

A man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a dark suit jacket, a white dress shirt, and a dark patterned tie, is sitting at a poker table. He has a distressed expression, with his right hand resting on his forehead and his left hand on the table. The table is covered with a red cloth, and some playing cards are visible in the foreground. The background is a blurred red wall.

R.G. PETERSON

**TAPPED
OUT**

Tapped Out
Samantha Summers Novel #5

By

R. G. Peterson

Tapped Out

Samantha Summers Novel #5

In the early morning hours of New Year's Day, Private Investigator Samantha Summers receives a startling phone call; her father has been killed, and her dad arrested for his murder. Sam and her best friend and housemate, professional gambler Chancy Evans, leave for Shawano, Wisconsin determined to clear her dad, Stan Summers, the police chief there.

Sam uncovers that her biological father, Tony D'Aquisto, a man she never met, has secrets that – for her own wellbeing and safety – might be best left undisturbed. Among Tony's personal effects they find eight little black books filled with hundreds of women's names, passports and licenses under various aliases, clothes that cost thousands of dollars, and no money or credit cards.

Determined to find the person or persons behind Tony's murder, Sam and Chancy's investigation takes them from North-Central Wisconsin across much of the northern US and back again.

Sam and Chancy's usual playful banter turns antagonistic as the trip to Sam's hometown dredges up unpleasant memories and opens old wounds, with new ones soon to be inflicted.

GNM Books

Copyright© 2019 by R G Peterson

Tapped Out is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and events are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictionally. Any resemblance to actual event, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved

Cover Illustration by James A. Peterson

www.GNMBooks.com

Find us on Facebook @ GNM Books

Tapped Out
Samantha Summers Novel #5

By

R. G. Peterson

ONE

Milwaukee – New Year's Day

Sam burst into my bedroom, threw on the light, and yelled, “Get up! Rainey just called. My father’s dead, and my dad’s been arrested for his murder.”

It was New Year’s Day morning. 3:33 to be precise. I’d just gotten to bed half an hour earlier. My head felt as if I’d rammed it into a concrete wall, not once, not twice, but at least a dozen times. The room spun, and everything appeared out of focus. I threw the covers over my head. “It’s January 1st,” I said, “not April 1st. Wake me in a week.”

Sam ripped the covers off my bed and dragged me into the shower. She didn’t bother to wait until the shower heated up, and held me there as I tried in vain to move past her.

“Okay, okay, okay. I’m up,” I said. “And awake.”

Sam stepped away from me, water dripping down her arm, her sweatshirt soaked. “Be ready in ten minutes. Pack a suitcase. We’ll be there at least a week. We’re taking my car. I’m driving.” When I didn’t move, Sam said, “Goddamnit, hurry up.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Eleven minutes later, I’d dressed, thrown enough clothes into a large suitcase for two weeks, grabbed my winter gear, and headed out the door. Sam had already made her way down to the underground garage, opened the overhead door, and was heating up her five-year-old dark-blue Jeep Cherokee. I threw my suitcase into the back and climbed in the passenger seat. She glared at me as if I’d kept her waiting for an hour.

“Sorry,” I said sheepishly.

Sam squealed her tires and backed out. The Jeep had barely stopped moving when Sam stomped on the gas pedal, propelling her car forward, throwing me back against the seat. She couldn’t be bothered to lower the door after we exited, so I reached across her and hit the button one more time. I twisted in my seat to see it descend.

Feeling as if I’d accomplished everything I planned on doing that day, I laid back in my seat and propped my head against my jacket, which I’d placed between me and the passenger side window. I closed my eyes. The next time I opened them, Sam had stopped to get gas in Appleton.

“Make yourself useful,” she said. “Get me a couple of extra-large coffees. One salted-caramel, the other a double mocha. Get whatever you want for yourself.” I thought that exceptionally generous of Sam, especially since she didn’t offer me any money.

For the record, I'm professional gambler, Chancy Evans. I own a luxury condo in Milwaukee's Third Ward, where I live with Samantha Summers, ex-cop, disbarred lawyer, a private investigator, and, unknown to her, the love of my life. At six-one, Sam's a shade taller than me. She has the complexion of her Sicilian ancestors and eyes so dark they double as black holes. Depending on her mood, her hair can range from its natural dark-dark brown to white-hot blond. Most people mistake her for a Victoria's Secrets goddess. She's a confirmed lesbian, and sees me as the brother she always wanted. Which makes my life interesting. And wanting.

Throughout our seventeen-year relationship, we've been there for one another through thick and thin, good times and bad, for better or worse, fat and... You get the picture. We're like an old married couple. We take delight in giving each other a hard time without taking offense, and, on rare occasions, we fight. And, like with most long-married couples, there's no sex. Sam refers to us as "Besibends" – best friends who are closer than the closest of siblings.

I got two large coffees for myself, mimicking Sam's order. I also got a box of apple fritters to share. I opened the box on the way out, to make sure I'd get one.

When we were back on the highway, I asked, "So what happened?"

"It seems my biological father showed up in Shawano right after Christmas."

Sam looked at me to see if I remembered that her adoptive dad, Stan Summers, was the Chief of Police there. I nodded.

"Anyway, my father felt sorry for dumping my mother all those years ago and wanted to see if they could get back together. When my dad found out, they got into a fight. My father and my dad." Sam paused. "This isn't working," she said. "Okay, from now on, I'm going to call my biological father, Tony. The man who raised me will be, 'Dad.' Got it?"

"I guess. You went through that a little fast, but give me a day or two to think about it."

"Quit being a smartass."

"Sure," I said, stifling a laugh. "Go on."

"I'm glad you find this so funny," Sam said. "My dad's been accused of murdering someone."

"Sorry," I said. I guess she wasn't in the mood for our usual playful banter.

"My father...ugh...Tony rented a cottage a little north of Shawano. When the owner of the cottage knocked on Tony's door yesterday afternoon, to remind him that he was supposed to have checked out that day, he got no answer. The TV and most of the

lights were on, so the landlord used his key to enter the place and found Tony dead in the bedroom. Someone had shocked him with a stun gun.”

“But those things don’t kill people. Do they?”

“He was stunned more than once,” Sam said. “At least four separate times.”

“But still...”

“If a person has a heart condition – and we won’t know for sure if Tony did until the autopsy – using a taser or stun gun can send them into cardiac arrest.”

“So, other than their fight, why do they suspect your father...sorry, your dad killed him?”

“His squad car was spotted outside the cottage earlier that day. And the stun gun he keeps in it was completely discharged.”

TWO

Shawano – The Summers' Home

We pulled into a driveway and parked behind a black Mercury Marquis. The house was a two-story Colonial with grey aluminum siding. Raena “Rainey” Summers stood outside the front door smoking a cigarette. Despite the temperature in the teens, she wore no coat. She had on black slacks and a royal-blue sweater over a black blouse. Rainey was five-foot-nine with auburn hair and light, freckled skin. She had piercing blue eyes that lived up to their description. I’d never seen her smile. I’m not sure she was capable of it.

As Sam got out of the car, Rainey stiffened. She took a long drag on the cigarette, held in the smoke as if trying to get high, then exhaled, letting it out in a slow stream. When Sam got to within five steps, Rainey said, “It’s good to see you. I’m glad that you could come.” Rainey’s greeting held zero warmth.

“How’s Dad doing?”

“How do you think he’s doing? He’s in jail.”

Sam turned to me and said, “See where I get it.”

“Yeah. The condescension doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

Sam favored me with hooded eyes before turning back to her mother.

Sam asked, “Has he been arraigned yet?”

Rainey shrugged, “Later today, I’ve been told.”

“Will he be able to get bail?”

“How should I know? You’re the lawyer. Or used to be. Before you got disbarred.” The disdain Rainey had for her daughter hung in the air like the snow clinging to the branches in their yard.

Sam ignored her mother’s comment and said, “You remember Chancy?”

Rainey nodded. “Have you had any luck converting her?”

“I love her just the way she is,” I said.

Rainey offered a dismissive grunt. “Does she know?” she asked.

“Know what?” Sam and I said in unison.

Still addressing me, she said, “That you’re nuts about her? Even though she’s a lesbian.”

I chuckled uncomfortably. “Sam knows I’m only crazy about one person. And you’re looking at him.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” Rainey said. She tossed away the remains of her cigarette and went inside. Sam and I followed. I sensed Sam suspected there was something to her mother’s revelation. She ran the past six years through her brilliant mind and hit upon my reluctance to commit to any form of a romantic relationship. Sam, on the other hand, had slept with more women in a week than I had in the last four years.

We followed Rainey into the kitchen. She grabbed a cup of coffee and walked past us back into the front room. “She’s quite the hostess,” I said.

“A leopard doesn’t change its attitude.”

Sam grabbed two more cups from the cupboard and poured us some coffee. She took a sip and made a face as if she’d swallowed arsenic. She pointed to the table and said, “You’re going to need a lot of sugar. Rainey’s always made it strong.”

Sam found a container of International Delight Caramel Macchiato coffee creamer on a shelf in the refrigerator. She glanced at the expiration date, smelled the creamer, shrugged her shoulders, and poured about three tablespoons into her coffee. She handed the creamer to me. She’d left a few drops. I chanced a quick whiff and cringed. I threw the carton away and added four packs of sugar to my coffee. I took a sip and grimaced. I added two more packets. We returned to the living room and sat on the couch.

“So, what happened?” Sam asked.

“I told you what happened.”

“You told me that Dad killed my biological father. You didn’t tell me how Tony found you after all these years? It certainly wasn’t a coincidence. Did he come to the house?”

When Rainey didn’t answer, Sam asked, “Why are you holding back? What is wrong with you?”

“Don’t talk to me like that. I’m your mother. Show some respect.”

“Respect is earned.”

“Still the same brat you’ve always been.” Rainey turned to me and said, “Obviously, you’ve not had a positive influence on her.”

“We’ve made progress,” I said. “She no longer chews with her mouth open.”

Rainey shook her head in disgust. “I can see she’s had an adverse effect on you.”

“Can we get past this?” Sam asked. “We’re here to help Dad, not to rehash the good old days.”

Sam waited until her mother eased back in her chair. Rainey’s eyes drifted to look at the carpet as if seeing a stain for the first time.

“Start from when Tony got into town,” Sam said.

Rainey shifted in her seat and, without looking up, said, “The day after Christmas, he showed up on our front stoop. It took a few seconds to recognize him. When Tony’s eyes twinkled like I remembered, I must have looked shocked, because he smiled even wider. He asked if he could come in.” Rainey stopped abruptly, lost in thought.

Sam prompted her to go on. “Rainey? Rainey! Mother!”

“Anyway. I was angry and excited at the same time. I was still pissed at him for having left me in that situation. Carrying you. But a part of me thought it was nice to see him again after all of these years.”

Rainey looked at me and said, “That’s how I know how you feel the way you do about my daughter. I used to look at Tony that same way.”

She paused before going on. “I felt like I was seventeen again. My heart raced. The old feelings returned.” She stopped speaking once more. We waited her out. “I don’t know what I expected. This isn’t what I’d wanted out of life – being married to a police officer in some small town. In the middle of nowhere.” After another long pause, she said, “Tony and I had always talked about getting out of Iowa. Making it big someplace else. LA, Chicago, New York.” Rainey grew sad. “That all ended when I got pregnant. He said he didn’t want to be burdened with kids. His plans didn’t include them. He needed to be free to do what he wanted, when he wanted. A wife? Yeah. Kids? No.”

“Did he say why he came here?” Sam asked.

A tear leaked from Rainey’s eye. “He said he’d made a mistake. That he still loved me and wanted me to go away with him. Said he’d had some heart issues, which forced him to reexamine his life and what he’d done. Said I was his biggest regret.”

“You weren’t actually thinking of leaving Dad,” Sam asked, incredulous. “Were you?” When Rainey didn’t answer, Sam grew indignant. “How could you? Dad has been here for you for thirty-seven years. He knew you were pregnant and still agreed to marry you. How could you give it even one second of thought?”

“I remembered how things used to be. How we felt together. I’ve never gotten over your father.”

“Don’t call him that. He was a sperm donor. Nothing more. My real dad is sitting in jail for killing him.”

Rainey grew incensed. “He’s your father. You wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for him.”

“I’m not going to grieve over him, if that’s what you want. I never saw him. He was never a part of my life. His death means no more to me than somebody I don’t know

getting killed in Atlanta, or London, or Cairo. What *does* concern me is whether dad knew you'd given some thought to running away with that guy."

Rainey stared at Sam.

Sam narrowed her eyes and returned it.

After a moment, Rainey dropped her chin to her chest and whispered, "Yeah. He knew."

Sam jumped to her feet, shouting, "How could you? You're despicable."

Rainey reacted by shooting out of her chair and stepping toward Sam. "He was standing outside on the porch. He heard it all. Saw most of it. When your father..."

"Don't call him that."

"When Tony took me in his arms, your dad came rushing into the house. He was angrier than I'd ever seen him. He had his gun drawn. I thought both of us were dead. He shouted, 'Get away from her or I'll kill you.' "

When Rainey paused once more, Sam asked, "What happened then?"

"Your fath... Tony left. Ran out of here. Kept his eyes on your dad the whole time. I heard a car start up, and it roared away, tires skidding on the frozen snow."

"Did he leave town?"

"I thought so at the time. But we found out later, he'd rented the Tyler Cabin. Northeast of town."

"We? Dad knew?"

Rainey nodded. "He went out there to confront him once more. The day after that, the landlord found him. Dead. They suspect he'd been shocked to death with the stun gun your dad kept in his squad car."

"Did *you* see Tony again?" Sam asked.

Rainey sat down and studied the carpet once more. I had to strain to hear her reply, "Yeah."

"When?" Sam asked.

"That same day. I went out to the cabin to talk to him."

"You were going to run away with him."

"I'd packed some clothes and threw them in my car. On the way there, I thought about it. All of it. By the time I'd arrived, I'd decided to tell him I was staying here. That I'd grown to love your dad. That I wanted to grow old with *him*. Here. This is my home. I asked Tony to leave and never contact me again."

I'm emotionally over-excitabile. Which is why I've been so successful at gambling. I can read people's emotions like a Dr. Seuss book. I touched Sam's arm to let her know her mother hadn't told us everything.

"What aren't you telling me?" Sam asked.

Rainey slowly raised her head. "It wasn't just about your dad. I realized that he'd never asked."

"Asked what?" Sam said.

"About you."

THREE

Sam got to see her dad, mid-afternoon. He was held without bond; because the court didn't want to be seen as giving favoritism to one of their own. When I talked to Sam later, she told me her dad had refused to talk about the case. When she mentioned she wanted to hire the best legal representation available, he said, "Save your money."

She'd never seen her dad act like this, which caused her even greater concern.

I offered to pay for his lawyer and suggested we get Attorney John Anthony Thomas onboard. Sam called him, and he agreed to represent her dad.

We booked a room at the Shawano Four Seasons Hotel. It didn't quite meet the standards of the Four Seasons Hotels where I normally stay, but at \$79 per night, it was a third cheaper. We asked for adjoining rooms, unpacked, and met in the lobby at six for dinner.

Sam took me to Bubba's BBQ Co. Apropos for the way I felt, I ordered the Hangover Burger. Sam ordered the Double Dog Dare Ya Burger, two half-pound patties with double bacon. In a well-rehearsed, manner-of-fact, dubious voice, the waitress explained to Sam that if she finished it, they'd put her picture on the wall.

While we were waiting for our burgers, I asked Sam why she thought her dad was so reluctant to discuss his case.

"I'm not sure," she said. "I think he's hiding something. But I don't know what, or why."

"Do you think he might have actually done this?"

Without hesitation, Sam said, "Uh-uh. No way."

"But your mom said..."

"Rainey says a lot of things. Most of them are said to feed the fantasies of her imagined idyllic life. You can't trust a thing she says."

I thought Sam had finished, but she started up again with a mixture of hurt and anger. "Probably made the whole thing up about Tony wanting her to go away with him."

"But she said your dad heard it."

"I couldn't get him to verify any of it. Kept turning the conversation to me. Asking how I was doing. Wanted to know if I'd found anyone special yet. I could tell he hoped I'd tell him I'd outgrown women and was dating some guy. Even asked about you as if our arrangement was more than besibends and housemates."

I grew uncomfortable because I suspected what Sam was going to ask next. She didn't disappoint. "Is my mother right? Do you have stronger feelings for me than just close friends?"

"Are you asking do I love you?" I asked. "Yeah. You're the closest relationship I've ever had. Probably the closest I ever will. I feel closer to you than I thought, for me, was ever possible. But I also know who you are."

Sam sat back in the booth and stared at me, trying to cut through my words to determine how strongly I felt about her. She started to speak just as our waitress brought our drinks. After she left, Sam said, "I really care about you, too. But I hope you're not avoiding getting involved with someone just so we'll continue to live together."

Much too quickly, I said, "No. I just want to be sure whoever I date, likes me for who I am, and not because of my money."

Sam's eyes crinkled as she raised her glass of beer to her lips. "With that criteria, you'll be single the rest of your life."

"A woman phoned me the other day. She said, come over. Nobody's home."

"And?" Sam asked.

"I went over. She was right. Nobody was home."

Sam's eyes sparkled, lighting up for the first time that day. It felt good to see her like that.

"What's your next move?" I asked.

"It'll be a few days before the forensics comes back, so we'll have to wait on that. The preliminary report by the county coroner is Tony died of a heart attack, but we'll know more after the autopsy."

"Are we going to be able to get in and see the cabin?"

"Yeah. Darryl, one of Dad's deputies, is a friend of mine from high school. Said he'd meet with us at nine tomorrow morning and let us know when we can get in to see the cabin. It might be a day or two. The State's forensics team isn't quite done with it yet."

"Anything else?"

"I want to check into Tony's background," Sam said. "See what he's been doing for the last thirty-eight years. We'll start by examining his personal effects. Darryl told me they collected all of his things, and they're holding them in the property room in the station. There are a couple of suitcases, a briefcase, and a personal computer. I'll download the files from the PC onto a thumb drive and send it to Adrianna." Adrianna being Sam's assistant and expert computer hacker.

Our waitress brought our meals. We ate in silence as Sam reflected on everything she'd been told and seen for the last few hours. I ate two-thirds of my burger before pushing it away. Sam finished hers before I was halfway through with the part I *did* eat. When the waitress came back and saw that Sam had eaten the pound of meat, she gasped, and her eyes grew as wide as manhole covers.

"Oh, my goodness," the waitress said. "You must've been hungry." She looked at my plate. "You didn't help her eat that, did you?"

I broke out laughing. Sam stood and walked over to the wall, where they kept the pictures. She motioned for the waitress to join her and pointed to a row of images from over the years. Four of them were photos of a much younger Samantha Summers smiling at the camera.

The waitress moved in to take a closer look, then shifted her attention back to Sam. Her mouth hung open as if in the presence of a deity. She started to apologize, but Sam waved her quiet.

"Does Henry Biever still come around?" Sam asked.

"Yeah. He comes in about once a month. But he hasn't been able to finish one of those in years."

"Take my picture," Sam said. "Make sure he sees it the next time he comes in."

The waitress snapped a photo of Sam. I paid the bill, and we returned to the hotel. Sam to give the case more thought. And me, thank God, to finally get some sleep.

FOUR

We went to the police station first thing the next morning; Darryl Deprey was the lone person in the office. Darryl said in a conspiratorial voice, “No one can know I let you do this. If word gets out, they’ll say you tampered with the evidence.”

“No problem,” Sam said. “This is just between us three.”

Darryl glanced in my direction and gave Sam a can-I-trust-this-guy look.

“Think of Chancy as bringing-your-child-to-work day.”

Darryl took us to the property room and reminded us not to remove anything.

Sam opened Tony’s computer and quickly overrode the password. She knew from Rainey that Tony had played basketball at Iowa and wore number 37. She first typed in “Hawkeye37.” It didn’t unlock. She paused and thought how everything she knew about Tony pointed to his being a narcissist. She typed in, “37Hawkeye.” The computer unlocked. She scanned the files to see if anything drew her attention. Six files started with “Tony,” but each had a different surname attached.

She copied the contents of various sections of the computer to thumb drives. She put all of the photos on one drive, his word documents, spreadsheets, downloads, and websites on a second, video files on a third, and his emails on a fourth.

Next, she went through his luggage. The clothes were from Burberry, Dolce and Gabbana, and Ralph Lauren, while his shoes came from Salvatore Ferragamo and Testoni. He had three Brunello Cucinelli sweaters.

After examining his wardrobe, Sam said, “This would fit right in with your closet.”

“Yeah, but I make that shit look good.”

“Only to someone with cataracts.”

She removed the clothing from the two suitcases and placed them neatly on the floor. She wedged her fingers along the bottom of the suitcase and pried out a false bottom. Underneath were six sets of fake IDs, including passports, drivers’ licenses, and social security cards, each with a name from among those she’d found on Tony’s computer: Tony Balistreri, Tony Russo, Tony Du Luca, Tony Morelli, Tony Conti, and Tony Bianchi.

It was easy to see where Sam had gotten her looks. Tony was dark-skinned, dark-hair, and dark-eyed. His licenses listed him as six-feet-six. He looked like a leading man out of Hollywood – a mix of Cary Grant and Pierce Brosnan.

Sam snapped photos of everything with her phone.

In the second suitcase, Sam found eight “little black books.” Each page of the one hundred page books had a woman’s name, phone number, description of each with a rating from 1-10 with seven being the lowest number, and 1-5 stars.

I asked Sam, “Why would he rate them twice?”

She gave me a how-dumb-can-one-straight-man-be look. “The one to ten is his rating of their physical beauty. The one through five, how good they were in bed.”

“He slept with all of these women? There are over seven hundred names.”

“Take pictures of each page,” she said and handed me four of the eight books. It took us thirty-three minutes to photograph the seven hundred-eighty pages of names.

Darryl came in when we were two-thirds of the way through, and asked what was taking so long. Sam didn’t stop, but answered, “Make sure, when someone takes a closer look at his effects, they search for a false bottom in his luggage. We’ll be finished in a few minutes.”

Darryl must have been around Sam quite a lot when they were younger because he knew he was being dismissed. He went back to the office.

We repacked everything the way we’d found it, and headed for the office. Sam thanked Darryl and told him that attorney John Anthony Thomas, her dad’s lawyer, would be arriving later that day.

We drove to the hotel and went to Sam’s room. She downloaded the thumb drives’ info to her computer and the pictures from our cameras as well. We drove to the post office and shipped the thumb drives to Adrianna by priority mail.

That concluded, Sam said, “I’m hungry. Let’s get something to eat.”

FIVE

That evening we joined Thomas and Sam's dad, Stan Summers, for the interview. Stan was close to my height at just under six feet, with a stocky build – thick chested and massive arms – reminiscent of the wrestler he was in high school. His blond hair was thinning and had begun to turn gray, and his light blue eyes held a wariness bordering on sad.

Stan was reluctant to talk to any of us. Thomas asked him what'd happened.

All Stan would say, "He had it coming."

Thomas asked, "Did you kill him?"

Stan stared at Thomas and then shifted his attention to Sam. After a few seconds, he repeated, "He had it coming."

"Did you shock him with your stun gun," Thomas asked, "knowing he had a bad heart, and that it could kill him?"

Stan looked at Sam, but answered, "It's not mine. It belongs to the police department."

"Is it the one that was used to kill D'Aquisto?" Thomas asked.

Stan shrugged and refused to say any more.

After half an hour of further questions that elicited not one reply, Sam asked, "Dad, why are you making this so tough? Attorney Thomas can't help you unless you cooperate. What's going on?"

He looked at Sam and offered her a sad smile. "I love you, Sammy," He said, "And your mother, too." He stood and asked the guard to take him back to his cell.

The three of us went for coffee and to discuss our next moves.

"Is your father always like that?" Thomas asked Sam. "So uncooperative?"

Sam shook her head, "It's not like him at all."

Thomas said, "You say there's someone who can place him at the cottage the day D'Aquisto was killed."

"The owner who leases it. He saw my dad knocking on the cabin door about three-thirty that afternoon."

"Did he also see D'Aquisto?"

"No. My dad was on the front porch, knocking on the door when he passed. But never saw D'Aquisto."

"Did the landlord see anyone else there that day?"

“I didn’t ask, although Rainey, that’s my mother, she’d been out there as well. She went there to tell Tony she’d decided to stay in Shawano with my dad.”

“Was that before or after your dad went out there?” Thomas asked.

Sam’s eyes grew steadily wider. “Oh. My. God.”

“What? What?” I asked.

“I believe my dad thinks my mother killed D’Aquisto. That’s why he’s not saying anything.”

Sam stood and said, “Mr. Thomas, we got you a room at the Shawano Four Seasons. You can ask the waitress where it is. Chancy and I have to talk to Rainey. Thanks, and sorry.”

SIX

We headed back to the Summers' home. Rainey glared at us as if we were Jehovah's Witnesses wanting to know if she'd found God. She let us in reluctantly, and, as before, didn't offer us anything to eat or drink.

"What brings you back here?" Rainey asked.

"It isn't for the refreshments," Sam said.

"You want something; you know where to find it."

"It's good to know some things never change," Sam said. "On the other hand, it's too bad that some things never change."

"Watch how you speak to me. I'm still your mother."

"In name only," Sam said.

Rainey gave Sam the same look Sam often gave me – a death stare. I shrank out of pure habit. Seeing Sam not react, Rainey said, "Just ask me what you came here to ask, then leave."

"Dad thinks you killed D'Aquisto."

"Did he say that?"

"No. But he refused to talk to us, or the lawyer, about what happened. The only way that makes sense is that he's protecting someone. ... You."

"You don't come back here for years, and when you do, you insult me?"

"What time did you talk to Tony the day he died?"

"I don't remember," Rainey said nonchalantly as if Sam had asked the date of Lincoln's birthday. In an equally dismissive manner, she added, "Some time that afternoon."

"Before or after three-thirty?"

"I told you, I don't remember. I wasn't thinking about the time. I was thinking about leaving, then changed my mind. I focused only on what I was going to say to him."

"Did you go inside?"

"No. He held the door open with one hand and half-stepped outside."

"You told us that you'd asked him to leave and never contact you again."

Rainey nodded.

"How did he react to that?"

Rainey's head sagged. "He didn't. He tried to change my mind, but after a minute, he gave up as if he had better things to do. He certainly wasn't all that disappointed."

“You seem hurt by that,” Sam said.

Rainey glared at Sam. “Wouldn’t you be. No, of course not, you’ve always been a cold-hearted bitch.”

“I had a great teacher.”

Rainey looked at her daughter with a mixture of hate and revulsion. A moment later, she said, “He came all this way to ask me to leave with him. Tells me he made a mistake in not marrying me. But when I tell him I’m not going with him, he acted as if it was no big deal. As if I was an object he saw at a rummage sale and couldn’t talk the seller down in price.”

“Did you find anything strange about his behavior?”

“Like what?”

“You said he opened the door but stood holding it. Almost as if he was barring you from coming inside.”

