off his feet.

A wave of relief swept through Sammi Jo as she looked at Isabel and Alma, the tension draining from their faces as they smiled at her.

"Well played," Alma said with a pleased nod.

"Thanks," Sammi Jo said.

"Petey Samson must've alerted you," Isabel said.

"I met him running along the sidewalk while I was hurrying over to see you," Sammi Jo said.

Isabel nodded. "I knew he'd do something heroic when Troy told us Petey Samson had escaped through the raised window."

"He's the best dog there ever was," Alma said.

"You didn't bend or damage our pressure cooker lid, I hope," Isabel said.

Sammi Jo inspected it. "I wanted to use a rolling pin, but I couldn't find one," she said.

"We lent them to your Aunt Phyllis," Isabel said. "She was in the middle of making pies, and nobody in town sells rolling pins."

"So, we stepped in and saved her pies," Alma said, kicking the knife Troy had dropped on the floor away from him.

"I've never tasted a better slice of blackberry pie a la mode," Isabel said.

"I suppose we need to call the sheriff and an ambulance," Sammi Jo said. "I used my old softball swing because I was scared out of my wits for your safety."

"You knocked it out of the park," Alma said.

"No, Petey Samson deserves the credit," Sammi Jo said. "All I did was take care of business."

"Speaking of whom, where's the dear pooch?" Isabel asked.

Sammi Jo turned around and saw no beagle was there. "I forgot all about him," she said. "I guess he's still sitting in the back yard."

"He's been waiting for one of us to let him inside," Isabel said. "The butterball could vault out of the raised window but not back inside it."

"Uh, Isabel, you better take a peek out at the flowerbed," Alma said, looking through the picture window.

Isabel laughed. "I don't fuss anymore. Let him dig to his heart's content. He's a beagle, and they love doing it."

"We'll need to give him another tub bath," Alma said.

"Who cares?" Isabel said. "We've got plenty of soap and water."

"We'll have to fill in the flowerbed," Alma said.

"Oh well, beagles will be beagles," Isabel said.

"Suppose he digs up another curious bone," Alma said.

"Come again, please?" Isabel asked.

"We'll have to postpone playing Scrabble and start all over again with solving a new mystery," Alma replied.

Isabel lost the grandmotherly sweet smile as her hazel eyes flared. "You call that troublemaker dog back indoors right this instance," she said.

"I thought you just said to let him play in the flowerbed," Alma said.

"Petey Samson has done enough digging holes for one beagle," Isabel said. "If I don't get to play Scrabble, I'll flip my wig even if I don't have a wig to flip."

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Chapter 38

“We can chalk up another mystery in the solved and completed category,” Blue said.

“Yes, this mystery is in the bag,” Isabel said.

“It’s jolly good to hear the stirring news,” Willie said.

“Any chance you’ll be retiring now?” Ossie asked. “I heard a rumor that your solving Betsy’s murder is your swan song.”

“Where did you hear such an outrageous thing said?” Alma asked with heat.

Ossie gave a disarming shrug. “Who told me isn’t nearly as important as whether or not you’re hanging up the spurs.”

“First, only bowlegged cowboys in ten-gallon hats wear spurs,” Alma said. “Second, I wouldn’t be caught dead riding on a horse like a cowboy.”

“Not when you can go chasing after armed and dangerous criminals for getting your kicks,” Isabel said.

Alma looked at Isabel while the Three Musketeers chuckled. Isabel and Alma relaxed sitting in a pair of aluminum lawn folding chairs beside the wooden bench. The ladies wore summery linen while the Musketeers came in seersucker duds with John Deere gimme hats.

Everybody sat there enjoying their tall glasses of iced tea and watching the world go by on Main Street. The Tuesday morning sun cast down its golden light, and the humidity was low, a treat since the June days usually turned hot and stuffy in Virginia.

“What’s Petey Samson up to?” Ossie asked.

“Sleeping,” Alma replied.

“What’s Sammi Jo up to?” Ossie asked.

“Working,” Alma replied.

“What’s Reynolds up to?” Ossie asked.

“Rebuilding a carburetor,” Alma replied.

“What’s Eustis up to?” Ossie asked.

“Counting pills,” Alma replied. “Are you taking roll?”

“I’m just making idle chitchat to pass the time,” Ossie said.

“Pick a different idle topic to chitchat about then,” Alma said.

“Isabel, I’ve got a milestone birthday coming up,” Blue said. “Never mind which one it is, but I’d like to throw a party in the bingo hall at the firehouse. One problem, however, gives me reservations.”

“Tell us what troubles you so much,” Isabel said.

“If I invite you and Alma as I wish to do, will there be a murder?”

Blue asked.

“Why might there be a murder at your birthday party?” Isabel asked.

“Are you also inviting a hit man?”

“No, but everywhere you and Alma go, the dead bodies are dropping like flies,” Blue replied. “I can’t have the discovery of one putting a damper on my festivities.”

“Blue, what an unkind thing to say to Isabel,” Ossie said, always her fiercest defender. “She and Alma can’t help it if they are a pair of dead body magnets.”

“Everybody step back and take a breath,” Isabel said. “I think Blue asks a fair question. I’ll leave it to our most outspoken member to answer. Alma, are we a pair of ‘dead body magnets,’ as Ossie calls us?”

Alma shrugged. “It beats me. I just get up every morning, thank the Good Lord above I made it to a new day, and whatever it brings, it brings. I have no control over determining it.”

“I couldn’t have said it any better myself,” Isabel said.

Willie chipped in his two cents. “Just go ahead and invite everybody, Blue. If a dead body—and I doubt if there will be one—turns up, we’ll take out the time and deal with it then.”