“Yeah. So?”

“Did you hear anyone else inside the cabin? Someone moving around? Did he seem nervous?”

Rainey crossed her arms and tapped her foot, then, with a hint of anger, said, “He didn’t seem nervous so much as that I’d interrupted something. Glanced over his shoulder a couple of times as if he had something cooking on the stove.”

“You didn’t find that odd?”

“Why should I?” Rainey said, still pissed. “Maybe he had something cooking on the stove.”

Sam looked at Rainey with disgust. “Right. I’m sure that was it.” Sam paused before adding, “Think back. Do you remember a sound, a smell, something out of place?”

Rainey opened her mouth to answer, but Sam stopped her. “Close your eyes and try to relax. Take yourself back there. Replay the whole encounter.”

Rainey’s anger grew with every order her daughter gave. She glared at Sam. The hatred between them palpable. Still, after a few seconds, Rainey closed her eyes and drifted back in time.

Her eyes flew open, and she gawked at Sam. “I smelled perfume.”

“What kind?”

“Something I’d never smelled before. As if someone had sprayed different scents of room deodorizer.”

“So, probably a mix of perfumes.” It wasn’t a question.

Rainey's shoulders slumped, taking in Sam's revelation. "That bastard," Rainey mumbled.

Sam waited for her mother to regain her composure before she asked, "He was alive when you left him?"

"Of course he was," Rainey shouted, more pissed off than I'd ever seen Sam.

"You can see why Dad thought you might have done this. He knew you hated Tony for what he'd done. Then he comes here, and when you finally get the chance to reject him, he doesn't care. That must have made you even angrier. Angry enough to kill. At least, I can see how Dad might see it that way."

Rainey's eyes glazed over. She slumped in her chair, forlorn. I read it as someone who, after thirty-seven years, realized she'd given her love to the wrong man.

Sam asked, "Were you aware that Dad had a stun gun in his car?"

"Of course," Rainey said. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Do you know where he stored it?"

"What are you getting at?"

"I'm trying to show you why Dad may have jumped to the conclusion that you..."

"Well, I didn't. And if you're such a great detective, I'd think you'd be out there looking for whoever did."

Sam didn't say another word. She stood and walked out the door. I rose and opened my mouth to say something to Rainey, but the look she gave me was one I'd gotten way too many times from her daughter.

SEVEN

After a quick stop at Luigi's Pizza and Pasta, we returned to our hotel with an extra-large meat lover's pizza. As we ate, we looked at the pictures we'd taken of Tony's hidden stash. Sam sorted the photographs and documents into relevant groups.

Sam stuffed the slices of pizza into her mouth with one hand and navigated the pictures with the other. We were looking at the notes in Tony's black books when Sam sat a bit straighter.

"What?" I asked. "What?"

"There." Sam pointed at six separate names on the close to eight hundred pages. "Don't you see?" Sam asked as she attempted to swallow the enormous bite she'd taken.

"Obviously not."

"Your brain works at the speed of dark," Sam said. "Look. There." Sam pointed once more at each name, but more slowly, pausing over each.

"Sorry, I still don't see what's so obvious to you."

"Can I trade you for what's behind door number one?"

I pretended to be hurt. "I don't know what your problem is," I said. "But I bet it's hard to pronounce."

The right side of Sam's lip raised a fraction before pointing at the six names once more. "In addition to the rankings, there's a dash after the entry."

I studied the document once more. What Sam had said seemed so evident that I wondered how I missed it. Then again, it was so minute I'm sure 99.99 percent of the world's population would have missed it, as well.

"What do you think it means?" I asked, staring at the books' pages.

"His way of setting these women apart from the rest."

"And?"

"We'll have to look into them and see if we can discern some sort of pattern. Write these down."

I grabbed a notepad from the table and poised my pen above the sheet of paper.

"Doris Sweeny, C.C. West, Shauna Ward, Debra Hart, Sydney Atwater, and Alora Taylor."

"How do you propose to find these women? There must be hundreds, if not thousands of women with those names."

"I have an idea, but I want to wait until Adrianna sends us what she finds."

We looked next at Tony's fake IDs.

"These look authentic," I said. "He must have known a good forger."

"They are exceptional. I wonder if they're real. Something else for us to look into."

I touched the photos of Tony's drivers' licenses. "These look authentic, too."

There were six licenses – Oklahoma, Kansas, South Dakota, Oregon, California, and Minnesota – each with a different name. The birthdates were all different, but close: all within two years of Tony's.

"Why did he use a different birthdate on each of these. Wouldn't it have been easier just to use *his* every time?"

Sam didn't answer. I heard the wheels spinning in her head. I knew better than to interrupt.

After three minutes, she said, "I think I know why."

She left it at that.

"Are you going to share?"

"You had three breadsticks and three slices of pizza. I think I've shared enough."

She got up and went into the bathroom. I heard the toilet flush, and the shower turned on. A second later, she opened the door, stopped abruptly, and frowned. "Are you still here?" she said.

"Just leaving."

EIGHT

The next morning, we got in Sam's Jeep and drove to the jail, where we were taken to the holding cell. Stan stood when he saw his daughter.

"Hi, honey. How're you doing?"

"I'm fine," Sam said matter-of-factly. "Rainey says she didn't kill Tony. So, you can stop all of this crap and help me get you released."

"I don't want to talk about that," Stan said. "Let's talk about you." He glanced at me, then back at Sam.

"I'm a lesbian, Dad. I like women. You may have noticed that Chancy – although he can be somewhat effeminate at times – is still a guy."

I lowered my hand that I'd been holding limply by my side, stood a bit straighter, puffed out my chest, and let my arms bow from my sides as if my lats prevented them from hanging straight down.

Sam rolled her eyes. She returned her attention to her dad and started to say, "Rainey..."

Stan shook his head, "I wished you'd call her mom."

"Why? She's never been much of one."

"She's still your mother," he said with a touch of force.

"Can we get past that, please?"

Stan shrugged as a concession.

"Alright," Sam said. "My *mother* went to see Tony that day. But you knew that already. Didn't you?"

He nodded.

"Did you see her there?"

In a near whisper, he said, "I did. I followed her. I saw him open the door and greet her. I was so distraught. Didn't know what to do. I wanted to confront them right then, but..."

"So, you drove away. You didn't continue to watch them."

Stan shook his head so slowly I thought someone had shot the scene in high speed and was playing it back at twenty-nine frames per second. "How did you know?"

"Because my mother never got inside. She told him she'd decided to stay here with you."

Stan straightened, went wide-eyed, and began to fidget. “But she’d packed a suitcase.”

“She admitted that she’d given some thought to going with him. But on her drive over, realized that her life was here. With you. She chose you over him. Don’t you see?”

He searched Sam’s eyes for the truth. Satisfied she’d been honest, his shoulders slumped.

“She never went inside,” Sam said once more.

“But...”

“But she wasn’t home two hours later, so you decided to go back and confront them.”

Stan gave Sam a sideways glance wondering how his daughter knew so much.

“Did you get a chance to talk to him?” she asked.

Stan went back to shaking his head. “He wouldn’t open the door. I could hear people moving around inside. But no matter how loud I pounded and yelled for them to let me in, they refused. After ten minutes, I left. I went for a long drive. A couple of hours later, I drove back to our place, and she still wasn’t there. I felt certain I’d lost her for good. After all of these years. Knowing that she never loved me the way she loved him. I was still crazy about her. I still am.”

Stan looked at me. I grew uncomfortable and shifted from foot to foot. I turned away, hoping Sam didn’t notice.

“The thought of being without her made me nuts.”

“Make sure you don’t say that,” Sam said, “if it ever goes to court.”

Stan nodded.

“Did you see Rain...*Mother’s* car when you went back?”

Stan shook his head. “I thought they’d moved it out of sight. Hid it behind the cottage. I couldn’t drive back there because the gate to the driveway had been closed and locked.”

Sam studied her dad for a moment before asking, “What aren’t you telling me?”

“I could smell her perfume. It still lingered by the door.”

“So, what stopped you?” Sam asked.

“Stopped me from what?”

“Confronting the two of them. Why didn’t you barge in? You’re a cop. You could have easily broken down the door. Hell, Chancy could have broken down *that* door.”

“Hey, hey, hey. I’m as macho as the next man.”

“I’ve seen you struggle opening an envelope.”

“That’s what teeth are for.”

“You’re saying you could have chewed through the door.”

“Definitely.”

Stan seemed amused by our banter. I’m sure he read more into it than was there, at least from Sam’s point.

She grew serious. “Dad, my mother wasn’t there.”

“How do you know?”

“Because Macho-Macho Man here is a human bullshit detector. He swears mother told the truth when she gave us her side of the story.”

Stan studied me for a long moment.

I offered him my most sincere smile. He wasn’t sold.

“So why didn’t you barge in?” Sam asked.

“I’d worn out my anger banging on the door. I’d come to the conclusion that, if that’s what it would take to make your mom happy, so be it. I’ve always just wanted her to be happy. I thought back to all those times she seemed so disappointed in me. And our situation. So…” Stan raised his head, his eyes hopeful. “Are you sure she was going to stay. She chose me?”

“That’s what she said. And Chancy swears she was being honest.”

He looked to me for confirmation.

I nodded.

He walked back to his cot and sat down. He placed his face in his hands and cried.

Sam let him. When he’d somewhat recovered, Sam asked, “Why was your stun gun discharged completely?”

“I never saw much use for it. I didn’t need it to break up bar fights, or domestic disputes. They were given to us by the federal government. So we took them. It’s been sitting in my car for three or four years. I never charged it.”

Sam stood ramrod straight. “You said you heard people moving around inside.”

“Yeah?” Stan said, confused.

“Are you sure? More than one?”

“Yeah. That’s why I thought your mom was in there.”

“Think, Dad. Did you hear people talking?”

“Just the buzz of people talking. In whispers.”

“How many?”

“People? I don’t know. I didn’t give it much thought.” Stan paused and cast his memory back to that evening. “Two. Maybe more.”

“Men or women?”

“The voices were so low,” Stan said, “it was hard to tell.”

“Okay,” Sam said. “Sit tight. We’re going to get you out of here. It may take a few days, but I promise you, I’m going to find out who did this.”

Stan came forward, and they hugged as much as any two people can through iron bars.

“I love you, sweetie.”

“I love you, too, Dad.”

We left to find a witness.

NINE

On the way out of the jail, Sam called Rainey and asked her where she'd gone after meeting with Tony at the cabin. She said she went to her friend Lizbet Carson's house, and that Lizbet still lived on the west side of town, in the same home she'd been in for forty-two years.

We drove across town only to find that Lizbet wasn't there.

"What do you want to do now?" I asked.

"I'm hungry," Sam said. Before I had a chance to note that she's always hungry, she shut me down with a don't-dare-go-there look.

"You want to go back to Bubba's?"

"No. Once was enough. I want something lighter. Let's go to DQ."

"You want to go to Dairy Queen? You're kidding, right?"

Sam didn't answer. Five minutes later, we were sitting outside DQ. Sam left the car running with the heater on and stared out the window, distant and aloof.

"You want me to get you something?" I asked.

"No, thanks."

"Dilly Bar? A Blizzard? An ice cream cake?"

Sam continued to look out her window, checking the various cars sitting in the parking lot.

"You know," I said, "only people from the Midwest would ever choose to get ice cream in the middle of winter."

No reaction from Sam. So I continued. "I have a friend who has this theory. He swears by it. He believes that it's best to drink warm beverages in the summer because then your skin will feel cooler than your insides. And cold drinks in the winter, because then you'll feel warmer on the outside."

"I bet your friend dies of constipation," Sam said.

Before Sam could deliver the punch line, I said, "Because he's full of shit."

Sam stopped scanning the area, looked me in the eye. "In my next life, I hope I don't come back as you." She pointed out the window. "Let's go."

She jumped out of her car and speed-walked toward the entrance of Dairy Queen. She called out to a grossly overweight man who looked to be in his early forties. He moved slowly because his walk was more turning side to side than placing one foot in front of the

other. As I opened my door, I heard Sam call out. “Henry? Henry Biever? Is that really you?”

It took the man a couple of strides to stop and pivot to see who’d called out to him. A broad smile creased his face. “Samantha Summers. How’s it hangin’, babe.”

Sam surprised me when she didn’t take offense to Henry’s calling her “babe.” Instead, she wrapped her arms around him as much as she could, and they embraced.

As I approached, Sam said, “Chancy, this is one of my few friends from this town. Henry Biever. Henry, this is my housemate, Chancy Evans. He’s here to help me clear my dad.”

Henry shook my hand and said, “Good to meet you. Any friend of Sam’s is a friend of Sam’s.” He turned to Sam. “Sorry to hear about your dad,” Henry said. “I know you two are close. You found out anything that will help so far?”

“No, but I’m positive he didn’t do it.”

He motioned toward the door with his head. “Come on, I’ll buy you your favorite,”

Henry said to the teenager behind the counter, “I’d like one Salted Caramel Truffle Blizzard, and one Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup Blizzard.” He looked at me and asked, “What would you like?”

“The Butterfinger, please.”

Henry handed his credit card to the kid. He rang up our bill, handed back the card, and asked, “Will that be all, Dr. Biever?”

“That’s all tonight, Baker. Thanks.”

“We moved to the pick-up window and waited. Sam and Henry laughed about the trouble they’d gotten into in the past. Sam snorted a laugh when Henry recalled letting a pig loose in the school the day they were supposed to graduate, and almost wasn’t allowed to walk across the stage.

I asked, “Why a pig?”

“My nickname in high school was Pork,” Henry said with a chuckle. “Sam talked me into it, but, of course, she was nowhere around when I let the mangy thing loose.” He laughed so hard I thought he might have a coronary.

“You’re a doctor?” I asked. “Of what?”

“Medicine. OBGYN.”

He noticed the startled look on my face, and guffawed. “Sam and I were the two least popular kids in school. Me, because I was so fat and Sam, because she’s Sam.”

I looked at Sam, thinking she might erupt, but once more, she broke out laughing. Maybe she wasn’t as thin-skinned as I thought.

We picked up our Blizzards and moved to a corner of the room. Sam asked, “Did you notice anybody different hanging around town the same time Tony D’Aquisto was killed?”

“That guy from out of town? The guy who was killed at the Alexander Cabin?”

“Yeah, him.”

He gave her question some thought before saying, “I saw a couple of women I’d never seen before. Thought they might be visiting relatives for the holidays. The day the guy was murdered, I saw a white passenger van sitting outside the cabin.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. It had Minnesota plates on it. Looked like a rental.”

“Did you see anybody in the van?” Sam asked.

“Nah,” Henry said, “It was parked halfway up on the lawn. When I came back from the other direction, I think I saw it sticking out a little, parked behind the cabin. I couldn’t swear to it, though.”

“Let’s go back to the women you saw.”

“Sure.”

“Can you describe them?”

“One was young. In her early twenties. The other – closer to fifty. The younger woman had wavy brown hair under a pink stocking cap. She had on regular shoes – not boots and wore a long coat that didn’t look very warm. Like she wasn’t prepared for the winter. More like something you’d wear when it was in the low forties. That’s what first drew my attention. The other woman – the taller of the two – was blond. She was dressed warmer, although she didn’t have boots either. She wore a flapper hat.”

“Flapper hat?” I asked.

“Like they wore in the Roaring Twenties. It looks like a turban.”

Sam asked, “Did they look like they were related?”

Henry gave it some thought. “No. More like partners.”

“Where did you see them?”

“That’s the crazy thing,” Henry said. “They were headed into Temptations.”

“The sex store?” I asked. “There’s a Temptations in Shawano?”

Henry chuckled. “Obviously, this is your first time here. There isn’t much else to do in Shawano in winter. It’s also the reason I became an OBGYN.” He raised his eyebrows up and down a few times. “A lot of babies are born here in August through October.” He laughed again.

“One more thing,” Sam said. “Did they look like they were lovers?”

“Just the opposite.” Henry paused and became reflective. “It’s funny. They looked way too serious going in there. More like they were on a mission, instead of going in search of fun.”

TEN

First thing the following day, Officer Darryl Deprey let us into the cabin to examine the murder scene. The cabin wasn't what I picture when I think of a rustic hideaway. It *was* made of logs like a frontier cabin, but it had an extensive front porch with two rocking chairs and a porch swing. Inside, an open floor plan with a massive fireplace at the far end. It had a loft bedroom accessed by a set of narrow stairs. The bedroom held a king-sized bed, a wide, double dresser, and a chifferobe, with a nightstand and small lamp next to the bed. A fan with five etched lights hung from the middle of the ceiling.

"Who processed the scene?" Sam asked as she took in the crime scene markers placed at various spots around the cabin.

Darryl shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot, turning his hat over in his hands. "I did," he said. "Well, at first, at least."

"Did you call the Wisconsin Division of Criminal Investigation?"

Darryl looked down. "Not right away. I wasn't sure what I was looking at when I walked in."

"Did you touch anything?"

"Yeah, kinda."

"Kinda?"

"I thought maybe the guy just had a heart attack. Plus, he was naked and everything, which made me uncomfortable. I grabbed the bedspread and threw it over him. I called in Dan. Blank. You know, from Blank Funeral Home? When he got here, he took one look at the body and said I needed to call in the County Coroner. Which I did."

"And?" I asked, knowing he'd left something out.

"That's when I thought I'd better start looking for evidence."

"How much did you disturb?" Sam asked.

"A few things. I handled the glass sitting on the nightstand. I smelled it to see what might have been in it."

"And?" I asked again.

"It smelled like alcohol. Scotch would be my guess."

"What did you do with the glass?" Sam asked.

"I put it back."

"So, your fingerprints are on it."

Darryl shuffled his feet once more. “Yeah. Mine were the only ones. The place had been wiped clean.” Darryl surveyed the cabin before saying, “It must have taken hours. This place is pretty big.”

“Did the crime scene people search everywhere like they’re supposed to?” Sam asked.

Darryl nodded.

“How about the bedding?”

“It’d been washed and left in the washing machine.” Darryl pointed to the back of the cabin, where a small washer and dryer were stacked on top of one another. “The blanket and bedspread had been torn off the bed and laid at the foot. The Wisconsin Division of Criminal Investigation people took them.”

“How about the bathroom?” Sam asked.

“Yeah, they went over that, too. They didn’t find much. The drains had been scoured. There was no hair and no used towels – the ones that had were in the washer.”

“The kitchen? The living room?”

“I’m telling you, they looked everywhere.”

“Under the bed?”

Darryl nodded.

“Between the mattresses?”

Darryl blinked rapidly. “I don’t know. Come to think of it, I don’t think so. Then again, I was relegated to watching everything from the open door on the porch.

Sam moved to the bed, motioning for me to join her.

“Lift that end,” she said.

We lifted the mattress so that it was resting on its side. Sam held it in place and leaned in closer. We held the mattress up so long my arms began to shake – I’ve got to start working out.

Sam let go of her end and shook her head in disgust. She thought of something, stood ramrod straight, and headed toward the laundry room. She opened her iPhone and hit the magnifying app. She set it at its strongest power and scanned the outside of the laundry detergent, spending extra time examining the handle. After two minutes, she shook her head again. She moved her phone over the bottle of bleach and froze.

Sam asked Darryl if he had any latex gloves. He extracted some from his back pocket and handed them to Sam. She put one on her right hand, picked up the bottle, and carried it out of the room. She found a large plastic shopping bag stored in a cabinet and placed the bleach inside. She started to close the door, but something caught her eye. She

dug inside and extracted a second bag that'd been crumpled and shoved in the back. The lettering on the outside said, Temptations. She looked inside the Temptations bag and said, "No receipt." She placed that bag inside a third and handed the bags containing the bleach and the Temptations bag to Darryl.

"Get these tested for prints."

He held the bags up to eye-level and examined them. Not seeing what Sam saw, he shrugged and said, "Sure."

Sam asked Darryl, "Did you call my dad?"

"Uh-uh. I knew he'd had an argument with the guy. That it had something to do with your mom..." Darryl saw Sam's flash of anger and corrected himself. "With Rainey, and I thought I'd leave him out of it."

"You didn't talk to him at all?"

"I called him later. After I'd called the county coroner, and the coroner said it looked like D'Aquisto had been zapped multiple times with a stun gun. He showed me the marks." Darryl pointed to five different places on his chest.

"Five distinct, separate marks?" Sam asked.

Darryl hesitated, then nodded once.

"What aren't you telling us?" I asked.

Darryl looked at me, trying to determine how I knew. He gave up and switched his attention to Sam. "I didn't know what to do. It looked bad. Here's the guy your dad had been arguing with, and then he's dead. Shocked to death by a stun gun. Not once but multiple times."

Darryl paused.

I touched Sam on the sleeve. She nodded and gave Darryl a let-me-hear-it motion with her hand. "When Stan came into the office after the argument," he said, "he was really, really pissed. I'd never seen him like that. He kept mumbling over and over, 'I'm gonna kill the bastard.' "

"When did you call the Wisconsin Division of Criminal Investigation people?"

"Right after Coroner Crowe said he thought the guy had been murdered."

"When did you talk to my dad?"

"Right after that."

"And?" I asked once more.

In a barely audible voice, Darryl said, "Your dad said, 'He got what he deserved.' "

ELEVEN

We drove down the road and turned into the driveway of John Alexander, the owner of the cabin. Sam knocked on the door. A man in his late fifties, with a paunch, thinning black hair, and glasses an inch thick, cracked open the door. He wore a plaid shirt, jeans, and moccasins. He said, "I don't have any cabins available right now. Door County has plenty this time of year. Cheap, too."

Alexander moved to close the door, but Sam had placed a hand on the open edge. The door didn't budge.

"I'm Samantha Summers. This is Chancy Evans. My dad's..."

"Your Police Chief Summers' daughter?"

"I am. We were hoping you might be able to answer a few questions."

"I already told the police everything I know."

"We'd like to hear it for ourselves. Sometimes the police are vague about what was said."

Alexander opened the door wider and motioned us to enter. "Have a seat," he said.

We sat on a wooden bench with no padding. He took the threadbare recliner that looked as if it had been purchased before the Beatles recorded "She Loves You." Duct tape covered parts of the arms and the cushion of the faded orange fabric.

"Mr. Alexander..."

"Call me John."

"John," Sam said, "can you tell us what you saw that day? Before you found the body?"

"Sure. I drove past the place early that morning on my way into town. Smoke was coming from the chimney, but I didn't see any kind of activity. I stayed in town. Had breakfast at Angie's. They've got a great breakfast special; three eggs, a stack of pancakes and ..."

Sam cut him off. "That's great, but can you just tell us what you saw at the cabin? And at what time?"

"Ah, sure." Mr. Alexander wasn't too pleased that Sam had cut him off at describing the highlight of his day. "I stayed in town 'til the early afternoon. Picked up supplies and stuff. Anyway, I drove back to my place around three-thirty. I saw your dad's squad car parked along the road next to the cabin. I slowed down to see if everything was alright. 'Cause I own it, you know. I rolled down my window. I was gonna say something

like, is everything okay? But then I heard your dad pounding on the door and screaming for whoever was in there to open it. He was really scorched.”

“Pissed off?” I asked as clarification.

“More than pissed off. He was scorched.”

Sam gave me a withering look for having stopped Alexander’s narrative.

“Anyway,” Alexander started up again, “he yelled some guy’s name. Saying he should open the door. Threatened to knock the damn thing down. By that time, I’d stopped alongside the road. The sound of my car on the crunchy snow made your dad turn around. I asked if everything was okay. Your dad said everything was fine. That I should move on. He had it handled. So I came back here.”

“Did you leave here at any other time that day?”

“I left a little before seven. Went to the Shawano Cinemas. They have the latest Star Wars movie, the...’

“Can you stick to what you saw at the cabin?”

“Ah, sure.”

I read Alexander’s reaction as him mentally comparing Sam to Rainey and how rude both of them could be. I smiled. Inside.

“It was dark by that time,” Alexander said. “Couldn’t see much. I did slow down as I passed the place. The door was closed. Didn’t look like it’d been broken down. Couldn’t see much. As I said, it was dark. There’re no lights out this far.”

“Street lights?” I asked as clarification.

Alexander nodded, then said, “I stopped and had a drink at the Longhorn Saloon. Left there about eleven and came back here.”

“Were there any lights on in the cabin either time?”

“Yeah. When I drove into town, it looked like there were lights on in both the downstairs and the upstairs. I could also see a light flickering inside. I think it might have been the TV. There were only lights on downstairs when I came back. Oh, and the TV.”

“How about smoke from the fireplace?”

“Yeah. The same. Saw some going in, none coming back.”

“Tell me about the next day,” Sam said.

“The guy said he’d planned on checking out that morning. Eleven is checkout. Anyway, it was getting on close to mid-afternoon, and he hadn’t dropped off the key. I thought he was just another one of those lazy people who don’t wanna drive a mile to sign the paperwork and give me the key. So I went there.”

“What time was that?” Sam asked.

“Around three. Maybe a bit later.”

Sam motioned for Alexander to continue.

“The downstairs light was still on. I knocked on the door and called out but didn’t hear nothing from the inside. After knocking a second time, I let myself in. I was surprised because the place was spotless. I thought I wouldn’t have to do nothing to clean it. Felt pretty lucky. ‘Til I went upstairs. Found him stark-ass naked lying on the bed.”

“Can you describe it?” Sam asked.

“He looked like a dead guy.”

“Not that,” Sam said. “How was he positioned on the bed? On his side? On his stomach? Arms placed across his chest?”

“On his back. His arms were straight out to his side. His legs were spread a little. Not much. Just a little. Like this.” Alexander stood and moved his legs apart about six inches.

“Did you notice anything else that seemed unusual?”

“Just that there weren’t no sheets on the bed. The blanket and bedspread had been torn off and thrown on the floor. And the pillowcases and sheets were gone. The cops found them in the washer. Ruined. The brown sheets had been bleached. There were white splotches every place.”

“Did you smell anything different?”

“Like?”

“Anything.”

“I could smell the fire having died, and the bleach,” Alexander said. “There *was* a strange odor. Maybe the dead guy? No. It smelled more like something a woman might spray on her.”

TWELVE

We drove back to the jail because we'd gotten a text from Officer Darryl Deprey that he'd received the initial crime scene report from the state.

Sam read us the autopsy report. Tony D'Aquisto had died of a heart attack at approximately five in the afternoon the day before John Alexander found him. The results, however, didn't point to the stun gun as the cause. Tony died from over-exertion, which precipitated the attack. After he died, his body had been wiped clean with sanitary wipes and bleach. No evidence was found on the body. There were marks on his wrists and ankles consistent with the victim being tied down with something soft, similar to nylons.

The five marks on his chest were of two different sizes. Three of the marks were from a gun with prongs set at three centimeters. The second gun's prongs were two and three-quarter millimeters apart.

Sam raised her head after reading the report.

"My Dad's stun gun's prongs are slightly more than three centimeters. They're closer to three and an eighth."

Darryl started to ask, "How do..."

I stopped him. "Trust me, she knows. Just by looking at it, she knows. I've seen her do this before."

"Really?" he asked.

"For sure."

The autopsy concluded that Tony had a ninety-nine-percent blockage in his left anterior descending artery – the widow maker.

Tony had a high level of Sildenafil in his bloodstream. Three times the recommended highest dosage – three hundred milligrams vs. the one hundred milligrams.

I asked, "What's Sildenafil?"

"It's the technical name for Viagra."

"He had three times the recommended amount?" I asked.

"No," Sam said. "He had three times the maximum dosage you can get in a prescription."

"Wow!" Darryl said.

"That would mean..." I started to say.

"He died with an erection," Sam said. "He was still semi-erect when they had him on the autopsy table."

I asked Darryl, “How come you didn’t mention this to us when we asked you about the scene?”

Darryl blushed. He gave a sideways glance to Sam, then turned away.

“They found the remnants of the drugs in the whiskey glass on the nightstand,” Sam said. “Someone had slipped it into his drink. I don’t think he took it voluntarily.”

Sam went on to describe the side effects something like that could have. “Too much Sildenafil can cause the penis to become inflamed. Even fracture. In extreme cases, it can cause gangrene. Which, if that happens, can spread to the rest of the body. And you die. Trust me: dying of a heart attack is a more pleasant way to go.”

Darryl had retreated into his own world. I read it as someone who’d dabbled with the drug and was giving serious thought to dumping what he had left down the toilet.

“So this clears your dad,” I said.

She stared at Darryl until he looked her way. “It certainly should,” she said. “Unless you think my dad made Tony drink a Viagra-laced glass of whiskey and tied him to the bed with nylons. Then what? Tickled him until he had a heart attack?”

A sheepish Darryl said, “I got to check with the state first, but I think your dad will be out later tonight.”

Sam looked my way and gave me an eyebrow shrug. She stood and said, “I’m going to talk to my dad about the crime scene report.” She went into the jail area without Darryl’s permission. Forty-five minutes later, she came out. She didn’t look relieved.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“He claims he did it. He’s going to refuse to be released from jail.”

“What?”

“I believe he thinks Rainey will be arrested for Tony’s murder. I’m sure *he’s* sure she went there, and that they were having crazy sex to make up for all those years.”

THIRTEEN

When we returned to the hotel, Sam found an extensive email on her computer from Adrianna. It went back to Tony's days as a student and athlete at Iowa and carried through to the present day.

Sam read the report out loud to prevent me from reading over her shoulder. It stated that Tony had a mediocre career both in the classroom and on the basketball court. He had a 1.85 GPA and never graduated.

He sat the bench his freshman year as a Hawkeye. His sophomore year, he got into a few games due to multiple injuries at the shooting guard position. Tony didn't live up to the first part of the position's name. Actually, in some ways, he did. He shot. He just didn't make, shooting under 35% for the season.

He played more his junior year but didn't shoot much better – 41%. He was a spot starter his senior year but, midway through the season, lost his position to a freshman.

He used his status as a former Hawkeye athlete to secure a job with Hormel. After three years, they let him go due to shoddy performance as a spokesperson for the company.

Tony moved to Pennsylvania, where he worked for Alcoa Aluminum as a district sales manager for the East Coast, which included Eastern Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, and Rhode Island. Two-thirds of the way through his fourth year, they discovered that he was no longer making calls on some of Alcoa's biggest purchasers. He spent most of his time gambling in Atlantic City. He might have gotten away with it if he'd won. His gambling debts were in the tens of thousands. When he couldn't pay, the Golden Nugget contacted his supervisor and explained the situation.

Tony next got a job in Rhode Island, with United National Foods, again as a regional salesman. He lasted six months. He had falsified his resume. When his sales were lower than expected, UNF's human resources department contacted Alcoa.

Tony moved south.

He spent two years in Georgia, three in Florida, and one in Alabama. The story remained the same. He was an incompetent salesman.

He went west.

Despite not having acted before, he got an agent and took acting classes. He had walk-on parts in a few low budget films, and one line in *Death Before Dawn*, and two in *Towering Inferno 3*. Both were delivered with a woodenness that caused audiences to snicker. To supplement his income, he worked as a tour guide for *Dearly Departed: The*

Tragic History Tour of Hollywood, a 2.5-hour tour of where some of Hollywood's biggest stars had died, including Clark Gable and Spencer Tracy. After six years, he gave up his Hollywood dream.

Over the next thirteen years, Tony moved to Oregon, Montana, South Dakota, Kansas, Oklahoma, and finally to Minnesota. He showed no regular job and didn't file any income tax returns – either state or federal – during that period.

Sam stopped reading and swiveled in her chair to look at me. Her eyes held a sadness I'd not seen in quite some time.

"He was a total loser," she said.

"We knew that with the way he left your...the way he left Rainey, knowing she was pregnant with you."

"No. You don't understand."

"What?"

"The reason there are no records of him working after California is obvious."

"Huh? What's so obvious?"

Sam took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Do you ever wonder what life would have been like if you'd gotten enough oxygen at birth?"

"That's interesting and ironic because you only annoy me when you're breathing."

We exchanged fist bumps.

"Remember when we looked in his suitcase?" Sam asked.

"Yeah?"

"How would you describe his wardrobe?"

"Expensive."

Sam gave a palms-up-there-you-go shrug.

A few seconds later, it came to me what Sam had inferred. "Where'd he get the money to buy those expensive clothes?"

"And?" Sam asked as she motioned for me to continue.

I gave it some further thought and went wide-eyed.

"He was a con man."

FOURTEEN

“Do you think that might have had something to do with him being murdered?” I asked.

“I’ll see if Adrianna can find out if he has any outstanding arrest warrants under any of the names we found.”

“We should tell her to look at his drivers’ licenses to give her an approximation of where he might have been to help narrow it down.”

Sam staggered and grabbed her heart. She pretended to have trouble breathing. She leaned against a table as if to steady herself, and said, “Twice in one day.”

Sam opened her computer and scrolled to the pictures we’d taken of Tony’s things. She stopped at his drivers’ licenses and studied them for a moment. Satisfied, she closed the picture section on her computer. She opened her G-mail account and typed in Adrianna’s email address. Her note said: “Adrianna, Can you see if there are any outstanding arrest warrants for a: Tony Balistreri in Oregon; Tony Russo in Montana; Tony Du Luca in South Dakota; Tony Morelli in Oklahoma; Tony Conti in Kansas; and finally, Tony Bianchi in Minnesota.”

“A please and thank you would be a nice touch,” I said.

Sam amended her email and hit send.

It was getting late, so I didn’t expect we’d get an answer that night. I said goodnight to Sam and headed for the door. As I opened it, Sam said, “Hang on. Adrianna just responded.”

“That was fast,” I said.

“Not if she found what she was looking for.”

I read over Sam’s shoulder as she opened the email. “You do that on purpose, don’t you?” she said.

“What?”

“Stand behind me and breathe on my neck.”

“You could feel me breathing?”

I received a slight shake of her head.

“Can you hear my heartbeat, too?”

“I wondered what that hollow sound was.”

“At least I have one.”

“Touché,” Sam said. “Sit over there. Pretend you’re back in kindergarten, and your teacher is reading to you.” Sam got an impish smile and added, “Or was that eighth grade?”

“Freshmen year.”

“High school?” Sam asked.

“College.”

I took a seat, and Sam read. “He has outstanding arrest warrants in all six states – Medford, Oregon; Bozeman, Montana; Sioux Falls, South Dakota; Tulsa, Oklahoma; Lawrence, Kansas; and St. Paul, Minnesota. All for fraud.”

“Holy shit!” I said.

“You’re so eloquent.”

“It’s a gift. What are you going to do?”

“What are *we* going to do?”

“Okay. What are *we* going to do?”

“I’m going to have Adriana see if she can come up with who’s in charge of each of these cases.”

“How does that involve me?”

“It doesn’t, but the next part does. Once we get the information, we’re going to contact the detective in charge and talk to him or her.”

“That’s still you.”

“No. We’re going to go see them. I want to be in the places he pulled his cons and see if there are viable suspects.”

“Oh, I see.” I got another thought. “His documents looked so real. Could they be?”

Sam nodded and said, “They could be.”

“How?”

“A few years back, I was investigating someone and came upon a guy who wasn’t who he said he was. He’d stolen someone else’s identity.”

“I don’t get it. How can they be real?”

“Because the birth records and the death certificates are never matched in the system. All Tony had to do was scan the records, find a child born around the same time as him, and who had died at birth or early childhood. He must have found kids named Anthony or Tony who were born into an Italian family. From there, he could contact the office of records and ask for the dead child’s birth certificate. Once he had that, he could apply for a social security card, and then a passport and driver’s license under the new identity. Voila.”

“As simple as that?”

“As simple as that. I’ll send Adrianna another email and ask if she can verify any or all of it.” Sam looked at the time at the top of her computer screen and said, “It’s too

late to do anything tonight. Get out of here and get some sleep. We're headed for Minnesota first thing in the morning."

Slow to stand up, Sam grabbed me by the arm and ushered me to the door. "Don't sit up and watch porn all night. Get some sleep. It could be a long couple of days."

She pushed me out the door.

To the closed door, I said, "Goodnight,"

FIFTEEN

Minneapolis, MN – Tony Bianchi

Sam contacted Adrianna after I'd left, and got a list of the detectives who'd been assigned Tony's cases in the various cities. Adrianna was working on Sam's theory as to how Tony obtained the official-looking I.D.s.

Sam had me drive so she could become more familiar with the cases and the detective in charge of each. Three hours later, we crossed the St. Croix Bridge into Minnesota. Sam gave me directions to Minneapolis City Hall. We asked to speak with Detective Andy Jackson of the Forgery and Fraud Division.

Although Tony's home address was listed in St Paul, his crimes were first reported to the Minneapolis police.

A man in his early fifties with wispy blond hair, dressed in a dark gray suit, met us at the call desk. He tugged on his pants in an attempt to keep them from sliding down as he walked.

"How can I help you," he asked.

"You don't look anything like your picture," I said.

"Yeah. That's original. I suppose next, you're going to pull a twenty out of your wallet and hold it next to my face."

"You have to excuse Ace," Sam said. "He was conceived on the highway. Just another accident."

Jackson scrutinized me once more before returning his attention to Sam. Like most men, upon seeing her for the first time, he liked what he saw. I'm sure that was why he was so willing to ignore me and not throw us out of his office.

"We were hoping to get a few minutes of your time to discuss a case you've been working on," Sam said. "It's about Tony Bianchi."

"You have information on Bianchi?"

"Yes. Is there someplace we can talk that's more private?"

"Sure. Come in"

Jackson pushed open a gate and led us down a short hallway. He stopped at an open doorway and stepped back. He swung his arm in the universal after-you gesture.

We sat around a rectangular desk, Sam and me on one side, Jackson on the other.

Jackson asked, "What kind of information do you have?"

“First off,” Sam said, “his real name was Tony D’Aquisto. He was born and raised in Iowa.”

“Was?”

“Yeah. He’s dead. In Shawano, Wisconsin, about five days ago. The police are treating it as a murder. Someone tied him to a bed, then he had a heart attack. Too much exertion.”

“Someone tied him to a bed? Sounds like sex gone wrong.”

“I’m telling you what the police believe. Someone had spiked his Scotch with Viagra. Three times the maximum prescribed amount. If someone gave him that knowing he had heart disease, it would be murder.”

“How do you know this is the same guy I’ve been looking for?”

Sam pulled out her phone and showed Jackson a picture of Tony’s Minnesota driver’s license.

“That’s him. Dead, huh?”

“Call Darryl Deprey. He’s the police officer handling the case in Shawano.”

“Okay.” Jackson drew out the word, not sure if Sam was leading him on. “Why not *call* and tell me? Why come all this way to share your news?”

“We were hoping to get some information from you.”

“Such as?”

“First off,” she said, “can you tell us about the scam?”

Jackson leaned back in his chair. “Who are you two exactly?”

“My name is Samantha Summers. I’m a private investigator hired to clear the person who the police have arrested for the murder. This is my associate, Chancy Evans.”

Jackson didn’t bother to look in my direction, choosing instead to keep his attention locked on Sam. Surprise, surprise.

“What’s the name of the person the police think killed him? And why?”

“His name is Stan Summers. He’s my dad. The motive is that Tony came to town to ask my mother to go away with him.”

“Why would she do that?”

“They were high school sweethearts.”

“Wait a minute,” Jackson said. “Tony was in his mid-fifties. After all this time, he wants her back? And your dad found out and killed him? At least that’s what the police believe?”

“I know he didn’t do it. But he thinks my mother may have, so he’s confessed.”

Jackson narrowed his eyes. “No offense, lady, but it sounds like you come from one fucked up family.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” I said.

Jackson slid his eyes my way, then back to Sam and tried to read her reaction. Nothing.

“Okay,” Jackson said again, then, “Tony Bianchi ran a scam we labeled ‘The Miracle Car’ scam. Tony claimed to be the adopted son of millionaire Salvatore Bianchi, a wealthy executive of a food company. He convinced people he was the sole heir of the Bianchi estate, valued at \$1.2 billion. Bianchi told the members of a church he’d joined a year earlier that he’d been instructed to give fellow “believers” one of the sixteen luxury cars of his late father’s estate. Bianchi told the marks that for the conveyance fee of \$1,500, they’d receive one of the vehicles.

“Word spread throughout Jonathon Cooper’s church, and within a month, over 600 people ponied up. Of course, no such estate existed. No Salvatore Bianchi. And definitely, no cars. Bianchi walked away with...”

Sam said, “Over \$900,000.”

“Yeah. Bianchi told those who’d given him the money that the process of ‘gifting’ the cars had to go through probate court, and their vehicle would be available in a couple months. Then he disappeared.”

“How long ago?”

“A little over a month.”

“Of these over 600 people, were there any who threatened to get even?”

“None of them were too happy if that’s what you mean.”

“No. Did anyone threaten to kill Bianchi?”

“Yeah. Two. Grant Morrison and Tommy O’Shea.”

“Who are they?”

“Morrison is a hedge fund guy. Says he was buying a car for one of his investors.”

Sam raised her hands, palms up, as a way of asking ‘who.’

“He wouldn’t say, but we know Morrison has ties to the local syndicate.”

“The mob?” I asked.

Jackson slowly looked my way. He rolled his eyes and went back to staring at Sam. “The other guy, O’Shea, is a legitimate businessman. Local alcohol distributor. His money comes from his family. Who weren’t legitimate.”

“Do you have their contact information?”

“Yeah. But I’m not giving that to you. It’s part of the investigation.”

“Which is now over.”

“Not until I do the paperwork and talk to the people in Shawano. Besides, the homicide rate is down in the Cities. I’d like to keep it that way.”

”At least give us the name of the church,” Sam said.

“The Church on the Fringes.”

“The fringes of what?” I asked.

“That’s its name.”

“The Church on the Fringes?”

“Isn’t that what I just said?”

“I guess,” I said, even though I was still confused.

“It’s in Coon Rapids. North of the Cities.”

SIXTEEN

Coon Rapids, MN – Reverend Jonathon Cooper

We called ahead and talked to Reverend Jonathan Cooper. He told us he'd be free that afternoon just after three. We pulled up a few minutes early, to a two-story building that looked more like a converted house than a church. Its most telling difference, attached to the peak of the roof, was a large cross. The entrance of the brown, clapboard structure had been remodeled to allow a glass, double-door entryway.

A woman, in her late forties, dressed conservatively, greeted us. Her yellow blouse was buttoned to the neck, and her gray skirt fell well below her knees. She wore little makeup, making her look ghostly pale, and sported a plain wedding band. Her dark brown hair was cut in a bob. I thought I'd stepped back into a black and white fifties' TV show.

"Welcome. How may I help you?"

"We called earlier," Sam told her. "We have an appointment with Reverend Cooper. My name is Samantha Summers, and this is Chancy Evans, my associate."

"Yes, Miss Summers. Reverend Cooper is in his study preparing this week's sermon." Saying his name, the woman sounded like a star-struck teen talking about the latest boy band crush. "Right this way."

Every wall had been painted off-white, and a crucifix adorned each one. We walked through an open room that had a lectern, about a hundred folding chairs with padded seats and backs, and two extra-long folding tables. One was covered with a white tablecloth embroidered with doves and lilies: the other remained plain and uncovered. A cloakroom sat off to the side. In the back, stairs led to what I guessed was the Reverend's living quarters.

The woman led us to a medium-sized office and gestured for us to enter. Reverend Cooper, a man in his mid-forties with greying blond hair and bright blue eyes, sat behind a small desk, writing on a legal pad. He looked up and said, "Excuse me. I need to finish this thought," and went back to writing. It was either a very long or a very profound one because he kept us waiting for close to four minutes.

There was a bookshelf in his office; every book in it had something to do with an aspect of the Christian religion. At least the Christian religion he practiced and preached. A few of the titles stood out: *Social Justice Warriors Always Lie*; *Race and Reason*; *White Identity: Racial Consciousness in the 21st Century*; *This Time the World*; *Trevor Lynch's White Nationalist Guide to Movies*. The religious books were: *With God On Our Side*; *Be*

Right (Romans): How to Be Right With God; The Book of Enoch; Great Doctrines of the Bible; and the ever-popular, *The Non-Prophet's Guide to the End Times*. The one that caught my eye, as well as Sam's was, *Why Homosexual Marriage is Wrong*.

When Cooper finished his thought, he placed his pen gently on the desk parallel to the paper, stood, and walked forward to shake our hands. Tall and lean, he moved awkwardly as if one of his feet had fallen asleep.

He looked at Sam as if he knew her. He examined her from the soles of her shoes to the tips of her hair, then stared intensely into her eyes as if trying to decide if he should ask her something. He chose not to and, instead, said. "I'm Reverend Jonathan Cooper."

Sam took hold of his hand and squeezed, causing Cooper to wince. "I'm Samantha Summers. I'm a private investigator. Interesting collection you've got," Sam said. "Three versions of the King James Bible, a book on White Supremacy, one a condemnation of the gay community, one on the end times..."

"Everything there is in the bible," Cooper claimed. "The inspired and inviolate word of God. You have to know how and what to look for."

"It's remarkable how some people get to pick and choose which words they follow."

He examined Sam further before looking down at his hand, still encased in her vice-like grip. "Your grip increased when you mentioned the book on gay marriage. You wouldn't happen to be a lesbian, would you?"

"Guilty."

Cooper swung his attention to me. His look of revulsion indicated he believed I must be gay as well.

"This is Chancy Evans," Sam said. "He's my associate. And he's not."

Cooper grunted derisively. "A lesbian?"

"A bigot," Sam said.

Though Sam eased up on the handshake, Cooper still had difficulty extracting his hand. Once free, he shook it to get the feeling back then remembered his secretary was still in the room. He addressed her in a tone that was both dismissive and condescending, as if talking to a disobedient child of five. "Thank you, Margaret. Please take care of that matter we discussed earlier."

Margaret didn't mind. Her eyes sparkled, and she offered him a warm smile. When she looked our way, it faded faster than the Alaskan winter sun. I read it as distaste for Sam's lifestyle, and for Cooper spending so much time staring at her. Although, it might have been for the thought of leaving the Rev alone with two degenerates.

Cooper motioned to a set of chairs on the opposite side of the room. He rolled his chair out from behind his desk and steered it until he was well within our personal space. If it was an attempt to make us feel uncomfortable, it worked. At least, on me. As for Sam, it didn't faze her. She leaned in a wee bit closer as if the two were about to share an intimate secret.

Cooper's eyes communicated an unmitigated contempt for Sam. It was as if he were judging an unsavable soul. A long minute later, he said, "We offer conversion therapy sessions. We've had a great deal of success."

"No, thanks," Sam said as if the Rev had offered her a cup of coffee. "I'm fine."

"Aren't you concerned about your eternal wellbeing?"

"Not any more or less than you should be."

"I'm a man of God."

"Which One?" Sam asked, glancing at his books once more.

"A Priest, a Minister, and a Rabbi wanted to see who was better at his job," I said. "Each went into the woods to find a bear, and attempt to convert it. When they got back together, the Priest said, 'When I found the bear, I read to him from the Catechism and sprinkled him with holy water. Next week is his first communion.' The Minister said, 'I found a bear by the stream. I preached to him God's Holy Word. The bear was so mesmerized, he let me baptize him.' The priest and the minister looked down on the Rabbi lying on a gurney wrapped in bandages from head to toe. 'If I had to do it over again,' the Rabbi said, 'I don't think I'd start with circumcision.' "

Cooper stared at me as if I had horns growing out of my head and a pointed tail sprouting from my coccyx.

"Let me guess," Cooper said as he returned his attention to Sam. "Like most lesbians, you were raised by an overbearing mother and a distant father."

Sam remained stone-faced. I felt as if I was back in Vegas playing poker. The Rev took her unimpassioned expression to mean that he was correct in his assessment.

"If you're waiting for me to agree, I hope you brought something to eat because it's going to be a long time."

Cooper's face turned crimson, and he balled his fists.

In a calm, quiet voice, Sam said, "Before we go on, let's set some ground rules." Sam didn't wait for Cooper to agree or even acknowledge her statement. "You worry about *your* eternal salvation. I'll worry about mine." That settled, she said, "If you could answer a few questions, we'll let you get back to saving all those lily-white souls."

Cooper regarded Sam once more, trying to decipher how literally he should interpret her statement. After a moment, he said, "When you called, you said you had information regarding a former member, Anthony Bianchi."

"Yes," Sam said. "We know that he bilked members of your church out of hundreds of thousands of dollars."

The Rev nodded as a way of saying go on.

"He was last seen in Wisconsin. Shawano. He rented a cabin north of town."

"And?" Cooper asked.

"And he's gone."

"Do you know where?"

"I have a good idea."

"Where?"

Sam leaned in farther. Reverend Cooper flinched. The corner of his mouth curled a teeny, tiny, little bit.

"We heard a couple of your members took the scam very personally," Sam said.

"Why wouldn't they? They work hard for their money. To have it stolen from them is a sin. They deserve justice."

"We hear most of your members are quite wealthy."

"Yes. What does that have to do with their money being stolen?"

"I was just wondering," Sam said, "if you have conversion therapy for the rich as well."

Cooper appeared confused.

"The whole eye-of-the-needle thing."

"That is a greatly misunderstood parable."

"Really?" Sam said.

"Really."

"What kind of justice?"

"Excuse me?" Cooper asked.

"What kind of justice do you believe is warranted by theft?" Sam asked.

"I'm not quite sure what you're asking me."

"He's dead," Sam said.

Cooper got a smug, self-satisfied smile. "My members will be glad to hear it."

"He was murdered."

Cooper shrugged as if that particular fact didn't bother him.

“You believe murder is just,” I asked, “because he stole some of your rich members’ money?”

“God works in mysterious ways.”

“So do men,” I said.

He glared at me. “Proverbs, 14:14.”

“Matthew, 6: 14 and 15,” Sam countered.

Cooper: “Exodus, Chapter 22: verses 1 and 2.”

Sam: “John, Chapter 3: verses 16 and 17.”

Cooper grinned. “You know your bible.”

“My mother forced me to go to Sunday school from the time I was four.”

Cooper sat back in his chair, placing some space between Sam and him. “Is that why you came here?” he asked. “To tell me that Anthony was dead?”

“That and to see if you could shed some light on the two people we were told took the scam the hardest. Grant Morrison and Tommy O’Shea.”

Cooper failed to mask his surprise that Sam knew the names of two of his members. I’d seen the look thousands of times when guys sitting across from me at the poker table were sure they had the winning hand, only to have me turn over a better one.

I decided to jab him one more time. “If anyone in your congregation needs an ark, I Noah guy.”

Cooper blinked so slowly, I thought he might be fighting off sleep.

To regain his focus, Sam asked, “What can you tell us about those two?”

“I’m not comfortable sharing my members’ information with anyone,” Cooper said. Especially someone from outside our congregation. What is your interest in this anyway? Who hired you?”

“No one. My dad has been arrested for his murder.”

“I see. So what did your dad have against Anthony?”

“Tony wanted my mother to run away with him?”

Cooper, as if he’d heard something incomprehensible, said, “But Anthony was married. He and his wife Alora were regular members here. They attended every week, no matter what the weather. They came to all of our socials. They were very generous, although we came to realize that it was a part of their scam.”

“Married? Are you sure?”

“At first, I thought they might be father and daughter. She was quite young, early twenties at the most. But then he introduced her to us as his wife. She did wear an engagement and wedding ring.”

“Do you have her address?”

Cooper shook his head, “The police told me it was a vacant lot in St. Paul.”

“Phone number?”

“Uh-uh.”

“How did so many people fall for the scam?” I asked.

At first, I thought Cooper might not answer. He continued to stare at Sam but eventually said, “That’s one of the reasons Morrison and O’Shea took it so hard. At one of our socials, the three of them were talking when Anthony casually mentioned that he was required to give his deceased father’s cars away. He said something about his father trying to make peace with God. That he insisted they be given to righteous believers. Anthony made it sound as if he was having difficulty finding anyone who met that condition. Morrison and O’Shea were drawn in. Anthony led them along for months. Of course, by that time, the word had spread. Not only throughout my church but to their friends and relatives as well.”

“Didn’t it sound suspicious to all those people?” I asked.

“No. Anthony said there were a limited number of cars. Sixteen, if I remember correctly. He took anyone who talked to him about it into his confidence. Made it seem as if he saw them as one of the deserving sixteen people. He cautioned them not to tell anyone else. Made it sound that if they did, it’d ruin their chance of getting one of the luxury cars.”

“Did anyone ask to see the cars?” I asked.

“He had a picture. He’d show it to those who were interested. Even took five people on separate occasions to see them. Turns out, he had conned someone else into loaning him the vehicles for a few days. Told the guy, he needed them for a photoshoot for a campaign he was working on. I don’t understand that part completely, but the cars were there, and they were real.”

Cooper’s curiosity got the best of him. He asked Sam, “Why your mother? What was she to him?”

“They were high school sweethearts. He was also my biological father.”

Cooper slid his chair farther away from Sam.

“Your father?”

“Biologically,” Sam reiterated.

“That sounds like justification to me.”

“How so?” I asked.

“Leviticus Chapter 10:10.”

Sam translated for me. “He’s saying anyone who commits adultery should be put to death.”

She addressed Reverend Cooper. “First off, they weren’t sleeping together. My mother told him to get lost. Second: does Margaret’s husband know you’re sleeping with *her*?”

Cooper sneered, reminding me of a cat clawing at a goldfish and not giving a shit that it got caught.

“Were you aware that Anthony had a bad heart?” Sam asked.

“He mentioned it after services one day. Why?”

“Just curious,” Sam said.

“Is that all?” Cooper asked.

“No. I’m hoping you’ll pass along my name to Morrison and O’Shea. Here’s my card. We’re staying at the Foshay. But, first, we’re on our way to the Capital Grille for lunch.”

Cooper raised an eyebrow. I read it as him wondering how a private investigator could afford such an extravagant lifestyle.