“I agree,” Ossie said. “By the way, is your milestone birthday the big nine-oh?”

“It is but, as you can see, I’m still vertical and ventilating oxygen,” Blue replied. “I’d like for Willie and you to put all ninety candles on the top of my birthday cake and light them. I want to make a special wish for when I blow them out.”

“You better get cracking then,” Alma said. “Sticking that many birthday candles on top of the cake will take you awhile to finish.”

“Can you buy that many birthday candles in Quiet Anchorage?” Isabel asked.

Alma shrugged. “You might have to drive all the way to Warrenton for getting them.”

“Isabel, I meant to mention to you I noticed Blaine is holding a sale on his potted flowers,” Ossie said.

“Which potted flowers did you see on sale?” Isabel asked.

“He discounted his marigolds by fifty percent,” Ossie replied. “That’s a bargain any day of the week.”

“Blaine couldn’t *pay* me to take a single one of his marigolds,” Isabel said.

Alma turned to hide her grin. “You can relax because we’ll dig up no other bones,” she said.

“We can’t be one hundred percent certain of it, so I’m not taking any chances,” Isabel said.

“I don’t blame you, Isabel,” Willie said. “I feel the same way about the piney woods. I’ve had my fill of tripping over the human bones while I’m rambling around out there, so I’ve stopped going.”

“You’ll miss spotting all the UFOs,” Ossie said. “I heard on the History Channel June is the month they’re the most prolific flying in the night sky.”

“Is that so, huh?” Willie said. “Perhaps I spoke too hastily, and I should reconsider my decision. What do you think, Alma?”

“I always go by the old hippies who say if it feels good then do it,” Alma replied.

“Does that old hippie saying also explain why Isabel and you aren’t ready to retire from the sleuth trade?” Ossie asked.

“We feel gratified if we’re able to ease an unfortunate soul’s grief and distress,” Isabel replied. “This time Doris Sweet took a small measure of comfort in learning the truth about what happened to Betsy the morning when she was last seen alive. Doris thanked Alma and me several times, but no thanks are needed.”

“Still, we appreciate hearing them,” Alma said.

“Is she heading back to Florida or staying in town?” Ossie asked.

“Doris can’t bear to live here where her memories will always be so raw and painful,” Isabel replied. “She left town before dawn in her rental car heading south, but not before she made a stop at Uncle Jimbo’s antique shop to buy her knickknacks. Betsy’s cremated remains will be shipped to Doris when they’re ready.”

“I feel sorry for Doris,” Blue said. “She’s a swell lady who got dealt a lousy hand.”

“She’ll be back on the beam in next to no time,” Isabel said. “She has good friends living in Florida, and she promised to stay in touch with Alma and me.”

“I also feel sorry for Troy’s mother,” Alma said.

“Yes, the hard-working Valerie Raft now has a heavier cross to bear,” Isabel said. “We’ll call her in a couple of days. She might welcome hearing a friendly voice.”

“What about the pig bone I planted in your flowerbed?” Willie asked. “What if the townies still talk and wonder about it?”

“What if they do?” Isabel replied. “Just let them. Nobody will ever see the pig bone again, I guarantee you.”

“Sheriff Fox might ask his questions about it,” Willie said.

“He’s too thrilled to have made the arrest and closed out a homicide to give it another thought,” Isabel said.

“The German Luger we dug has been bugging the devil out of me,” Blue said. “Like how did it get there? So, I did a little detective work of my own.”

“What did you discover, Marlowe?” Isabel asked.

“The clearing in the piney woods is a dumping site,” Blue replied. “Farmers used to haul their loads of debris and trash out there to discard. That’s why the Roberts kids searched for the old bottles and jugs there.”

“Somebody must’ve gotten tired of the Luger and thrown it away,” Willie said.

“What about the Luger that Betsy carried in her pocketbook?” Ossie asked.

“Troy must’ve sold or pawned it since he told Sammi Jo that Betsy never had a Luger,” Isabel replied.

“Did Betsy have the affair with Chad?” Alma asked.

“I did a little more detective work on that matter,” Blue replied. “I found nothing to prove Betsy Sweet ever had a dalliance with Chad Jones. It was all ugly rumors and gossip saying they did.”

“May her troubled soul finally rest in peace,” Isabel said.

“I think we can confidently assume she will now,” Alma said.

Ossie rattled the ice cubes in his tall glass. “Well, drats it all, lookie here. I’ve done run dry on my iced tea.” He looked at Willie. “Didn’t Corina tell us she has another pitcher chilling in her refrigerator?” Ossie asked.

“My niece is always good for a pour of iced tea during the summer,” Willie replied. “I’ll go in and fetch the pitcher in a minute.”

“Meantime, where’s our Scrabble board?” Isabel asked, snapping a look around them. “We’re sitting out here jabbering away like a flock of pea fowls when we could be set up and playing a game. That won’t do at all.”

“Don’t get your bowels in an uproar,” Alma replied. “I brought it along in the car.”

“Are you waiting for a phone call from the White House?” Isabel said as she pointed. “Get it out of the car. Now.”

“Just give me half a chance and I will,” Alma said, reaching for her pocketbook and car keys.

“Aw, take your good time, Alma,” Willie said. “We aren’t budging from this spot anytime soon.”

“That June sun feels too luxurious to move a muscle,” Ossie said.

“Absolutely so,” Blue said.

“It’s a lovely day,” Isabel said.

As Alma ranged up from the folding lawn chair and made her way to the parked car, she thought everything had returned to normal in Quiet Anchorage, Virginia. For now, it had, anyway.

The End

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