Sam didn’t try to hide her disdain for Cooper. She stood and walked away. I got to my feet and followed.

As a taunt, Copper said, “I’ll pray for you.”

“Don’t bother,” Sam said over her shoulder. In a voice loud enough for Cooper to hear, she said to me, “Cooper’s proof that God *does* make mistakes.”

SEVENTEEN

Minneapolis, MN - Tommy O'Shea

"The Rev wasn't too happy with you," I said.

"He's one of the things Jesus and I agree on."

When Sam didn't go on, I asked, "And that would be...?"

"We can't stand hypocrites. Judgmental asshole." She added: "I need to find a bathroom."

"You have to go?"

"I have to wash my hand. What a douchebag."

"I assume you're still talking about Cooper," I said. "What were all those bible verses about?"

"Cooper believes that thieves deserve a horrible fate. I cited the parts of the bible that showed God forgives all those who ask for it."

"Interesting," I said. "Anyway, this might make you happy."

"What?"

"The Rev was one of the many people taken in by Tony's con."

"I wondered about that."

"Cooper's body language screamed how pissed off he was when you were talking about the scam. He got particularly upset when I asked him if anyone saw the cars. *He* did. Live and in color. I suspect he was one of the first who ventured down that rabbit hole."

"Probably the others asking him to check it out for them," Sam said.

"Probably."

"What did you take from his reaction to Tony's death?" Sam asked.

"He tried to remain reserved, but he was..."

"He was what?"

"I'm searching for the right word," I said.

"That happens a lot with you. You should carry around a pocket thesaurus."

I pretended to pull one out of my coat pocket and flipped through the imaginary pages. "Omniscient."

"All-knowing? Cooper?"

"No, you."

"Are you saying, I'm a know-it-all?"

“If the shoe fits...” Before Sam could chastise me, I added, “Oh, and Cooper was omnivorous.”

“Ravenous?”

“Greedy. To answer your earlier question, he was reticent but inscrutable.”

“So, you’ve got nothing.”

“There was something. I got the impression he knew you, or at least that you reminded him of someone. When he realized you’re a lesbian, he took it personally.”

Sam retreated into her thoughts. I let her be. Three minutes later, she said, “Tony was married. Yet he asked Rainey to go away with him?”

The way Sam said it; I knew she questioned if her lack of commitment, and jumping from lover to lover, was an inherited trait. She reached over and took hold of my hand.

I broke the silence. “So, we’re going to the Capital Grille?”

“Yes. Please.”

I asked Google assistant for directions and weaved my way through downtown Minneapolis.

“There was an Alora Taylor in Tony’s black book,” Sam said. “She was one of the last ones he listed, and he’d put a dash mark by her name.”

“What were *her* rankings?” I asked.

Sam let go of my hand and said, “You’re disgusting.”

“I know. So, what were they?”

Sam spoke to the side window. “Ten and five.”

I started singing, “Oh, What a Night.”

Sam punched my arm. It went numb. It’s a good thing I’m a decent one-handed driver.

We found a spot up the street from the restaurant. As we got out, Sam said, “I hope this doesn’t take too long.”

I looked through the window and said, “It doesn’t look that crowded.”

“Not that,” she said. “This.”

Two behemoths unfolded from a Town Car and did the steroid walk. They stopped and blocked our way.

“Can I help you?” Sam asked.

“We’d like you to take a ride with us,” the bigger of the two said.

“Sorry,” I said, “but we have reservations, and you know how hard those are to get at this time of day.”

“Funny guy,” said the smaller of the two, but who still blocked the sun. “You don’t want to miss the very important appointment we scheduled for you.” He slid his jacket to the side, exposing his gun.

“That’s different,” I said.

He pointed to the Town Car, and I led the way. As I got in, Sam said, “Keep moving and go out the other side.”

I slid into the back, continued to the opposite side, opened the door, and started to get out. The bigger guy leaned in to grab me, shouting, “Hey, stop.”

“That’s okay, Chancy,” Sam said. “Get in. Have a seat.”

I did as told, although I wondered why Sam had instructed me to keep going. Bigger and Smaller Big sat in the rear-facing seat across from us.

“Who are we meeting?” Sam asked. “Morrison or O’Shea?”

They stared at Sam as if she were dog excrement. I grinned in the face of a reaction one-hundred-eighty-degrees different from the looks most guys gave her.

She studied the two guys. “Ruddy complexions. Pale skin. Reddish hair. Blue eyes. Small dicks. O’Shea.”

“You got a smart mouth for a rug muncher,” Bigger said.

“Jealous?” Sam asked. “When’s the last time either of you got laid?”

I sank further into the seat.

Smaller Big said to Bigger, “Maybe we should convert her.”

“Not likely,” Sam said. “My last girlfriend was better hung than either of you.”

“Goddamnit, Sam. Quit antagonizing these assholes.” I didn’t actually say that, but that’s what was screaming inside my head.

Sam asked, “What does he want?”

The goons shook their heads. Sam glanced in my direction.

“They don’t know,” I said in a croaked whisper.

Smaller Big said, “He just told us to make sure you came with us.”

Bigger became agitated as if his buddy had revealed a long-held Masonic secret. “Just sit back and enjoy the ride,” Bigger said. He glared once more at his companion, before settling back in his seat

We rode in silence for twenty minutes.

We arrived at a mansion in Minnetonka, a suburb of Minneapolis. We entered a long winding concrete driveway. A hundred or so yards in, on our right, we saw a miniature replica of the Trevi Fountain of Rome. Across from it, on our left, was a smaller version of the Maze at Hever Castle. Palatial is the best way to describe the residence. It was a

three-storied mansion made out of white masonry with dark-gray pyramid hip roofs. It looked more like a luxury hotel than most luxury hotels.

“Maybe we should stay here instead of Foshay,” I said.

“I don’t think even you can afford this place.”

The car stopped under a portico, and Bigger motioned us out. Before Sam extracted herself from the car, she said to the driver, “Keep the motor running. We’ll be right back.”

Bigger led us down an ornate hallway decorated with pictures of exceptionally green countrysides and spacious mountains. Ireland. He stopped before an open door and motioned us forward. Sam strolled in as if she’d been there a dozen times, and stopped five feet inside the room.

Bigger placed his left hand on Sam’s shoulder to move her further into the room. She spun to her right and elbowed him in the nose. It erupted like Mt Vesuvius. Blood spurted everywhere. Through teary eyes, he grabbed for Sam. Her left hand shot forward like a cobra strike, catching Bigger in the soft part of his throat. He fell to his knees, gasping for air. Sam raised her right knee as if auditioning for *A Chorus Line* and caught Bigger under his chin. He folded in a heap on the floor.

Smaller Big reacted much too slowly. He lurched at Sam, only to have her pull a gun from behind her back and place it square against his forehead.

“Take one more step, and pictures of Ireland won’t be the only thing decorating these walls.” She said to me, “Get his gun.”

I stepped forward and relieved him of his Glock. I started to move back, but Sam said, “The one on his ankle and the knife in his right-hand pocket, too.” Once I’d relieved him of his weapons, I stepped away to a much safer distance.

“The only reason you’re not on the floor with this other loser is that you answered my question,” Sam said. “Sit down with your back against the wall and your hands under your butt. You move, you won’t be having any sex. Forever.” Sam made a point of aiming the gun at Smaller Big’s crotch. He flinched and began to sweat. He tried without success to close his legs like a good Catholic schoolgirl.

My hands and arms laden with weapons, I asked, “What should I do with these?”

Sam motioned to a leather chair across the room in front of a fireplace. “Here, take this one too. It’s his.” Sam gestured at the still unconscious Bigger. “I took it off him when he reached across me to stop you from getting out of the car.” She handed me a second Glock. I dropped the weapons onto the chair and rejoined Sam.

In a calm, even demeanor, she addressed the man sitting behind the desk. “Mr. O’Shea, it’s good to meet you. This is my associate, Chancy Evans. We were told you wanted to see us?”

O’Shea stared long and hard with contempt and loathing at his two goons. When he considered Sam, it was with respect and admiration. O’Shea nodded at two chairs across from his massive desk. We sat.

“You mind if we don’t talk in front of my men?” O’Shea said.”

“It’s your party,” Sam said.

O’Shea glared at Smaller Big. “Connor, get Patrick out of here. Looks like he needs to see a doctor.”

Connor scrambled to his feet, then struggled to help Patrick to his. Halfway up, Patrick collapsed once more. Connor shot a wary glance at O’Shea, grabbed his partner by his ankles, and dragged him out of the room.

“And close the door,” O’Shea ordered.

When we were alone, O’Shea said, “That wasn’t very smart on your part, Ms. Summers. Patrick gets testy when someone takes his gun.”

“Which one’s Patrick?” I asked.

“You, I don’t want to hear from,” O’Shea said. “Understand?”

I swallowed hard.

“Good,” he said. Then to Sam: “You, you’re the daughter of the lowlife that ripped me off.”

“Biological. He hardly qualified as a father. I never met him.”

“So you say. How do I know you don’t have my money?”

“You don’t.”

O’Shea stared at her, trying to determine if she was telling the truth.

“Maybe you should be looking for his wife,” Sam said. “If she is his wife.”

In ultra-slow motion, O’Shea gave a single nod; his way of saying, I have, and I am.

“Where you from?” he asked.

“Milwaukee,” Sam said. “Although I did grow up in Shawano. Went to school at Madison. Moved to Milwaukee when I was thirty-one.”

“And this is your boyfriend?”

“He’s my associate,...and my friend.”

“Reverend Cooper told me you bat from the wrong side of the plate. After seeing you, I have a hard time believing that.”

“Believe what you want.”

O’Shea gave Sam a sideways glance and asked, “What’s your real name?”

“Samantha Summers *is* my real name.”

“You look like a wop.”

“Again, biologically. I was raised in an Irish-English home. First in Iowa then in Wisconsin.”

O’Shea paused. “So you never met your dad.”

“*He’s* not my dad. Just the man who got my mother pregnant. He left her in that condition and went off to college. He never came back.”

“Until a few days ago,” O’Shea said.

“Until a few days ago.”

“And you didn’t talk to him?”

“I’m not a spiritualist. I don’t speak to the dead. Nor they to me.”

“You don’t seem very upset about your father being murdered.”

“He’s just another dead body. My real dad is in jail for killing him. I’m looking for whoever did kill him.” Sam paused. “Did you have anything to do with it?”

“How’d he die?”

“A heart attack after being tortured.”

“Not my style.”

Sam stood. “Sorry, I couldn’t be of any more help. We’ll show ourselves out.” Sam got to the door and turned back. “If I were you, I’d change churches. Cooper seemed to know more than he should’ve about the swindle and Anthony’s death.”

O’Shea studied Sam a moment before giving her one more brief nod.

Once we were in the car, Sam looked at me expectantly. “So?” she asked.

It took a few seconds for me to understand what she was asking. “No. He didn’t do it. He was clueless.” I asked, “Why did you implicate Cooper?”

Sam stared out the window and said, “Why not?”

EIGHTEEN

Minneapolis, MN – Grant Morrison

On the way back to the Cities, Sam searched for Grant Morrison, by Googling hedge fund managers in Minneapolis. She found a listing for Morrison Capital Management. We picked up Sam's car – it had a ticket – outside the Capital Grille. Sam tore it up and threw it in the trash. She drove us to the building located on South Marquette Street.

We studied the building's directory and took the elevator up to the fifth-floor offices. I opened the elaborate frosted glass door, and Sam went in ahead of me. She explained to the secretary that we had some critical information for Grant Morrison. When the secretary asked what it concerned, Sam said, "Tell him it's about Anthony Bianchi."

The secretary touched a button on her headset and conveyed Sam's message to the person on the other end. The secretary said to us, "The office at the end of the hallway on your right." She pointed to our left. Sam led the way.

As we entered the plush office decorated with awards and photos, a man in his mid-fifties stood to greet us. He was over six feet tall with flecks of gray dotting his jet-black hair. He appeared physically fit, sported a spray-on tan, and a Tom Ford Windsor base sharkskin three-piece suit, which probably cost three times the amount of money Tony swindled from him.

When he saw Sam, his eyes lit up, and he smiled warmly, showing off his gleaming, capped teeth. I was once again the Invisible Man.

He made no attempt at feigning that he didn't know why we were there. "Ms. Summers," he said, "I've heard so much about you. It's good to meet you finally."

Sam introduced me

Morrison had to forcefully tear his attention away from Sam. It was as if he'd sprained his neck. He looked briefly at me, gave me an almost imperceptible nod, and went back to lusting after Sam.

"Please sit, won't you," he said and pointed at two chairs opposite his desk.

When we'd taken our seats, he perched on the front of his desk – one cheek on the edge and his opposite foot resting on the plush office carpet. He placed one hand casually over his crotch.

Sam offered him a wry smile. "If you've heard so much about me, you know I like women. And, if I should ever sleep with a man, it wouldn't be one who belongs to an establishment like Cooper's."

Morrison cranked up the charm. “I assure you, my lone reason for going there is because so many of my clients...how should I say this? So many of my clients are inclined to agree with Jonathan and his views.”

“Right,” Sam drew out the word so long Lincoln could have given his Gettysburg Address.

Morrison chuckled. “While Cooper drones on and on, I spend my time daydreaming. You’ll be my latest daydream as that boorish man whines about White Suppression.”

“We hear you were exceptionally pissed,” Sam said, “when you discovered you’d been taken in by Bianchi.”

“Of course. But not for the reasons the others were. I can buy a fleet of cars like the ones Bianchi was allegedly giving away. I’d acted on behalf of a client who didn’t take it too well. I was worried about my reputation. So, I had to wine and dine him and give back some of my commission to keep him with my firm.”

“So, you didn’t want to get revenge?”

“I’d be lying if I said I didn’t,” Morrison said.

“You’ve heard he’s dead.”

“Cooper told me he was murdered. Tortured or something. Frankly, it doesn’t bother me one way or the other. Once I had my client back in the fold, I forgot all about the man.”

Sam glanced in my direction to see if Morrison was telling the truth. I nodded.

She asked, “Do you think anyone else in your congregation would be pissed off enough to have a hand in Bianchi’s death?”

Again, he offered Sam his award-winning smile. “As I said, it’s hardly *my* congregation. But if you’re asking if O’Shea or Cooper might have done this? Yes. I believe they would.”

Sam got up to leave.

Morrison launched himself off the desk and stepped in close to her. He took hold of her hand. “We can talk about this some more over dinner tonight if you’d like. I can get us a table at the Spoon and Stable. Do you like French cuisine?”

I barked a laugh. A stunned Morrison glanced in my direction.

“Sam’s more of a Taco Bell kind of woman. Though she does like Five Guys.”

Playing off my statement, he said, “If that’s the case, you’d love Manny’s Steakhouse.”

“Very kind of you,” Sam said, “but I already have plans. I’m meeting some friends at the Kitty Cat Klub.”

Wrestling with the idea that this gorgeous woman standing across from him would prefer a woman to him threw Morrison. He let go of Sam's hand, stepped back, and evaluated her once more. He wasn't buying it. Certain she was pulling his leg, he said, "Some other time then."

"Only if you have trans surgery."

NINETEEN

Medford, Oregon – Tony Balistreri-Doris Sweeny

First thing the next morning, Sam rushed into my room and pulled me out of bed. “Grab your suitcase,” was all she said.

The last time I got that confused, I’d spent a day trying to understand why “colonel” is pronounced “kernel.”

We threw our suitcases in Sam’s Jeep, and she jumped into the driver’s seat. Twenty minutes later, we drove into the long-term parking structure at Hubert Humphrey Airport.

“What are we doing here,” I asked.

“Catching a plane.”

Sam had checked the flight schedule when she first awoke, looking for a direct flight to Portland, Oregon. I paid for two last-minute one-way tickets, on Sun Country Airlines, at \$650 each.

Four hours later, we arrived in Portland and rented a mid-sized Chevy Malibu. Sam accessed directions on her phone to Medford. We pulled into the Marriot Spring Hill Suites at mid-afternoon.

We grabbed some food and talked about the case. We agreed that at the moment, Reverend Cooper was our only suspect. Still Sam wanted to look some more into Alora Taylor. Sam emailed Adrianna and asked her to do a more thorough search on the woman.

I woke at eight forty-five the next morning and placed my ear at Sam’s bedroom door to see if she’d gotten up. I didn’t hear her moving around and thought she was still asleep. Twenty minutes later, the door to our suite swung inward, and Sam strode in, sweat dripping off her face.

“Is it raining outside?” I asked, and glanced out the window.

She walked past me without a word, went to her room, and said, “Give me fourteen minutes. Be ready to go.”

I jumped in the shower, fixed my hair, and walked out to find Sam tapping her foot.

“Breakfast?” I asked.

“After my eight-mile run, I need to refuel. You’ve kept me waiting far too long.”

The clock on the wall showed it’d taken me twelve minutes, but when Sam felt hangry, I knew better than to make a smartass remark.

We ended up at the Black Bear Diner. Sam ordered the Hungry Bear Breakfast. I got a three-egg omelet. We both got coffee.

“Who are we talking to today? I asked.

“Detective Riley Hunter.”

“Riley? Man or woman?”

“Woman. She’s in charge of the Financial Crimes Unit section.”

“What was Tony’s scam here?”

Sam raised one eyebrow.

It dawned on me. “That’s why we’re talking with Hunter,” I said.

Sam cocked her head and casually pointed at me. “Keep in mind,” she added, “this took place thirteen years ago. Tony would have been about forty-two.”

After breakfast, we drove to the Medford Police headquarters on Ivy Street and told the desk sergeant that we were there for our appointment with Detective Hunter. A uniformed officer showed us the way. Hunter’s office was rather small, with few personal items in view. She was in her mid-thirties, five-feet-eight, her dark brown hair, cut short. She wore a black pants suit and just enough makeup to add a bit of color to her lips and cheeks.

She rose and offered Sam her hand. “Samantha Summers? Hi, I’m Detective Hunter.”

Sam introduced me, and the three of us got comfortable. Well, Hunter got comfortable in her plush, black leather office chair. I felt as if I was back in Catholic grade school in a wooden, rigid, too small chair.

Hunter got right to the point. “You said you have some information on Tony Balistreri.”

“His real name was Tony D’Aquisto,” Sam said. “Now he’s deceased Tony D’Aquisto.”

“He’s dead?”

Instead of offering one of her smartass remarks about the meaning of deceased, Sam nodded.

“When?”

Sam explained the events of the past week and how her dad had been arrested for Tony’s murder. And that she believed he was covering for her mother.

When she finished, Hunter asked, “Did you find the money?”

“What money?” I asked.

“He claimed he worked for a talent agency looking for young actors. He rented office space in a building on Main Street. He made one area the holding room for the children and their parents. He used the name of a legitimate child agency in the L.A. area and had photoshopped pictures of him with a young Daniel Radcliff, and Emma Thompson, another of him with Vanessa Huggins and Zac Efron, and a third showed him with Miranda Cosgrove and Jennette McCurdy. Among the framed photographs were stills of him in two movies in which he had small parts standing next to the stars of the movies. Everything looked legit.”

“How’d the scam work?” I asked.

“He put an ad in the local paper for a casting call for young talent. Every parent within a hundred miles, who thought their child would be the next Miley Cyrus or Frankie Munoz, showed up. In one week, there were over two hundred kids. A woman, going by the name Doris Sweeny, posed as his secretary.”

Sam stopped her. “What did this woman, this Doris Sweeny, look like?”

“Mid-thirties at the time. Quite attractive, I hear. Average height. Light brown hair. Dressed well and expensive. It helped sell the con.”

Hunter, noting my surprise at her, remembering everything so clearly without consulting her file, said, “It was my first case as a fraud investigator.”

I nodded.

“Anyway, each parent filled out a consent form, home address, and phone number. The fine print, which most people didn’t bother to read because the contract was nine pages long, stated that if the child made it to Hollywood, the agency would get thirty percent of the child’s salary the first five years.

“The secretary would bring the child and his or her parents into the area where Balistreri waited. He’d talk to the parents and throw out names of children who were supposedly represented by the agency. He personally claimed to have discovered some of the biggest childhood actors in TV and movies.

“After talking with the parents for twenty minutes and hearing what they wanted for their child, he did a screen test with the young actor. He set a camera on a tripod and handed the young person a script. He described the character’s background and what they were looking for in the way of a performance.

“Every child nailed it every time. Balistreri gushed how their child was a one-in-a-million find, and he was going to rush the video off to the home headquarters in Southern California because he was so excited.”

“Where does the scam come in?” I asked.

“He’d pretend that he’d said way too much. Begged the parents not to find another agent who’d take less money. He convinced the parents their child would be a star, and, because of that, he was willing to drop the thirty-percent fee down to fifteen. But to ensure that they wouldn’t sign with anyone else, he’d need a good faith down payment of \$1,500. He assured them this money would be returned when the child got his or her first role.”

“How many people were taken in?” Sam asked, speaking for the first time since we’d sat down.

“One hundred twenty-eight. He also bounced the check for the rent of the building, for another \$2,000. In total, they made off with…”

“\$194,000,” Sam said.

“Yes. That’s correct,” Hunter said, clearly impressed at how quickly Sam had calculated Tony’s ill-gotten gains.

“Were any of the parents really pissed?” Sam asked.

“I’d have to say they all were.”

“No. I mean pissed enough to want to kill Balistreri?”

“I didn’t get that impression,” Detective Hunter said. “Most seemed more upset that little Johnny or Judy wouldn’t be going to Hollywood any time soon.”

TWENTY

Bozeman, MT – Tony Russo-Caitlyn Connor

We drove back to Portland and booked a flight to Bozeman, Montana. We arrived there just before midnight. We rented another Malibu and got a suite at the Spring Hill Suites in downtown Bozeman. It was after two in the morning when I got to bed.

I woke at seven thirty-eight. Sam was gone again. She entered the suite at eight fifty-two, dripping wet once more.

“Another eight-mile run?” I asked.

“Too tired. Only seven.”

Before she could say any more, I said, “I’ll be ready in eight minutes, and we can get breakfast.”

I rushed to get ready and came out of my room six minutes later. Sam was waiting, tapping her foot once more.

“Did you shower?” I asked.

“In and out,” Sam said.

“Sounds like your last date,” I said with a smirk.

“Or the bullet I’m going to put through that thick skull of yours.” Sam shook her head and added, “When are you going to start acting your age instead of your shoe size?”

I saw her question as rhetorical but shrugged anyway.

We went to a place that served all-day breakfast, called Main Street Overeasy.

Sam ordered the Grizzly Killer. They brought it out on a platter.

I asked Sam if she’d called anyone in the Bozeman police department yet. Too busy eating to speak, she shook her head.

“We’re going to walk in cold?”

Another shake.

“Do you know someone here?”

Shake.

“You’re going to call when you’re done eating?”

Shake.

Needless to say, I was once again confused as hell. “If you haven’t called and won’t be, and you don’t know anyone here, how is it that we’re not going to walk in cold?”

I waited as Sam finished chewing. “I emailed the detective in charge a few days ago. That’s why I didn’t want to wait to fly here. We have a ten-thirty appointment with Detective Thomas Dowd.”

“Man or woman?” I asked.

In between bites, Sam said, “That’s funny.”

We entered the Bozeman police station mid-morning and reported at the desk. The sergeant gave us directions to Detective Dowd’s office. A man in his early forties came out and shook our hands. “I’m Detective Thomas Dowd,” he said. “I take it you’re Samantha Summers, and this is your associate Chancellor Evans.”

“Chancellor?” I said to Sam.

“It makes you sound more intelligent,” Sam said with a smile. “Now, don’t go prove me wrong.”

Detective Dowd failed in trying to hide his smile and ushered us into his office. Without preamble, he said, “You have information on Anthony Russo?”

Sam explained that his name was Tony D’Aquisto and that he’d been murdered in Wisconsin a week ago. She shared with Dowd Tony’s other aliases, and how he’d been accused of at least five other confidence schemes that we knew of.

“How’d he die?” Dowd asked.

“Someone gave him an overdose of Viagra and tied him to a bed. The police theory is, he was tortured, but they’re not sure how. Between the Viagra and the exertion, it caused a heart attack.”

Dowd sat back in his chair, folded his hands, laid them in his lap, and got lost in thought. “Interesting.”

“We were wondering,” Sam said, “if you could tell us about his scam? It seems each one was different from the others.”

“Sure,” Dowd said. “He and his partner, a woman named Caitlyn Connor West...”

Sam held up her hand in a stop motion. “Can you describe this woman?”

“Sure.” Dowd consulted his notes. “C.C. West was in her late twenties. Of course, that was eleven years ago. She was about five-eight, five-nine. Strawberry blond. Heart-shaped face. Exceptionally good looking. Great figure. It helped sell the con.”

“Which was?” Sam asked.

“Russo and West ran a clinic that specialized in weight loss and curing men of erectile dysfunction. They had before and after pamphlets created showing the before and after pictures of people who they’d helped in the past. Including images of themselves. They’d been photoshopped. Their heads placed on grossly obese people. Claimed they had

a revolutionary new product, made from all-natural substances used by the ancient Egyptians, to shed unwanted body fat.” Dowd chuckled and added, “After all, who’d ever seen a fat Egyptian?”

Sam and I smiled politely.

Dowd cleared his throat and shifted in his chair. “Anyway, they rented a little storefront clinic on Park Street. For two months, four hundred twenty-two people were scammed for close to \$250,000. The medicines were vitamin supplements purchased in bulk from the Sam’s Club in Billings. They repackaged them and guaranteed people their money back if they saw no results.”

“What happened when people discovered it wasn’t working?” I asked.

Detective Dowd scrunched up his face and said in a much softer voice, “Actually, quite a few people did see results. When we asked a local physician why he said it was the placebo effect. The power of the sales pitch convinced people it worked. So it did.”

“How’d you catch on?” I asked.

“A couple of people complained. One man in particular. Harold Harrison. Didn’t lose a pound. Actually gained some weight. Russo claimed it was Harold’s fault. That he wasn’t following the program. We investigated anyway.”

“And?” I asked.

“They left town the next day. People were pissed.”

“That they’d been taken in?” I asked.

“That they’d left. It was the first time any of them had any success. Both the men and the women. When we told them we had the pills tested and that they were daily vitamins they could purchase over the counter, they didn’t believe us. Some even started a recall petition for our mayor.”

“Why your mayor?” I asked.

“Because he’d hired the police chief.”

Sam finally spoke. “Is Harold Harrison capable of murder?”

“Ha! Harold Harrison isn’t capable of getting out of bed. He weighs five hundred thirty pounds give or take an ounce. Russo agreed to make a house call to help him out. Took him for twice the amount he’d stolen from everyone else. Told Harold, he needed twice the supplements as usual.”

“But it didn’t work?” I asked.

Dowd forced a laugh. “Harold thought because he was on the pills, he could eat even more. He ate pizza and pasta three times a day.” He shrugged and added, “Go figure.”

“So if everybody was happy, why file a complaint?” I asked.

“Any fraudulent action,” Sam said, “whether it proves to work or not, must be reported to the state offices. This is shared with other municipalities so they can be on alert for these types of scams.”

“Do you have any information on the woman?” Sam asked. “Did her fingerprints show up in any files? Were they known to have worked together before this, or since?”

To each question, Dowd shook his head. “We have nothing. Russo’s fingerprints didn’t show either.”

TWENTY-ONE

Sioux Falls, SD – Tony Da Luca–Shauna Ward

We hopped on a United flight to Sioux Falls, South Dakota. It was the most expensive flight by a few hundred dollars but saved us the most time. We drove – another Malibu – directly to police headquarters and asked to see Detective S.W. Lane, the person in charge of investigating embezzlement in the Sioux Falls area.

The desk sergeant called Detective Lane, explained that two people would like to talk to her, and then bobbed his head up and down like a parrot as he listened to her reply. When he hung up, he said, “Right this way,” and escorted us to her office.

Lane stood, reached across her desk, and shook our hands. She was five-feet-ten with jet-black hair, dark brown eyes, and the figure of a fashion model.

After introductions, and before Sam could explain why we were there, Lane said, “You’re here about Tony Da Luca?”

“How’d you know?” Sam asked.

“It’s been a big story around here for eight years. You’re either a reporter, the FBI, or someone hired to find him. You didn’t show me a badge, so I’m assuming it’s one of the other two.”

“The last one,” Sam said. “Tony Da Luca, who’s actually Tony D’Aquisto, was murdered in Shawano, Wisconsin, eight days ago. My dad, the police chief there, has been arrested for his murder. He didn’t do it. We’re looking at possible suspects who might have. D’Aquisto swindled a lot of people out of a lot of money. We’re asking the local authorities who Tony scammed who might have been angry enough to commit murder.”

Lane shook her head. “No one here. What he stole wasn’t enough for anyone to get that upset about.”

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“The scam was small, but added up.”

“What’d he do?”

“He set up an international phone hotline in Canada that charged anyone who called it \$9 a minute plus international fees. It amounted to a total of \$13.45 a minute. He’d go into one of our local businesses and explain he’d come for an interview. He dressed exceptionally well, so no one gave it much thought. When they’d tell him that he must be in the wrong place, he’d ask if he could use their phone to call his wife to find out where he was supposed to be.

“Everyone was eager to help. He’d call his international number and talk for a little over a minute. That doubled the charge to two minutes. He’d thank the office person for being so helpful and leave.”

“That couldn’t have amounted to too much money,” I said.

Before Lane could answer, Sam said, “Let me guess: between the various businesses, such as attorneys, accountants, nursing homes, health care providers, schools, web design, jewelry stores, gift shops, insurance agencies, health clubs, financial planning, contractors and such, he hit close to nine-hundred places. Which means, in just a few days, maybe a week, he took in close to \$24,000.”

“\$25,178.40,” Lane said with a hint of admiration.

“Was there anyone with him when he went into these places?” Sam asked.

“Uh-uh. He’d often walk down the street, hitting one building after the other. No one thought anything of it. They believed he’d just gotten the address wrong, so when he hung up the phone, he’d head next door.”

“Thanks,” Sam said. “You’ve been a great help.”

As we were leaving, Lane said, “If I need to get a hold of you, where are you staying?”

Sam handed her a business card. “We’ll be leaving Sioux Falls and driving to Tulsa. If you need, you can call me on my cell.”

Lane looked disappointed. “Good luck clearing your father. Let me know what happens.”

TWENTY-TWO

Tulsa, OK – Tony Morelli-Sydney Atwater

“We’re driving to Tulsa? Today?” I asked.

Sam got into the Malibu and drove off, not waiting for me to buckle in.

We were headed to Tulsa.

We took I-29 south, and I settled in for the nine-hour drive. Despite Sam being deep in thought, I said, “I think Detective Lane liked you.”

Sam didn’t respond.

“Her asking where you were staying was her way of telling you she was interested.”

Nothing.

“Is there a secret code you send? Is it the pheromones? Or what? How’d she know?”

“I’m thinking,” Sam said. “Can I ignore you some other time?”

“Sure,” I said but went on anyway. “Something was off... No. Not really off. There was something *more* than Detective Lane wanting to sleep with you. She seemed both angry and admiring of Da Luca’s scam. Almost as if she appreciated its simplicity and how much he got away with.”

“You often find people who investigate confidence schemes, see so much of this stuff, that when someone is able to do what he did so smoothly and efficiently, they appreciate it. They’re also upset when they aren’t able to catch the person.”

I changed the subject. “Have you come to any conclusion so far as to who might be behind his murder?”

“I have some ideas.”

“Do you think Cooper might have done it?”

“Possibly,” Sam said without much enthusiasm.

“Why didn’t we stop in Lawrence?”

“I want to visit the sites in order of Tony’s cons. Tulsa’s the next reported case.”

“Who are we seeing there?”

“The detective’s name is Parker Vance. We have an appointment first thing tomorrow morning.”

Sam went back to giving the case some more thought. Somewhere around Emporia, Kansas, I fell asleep. Sam’s phone rang, and through the haze, I heard Sam talking to someone. After she finished, I asked, “What was that about?”

“That was Adrianna. She called to tell me I was right.”

“What else is new?”

“There is that.”

“So, what are you right about this time?”

“Tony searched the records for someone of Italian descent with the first name of Anthony who died very young. A year-old or younger. He’d contact the records office and request a birth certificate. Because the birth records and death records are never crosschecked, they’d send it to him. He used that to set up fake IDs, acquire passports, and to apply for social security numbers. That’s why his documents passed inspection every time.”

“Is there a way for Adrianna to check to see if he had any other aliases besides the ones we found.”

“She’s on it.”

Sam descended into quiet mode once more. I got so bored, I played the alphabet game by myself. We arrived in Tulsa just after seven p.m. and got a suite at the Hyatt. We dropped off our bags and went to eat.

Sam chose Lefty’s Sports Bar because Sunday Night Football was on TV, and the Packers were playing the Vikings. The game came down to a last-second field goal miss by the Vikings’ kicker, moving the Packers into the NFC Championship game.

“Great game,” I said as we got into the Malibu.

“Uh-huh.”

“You think they’ll do well in the next round?”

Sam shrugged.

“With Rodgers,” I said, “a team always has a chance.”

Sam nodded.

“What the hell’s happening?” I asked. “I’ve never seen you so reticent.”

Sam shot me a look of disdain. I returned it.

“Yeah, okay,” Sam said by way of an apology. “There’s something strange going on. I can’t get a handle on it, and it’s driving me crazy.”

“Strange, in what way?”

“A different scam each time. Most conmen use the same one, over and over. It’s their calling card. Tony changed his scam every time he moved. And there are all these women. The ones he put a dash behind. They seemed to be in on them.”

“You think Shauna Ward was in on the one in Sioux Falls?”

“That would fit the pattern, but...”

“But what?”

My question received another shrug.

We found an open space in the hotel's parking structure and went to our room. As we approached our door, Sam took the room's keycard from her pocket and prepared to slide it through the slot. From behind Sam, two people walked our way dressed in bulky winter coats, wearing stocking caps and scarves covering their faces. They were very animated: waving their arms, bobbing their heads, and talking in low, angry voices. When they were a few feet from us, Sam spun to see who it was. Before she could react, one of them reached out and jabbed something into Sam's side. I moved to restrain the person, only to have the other person's hand dart forward. I felt a jolt of electricity shoot through me. My body shook, and I fell to the ground.

I heard a garbled voice. "Leave this alone. Go back to Wisconsin. Next time, it'll be much worse."

TWENTY-THREE

I came to, disoriented, my face pressed against a well-worn hall carpet that smelled of dust and carpet cleaner. My eyes came into focus. I saw Sam struggling to get to her feet, kneeling on all fours. She rolled over and leaned against the wall.

“God, that hurt,” she said as she placed one hand on her ribs. “Didn’t you see them coming?”

“Yeah, but they looked like they were arguing. I just thought it was just another happily married couple.”

“What did they look like?”

“One was taller, not quite your height. The other around five-four or five-five. They were bundled up. I couldn’t see their faces.”

“And that didn’t send alarm bells ringing in that brain of yours?” Before I could answer, Sam added, “I sometimes wonder if I were a bird, who’d I shit on. Then you open your mouth and remove all doubt.”

Sam held out her hand and helped me up. I had Bambi legs.

Sam retrieved the keycard from off the floor and opened the door. She walked to the room phone and called the front desk. “This is Sam Summers in room 312.” ... “Did you happen to notice two people dressed in heavy winter coats and stocking caps?” ... “Is there a second entrance to the hotel?” ... “Do you have security cameras?” ... “We were just attacked outside our room. I’m hoping I can take a look at your video.” ... “Give me ten minutes. I’ll be down.” ... “No, don’t call the police yet. Nothing was taken.” ... “Thanks.”

Sam went into the bathroom and splashed cold water on her face and back came out. “Let’s go. Unless you feel the need to stay here and recover.”

I shook my head, which made me nauseous. I swallowed the bile in my throat and motioned for Sam to lead the way.

The desk clerk had called security. A bulky man wearing a too-tight blue blazer moved to greet us. “I’m Ted Daniels. Head of security. Why don’t we talk in my office?”

We entered a hallway with a sign that read, “Staff Only,” and moved to a medium-sized room halfway down the hall. A wall of monitors showed different areas of the hotel.

“Do you have a view of the third floor?” Sam asked.

Daniels pointed to a screen midway up the wall. He leaned forward, pressed a couple of buttons, and a video sprung to life. He rewound it until it showed us walking

toward our room. The two people had taken the stairs and had their backs to the camera. I watched as they approached us, gesturing to one another. Sam had started to slide the card in the door reader when she turned and went down to her knees. I reacted, but a second later, I fell to the floor, as well.

The taller of the two bent over and said something to us before they continued to the far end of the hallway and disappeared through a fire door. Sam and I lay on the floor for close to three minutes.

“Do you know what that was about?” Daniels asked.

“We’re working on a murder case,” Sam said. “I think we’re getting too close. They told us to leave it alone.”

“I think we should call the police,” Daniels said.

“That’s okay. We have a meeting first thing tomorrow with Detective Olson of the fraud division.”

Sam stood to leave and swayed.

“Are you sure you two are okay?”

“I am,” Sam said. “How about you, Chancy?”

“I’m experiencing déjà vu and amnesia at the same time. Other than that, I’m fine, fine, fine...”

Sam playfully tapped the back of my head. I said fine one more time and stopped.

Sam said, “Ace hasn’t learned to think without moving his lips.”

We returned to our room. As we stepped inside, Sam said, “There was something familiar about one of the people. I can’t put my finger on it. Yet. Let’s get some sleep. Maybe it’ll come to me.”

I started walking toward Sam’s bedroom. She grabbed me by my shoulders, spun me around, and said, “Nice try. I wasn’t that shocked.” She patted me on my backside and gave me a gentle push toward my room.

We woke at eight a.m. and got breakfast at Timmy’s Diner. Sam ordered half of what she usually did.

“You go for your run this morning?”

“Nah. I still feel a little wobbly. They did that to us in cop school. But they used a Taser. The Taser felt worse, but I felt much more disoriented with the stun gun. My head still hasn’t cleared completely. On the other hand, it might be that I’ve been hanging around you too much lately.”

“Thanks. I’m glad I can help.”

We drove to the Civic Center and police headquarters. Sam told the desk sergeant we had an appointment with Detective James Weaver. We were taken to the second floor and into Detective Weaver's office. He stood as we entered. He was about our age, late thirties, and a shade shorter than both Sam and me. He had sandy-blond hair, an athletic build as if he worked out religiously, and wore an off the rack, black suit. He eyed Sam. Of course.

We shook hands.

After a minute of ogling Sam, Weaver said, "You said you have information you'd like to share about Tony Morelli."

Sam explained who Tony really was and what had led us to sitting in his office. "Can you tell us what Tony's scam was this time?"

"This time?"

"He's run different cons all across the US. Whenever he moves on, he develops another."

"Not the same one?"

I didn't know if Weaver was slow or so enamored with Sam that what she told him didn't hit home.

Sam went through the other scams we'd uncovered over the past five days.

When Sam finished, and Weaver didn't respond, Sam said, "That's all I have, Detective. Can we move on?"

"Um, oh, yeah. Sure. What did you want to know?"

"What was his con?"

"Oh, yeah, that." Weaver picked up a file and skimmed through it. "Let's see... Okay. Seven years back, he put his profile...well, not his real profile...on a dating site. He used his real picture and made up a list of attributes the women found enticing."

"Such as?" Sam interrupted.

Weaver consulted his notes. "Said he was a widower. That he'd lost his wife to cancer about a year earlier. Liked romantic getaways, long walks near water, Peter Cetera songs, romcom TVs and movies. For his hobbies, he listed gourmet cooking and hiking."

"And?" Sam and I asked at the same time.

"Oh, yeah. He got over forty hits. He dated each one, taking them to one of the better restaurants in town based on the information the women had shared on their bios. He'd never make a move on the first date. He'd drop them off at their homes and give them a goodnight peck on the cheek."

Weaver continued, “During their conversations, two things happened. He’d subtly find out how much money the woman was worth, and he’d share with them how lonely he was, and how he felt that he wasn’t meant to be on his own. Those with money, he took on second and third dates.”

Weaver stopped in his telling and added, “You have to realize he juggled dating three or more women during the same period. He’d tell them he had to travel for work and would be gone for weeks at a time. Of course, he wasn’t. He’d rented a small apartment near the college campus.”

He waited for that to sink in. Sam motioned for him to go on.

“Anyway, after a few more dates, the women often asked him to come home with them. After they’d have sex, he would – not right away, mind you, but some time later – he’d share with them how the medical bills he’d racked up while his wife was sick weighed him down. He said it was the reason he was working so hard and that he’d love to find a job where he didn’t have to travel so much and could stay in one place. Each woman took that as tantamount to him, asking her to marry him. The women offered to help him financially. He always said no, at first. That it wouldn’t be right. That he’d feel too guilty. They all insisted. They told him they had more than enough money and wanted to help.”

“How much?” Sam asked.

“He showed them outstanding bills for up to \$200,000. Less if the mark had less money. Only one woman hesitated to pay off his bills. They sent the money to a P.O. box here in Tulsa. It had the name of a fake collection agency. He’d then withdraw the money and send it to a bank in Oklahoma City.”

“How much?” Sam asked once more.

“\$2.8 million.”

“Holy shit!” I said.

“Yeah,” Weaver said. “Once he had the money, he told the women that he needed to give a month’s notice on his old job, assuring them that he’d then find a job in the Tulsa area and they’d be together forever.”

“Who came forward?” Sam asked.

Weaver flipped through the folder. “A woman by the name of Sydney Atwater.”

“Does she still live here?”

He flipped through some more pages and said, “She seems to have disappeared. We looked for her for a while. We had some follow-up questions. But it’s been so long we’ve kind of moved on.”

Sam stood. “Thanks, Detective Weaver. You’ve been a great help.”

Weaver rushed to stand up. “If you’re around tonight, maybe we could have dinner.” He remembered I was there and asked, “Are you two together. I mean, like boyfriend and girlfriend?”

Sam shook her head. “Chancy got hurt in Iraq. It doesn’t work anymore. But he loves to watch. It’s the least I can do.”

Weaver took a quick peek at my crotch, then back at Sam. The debate inside his head would have raged for days if Sam hadn’t added, “He likes to video it on his phone.”

TWENTY-FOUR

Sam called Adrianna and asked her to find either a phone number or an address for a Sydney Atwater in the Tulsa area. I asked Sam if she wanted to get lunch, but she said she still wasn't feeling quite right. Instead, we went to Foolish Things Coffee Company. It was decorated in Bohemian style. Bottles of liqueurs dotted the shelf. Small pies and pastries lined the counter. Wall hangings covered every available space. I felt under-dressed.

We ordered our usual, double mocha for me, chai tea for Sam. I got one of the tiny apple pies and two forks. We sat beside a washed-out red fireplace with two large candles flanking each of its sides.

I offered Sam the pie, but she shook her head. I grew worried. If she kept this up, she'd look anorectic. On the other hand, maybe I could market the stun gun as a way for people to lose weight.

"What's going on in that brilliant mind of yours?" I asked.

"If Moses had known you, there'd have been only nine commandments."

"As Gandhi said. 'A sharp tongue does not mean you have a keen mind.' Or was that Ben Franklin? Anyway, yours seems to be stuck. What? You can smell the coffee but can't find the creamer?"

"I keep going back to my biological father being such a lowlife scum, womanizer, deadbeat, piece of trash, who stole millions of dollars from people. If my dad weren't in jail, I'd stop investigating this in a heartbeat."

"What if your mom had been accused? Would you drop it then?"

Sam gave my question serious thought. I was sure she'd say she'd let her rot in jail. So when she said, "No, I'd try to find the truth," it shocked me.

I'd finished the pie and was still hungry. I went to the counter to order more coffee and another snack. I saw Sam answer her phone, jump to her feet, and rush toward me. I handed the barista a fifty just as Sam grabbed me by the arm and dragged me out of the coffee house.

The barista yelled, "Sir, your change."

"Keep it," Sam told her as she pushed me through the door.

We drove to a small house on the outskirts of Tulsa. It was a red colonial home with a series of thin columns supporting a small portico. Sam rang the bell. A woman in her seventies answered the door.

"Yes?"

“Hi, we’re looking for Sydney Atwater. We were told she lives here.

“I’m sorry, but there’s no one here by that name.” She closed the door.

Sam looked my way. I shook my head. I leaned past Sam and pressed the bell until the woman answered, her face set in a scowl. “If you don’t go away, I’ll be forced to call the police.”

“We were just there,” Sam said. “They’ve been looking for Sydney for a few years.”

While the woman tried to decide what to do, Sam took out her phone and punched in a number. “Yes,” she said. “I’m looking for Detective Weaver.” ... “Certainly. Tell him Samantha Summers has found Sydney...”

“Stop!” the woman shouted.

Sam disconnected the call.

The woman glanced over her shoulder and fidgeted. “I’ll be right back.”

“Leave the door open,” Sam said.

The woman shifted her eyes between Sam and me, turned and left. No more than three minutes later, a woman in her mid-forties with light brown hair, light blue eyes, and a round, angelic face, wearing three-inch heels – making her five-eight – carrying an air of importance, stepped through the door. “Follow me,” she said and walked around the house to the backyard. We spread out around a patio table under a broad umbrella.

“Can I get you something to drink?” she asked once we’d settled in.

“No, thanks,” Sam said. “We just came from Foolish Things Coffee.”

The woman bobbed her head in approval. “How can I help you?”

“We’ve been tracking leads as to Tony D’Aquisto’s past,” Sam said. “You were one of the people he mentioned in his black book.”

“I didn’t know him as Tony D’Aquisto,” Atwater said. “I know him as Tony Morelli. It wasn’t until later that I found out his real name. ... So what’s he done now? Conned more women into giving him their life savings?”

“We’re you two married?” Sam asked. I don’t know who was more stunned by her question, Atwater, or me.

Atwater fought back tears. In a quiet voice, she said, “Yes.”

“And?” Sam asked.

“Three weeks later, he disappeared. He went on a business trip. Supposedly, I grew worried. He wasn’t answering his phone. Thought something had happened to him. I filed a missing person’s report. When the cops looked into it, they found he’d scammed over twenty women out of money. Including me. I hope he rots in jail. If they find him.”

“We have,” Sam said.

“Where?”

“In Shawano, Wisconsin.”

“Wisconsin? Who did he try to con there?”

“My mother.”

“Is he in jail?”

“No.”

“How come?”

“He’s dead.”

Atwater stared at Sam to gauge the truth of her statement. Seeing the truth in Sam’s eyes, she burst into tears. “Oh, God, no.” She grew hysterical and repeated over and over, “I loved him so much.”

When Sam got her settled down, she asked, “So you haven’t heard or seen him since, when?”

Between sobs, Atwater said, “Seven years in August. August 10th, to be exact. The day he drove off on his business trip.”

“How much did he get from you?”

“\$375,000.”

“Yet, you still loved him?”

“Yes. I still do. This is all so horrible. I always hoped that he’d come back to me. But now...”

“I’m sorry,” Sam said and stood to leave.

“Has he been buried yet?” Atwater asked.

“No. His body is being held as part of a murder investigation.”

“Murder? Are you sure?”

“Quite,” Sam said. “Again, I’m sorry.”

“She’s lying,” I said as we drove off.

“I know. When I told her he was dead, she didn’t ask how he died. She *is* a pretty good actress. She almost had me convinced.”

“She *did* tell the truth about being in love with him,” I said. “And *still* is.”

TWENTY-FIVE

Lawrence Kansas – Tony Conti-Debra Hart

At first light the next morning, we left Tulsa and headed for Lawrence, Kansas. It's too bad Triple-A doesn't offer frequent driver miles. We entered the city limits just after ten a.m. and drove directly to police headquarters. We asked to see Detective Ron Irwin and were told he'd stepped out but should be back any minute.

As Irwin entered the building carrying an extra-large coffee, the desk sergeant called him over and motioned to the two of us sitting on hard plastic chairs positioned against the far wall. Irwin took one look at Sam and hurried to join us.

"Hi, I'm Detective Irwin, how may I help you?" He aimed his question at Sam. My chair and I were one and the same.

Sam introduced us as usual. Irwin nodded but didn't offer to shake hands. When Sam told him we had information on Tony Conti, he led us back to his office.

Once we'd all taken a seat, he asked if we knew where Conti was.

She explained that Conti was D'Aquisto and that he'd been murdered in Shawano. Irwin took it in as if watching a rerun of NCIS for the fourth time.

When Sam finished, he asked, "So you came all this way to tell me that?"

"No," Sam said. "Someone has been arrested for D'Aquisto's murder. We were hired to find the person who actually did kill him."

"Okay? So?"

Sam explained, "We're operating on the premise that someone who'd been conned by D'Aquisto got angry enough to track him down, give him an overdose of Sildenafil, then torture him, resulting in D'Aquisto death due to a heart attack."

"Torture, how?"

"We're not sure. He'd been restrained naked on a bed. The coroner said D'Aquisto had somehow exerted too much energy, probably trying to break free of his restraints. That, along with the Sildenafil, led to his heart attack. We were hoping you could tell us what D'Aquisto's scam entailed."

"Sure. He came to the area three years ago, posing as a geologist working for Koch Industries. He had business cards and an ID from the corporate headquarters."

Sam started to ask where or how he got the ID, but Irwin held up his hand, stopping her. "We're not sure. They were identical to those issued by the company. We believe he

had inside help to acquire them, but we have no proof, nor have we found anyone within the company connected to him.”

“Does a Debra Hart work there?” Sam asked.

Irwin’s eyebrows went up, picked up his phone, and dialed a number from memory. He introduced himself to the person on the other end and asked if Debra Hart was an employee. He then asked, in what department. When the conversation ended, he turned to Sam. “How’d you know?”

“We found a black book among D’Aquisto’s belongings. He’d highlighted some of the names. She was one of them.”

When Irwin started to ask how Sam had known it was Hart instead of any of the others, Sam held up her hand as he had a moment ago. “We’ve found the rest. She’s the last one.”

“She left the company,” he said, “about the same time Conti disappeared from here.”

“So, what was the scam?” Sam asked again.

“He came to town, passing himself off as a geologist. He bought a social membership at Lawrence Country Club. Made friends with a couple of the members, Dr. Harley Kemper and Mathew Underhill. Throughout the next few months, they became close. One night, Conti took them into his confidence and told them that he’d found a rich vein of oil and natural gas north of the city. At first, he refused to divulge the exact location. A few weeks later, he took them out to the area. It was old farmland that’d been abandoned. He told them that he’d been authorized to purchase the 4,000 acres for the company.”

“How’d the scam work?” I asked.

“He said the current price per acre was \$2,000. About \$1,000 below average for that area. He confessed he was considering buying the land himself under a different name, then selling it back to his company at the true market value.”

Sam did a quick calculation. “A profit of four-million dollars.”

“Yeah. Told Kemper and Underhill, he was short on cash. He didn’t have the eight million to buy it himself, and he was looking for partners. They were hooked. After discussing it for a few days, they decided to divide it sixteen ways. Each partner, including Conti, would put in five-hundred thousand.”

“Weren’t these smart business people?” I asked.

“Yes, but two things sold them on the legitimacy. First, Conti took them to a place where they could smell the gas coming out of the earth. He’d rigged a system with a tank of propane under the ground. Told them he’d dug in the area and found the gas. None of them knew anything about geology, but the gas smell convinced them.”

“Natural gas is odorless,” I said.

Irwin bobbed his head as if to say, ‘it’s amazing how smart people can be so dumb.’

To get us back on track, Sam asked, “The second thing?”

“He had a contract drawn up, which they all signed. It made Conti the head of the corporation, and Kemper and Underhill its voting members. The fifteen members believed that once the money was in the bank, it needed Kemper’s and Underhill’s signatures to move it.”

“Obviously, they were wrong,” I said.

Another nod from Irwin. “The eight-page document had a clause buried on page six, stating that if all three members weren’t available, one of them could withdraw the money if that person had a signed affidavit from the other two. And he did.”

“He forged their signatures?” I asked.

Irwin nodded. “One night, at the Country Club, the three of them were drinking heavily. He tricked them into signing what they thought was a life insurance policy covering him in case he died. It was a fake. He mentioned that he’d had some heart problems in the past and that the life insurance policy was for the other partners’ protection. He then forged their signatures on a letter giving Conti permission to withdraw the funds. He disappeared the next day.”

“With seven-and-a-half-million dollars,” Sam said.

Irwin went back to nodding.

“Which of the people who invested took it the hardest?” Sam asked. “Enough that they might want to kill D’Aquist?”

“All of them, I suppose. Although, if I had to guess, it would be either Kemper or Underhill. Most likely, Underhill. The other thirteen were really pissed at those two for bringing them into the scam and vouching for Conti. The club rescinded Kemper’s and Underhill’s memberships.”

“But Kemper’s a doctor,” I said.

In a tone, which was a mixture of sarcasm and incredulity, Irwin asked, “Yeah. And doctors aren’t capable of murder?”

He had me there.

“What does Underhill do for a living?” Sam asked.

“He was the CEO of an information technology company. They service the University, our local government, most of the health organizations, and even homeland security.”

“Was?” I asked

“Yeah. When it became apparent that we were not going to find Conti, the board voted him out.”

“Where is he now?” Sam asked.

Irwin shrugged. “He sold his house. He and his wife moved. Out East is the rumor. No one knows for sure. That was three years ago.”

We thanked him for his time and the information. As soon as we stepped out of the door, Sam called Adrianna and asked her if she could do a search for Mathew Underhill.

Next, Sam called Dr. Kemper’s office. The nurse said Kemper wouldn’t be available any time that day. Sam asked her to mention that we had information on Tony Conti. I heard the intake of air from the other end. Three minutes later, the nurse came back on the line and told us Kemper would meet us after work, at 6:00 p.m., at a place called Tonic.

We got a hotel room, grabbed a quick nap, woke at four-thirty, took showers, and arrived early at Tonic. The crowd was sparse. The bartender told us that the college crowd didn’t come in until after eight.

A tall gentleman, in his late forties, with graying hair, entered the bar a little past six. He scanned the room. His eyes lit on Sam. After surveying the room once more, he headed our way.

Introductions were made, and we moved to a booth. Kemper ordered a Vodka Martini. Sam and I settled for the local brew.

Eager to hear what Sam had to tell him, Kemper asked, “You found Conti? Did he still have our money?”

“Yes and no,” Sam said.

“I don’t understand,” Kemper said.

“Yes, we found him,” Sam said. “No, he didn’t have any money.”

“Where is he?”

“Shawano, Wisconsin.”

“Is he in jail? Can I talk to him?”

“No, and no.”

“No, and no?”

“No, he’s not in jail. And no, you can’t talk to him. He’s dead.”

“What?”

“Dead as in deceased, goner, bought the farm, bit the dust, gone to...”

“Thanks, I get it,” he said to me. To Sam, he said, “He didn’t have any of our money.”

“Nothing. Just fake passports and other IDs”
Kemper’s head dropped.
“Do you know who killed him?” Sam asked.
Kemper’s head shot up. “What?”
“Did you kill him? Or know who did?”
“Of course not. I’ve been here.”
“You’ve never left the city once in the three years since he took off with your money.”
“Well, yeah, of course. When did he die?”
“He died eleven days ago. Someone gave him an overdose of Sildenafil. Between that, his bad heart, and the fact that he’d been forced to exert himself, led to the heart attack.”
“Viagra. He took an overdose of Viagra?”
“As a doctor,” I said, “you’d have access to large quantities of the drug.”
“Are you kidding me? First, I’m a doctor.”
“Doctors have never committed murder?” I said and silently thanked Detective Irwin.
“I’m sure they have, but... I wouldn’t. I couldn’t.”
“And second?” Sam asked.
“Second?”
“You said, ‘First, I’m a doctor.’ ”
“Right. I was here. In Lawrence. Everyone at the hospital can vouch for me. Besides, the person I’d be looking for, if I were you, is Mathew Underhill. He said to me, ‘If I ever find that bastard, he’ll be dead, but only after I get my money back.’ ”
“You took that as a serious threat?”
“Of course. He looked so demented; I thought he might have a stroke. I’ve not seen anyone that pissed since Kansas lost to Kansas State at home.”
“Have you heard from him?”
“Hell no. He didn’t even tell me he was leaving. When we lost our club memberships, we stopped talking. One day he was gone. Someone said he went east. Who knows for sure?”
“Would there be anyone else he’d have contacted?”
“Not likely. I was his best friend. The way everything unfolded, neither one of us has too many of those left. Once my contract is up at the hospital, I’ll be leaving here as well.”

TWENTY-SIX

As we left Dr. Kemper contemplating his Vodka Martini and the rest of his shitty life in Tulsa, we walked out to meet a gentleman three inches taller than Sam. He was wearing a dark three-piece suit along with a smug smile. He subtly moved his jacket to the side, letting us know he was carrying.

“Ms. Summers, I’ve been tasked with asking you some questions.”

“Ask away,” Sam said.

“Can we go someplace more private?”

“We could, but then Chancy wouldn’t feel as safe.”

He looked at me then said to Sam, “He can stay here, if he wants.”

“No, thanks,” I said. “I’m her good luck charm.”

“Suit yourself.” He said to Sam, “There’s a little coffee shop around the corner.” He checked his watch. “There won’t be many people there at this time, but enough that you’ll still be able to yell for help.” The smug smile grew even more superior.

“Or you will,” Sam said, mirroring his smile.

He was shaken. He recovered to say, “Yeah, that too.”

We walked side-by-side around the corner and entered a small coffee house. We sat at a table near the back, and Sam said, “If you want something, Chancy’s buying.”

And a bear shits in the woods, water is wet, and the Pope is Argentinian.

“No, thanks,” the man said. “Too much, and I won’t be able to sleep tonight.”

Sam gave me an upward head bob, and I went and got our usual.

When I got back to the table, Sam and the man were staring at one another. As I lowered myself into a chair, Sam asked, “What’s your name?”

“Just call me, Joe.”

“Okay. Joe. What’s this about?”

“I was hired by some people to stay on top of the Tony Morelli scam. Some of the gentlemen who had their money stolen aren’t thoroughly convinced that Underhill and Kemper didn’t have more to do with this than they claimed.”

“What does that have to do with us?” I asked.

He slowly turned my way, then looked back at Sam, “I was hoping you might be able to shed some light on your conversation with Kemper.”

Sam glanced my way and nodded for me to share my thoughts.

“Kemper is clueless,” I said. “He didn’t have anything to do with this, other than being taken in like everybody else.”

Joe looked at me to gauge the veracity of what I’d said. I offered him the same smile Sam and he’d shared earlier.

“As for Underhill, we haven’t found him yet,” I said. “Why don’t you give us your number? And we’ll get back to you when we do.”

Joe placed his hands flat on the table, shot to his feet, and leaned halfway across the tabletop. It was the opening Sam was looking hoping for. Her hand darted forward and snatched the gun from Joe’s holster. Stunned, Joe stood straighter and stared at Sam in amazement. She positioned the weapon, so it was pointed at his crotch. Joe glanced down, then dropped back into his seat. Perspiration dotted his forehead and upper lip.

“I don’t appreciate being threatened,” Sam said as she moved the gun under the table, “if even if it is subtle.”

Joe held up his hands: in both a don’t-shoot and whatever-you-want gesture.

“Lean back and place your hands behind your head, like your relaxing on a Caribbean beach,” she said. When he did, she handed me the gun. “I know holding one of these things makes you nervous. Try to relax.”

Joe’s eyes widened a smidgeon. I could smell the fear.

Sam reached across the table and took Joe’s phone from his inside jacket pocket.

“Who specifically are you working for?” Sam asked.

Joe shook his head. “I can’t and won’t tell you that.” He looked uncertainly at me and added, “I know you have the gun, but you won’t shoot.”

I offered him my best imitation of Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*. He leaned farther back. The sweat was now running down his face.

Sam reached out his phone to him. He wasn’t sure what to do. “Take this with your left hand.”

He did.

“Open it,” She ordered. “Slowly. Sudden movements make Chancy even more nervous.”

In a sloth-like move, he did as instructed.

Sam snapped her fingers and motioned for him to give it back. She opened his phone’s information settings. “Prince Oswald? Really? Your parents were Prince fans, or do you come from royal blood?”

“Yes,” Prince Oswald said and tried to regain his superior attitude, but failed.

“I’m going to call you Joe,” Sam said. “You don’t look like any prince I know. More like a frog. Oswald? Yes. Prince? No.” She glanced in my direction and asked me, “You ready.”

I nodded, even though I wasn’t quite sure what I was ready for.

As Sam read through the names, it came to me what she wanted. I watched for any reaction Joe had as she said each one. Five minutes later, she asked me, “Well?”

“There were eleven names. Josh Allen, David Beasley, Mike Campbell, Dean Drucker, Jim Halder, James Jackson, Dr. Mark Mann, Chris Morris, Dennis Nelson, Thomas Vander Hey, and Jim Wilson. His strongest reactions were for Campbell and Wilson.”

Sam took a picture of his recent calls going back three weeks. She snapped her fingers and motioned for me to give her back the gun. Sam ejected the clip from his Ruger, checked the chamber for a bullet, handed me the clip, and said, “Take the bullets out.” She proceeded to break down the gun and pocketed a few of the pieces in her coat pocket. She handed the barrel to Joe.

“Souvenir,” she said.

“Thanks,” he said with a hint of a smile.

“Tell Campbell and Wilson, we’ll be in touch. Joe.”

His smug smile returned.

Sam stood and said, “I’d drop that smile. It makes you look like an entitled, asshole, frat boy.”

I know now what Billy Joel meant by “the smile ran away from his face.”

As Sam walked out, she threw a couple parts of the gun in the trash, a few more down the sewer, pocketed the bullets, and got into the passenger seat. I guess I was driving.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Sam sent the eleven names Joe had the strongest reaction to, along with his recent calls log, to Adrianna and told her to get back to us as soon as she had the information Sam was seeking. We checked into a hotel. I turned on the TV and watched a rerun of the Packer-Vikings playoff game on the NFL channel. Sam studied the names we'd gotten from Joe and tried to match them with the local white pages. It didn't do any good. Most of the numbers Joe had were from cell phones, and all but two of the names didn't show up in the pages.

As Sam stewed over making no progress, I said, "I'll bet you the Vikings' kicker makes the kick this time."

Sam looked up from her list and noticed it was the end of the game. "How much?"

"You win, I pay for dinner. I win, I'll let you have me pay for dinner."

"You're on."

When the Vikings kicker missed, I said, "Man, I thought for sure he'd make it this time."

Sam snickered. "Let's get room service," she said.

Thirty minutes later, as our steaks arrived, Adrianna sent us virtually the complete bios for the names from both the contacts and the recent calls log on Joe's phone.

After looking at them, Sam asked, "Are you sure about Campbell and Wilson?"

"Most definitely."

Sam dialed the number for Campbell. "Mr. Campbell?" ... "This is Samantha Summers." ... "Yes. That's correct." ... "No. Prince didn't give us your name. At least, not voluntarily." ... "I'd like to meet with you and some of your cohorts: Josh Allen, David Beasley, Dean Drucker, Jim Halder, James Jackson, Dr. Mark Mann, Chris Morris, Dennis Nelson, Thomas Vander Hey, and Jim Wilson." ... "That's correct. And it needs to be soon. Like yesterday."

Campbell must have given it some thought because Sam moved the phone away from her ear, placed her hand over the mouthpiece, and mouthed, "He's rattled."

I could hear him talking, and Sam moved the phone up to her ear. She nodded at whatever he was saying, and then said, "Tomorrow, first thing, would be great." ... "We'll find it." ... "8:00 a.m." ... "Perfect."

When Sam hung up, she said, "We're meeting with the rest of the guys Tony scammed in the oil/gas con."

“Did Campbell sound like the leader?”

“Campbell sounded like another pissed off entitled asshole.”

“So, he’s the leader?”

“Birds of a feather,” Sam said and left it at that.

She woke me at seven the next morning after she got back from her run, and we grabbed a breakfast sandwich and two extra-large coffees along the way. The Lawrence Business Center building looked like a converted Best Western Hotel. We entered the building at ten minutes to eight. Sam took one look at me, and said, “What a slob,” She brushed the crumbs from off my coat. She headed for the directory, checked the listings, and we walked up the stairs to the second floor, office 210. A secretary showed us into a conference room, with a fifteen-foot-long table and sixteen, plush leather chairs surrounding it. A gentleman in his mid-fifties stood as we entered. He didn’t bother to offer his hand.

“I’m Michael Campbell,” he said. “Have a seat.” He motioned to two chairs halfway down the far right side of the table. Seven other men were already positioned squeezed together around the opposite side. Soon, another distinguished-looking man entered and took the seat at the near end. No introductions were made.

Campbell returned to his seat at the head of the table, then said, “Mr. Oswald...”

“Don’t you mean Joe?” I said.

Campbell shot me a look that I’m sure he’d used to intimidate hundreds of subordinates over the years.

I offered him the same smug frat-boy look Joe had given us last night. Campbell flushed red.

He focused his attention on Sam. “You’re boyfriend is impertinent. I’d like him to leave.”

“I would too, but we’re stuck with him. He’s emotionally excitable.”

That drew a black stare from the eleven men. Sam clarified. “It makes him a human bullshit detector. If you’re lying or leaving something out, he’ll know immediately. So he stays.”

Eleven pairs of eyes swung my way, seeking the legitimacy of Sam’s statement as if it was written on my forehead for the entire world to see. I smiled once more. That one was condescending. Being wealthy individuals, I’m sure they were used to people treating them with deference. I felt like the Chinese guy standing in front of the row of tanks in Tiananmen Square.

To get us back on track, Sam said, “Joe told us that you commissioned him to look further into Underhill and Kemper. I’m sure he mentioned that we believe Kemper was telling us the truth.” She leaned her head in my direction to emphasize her point. She went on. “Underhill, we’re still looking for. But Kemper told us that he – Underhill – was so pissed he wanted to kill Conti. To me, that doesn’t sound like someone who was in on the scam. Unless you subscribe to the theory that he was in on it with Conti and that Conti screwed him and then left. Hell, maybe Underhill and he are sharing a drink on some tropical island.” Sam shrugged as a way of saying she didn’t know and couldn’t care less.

“What I’d like to know,” she said, “did any of *you* want to kill him? Maybe one or more of you found him in Wisconsin, and did.”

“He’s dead?” Campbell half-shouted.

“As a doornail. Extinct. The big sleep. History. ...”

“Thank you for clarifying that, Ms. Summers,” Campbell said. “Can we move on?”

“Certainly. Which of you wanted to murder him?”

No one answered. Most turned away or refused to make eye contact with Sam. Or me.

“That guy,” I said and pointed to the last man who’d arrived.

Sam stared him down, then asked, “What’s your name?”

He remained tight-lipped.

“Jim Wilson,” Sam said.

Wilson flinched then glared at Campbell. Campbell shook his head in denial.

“Did you hire someone to kill him?”

“Of course not. That’s absurd,” Wilson said.

Sam glanced my way. I shook my head.

“What aren’t you telling us?” Sam asked.

“I refuse to be subjected to this anymore.” Wilson stood and stormed out of the room.

Sam addressed the others. “Other than, Prince Oswald, and possibly Wilson, none of you have taken extra steps to try and find Tony Conti?”

Heads shook all around.

“There were only eleven of you here,” Sam said. “There should be thirteen. Who’s missing?”

No one offered an answer.

Sam listed the remaining nine names of the men seated across from us from memory, “Josh Allen, David Beasley, Dean Drucker, Jim Halder, James Jackson, Dr. Mark Mann, Chris Morris, Dennis Nelson, Thomas Vander Hey.”

When she finished, she looked at me once more.

I pointed to the man sitting to our far left. “That’s Beasley.” Going down the line, I added, “That’s Nelson, that’s Jackson, that’s Halder, that’s Mann, that’s Drucker, that’s Vander Hey, that’s Morris, and that’s Allen.”

Their reaction to me nailing every name correctly, made me smile once more.

To Campbell, Sam said, “I gather, the last two guys didn’t agree to go along with hiring Joe to examine the incident further.”

Campbell’s resolved faded faster than laughter at a bad joke. “No, they wanted to get it behind them. Said there was too much time being wasted on something they figured would never be resolved. And that even if Conti were found, the money more than likely never would. Other than the cursory nods of greeting when we see each other, we don’t even talk anymore.” He then asked, “*Did* they find the money?”

“Not one cent. Whether he stashed it someplace, or spent most of it, I doubt if we’ll ever know. All of you can kiss your half-a-mil goodbye.”

Ten pairs of shoulders sagged as one.

Sam stood. “My advice to you is, move on. He’s gone, and so is your money. Mr. Campbell, we’d appreciate it if you’d give us the names of the last two men who were scammed by Conti. We’d like to check them out for ourselves.”

Campbell nodded. “I’ll have my secretary give them to you.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

Sam called Adrianna with the additional names Campbell's secretary had given us, along with a request that Adrianna look deeper into Jim Wilson's background.

Sam was hungry; again, as always, or permanently, maybe eternally – you choose. We went to Lassalle's New Orleans Deli. Sam got the muffuletta, and I got the shrimp po boy. I asked Sam what she thought we might find out about Wilson. She shrugged and said that she wanted to double-check because of his strong reaction to her question.

As we were finishing our meal, Sam received a text from Adrianna, letting her know she'd sent a file on each of the people: Jim Wilson, Jeff Rudaski, and Bill Simon. Sam gestured to the table and got up. I left enough to more than pay for the bill and followed. She Googled, Internet café, and found one up the street. After grabbing her computer out of the Impala, she led the way without a word. I was beginning to feel like Little Bo-Peep's lost sheep.

Sam found a table near the back, and I went and got our usual coffee drinks. When I returned, Sam was reading Adrianna's email with interest. I placed her extra-large coffee in front of her. She didn't seem to notice. Five minutes later, she said, "Listen to this. Jim Wilson was an officer in the Army. Rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel. He was relieved of duty when a box of grenades and six M249 light machine guns went missing under his watch. Everything was eventually found, but it didn't stop the military from firing him."

"The army doesn't *fire* people," I said. "They're discharged. With or without honors."

"Would you mind going back to the counter and getting a straw?"

"Sure. Why?"

"I'd like it if you'd suck the life out of somebody else's day."

"You know you're beautiful when you're angry?" I said. "But, someone should put a bag over that personality of yours."

Sam's lip curled. "That was one of your better ones."

She went back to explain what Adrianna had uncovered about Wilson. He owned three gun stores, two of which were also shooting ranges in or near Lawrence. Adrianna also sent his financial background. His stores had made more than two million dollars over the last seven years.

"That's not bad," Sam said, "but I can see where losing half-a-mil would hurt."

“No wonder he was so pissed,” I said. “How about the other two?”

“Rudaski is a vice-president of the US Bank in town. He’s not rich by today’s standards, but he is nearing Aaron Chancellor Evans’ territory. As for Simon, he owns a couple of car dealerships in the area. He’s not hurting either.”

“What’s our next move?”

“We’ll call on the last two and interview them. Then we’ll take another run at Wilson.”

Both Rudaski and Simon told us they’d almost immediately moved on from Tony’s scam. Neither thought pursuing it was good for their reputations or business. I read both men as having told us the truth.

After interviewing them, I asked, “How do you propose we get in to see Wilson?”

“I’m still thinking about it.”

Later that day, after Sam made numerous phone calls to Wilson’s stores, she found out where Wilson would be, and we drove to The Gun Store and Range.

“These military guys are sure creative,” I said. “Catchy name.”

“I like it,” Sam said. “Simple and to the point. Like you. Well, at least the simple part.”

Sam asked to see the owner. The way she said it made it sound as if she was a pissed off customer. After repeatedly declining help from the man behind the counter, he relented and found Wilson.

“Oh. It’s you two.” Wilson said. “You found your way in. I’m sure you can find your way out.” He looked at me, turned to Sam, and said, “On second thought. Make sure you take your retard with you.”

“If I were you, I’d be careful about denigrating other people’s intelligence, having screwed up twice in such a short period of time.” Sam let that hang for a few seconds before she added, “I’m sure your staff would like to hear about what not only happened here, in Lawrence but what also happened when you were in charge of munitions at your last command.”

Wilson slid his eyes sideways to see if his counterman was listening. He was. “Stew, go check the inventory. See if it matches what we have on file.”

When Stew left, Wilson said, “You realize I still know people in the military. Some are excellent shots.”

I swallowed hard. Sam laughed derisively. “So am I,” she said.

Wilson harrumphed.

I regained some of my lost composure and said, “She has the highest score of trainees in the Madison Police Academy. Gun and rifle.”

When Wilson still appeared skeptical, Sam suggested, “Let me show you. Grab that Colt M4 carbine from your shelf.”

When Wilson hesitated, she added, “I’ll make you a deal. Pick your best shooter. If he wins. We leave. If I win. You have to answer our questions.”

Wilson smirked. “Sure. Follow me.”

We went into the shooting range, and Wilson called out to a man in his early thirties who looked like he’d spent years in the military. He was muscular yet lithe. He walked with his shoulders back and his head high as if he was marching in a military parade, yet his eyes showed that he’d seen the bloody cost of war.

“Charlie. This woman thinks she can beat you. Up for a little contest?”

Charlie studied Sam. I’m sure he thought she looked more like a beauty queen than a marksman. Or markswoman. Or a marksperson. “Pistol or rifle?” he asked.

“Why not both?” Sam asked.

Charlie stifled a laugh.

We grabbed ear protection and walked to a booth. Charlie motioned for Sam to go first. She shook her head and swept her hand forward.

Charlie stepped into the booth. “Gun or rifle first?” He asked.

“Gun,” Sam said.

The target was moved to forty yards. Charlie took his stance and pulled the trigger ten times. All but one hit the center mass. The tenth was high and landed in the 9-point area. When the target was brought forward, both Wilson and Charlie were quite pleased.

A new target was attached, and reset. Sam hit the center ten times. She seemed displeased because one of her shots was a hair to the right but still within the bullseye. As I had a few moments before, Wilson swallowed hard. Charlie was stunned.

“Rifle?” Sam said.

The target was placed at two hundred yards. When Charlie took his stance, I saw the tension in his back and shoulders. Sam had already won.

Once again, each took ten shots. Charlie hit the center six times, the nine-point area twice, and missed entirely on the other two.

Sam was Sam. After hitting the center with all ten, she handed the rifle back to Wilson. “Nice rifle. Good balance.”

Wilson was slow to take it back. When he did, he nodded at Charlie. It was curt and dismissive. Charlie walked out of the shooting area and left the store.

“We’re done here,” Wilson said. “I’d like you two to leave.”

“No wonder you were kicked out of the army,” Sam said in a loud voice. A few heads turned our way. Then stared at Wilson. “How unpatriotic,” Sam added. The stares grew more intense.

To me, she said, “We have a few more of Wilson’s stores to get to. You ready?”

“Sure.”

“Hang on,” Wilson said. “Let’s go into my office.”

We entered his office and stood.

“What do you want to know?” he asked.

“Why did you and Campbell take this the hardest?”

“Campbell never likes anyone getting the better of him. Sees it as a sign of weakness. As for me, Conti took more money than I can afford. My places are doing fine, but I had to borrow way too much. Thankfully, Rudaski went out on the limb for me and got me more than my credit line warranted. I need that money back, or I might have to file bankruptcy. He’s been good about extending the loan, but...”

“Did you hire someone other than Prince Oswald to find Conti? Possibly kill him?”

“He’s no good to me dead.”

“Unless that person found the money, then murdered him.”

Wilson looked away.

By his body language and tone, I was confident that he’d hired a second person to find Conti. Possibly one of his old military pals, I told Sam what I was thinking.

She asked Wilson, “Did you?”

He refused to answer.

“Just so you know,” Sam said, “if anything happens to either one of us, the other will be back here. You won’t know when. But we’ll be back. And, for your information, Chancy’s an even better shot than I am.”

He swung his attention to me. I offered my best sinister smile and gave him an upward head nod through squinty eyes.

He swallowed hard once more.

As we got ready to leave, I held my hand like a gun and pulled the trigger. Sam rolled her eyes and said, “Let’s go, killer.”

TWENTY-NINE

St. Paul, MN – Tony Bianchi-Alora Taylor

When we were alone, Sam asked, “Are you certain about Wilson? About hiring someone, I mean.”

“Quite,” I said.

My answer didn’t surprise her. As she turned the key to start the rental, her phone rang. She glanced at the caller ID – Adrianna.

“Hi, woman,” Sam said. “What have you got?”

Sam listened for close to five minutes, nodding her head on occasion and growing more excited as Adrianna explained what she’d found.

“Thanks,” Sam said. “You’re the best. Remind me to tell FBI Director Jamison to give you a raise.” Adrianna laughed so hard, I heard it through the phone. Sam disconnected.

“Underhill did go east,” Sam said. “But only as far as Wisconsin. He’s in Door County. He bought a gift shop in Fish Creek. Been there for three years.”

“That’s less than a two-hour drive to Shawano,” I said.

“Adrianna also found Alora Taylor. She’s living in St Paul, using her maiden name.”

“So, she wasn’t married to your father?”

“Stop calling him that,” Sam said.

“Sorry,” I said. “So Tony and this Alora Taylor weren’t married.”

“Or, she’s just avoiding using his name, because she knows the authorities are looking for her under Bianchi.”

“It’s like the six degrees of separation theory,” I said.

“What are you talking about?”

“You know, six women, six different states. Six degrees, or states, of separation.”

“Are you serious? That’s not what that means. Six degrees of separation is the idea that everyone on earth is six, or fewer, social connections away from each other.”

“Isn’t that what I said?”

“No, you said...” Sam stopped when she realized I was screwing with her once more. She pivoted one hundred eighty degrees and said, “We’ll leave first thing in the morning. I’ll get us tickets out of Kansas City into Minneapolis. It’ll be faster.”

“And more expensive,” I mumbled.

“You’ll earn it back in the next poker tournament. Plus some.” Sam snickered. I couldn’t tell if she was being flip, or doubted I would. I decided I’d ask her to clarify later...

after she got laid. It may have been the longest time for Sam between sexual encounters since I'd known her.

We woke at six a.m. and drove to Kansas City, boarding a Delta flight that arrived in Minneapolis just before noon that same morning. We picked up Sam's Jeep and drove to the address Adrianna had found for Alora Taylor.

She lived in the Highland Park area of St Paul on Snelling Avenue South in a ranch house set back from the street and fronted by trees and shrubs. We pulled into the drive and rang the bell.

A girl, I gathered was in her late teens, answered the door. She stood five feet tall, with light brown hair, dark blue eyes, a pretty face, with a pirate's smile. She was dressed in yoga pants and a low cut sweater that exposed her ample cleavage. She was a stunner. I felt like a dirty old man.

"How can I help you?" she asked.

Sam looked at the address and double-checked the information Adrianna had given her. "Sorry," Sam said. "I guess we're at the wrong house,"

"Who are you looking for?"

"Alora Taylor."

"That's me," she said.

For the first time since I'd known her, Sam was speechless.

Alora Taylor asked, "What's this about?"

"Tony Bianchi," I said.

Taylor's eyes went wide, and she took a step back. "I don't know anybody by that name. I guess you *do* have the wrong house." She attempted to close the door, but I stiff-armed it.

"Please leave," she said.

When we didn't move, she added, "Do I have to call the police?"

"That would be great," I said. "It'd save *us* the effort of doing it."

Taylor tried to close the door once more, but I kept my hand firmly in place.

"This won't take long," Sam said. "I just need to ask you a few questions, then we'll leave. If you answer honestly, we won't call the cops."

Taylor relented and stepped back from the door. She walked away and into the front room. She took a spot on the couch and pulled her legs up under her. She held her legs with one hand and crossed her free arm across her stomach. "What do you want to know?" she asked before we had a chance to sit.

Sam, propped on the edge of a chair across from her, while I remained standing, asked, “What can you tell us about Tony Bianchi?” Before Taylor could answer, Sam’s curiosity got the best of her. “Hold old, are you?”

“Twenty-two. Why?”

“Just curious, that’s all. You look like you could still be in high school.”

“I get that a lot. It’s a family thing. We all look young. My mom’s in her forties but looks like my older sister.”

“Do you own this place, or do you rent?” I asked.

“What? A twenty-two-year-old can’t own a home?”

“So, you own it?”

“Yeah,” Taylor said, defiantly.

“Ignore, Ace. His brain waves don’t quite reach the beach.”

Taylor glanced at me. I crossed my eyes. She leaned back into the couch, gave me one more fleeting glance before saying to Sam, “I met Tony at a bar in Dinky Town. I was taking some courses at the U. He was charming.”

“We talked with Reverend Cooper. He said that Tony introduced you to him as his wife.”

Taylor shifted and stared at the front window. “We got married about a month after we met.” It came out in a whisper.

“A month?” Sam asked.

Taylor nodded.

“Do you know his real name is Tony D’Aquisto?”

Taylor looked back at Sam, “No. Although...”

“You suspected Bianchi wasn’t his real name.”

“Only after he took off. The police told me he’d scammed some people at the church for a lot of money. Somewhere around \$900,000.”

“That doesn’t seem to bother you,” I said.

She shrugged. “I asked Tony why we were going there. To that church. If that’s what you want to call it. The pastor’s a real jerk. All that hate. Week after week.”

I asked, “What did Tony say when you asked him why?”

“Said he was working on a business deal of some kind. He didn’t tell me what it involved.”

“Have you heard from him?”

“No. I came home one day, and he was gone. All his clothes, his suitcase, everything.” With that, Taylor broke down and began to cry. “I keep hoping he’ll come back, but if he did what the police say he did...”

“You don’t know that he’s dead?”

“What? No, he’s not. You’re lying,” Taylor shouted.

“Sorry,” Sam said, “but he died close to two weeks ago in Shawano, Wisconsin.”

Taylor vehemently shook her head. “No, no, no, no, no.”

“Yes. He died of a heart attack.”

Taylor sobbed uncontrollably. Sam handed her a tissue from the coffee table in front of the couch but made no effort to console her beyond that.

Once Taylor had gained a modicum of control, Sam asked, “Did he try to contact you after he left? A phone message? A text? An email? Anything?”

Taylor shook her head to each of Sam’s questions. When Sam stopped asking her questions, Taylor said, “A heart attack? He never told me he had a bad heart. Where are they holding the body?”

“The County Morgue. The police are investigating his death.”

“Why? You said he died of a heart attack.”

“Yes, but he’d been tied up and tortured. He’d also taken an overdose of Viagra.”

“What? Uh-uh. Tony didn’t need Viagra. Why would he take it?”

“He had three times the recommended top dosage in his system,” I said.

Taylor cried once more.

“For the last few years,” Sam said, “Tony has conned people out of millions of dollars.”

“Millions?”

“Close to twenty million.”

Taylor’s eyes went wide. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“But...”

“He never told you,” Sam said.

“No.”

“Do you know if he’d been married before?” Sam asked.

“Uh-uh. Said he’d never met the right woman until he met me. That he was a confirmed bachelor. But meeting me changed all that.”

“Did you plan on having kids?”

Taylor cried harder. “Said he wanted ten just like me.”

‘We’re sorry to have given you such bad news. Here’s my card. Call me if you need anything. We’ll let you know when you can come and get the body.’

As we walked toward Sam’s Jeep, I started to say, ”She...”

Sam interrupted, “Lied. Yeah, I know.”

THIRTY

We got take out food from a Chinese restaurant and returned to the hotel to discuss what we had so far. On the ride there, Sam called Adrianna and asked her to see if there were marriage licenses issued under Tony's other names, and the women on whom Adrianna had done background checks.

The entire time we ate, Sam seemed distracted. I thought it was in preparation for laying it all out for me. Was I in for a surprise.

"So have you made any deductions yet," I asked, "as to who might be responsible for your...for Tony's death?"

Instead of one of her smartass comments, Sam said, "Something doesn't fit. There are only two people who seemed pissed off enough about being taken in by Tony to want him dead; Jonathan Cooper and Mathew Underhill."

"Both of them," I said, "are in close enough proximity to Shawano that they could drive over, kill him, and get back home."

Sam gave that some thought, then more to herself than me, said, "Yes, but why two different stun guns? That makes no sense. There had to be two people...at least. Neither Cooper nor Underhill seemed to have an accomplice."

Sam went silent.

I brought up another subject I'd been thinking about. "Both Sydney Atwater and Alora Taylor said they were married to Tony."

"Yes. And something tells me they weren't the only ones."

"Why's that?"

"Just a hunch. If what my mother told me was the truth, that Tony had been eager to get married. Why wouldn't he have found someone else, sooner? My guess is he married multiple times before Atwater. Maybe those dashes signified people who were more than just beautiful women who were great lays. Maybe he felt they were women he wouldn't mind marrying. Or did marry."

"But there were six of them," I said.

"Your point?"

"You think he got married six times?"

Instead of answering me directly, Sam said, "Henry the 8th, Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, Zsa Zsa Gabor, Elizabeth Taylor, Larry King, Mickey..."

"Mickey Mouse?" I interrupted. "I thought his heart belonged to Minnie."

“Speaking of something *mini*,” Sam said, “when does that brain of yours start working?”

“Funny.”

“Thank you.”

“Now that you brought it up,” I said, “marriage, that is, do you think you’ll ever settle down and get married?” I saw it as an innocuous question.

Sam didn’t. “Damn it, Chancy. Why’d you have to ask me that?”

“Huh? What?”

“Ever since Rainey said that you were in love with me, I keep thinking about it. It’s the first time since I’ve been around you, I’ve ever felt uncomfortable. Now, whenever you say or do something, I see it in those terms.”

“But nothing’s changed.”

“Yes, it has,” she said. “It puts a whole different light on our situation.”

“How?”

“Knowing that you see me as more than just a friend. It’s creeping me out.”

“Sorry. But, as I said, I know you’re not going to change.”

“Yes, but it’s holding you back. You’re not looking for someone to share your life with.”

I looked away from Sam. It set her off. “See! Right there. I don’t want it to be that way. I don’t want to be the object of your unrequited love. It’s made our relationship...awkward.”

“Sorry,” I said again. “But... What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing.” With that, a different look came over her. I dreaded hearing the words that followed. “When this is over,” Sam said, “I’ll find a place of my own. Hopefully, over time, we’ll both move on. And we can get back to being friends.”

Sam grabbed her coat and walked out the door.

THIRTY-ONE

I didn't sleep a wink that night. I tried everything to take my mind off of what had happened. I read Nelsen DeMille's *Plum Island*. I watched the infomercials on TV. At three-thirty in the morning, I went for a walk. Even pulled a few bottles of brandy from the hotel's honor bar. Every time my eyes grew heavy, my heart grew heavier, and I was up once more.

By noon the next day, Sam still hadn't come back to the hotel. I called her phone. She either had it off or refused to answer. The fourth time, it went directly to voicemail. I begged Sam to call me. I waited two more hours, then went to talk with Detective Andy Jackson of the Minneapolis Police Department.

I explained that I was worried about Sam; that no matter how pissed she was with me, she'd always let me know where she was.

"I'd like to help," Jackson said, "but you're in the wrong department. You need to go to missing persons. And they won't file a report until she's been missing for twenty-four hours."

"I know that. That's why I came to you. I'm hoping you can get your people moving on this. Use your influence."

"Sorry, Mr. Evans, but I really can't help you."

"You can act on a threat. Right?"

"What threat?"

"When we left you before, we talked to Jonathan Cooper. Right after that, two goons of Tommy O'Shea picked us up at gunpoint. Sam beat up one of the goons and took his gun. O'Shea warned Sam that his guy, Patrick...I think that's his name...maybe it's Connor. I don't know, and it doesn't matter. One of those guys, I think, might have grabbed her."

Jackson rocked back and forth in his chair, reflecting on what I'd said. "I guess it won't do any harm to check it out."

He motioned for me to come along. We drove to O'Shea's mini-mansion and were let inside. O'Shea was sitting behind his desk when we walked into his office.

"Detective Jackson," O'Shea said. "To what do I owe this pleasure? Have you found that weasel Bianchi's stash and my money?"

"No," Jackson said. "It seems that the woman who came to your home a few days ago has gone missing. Evans (he thrust a thumb in my direction) says that one of your men had a vendetta against her for..." Jackson turned my way, "How'd you put it? Oh, yeah."

He sneered at O'Shea and said, "She kicked the shit out of one of your goons. You insinuated that he'd find a way to get even."

"I assure you, Detective, that nothing has happened to his girlfriend..."

"She's not my..."

O'Shea broke out laughing. "Yeah. That's right. She's a dyke. Sorry." His apology fell short of being sincere by the length of the Mississippi River.

"But, you said..."

"I said it wasn't smart of her to take his gun away. I also told Patrick that he wasn't allowed to do anything until she had a chance to find my money. Did she find it?"

I shook my head. In barely a whisper, said, "No. She hasn't"

"There you go. I wish I could help you, but I don't know who, if anybody, might have taken Ms. Summers. That's if she's really missing," he said. "Thanks for stopping by." He picked up a spreadsheet he'd been reading when we walked in.

Jackson and I drove back to the station. He told me to stay in touch, gave me one of his cards, and dropped me off in front. Before I got out, I asked Jackson if he could put out an APB on Sam's jeep. He said he would. I gave him the make, the model, the color, and the license plate number. He said if he heard anything he'd call me.

I stood outside the police station, in the sub-zero weather, with no hat, my overcoat unbuttoned, and called Sam once more. No answer. I caught a cab, hoping Sam was back at the hotel. I went to our room. The only thing I found was our luggage.

THIRTY-TWO

I waited until 5:00 p.m. and decided to hit the Lesbian bars in Minneapolis to see if anyone could recognize Sam. I stopped at 19 Bar first. I didn't know what to expect, but it wasn't what I expected. It looked like most any other bar I'd been in. It had a pool table, a dartboard, tables and chairs, and a good-sized bar stocked with cheap to top-shelf booze.

The place had a handful of patrons at that time of day. The bartender, a woman in her late fifties, with close-cropped hair, carrying twenty extra pounds, was talking to two women with their arms around each other. When she saw me, she came over and asked, "What can I get you?"

"Some information."

She looked me over. "Are you a cop?"

I laughed. "Farthest thing from one. I'm looking for a woman."

"We get those in here once in a while. But most of them wouldn't be interested in you."

"Yeah, I know. That's why I'm here."

"You into rejection?"

"Huh? Um, no. This woman is a friend of mine. She never came back to the hotel we're staying at."

She looked at me, quizzically.

"Separate rooms," I said. "We're kind of business partners."

The woman nodded. "What'd she look like?"

I pulled a picture of Sam out of my wallet and handed it to her. "She's six-one, with blond hair," I said. "And she's beautiful."

"No shit, Sherlock," the woman said as she stared wide-eyed at Sam's picture.

"Trust me, that picture doesn't do her justice. Anyway, she went out last night. And when she does, she goes to places like this."

"Like this?" the woman asked as if I'd said her place looked like a dump.

"No, no. I mean, yes. I mean Lesbian bars. Because, you know, she's..."

"A lesbian. I get it." She studied the photo some more, "Last night, you say?" She shook her head, "Sorry, her, I'd have remembered." She handed the picture back. "Good luck."

I'd enticed the cabbie to wait for me by tearing a hundred dollar bill in half, telling him he could have the other half if he waited. He waited.

I went to Lush. The only things that stood out about the place were the posters: one of a drag show every Friday, another advertising the appearance of male strippers that coming Saturday, and a third, of two women locked in an erotic embrace and kissing. A burly guy sat on a stool behind the bar and greeted me when I came in.

“You’re new here,” he said. “The regular crowd doesn’t really show until seven or so. What can I get you?”

He saw me examining the posters. “You sure you’re in the right spot?”

“Sorry. I thought this is a lesbian bar.”

The guy had flecks of gray in his hair and goatee, despite being in his early thirties. His biceps strained his short-sleeved shirt, and his pecs pressed so hard against the material that you could see his nipples. He tittered. “You don’t look like a lesbian.” He grew serious, “You’re not one of those creeps who gets off watching women kissing and pawing one another, are you?”

How do I answer that? In the privacy of my bedroom? Watching porn on my computer? So I told him the truth. Kind of. “No, of course not. I’m asking people if they’ve seen my friend. She went out last night and didn’t come back. I’m just worried. Hoping she’s alright.” Before the guy could say anything else, I showed him Sam’s picture. He looked at it as if I’d handed him a picture of a dead fish.

He shook his head, “Nope. She would have caused a commotion. The women would’ve been standing in line just to get close.”

I thanked him and moved on to the Kitty Cat Klub. As soon as I walked in, I knew it had to be the place. There were couches, avant-garde paintings, wall hangings, a massive replica of a church facade, and a bandstand with a dance floor.

About a dozen customers were in the place, mostly female. I stood by the bar and waited until I got the bartender’s attention. I motioned to her. She stood five-ten, at least. She had strawberry blond hair that fell over her shoulders and emerald green eyes. Her long, straight nose added to her allure. When she reached me, she gave a single upward head nod.

I returned it. “Hi,” I said. “I’m hoping you can help me.”

“How?” her tone leaned toward curt.

“I’m looking for my friend. We’re here on a business trip. She went out last night, and she still hasn’t come back to the hotel. I think she might have come here.”

I handed her the picture of Sam. Her eyes lit up. “Yeah. We were hitting it off. I thought maybe we might go back to my place together after my shift, but...”

“But what?”

“I got busy serving drinks. The next thing I knew, she’s talking to this other woman I’d never seen before. Pretty soon, a second woman came up, and the three of them started leaning on one another. Then they headed out the door. She didn’t say anything. Oh, well.” She got a faraway look in her eye. I know the feeling.

“Leaning on one another in what way?”

“She was kind of propped up against the second woman, her arm draped around the shoulders of the first. Like that.”

“Do you have security cameras?”

“Sure. Why?”

“Can I see them? See who my friend went home with. It might help me locate her. See if she’s okay.”

The woman hesitated, but when she saw the concern on my face, she relented. “Hey, Cheryl,” she called out to a woman at the other end of the bar. “Take over for a few minutes. I’ll be right back.”

She showed me into the office and pulled up the security footage from the night before. She fast-forwarded until we saw Sam come into the bar. She and Elaina – the bartender – *were* hitting it off. Sam had that look I’d seen a hundred times – she was in lust. As the bar filled up, a woman approached the empty space next to Sam. It appeared as if she asked if the seat next to Sam was taken because Sam shook her head and casually pointed at the stool. The woman looked familiar, but I couldn’t place from where. When Sam turned to talk to Elaina, the woman reached across the bar for a napkin and subtly poured a small vial of liquid into Sam’s glass.

“Oh, my, God,” Elaina said. “Did she just spike Sam’s drink?”

“I think she did.”

Fifteen minutes later, Sam appeared to get tipsy. A second woman walked up to Sam and said something to her. A startled Sam pulled away from her and leaned toward the first. Sam tried to stand but struggled to move when the second woman placed her hand on Sam’s shoulder, holding her in place. A few minutes later, Sam wobbled; the second woman caught her. The first draped Sam’s arm over her shoulders. They lifted Sam to her feet and moved her toward the door. I noticed that the second woman didn’t so much walk as drag her left leg.

THIRTY-THREE

As I stepped out of the Kitty Cat, I called Jackson and told him I believed Jonathan Cooper had kidnapped Sam. He asked me what proof I had. When I told him it was a grainy videotape of Sam being taken out of the bar by a woman who walked like Cooper, Jackson said, on those grounds, he could never get a court order to search his place or the church.

“Fuck you, Andrew Jackson,” I shouted into the phone. “I hope they take your fucking face off the goddamn twenty.”

I disconnected and called Adrianna. I started to tell her that Sam had gone missing, but the panic and fear in my voice caused me to sound even more unintelligible than usual.

“Chancy. Chancy. Slow down. I can’t understand a word you’re saying.”

“Right. Right. Sorry. I think Sam’s in trouble,” I said more slowly. “Can you find an address for a Jonathan Cooper in the Twin-Cities area? He might be listed as Reverend Cooper.”

Adrianna said she’d call me right back; I told her I’d hold.

It took three minutes. She came up with two addresses: one on Silver Lake Road off of 76th Street; the other, on Larch Street Northwest, which was nearer his church. The one on Silver Lake was on the way, so I went there first.

I had the cabbie wait again, ran to the door, and rang the bell. I heard a young girl’s voice. She sounded as if she might be in high school. “Who is it?” she asked.

I spoke through the door. “My name is Aaron Chancellor Evans. I’m looking for Reverend Jonathan Cooper.

“He’s not here,” a second, more mature female voice said.

“Do you know where I can find him?” I said. “It’s kind of an emergency.”

“Sorry,” the younger voice said, “he hasn’t lived here for fourteen years,”

“Is your mother home?” I asked.

“Uh-uh. She’s out,” the younger one said. I heard the older girl shush her.

“Do you know where?”

“She didn’t say.”

“When will she be back?”

“She didn’t say.”

“Okay. If she comes home, please have her call me. It’s a matter of life or death.”

I gave them my number and had them repeat it back to me.

I could hear a heated discussion between the two.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

More arguing. It got louder. I heard the younger girl say she was concerned about their mother. The older girl said she was probably at Blaine’s house.

“Have her call me. Please,” I said again and started to leave.

The door swung open enough for me to see the younger girl’s face. I guessed her age as sixteen. She’d left the chain in place. “Mister,” she said, “I think my mom is missing too. She’s usually home by now.”

The older girl, who looked as if she might be a senior in high school, came into view, peering over her sister’s shoulder. “Can you show me some ID?” she asked.

I pulled out my Wisconsin driver’s license.

“You look familiar,” she said. “Have we met before?”

“No, I’m sure we haven’t.”

She snapped her fingers. “I’ve seen you on TV. Playing poker.”

I was stunned that anyone watched those programs, let alone a high school girl. When she saw the look of disbelief on my face, she said. “My boyfriend’s into it. Wants to be a professional gambler when we graduate. Wins a lot of tournaments around here.”

She opened the door and motioned for me to come in.

“Is your girlfriend missing?” she asked me.

“She’s my business partner.”

“You have a business partner?”

In a hurry to move on, I said, “It’s a long story. I’ve got to go. She’s been missing for a day.”

“So’s our mom,” the younger one said. “She never stays away this long.”

“When did you last see her?”

“Late yesterday afternoon,” the older girl said. “She had some errands to run. Which usually means, she goes over to Blaine’s house.”

“Is that her boyfriend?”

“It’s her girlfriend. My mom’s gay.”

I thought back to the books on Cooper’s shelves and wondered if that’s where his distaste for homosexuals originated. I glanced at a picture on the shelf of a woman with the two girls sitting before me. She could pass for Sam’s sister.

“My mom left my dad when I was five, and my sister, Sophie, was three.”

Her voice quavered, and she wrapped her arms around her body and squeezed. She made a face as if she’d swallowed bitter medicine.

“What?” I asked. “Did your dad molest you?”

The older one said, "My dad's not allowed to see us anymore."

"Why?"

The girls shifted uncomfortably, sharing looks that said, 'you tell him.' Finally, Sophie said, "Go on, Cecilia, you're older."

Cecilia took a second to screw up her courage, then said, "My dad was afraid we might grow up to be lesbians, too. He said it was his right and duty as a father to perform *jus primae noctis*. It means 'right of the first night.' "

"Oh, my God! I'm so sorry," I said as my eyes welled. "I take it, your mom found out and had a restraining order placed against your father. How long ago?"

They looked at each other, and Sophie said, "About two years. Mom said he got crazy mad when they were in court. Vowed he'd find a way to get us back. Said it sounded as if he was threatening to kill her. We haven't seen or heard from him since."

THIRTY-FOUR

Coon Rapids, MN

I asked them if their father lived in the house on Larch Street. Before I'd finished, Cecilia was shaking her head. "He lost the house. Foreclosed on. At least that's what mom said. Mom thinks he lives at the church, but she's not sure."

"Thank you, ladies. You've been a great help. I hope your mom is fine. I've gotta go."

I rushed out the door, jumped into the cab, and the cabbie drove me to the church. I gave him a second hundred unripped bill and asked him to wait one more time.

The church was dark. I saw no lights on at the street level or in the upper area, where I assumed Cooper now lived. As I approached the double doors, my phone rang. The caller ID showed a Minneapolis area code.

I turned away from the church and stepped back toward the street. "Yes?" I said in a near whisper.

"Mr. Evans?" I heard Detective Jackson ask.

"Yes?"

"We found Ms. Summers Jeep parked around the corner from the Kitty Cat Klub," Jackson said. "It had a ticket on it from early this morning, time-stamped at two thirty-three."

"I already told you she was there."

"Yes, but now I believe you may be right. Where are you now?"

"I'm standing outside Cooper's church. It doesn't seem like anyone is here."

"Be careful," Jackson said. "Take a walk around the church. Tell me if you see or hear anything."

"Okay."

I moved counter-clockwise around the church. All the basement windows were blacked out. About two-thirds of the way toward the back, I heard a muffled sound as if someone gagged had cried out in great pain.

"I just heard something," I said. "I think someone's being tortured. I'm going in."

As I disconnected, I heard Jackson say, "No. Wait. I'll call the..."

I ran back to the front doors and found a sizable rock in the flowerbed that flanked the walkway. I hurled it with everything I had at the glass door, shattering it. I used my

coat sleeve to break away the rest of the glass, leaving an opening large enough for me to walk through.

I stepped inside, pulled out my phone, and turned on the flashlight app. I swept the foyer but didn't see anything. I carefully made my way through the church, past Cooper's office, and headed for the stairs in the back.

I heard another muffled cry and raced forward. As I turned the corner, Margaret, Cooper's secretary, lunged at me, a stun gun in one hand, a butcher knife in the other. She jabbed the stun gun at my chest and pulled the trigger. I felt a surge of electricity, but fortunately, she managed only to shock my wallet. I did see stars, but I didn't go down, and I wasn't incapacitated. I ripped the stun gun from her hand.

Margaret lifted the knife high over her head and prepared to plunge it into my chest. I caught her forearm on the downswing and pressed the stun gun into her side. I hit the trigger. She shook like a bowl of Jell-O and fell to the floor.

I picked up the butcher knife and headed downstairs. Thinking back to all the TV shows and movies where people rush into danger only to be trapped, I proceeded with caution. I peeked around the corner and pulled back. Every few steps, I glanced through the slots of the stairs to make sure no one waited beneath them to reach through and grab me by my ankles. When I got to the bottom, I froze. The room was empty. *He's probably got her upstairs in his room.*

As I turned to climb the stairs, I heard a muffled groan. It came from my right. I turned my head and saw nothing but wood paneling. I approached it and placed my ear against the wood. Nothing. No sound of any kind. I stepped back and looked for a seam. It took me a few seconds, but then I saw it. I pushed on the wall, but it stayed firmly in place. I wedged my fingers into the tiny crack and pulled. It didn't budge. There had to be a lever or a button of some sort that released a latch. I ran my hands over the wall, hoping to feel a raised knot or bump.

Then I saw it. On an adjoining wall, a board attached to the wall had five coat hooks. I pulled on the first. Nothing. I yanked on the last and heard a click. A section of the paneling, two feet in width, swung forward.

I stepped around the opening and saw Sam tied up; her arms and legs bound to a wooden X; her clothes, ripped and torn. Her mouth was gagged, and her head drooped to her chest. A second woman, lying on the floor, didn't appear to be breathing. It looked like Sophie and Cecilia's mom. I ran to Sam and began to cut the ropes.

She raised her head and shook it. *She can't still be pissed.* Then I realized she was motioning to something behind me.

Leading with my forearm, I spun. Cooper had crept up behind me, reaching forward with another stun gun. My momentum knocked it from his hand but carried me into a position where my back was slightly turned toward him. He slid behind me, grabbed me around my neck, and attempted to choke me out. My first thought; stab him with the butcher knife. My second thought; I remember hearing it clatter to the floor when Cooper wrapped his arm around my throat.

I'd been in that position before. Sam had shown me what to do if attacked from behind. I thrust my hips forward, pivoted slightly to my right and swung my hand back, and caught him right in the groin. Hard. I mean, like I've-never-hit-anybody-that-hard-before-in-my-life hard. He was going to be speaking falsetto for a year.

Cooper gasped and let up on my neck. I stiffened my fingers on my left hand and thrust it over my shoulder with as much force as I could, aiming for his eyes. I felt the soft tissue give as my fingers found their mark.

He cried out in pain and dropped to his knees. I spun and kned him under the chin, snapping his head back. He was out. I kicked him a second time, just because I could.

I cut through the rest of Sam's restraints and put my coat around her shoulders. She hugged me in a way she'd never hugged me before, reminiscent of a frightened child clinging to a parent for solace. She cried uncontrollably into my shoulder. I rubbed her back and made soothing noises.

Sam pulled slightly away and looked at the woman lying on the cement floor. She rushed over and checked her pulse. When Sam looked at me and nodded, I took it to mean the woman would be okay.

I heard sirens, followed a moment later by the Coon Rapids police crashing through the upstairs doors. Their footsteps echoed through the church. One set stopped, and I heard an officer say, "She'll be alright. It looks like she's been stunned."

Three police officers came down the stairs, sweeping their guns from side to side. When the first cop stepped through the entry to the secret room and saw Sam cradling the woman's body and Cooper out cold, he yelled, "Show me your hands."

Mine flew up in the air so fast, my fingers tingled.

"Call a bus," Sam said. "We need to get this woman to the ER as soon as possible." Sam's order carried such force and authority that the police officer lowered his gun and spoke into his shoulder mic. He told the person on the other end to send an ambulance.

The second officer took the woman from Sam and checked her vitals. The third checked on Cooper. He glanced at the first officer, then me, and asked, "What happened?"

“This guy, Jonathan Cooper, kidnapped my partner,” I gestured toward Sam. “I’m assuming that woman as well. I think she’s his ex-wife. Anyway, he had Sam, that’s my partner, tied up to that wooden X over there.”

I paused, and he motioned with his hand to tell him more. I explained, as best I could, the series of events that had led me to the church, after searching for Sam most of the day. I told him I broke in, confronted Margaret, came down here, found the secret room, and had started to release Sam when Cooper attacked me from behind.

The guy checking out Cooper asked, “What’d you hit him with?”

I explained how I got free and how I’d punched Cooper in the nuts, poked him in the eyes, and then kneed him under his chin. I left out the extra kick to his head.

The first officer approached Sam and asked if she was okay. She nodded.

“Did he sexually assault you?” he asked.

I stiffened and waited anxiously for Sam’s reply.

She steeled herself and then nodded once more. “Him *and* that bitch, Margaret.”

Sam moved so fast, it surprised everyone. She stomped on Cooper’s groin with the heel of her barefoot. Despite being unconscious, he groaned. The officer standing next to Sam grabbed her and pulled her away.

They found some men’s sweats for Sam upstairs in Cooper’s living quarters and took me to police headquarters to get my official statement.

THIRTY-FIVE

They took Sam and Janine Cooper Jennings to the hospital. They admitted Janine to the ICU with internal bleeding and a fractured jaw. Sam had contusions and cuts to her body, legs, and arms. She was treated and released. The police brought her to the station where I was being questioned and put her in a separate room.

“What can you tell us about what happened?” a Detective by the name of Cervelli asked me.

I explained how Sam’s father had been murdered in Shawano, and that Sam was determined to find the person or persons who did it. I told him how Tony had been given an overdose of Viagra, tortured, and died of a heart attack, and how the ME had found burn marks on the body consistent with being shocked by two different stun guns.

Twenty minutes into being questioned, Detective Jackson showed up and confirmed my story about seeing Sam being drugged by Margaret Champion, and how Cooper (dressed as a woman) along with Champion, abducted Sam from the Kitty Cat Klub.

Four hours later, Sam and I were released from custody.

Jackson gave us a ride into the Cities. The police had retrieved Sam’s Jeep and brought it to the Minneapolis police station. Jackson and I talked about what had happened, while Sam sat in the back and stared out her window.

I thanked Jackson for his help and apologized for cursing at him.

He laughed. “I’ve been called and told much worse. I’m just glad things worked out in the end.”

“What happens now?” I asked.

“We’ll look further into Cooper and Champion. See if there are any other women they may have tortured, possibly killed. We’ll work with the Shawano Police as well and to see if Cooper and Champion look good for Tony Bianchi...”

“D’Aquisto,” I said.

“For D’Aquisto’s murder.”

Another thought hit me. “How did they know where Sam would be?”

“We found a tracking device on Summers’ Jeep. I’m assuming it was placed there the first time you went to talk with Cooper.”

I thought back to that meeting and realized when Cooper told Margaret to “take care of that matter we talked about earlier,” he was instructing her to plant the bug.

I thanked him for all of his help, and we shook hands. Sam stood next to me in a catatonic state, her head down, her eyes unfocused, and her arms wrapped tight around her body.

We got into the Jeep and headed for Shawano. Sam remained silent, staring out the side window.

As we crossed the St Croix River into Wisconsin, I said, “We need to stop and get gas. Do you want something to eat?”

She continued to stare at the scenery and gave a slight, almost imperceptible shake of her head.

I pulled into a Kwik Trip and fueled the car. Sam still hadn’t moved. I looked at her through the side window. Her eyes remained unfocused, and she had retreated into the safety of her head. I parked the car in a slot outside the store, asked Sam if she needed to go to the bathroom – another subtle shake. I told her I’d be right back. I bought four extra-large coffees and a box of pastries, including cinnamon rolls and fritters, then crawled back into the driver’s seat.

I handed her a cup of Salted Caramel Mocha. “This’ll make you feel better.”

Sam tore herself away from the window long enough to take the coffee from me. Instead of saying thanks, she offered a crisp nod, but never took a sip and held the cup with both hands, lost in thought.

We rode in silence for the next hour. Sam eventually laid her head against the seat back and closed her eyes. I thought she’d fallen asleep, but then she reached over and gently took hold of my hand. I thought I heard her say, “Thanks,” but it was so soft and quiet, I couldn’t be sure.

As we entered Shawano, I asked if she wanted to go to the hotel or to Rainey’s. She shook her head. “Henry’s,” is all she said.

“Henry Biever?” I asked, confused.

She nodded once more and handed me her phone. I pulled over to the side of the road and looked for Henry’s number among Sam’s contacts. I called his cell, and he gave me directions to his house. He was home by the time Sam and I arrived. He said he’d canceled the rest of his day’s appointments so he could be with Sam.

He helped me get her out of the car and into his house. She turned to me. “I’d like to talk to Henry alone,” she said. “Do you mind?”

“Sure. No problem.” I pivoted to leave, but Sam grabbed me and hugged me. She cried softly on my shoulder as we clung to one another. After a couple of minutes, she let me go.

I kissed her on the forehead and left.

I didn't know what to do or where to go. I drove around town and ended up at the Shawano police station. Despite Cooper and Champion looking good for killing Tony, Sam's dad was still in custody. I asked Darryl if I could talk to Stan Summers for a few minutes, and he agreed. I carried a chair from the office into the jail area and, for the next four hours, explained to Stan what'd happened over the past week.

When I told him about Sam and Cooper, he lost it. "I'll kill that goddamn, fucking bastard," he yelled.

His outburst brought Darryl rushing into the jail. "What's going on?" he insisted.

I gave him the Reader's Digest version of the Coon Rapids attack on Sam. Darryl appeared as if he might let Stan out of jail and ride along so they could send Cooper to the Eighth Circle of Hell.

In a low, menacing voice, Darryl said, "Don't worry, Stan. We'll get that son of a bitch."

I realized that two officers of the law had just threatened to kill someone. I tried to think of what to say or do. I was literally saved by the bell. My phone rang. Henry called to tell me that Sam wanted me to come and get her. I drove recklessly back to Henry's place and rushed up to his door. He opened it before I could knock.

"How's she doing?" I asked.

"Better," Henry said. The way he said it, I knew it wasn't much better.

Sam came into the living room from the back of the house and hugged Henry. "Thanks," she said to him.

She headed for the front door and climbed into the passenger seat.

I started the Jeep and asked, "Where to?"

"Home."

"As in Rainey's place?"

"Uh-uh. Ours."

THIRTY-SIX

Halfway to Milwaukee, in a distant, monotone, Sam said, “They didn’t rape me.”

When we passed the exit for Holy Hill, Sam spoke again, “He said, ‘that’s what bad girls deserve for breaking God’s law.’ ”

I wasn’t sure how to respond. Or even if she wanted me to. She spared me further debate. “They tortured me. They whipped us and used their stun gun on us.” Sam stopped speaking. She wrapped her arms around her, shielding her chest.

Tears rolled down her face. Her voice filled with anger and disgust. “I trained myself, so I’d never have to experience that again, yet...”

Sam’s family had moved to Shawano, the middle of her freshman year of high school. Four junior-year bullies didn’t appreciate losing the on-going-put-down battles to a scrawny fifteen-year-old girl. When they couldn’t win that war, they resorted to beating her up. She came away with two black eyes, a missing tooth, contusions to her arms, legs, stomach, and back, and three broken ribs.

When asked who was responsible for beating her, she claimed she’d been jumped from behind and couldn’t identify her attackers. Determined to learn how to take care of herself, Sam became proficient in three forms of martial arts: Jujitsu, Karate, and Jeet Kun Do.

On the night of the day she graduated from high school, after another heated argument with her mother about nothing, in particular, Sam went for a walk to cool off. Walking in downtown Shawano, she ran into the leader of the group that had attacked her. He didn’t recognize her until she said, “Hello, asshole. Long-time no see.”

He smirked. “Hey, hey. It’s that dyke ball-buster. Still haven’t learned your lesson.” “Maybe you would like to try to teach it to me again?” Sam scanned the area. “On the other hand, maybe not. None of your buddies are here to help.”

The guy took a quick look around.

Sam stepped back into the shadows between two stores and gave him a bring-it-on motion.

Certain no one was watching, he charged.

Their encounter ended with him having a broken nose that needed plastic surgery; a dislocated shoulder that required an inserted pin to keep it from popping out; a smashed

elbow that he would never fully straighten; and a knee that hurt like hell whenever the barometric pressure dropped.

When word spread, the humiliated ex-bully left town. He hadn't been seen in Shawano since. Now twenty-two years later...

When we reached the I-94 interchange, Sam said, "Cooper sat back and watched that fucking bitch."

She didn't say another word the rest of the way to my Third Ward condo. I parked Sam's Jeep in the underground garage, and we headed for the elevator. She looked at me through hooded eyes. The elevator and I had a hate-hate relationship. It worked for everyone else in the building but broke down half the time I used it.

"That's okay," I said, "I need the exercise."

I ran up the five flights and saw Sam stepping into our loft. The door closed before I could reach it, and I had to use my key. I heard Sam's bedroom door close, and the water to her shower turned on. She stayed in there until all the hot water had been used. She came out in a robe, grabbed a wine glass and a bottle of Chardonnay. She went back into her bedroom, closing the door. The little I could see of her looked raw. As if she'd scrubbed her skin until it almost peeled off.

I didn't see or hear from her for three days.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Shawano – Lizbet Carson

On the third day, I got a call from Adrianna. “Is she serious?” she asked me.

“About what?”

“Is she really going to close the office?”

“This is the first I’ve heard about it,” I said. “She hasn’t come out of her room since we got back.”

“She told me she was going to keep it open until the end of the month, then move on.”

“She’s feeling vulnerable. Don’t go looking for another job just yet. I promise to pay your salary for the next few months. Just hang in there, please.”

“Sure. No problem.”

At the risk of being shot, I knocked on Sam’s door. It swung open. She was dressed in a way that suggested little had happened, wearing jeans, a black sweater, and a royal blue blouse buttoned to her neck. Her face, though, gave a lie to the façade. It looked tired, washed-out, and thinner.

“Let’s go,” she said,

“Where?”

“Back to Shawano.”

“Ah... Sure... O...K.” Sam walked out the door. I mumbled, “Why are we headed back to Shawano?”

My suitcase was still in Sam’s Jeep. I grabbed my Canadian Goose coat and headed for the elevator. I started to step in, but Sam held her hand up in a stop-right-there move, and I headed for the stairs.

When I got down to the garage, Sam was sitting in the passenger seat of my car. I grabbed our luggage out of the Jeep, threw it in the trunk of my Tesla, started the car with my phone, and jumped in.

I was certain I’d taken way too long for Sam’s inner-clock, but she didn’t say a word. We stopped for coffee and pastries along the way. And, although Sam wasn’t very talkative, she was much more alert and not so nearly withdrawn.

We’d received a light dusting of snow, and the countryside looked like a Christmas card.

“This is nice,” Sam said.

“Yeah. The snow makes everything look so fresh and clean.”

“Yes, that too. But I meant being together. Going someplace.” She reached over and gave my hand a squeeze. “Thanks,” she added.

“You’re welcome.” I didn’t know exactly what she was thanking me for, and I wasn’t about to ask.

At the risk of breaking her reverie, I asked, “Why are we headed back?”

“I got a call from Detective Jackson early this morning. Cooper and that bitch have rock solid alibis for the day my... The day Tony was killed. They didn’t find any money either. The police discovered that what they’d done to Janine Jennings and me was part of the church’s conversion therapy. Just not to the extent they did it to us. Jackson said they’d be going away for a long time. Which is too bad.”

“Too bad?” I said.

“Yeah. They should be strung up and tortured like we were. Until they die.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I reverted to our earlier topic, “So, they didn’t do it,” then added before Sam could make one of her snide comments, “Rhetorical.”

Sam’s lip curled a teeny, tiny little bit. It wasn’t much, but it was a start.

“My dad’s still in jail,” she said. “They’ve set the preliminary hearing for Monday.”

“Where to first?” I asked.

“Lizbet Carson.”

“Who?”

“Lizbet Carson. The woman, my mom says she was with, when she left the cabin that day.”

“Checking on your mom’s alibi?”

“That’s why I wanted you to come along,” Sam said. “By now, my mom will have talked to her. Plenty of time to set up a cover story. I’m counting on you to see if she’s telling the truth.”

“Ah... Okay.”

“Plus, I do like being with you.” She added, “Even if you’ve got a crush on me.”

I glanced her way in time to see her smile.

She turned and looked out the window, before saying, “I kind of have a crush on you, too.” She quickly added, “But don’t get any ideas. I meant that strictly as Besibends.” I felt a warmth spread through my body. It crept up my face. Seeing it, Sam laughed for the first time in days.

We arrived in Shawano just before noon and drove straight to Lizbet Carson's house. Sam knocked on the door, and thirty seconds later, a woman in her early sixties opened it.

"Why Samantha Summers," Lizbet Carson said. "I haven't seen you since you left for college. How long has it been?"

"Nineteen years, almost twenty."

"You're as beautiful as ever. Come in. Come in."

She stepped back and let us pass. She ushered us into her front room and motioned toward the couch.

"Who is this handsome young man?"

"This is my associate and housemate, Chancy Evans."

"So you're the man Rainey keeps talking about. How long have you two been together?"

I started to correct her, but Sam said, "About six years now. Although we've known one another since our sophomore year at Wisconsin."

"Are you still a professional gambler?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"Please call me, Liz. Ma'am sounds so old."

"Sure. Liz."

"Is there much money in that sort of thing?"

"I make out alright. Enough to pay the rent and buy groceries." I hesitated to tell her that over the last five years, I'd cleared over nineteen million dollars.

"It sounds exciting." Although she didn't sound too excited. To Sam, Liz said, "It's so terrible about your dad. How's he doing?"

"We're on our way to see him when we're done here. We were hoping you could tell us what you know."

"Know?" she said. "I'm afraid I don't know much."

"My mother said she came over to your place that afternoon. The day D'Aquisto died."

"Yes?"

"Do you remember what time?"

"Let me think. I was watching Ellen, so, mid-afternoon. She'd so much to drink that she fell asleep on the couch. I checked on her once during the night, about 2:30. When I woke up again, around 6:30, she was gone. Why?"

"Just trying to put the timeline together, that's all."

Sam glanced my way for confirmation.

I nodded.

“Mrs. Carson, did you see any strangers about town that day?”

Liz sat back a little in her chair and wrapped her knitted fingers around her knee. After a few seconds, she said, “Now that you mentioned it, I did see a couple of women I’d never seen before.”

“Can you describe them?”

“One was about my height. The other about five-eight. Early forties. Although these days it’s so hard to tell.”

“Clothes? Hair?”

“They both had on winter coats and stocking caps. One had blond hair, the other was a brunet. They were going into the liquor store.”

Sam stood up, thanked Liz, and headed out.

THIRTY-EIGHT

“That’s a relief,” Sam said as we drove away.

”Huh?”

“Knowing Rainey didn’t do it.”

I kept my hands on the wheel. I turned briefly to look at Sam.

“What?” Sam asked. “I might not like her very much, but she’s still my mother.”

“Where to?”

“The jail. I want to tell my dad that Rainey didn’t do it. That she has a credible alibi.”

Once inside the police station, Sam asked Darryl if she could see her father.

“I’ll ask,” he said and went into the cell area.

“Of course,” we heard her dad say with derision. “Why wouldn’t I?”

Sam went back to see him while I remained in the outer office.

It took so long I nodded off. Sam woke me with a shake and a smile. “He said he’s going to consider rescinding his guilty plea. Let’s go to DQ.”

As we pulled into the parking lot, Sam grew excited. “Good. He’s here.”

We found Henry Biever eating another Blizzard. Sam asked me to order her regular: a salted caramel blizzard, and she went and sat with Henry. I joined them four minutes later. They were busting a gut. It was good to see Sam back to her old self. Not entirely, mind you, but she was on her way.

I reached out and shook Henry’s hand, “It’s good to see you again, Doc.”

“Likewise,” he said.

Sam looked up at me. “Henry just told me that one of his patients told him that coming to him was exactly like having sex. She lies there, has a foreign object inserted in her, and doesn’t have an orgasm.”

Henry chuckled once more.

“A psychiatrist conducted a group therapy session,” I said, “with three young mothers and their small children. ‘You all have obsessions,’ he said. To the first mother: ‘You’re obsessed with sweets; you named your first child, Candy.’ To the second mother: ‘You’re obsessed with alcohol; you named your daughter, Brandi.’ The third mother jumped to her feet, grabbed her little boy by the hand and whispered, ‘Come on, Dick, it’s time to go.’”

Henry said to me, "Sam tells me that she's convinced neither her dad or Rainey killed that Tony fellow."

"Yeah, Sam just has to figure out who."

"I will," she said, brimming with confidence.

"Where are you headed next?" Henry asked.

"Chancy and I are taking a run up to Fish Creek tomorrow."

"We are?"

Henry laughed.

Sam said, "We're looking for a guy named Mathew Underhill."

"Really? I've met the guy. He runs a gift shop up there. Life's a Beach. I thought his stuff was overpriced, but as long as the FIBs are willing to pay it, more power to him."

"What stands out about him?" Sam asked. "Did you get the sense he was a shill? Is that why things are overpriced?"

"Nah. I didn't get that impression. I saw it more as supply and demand. *Everything* up there is overpriced."

"He wasn't condescending?" I asked.

"Just the opposite. Very gregarious and charming."

"Interesting," Sam said.

Henry mentioned that he saw Sam's newest picture on Bubba's wall of fame. "I can't believe you can still put one of those away. It would take me three days and nine meals to finish one."

Sam giggled and patted Henry's stomach. He didn't take offense.

He addressed me. "It's a glandular problem." He saw my skeptical expression and added, "I have a hypothyroid and Cushing's syndrome. I've thought of having my stomach stapled, but that wouldn't cure the basic problems. My doctor's tried everything." His eyes crinkled, and said, "That's why I hate doctors," and bust up laughing once more. It was infectious.

He stood. "I have to run. Call me when you get back. I'd love to hear what happens."

"You got it," Sam said. She stood, and they hugged.

We watched Henry waddle out. Sam's face took on a bittersweet expression. "I'm worried about him. He's always been overweight, but lately, he's gotten so big."

"You two seem to have a very close relationship."

"He's the only man I ever slept with."

"What!?"

“Shhh!” Sam took a quick look around the area. Satisfied no one could hear her, she said, “We were teenagers. Outcasts. I knew I liked girls, but I thought, what the heck, you know, just to see what it felt like. And Henry was a virgin. So one thing led to another, and we did it. No big deal.”

I’d known Sam for eighteen years, lived with her for six, and it was the first time I learned that she’d been with a man... Well, a boy, but still.

“Who was your first?” Sam asked. “You’ve never told me.”

“Janice Roberts. Junior Prom.”

“How long did it take to convince her?”

“Two seconds. She was all over me. She practically tore my clothes off. I had to remind her the tux was a rental and to take it easy.”

“How long did you last?”

“The first time or the sixth?” I smiled and gave her a double eyebrow raise.

“Nice recovery.”

“I was a teenager. I was also sore for a week.”

Sam dissolved into laughter, then said, “Let’s get going.”

We lowered ourselves into my Tesla and headed for Fish Creek.

THIRTY-NINE

Fish Creek – MC Underhill

I'd suggested we go back to our hotel first. We'd never checked out – I can't wait to see the bill. Sam said she was eager to get there and talk to Underhill. I took Highway 57 until I hit Highway 42, which brought us into Fish Creek.

Sam gave me directions to Life's a Beach Gift Shop on Main Street. The wind off the bay cut through us. It felt like I'd stepped into a super subzero freezer as I got out of my car. My eyes watered, and my ears stung and, even though I wore gloves, my fingers felt like they were frostbitten. Sam, on the other hand, had her coat open, wore no hat, no scarf, and thin leather gloves. She marched up to the door of the store. Its lights were off. A paper sign hung on the inside of the door read, "Closed."

"Damn," Sam said.

I don't know what she expected. After Labor Day, you could drop a bomb on the peninsula and not kill anybody.

"You want to find a place to sleep?" I asked. "We can come back first thing in the morning."

"Not right now. Let's go there." Sam pointed across the street to a bar called The Barrel Room. The place was lit up like New Year's Eve.

We entered "The Room" and found fifteen people sitting around the vast tavern. Sam made her way to the bar and grabbed a stool. I took the one next to her. She had caught the bartender's eye as she'd stepped through the door. He slid his fingers through his hair and strutted the length of the bar, his smile growing larger the closer he got to Sam. When he noticed me, the smile faded. He sized up his competition and decided I had nothing on him. The smile returned.

"Hi. Welcome to 'The Room.' I'm Jimmy. What can I get such a beautiful lady?"

"A glass of Chardonnay and some information."

"And you, sir?" His tone had changed as if the next words out of his mouth would be to challenge me to an arm-wrestling contest.

"A tap," I said. "Do you have Sam Adams?"

"This is Wisconsin," Jimmy said, "not Boston."

"Sorry, it just looked like you'd be a minute man."

He didn't know how to take my comment. His eyes narrowed. He looked to see how Sam had reacted. Noting her stoic expression, he said, "You got it."

“That was good,” Sam said. “The best part is he didn’t know you’d insulted him. Now don’t piss him off. I want to ask him about Underhill.”

Jimmy came back and placed the wine on a coaster in front of Sam and a bottle of Witch’s Brew in front of me. I picked up the bottle and held it so I could read the label. I started to say it was the first tap beer I’d seen come in a bottle, but Sam placed her hand on my arm and gave me a shut-the-hell-up look.

“So, Jimmy,” Sam said. “You worked here long?”

“About two years.” Leer dripped off of every word.

“Where’s the best place to stay?”

“Besides my place?” He chuckled, then added, “I like the Apple Creek Inn. It’s just up the street. It’s not that expensive either.”

“Great.”

“No problem.”

She reached across the bar and held out her hand. “I’m Samantha. Samantha Summers.”

“Jimmy Walker.”

“Red, Black, or Blue?” I asked.

“That’s original,” he said, the sarcasm hung in the air like a Christmas tree overloaded with ornaments. He said to Sam, “You are the most beautiful woman who’s ever stepped foot in The Room.”

Sam beamed an award-winning smile. Jimmy melted.

“That’s a pretty interesting looking shop across the street,” Sam said. “Life’s a Beach. Do you know the owner?”

“M.C.? Sure. He comes in here once in a while.” Jimmy leaned against the bar, propping himself up on his right forearm.

“What’s he like? I mean, I ran into a guy that used to know him in Minnesota. Suggested we look him up. Somebody else told us he could be surly. We own a business that makes souvenirs. I want to be sure we’re not wasting our time.”

As if he’d anticipated Sam’s question, he answered as soon as she stopped speaking. “M.C.’s a good dude. Very chill. Everybody around here likes him.”

Sam tried to hide her surprise. Jimmy didn’t catch it. I did. She couldn’t believe he was talking about the same guy who’d threatened to kill Tony for conning him out of \$500,000.

“Thanks. So, Apple Creek, you say.”

“Yeah. I get off at one.”

Sam cringed. Jimmy was oblivious. At that moment, someone called for him at the other end of the bar. He gave Sam one more leer and a wink then went to help the customer.

“Let’s go,” Sam said.

I threw a twenty on the bar. Sam picked it up and said, “Something smaller.”
We checked into the Homestead Suites.

FORTY

We grabbed breakfast at the Blue Horse Beach Café. Sam grew introspective and silent once more. I guess her night alone had given her too much time to recall what'd happened to her in Coon Rapids. My presumption proved correct. Sam took one bite of her sandwich and pushed it away. She took a sip of her coffee and did the same.

I devoured my breakfast as if stoking up for a marathon and ordered a second cup of coffee.

When our waitress, Natalie, saw Sam's uneaten food and her still full cup, she asked, "Is everything okay? I can get you something else if you don't like it."

"No, thanks," Sam said. "I'm just not hungry,"

Natalie hesitated and glanced at me. I gave her a final shake of my head. She started to walk away, but Sam stopped her. "Do you know M.C. Underhill?"

Natalie beamed, placed a hand on her hip and rested all of her weight on one leg. "Yeah. Such a sweet guy. Comes in here quite often. His wife on occasion, too. Nice couple. They seem so happy. Well, at least he does. She has her moments."

"How so?" I asked.

"I've heard her say she misses her old life. I get the impression she's used to the finer things. They do okay over there," Natalie nodded out the window as if their shop was across the street and not down the block. "Now that I think about it, though, I haven't seen her since around Labor Day. I wonder."

"Wonder what?"

"M.C. seems happier since then. Who's to say? Anyway, he's a nice guy."

"How's his business doing?" I asked.

"Great. Well, at least during the summer months like the rest of the businesses here. Slows down quite a bit after that. We get a few people who come up here in fall, but it's nothing like the summer. Most of the businesses make about 75% of their profits from June through the first part of September."

Natalie hesitated, then said, "You sure I can't get you something else? We have great pastries. Our cinnamon rolls are to die for."

Sam started to shake her head, but I said, "That'd be great. Bring us two, please."

"Sure. You want them heated?"

"Even better," I said.

"I'll be right back." She spun on her heels and bounced away.

“Want to talk about it?” I asked.

At first, I thought Sam didn’t hear me. Her eyes remained unfocused. A tear leaked from her right eye. “I felt so helpless.”

I reached across the table and took hold of her hand. She raised her head and gave me a weak smile.

Natalie came back with two steaming cinnamon rolls the size of deep-dish, personal-pan pizzas. “Anything else?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “I think we’re good for now,”

Sam had looked out the window to hide her tears. When Natalie left, she turned back.

“I saw the video of Margaret putting something in your drink,” I said.

“They tested me at the hospital. They didn’t find anything. They think it must have been GHB.”

“The date rape drug?”

Sam nodded. “There was enough in there that I passed out. The doctors asked me some questions about it and concluded that more than likely, I’d been in a brief coma. The rest comes and goes. I’d come out of it enough that I remember that bitch torturing me. Whipping me. Punching me.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said as I fought back my own tears.

“If that wasn’t enough, they took turns using their stun guns. Mainly my chest.” She paused, then said, “I feel so humiliated.”

“How could you know? It took me a few times watching the video to see what she’d done. She covered it well. When she reached across the bar for a napkin, it blocked your view. She could have been a magician with that sleight of hand. I’m sure it wasn’t the first time she’d done that.”

“I still should have seen it, but...”

“I saw that, too. You were quite infatuated with Elaina. She’s beautiful.”

Sam didn’t react.

I tried to get her mind on something else. I picked off a part of the cinnamon roll and took a bite. “Man, that’s good. Have some.”

I offered a piece to Sam. She stared at it and declined. Something had caught her eye down the street, and she grew excited. Underhill was opening his shop. “Let’s go.”

I wrapped the cinnamon rolls in some napkins, threw a fifty on the table, and caught up to Sam as she stepped up the curb on the opposite side of the street.

Underhill was flipping the store sign to “Open,” as Sam reached the door. He grabbed the handle and opened it wide for us. “Welcome,” he said. “Come in. Come in. Can I get you some coffee,” he asked, thrilled to see someone entering his shop first thing in the morning.

“No, thanks,” Sam said. “We were hoping to talk to you. I’m Samantha Summers, and this is my associate, Chancy Evans.”

A surprised, but curious Underhill asked, “About?”

“What happened in Minneapolis a few years back.”

“Are you FBI agents?” he asked.

“No. I’m a private investigator.”

“Private investigator? For who?”

Sam explained what had happened in Shawano, leaving out the part that her dad had been arrested for Tony’s murder. Underhill listened with rapt attention.

When Sam had finished, Underhill looked at her expectantly. It dawned on him what she’d implied. “No. I didn’t kill him. I didn’t know where he’d gone until you just told me.” He leaned back against a display case and gathered his thoughts. “At first, I was pissed enough that that’s all I could think about. Getting even.”

“Were you mad enough to kill him?”

“Yeah. But I don’t think I could have. Then everything fell apart. We were ostracized. My wife and I. We decided to leave. We heard that Door County was a good place to relax. We never thought we’d stay. We planned on moving east. One of the bigger cities. New York. Philly. Boston. When we arrived here, it was so tranquil. Then I saw this place was for sale. My wife thought it was a terrible idea. She liked the big house, the fancy cars, the expensive wardrobe. But I convinced her to give it a try. She left me in September. Just walked out without a word.” Underhill shrugged as if the doctors had removed a one-hundred-pound tumor.

“I don’t ever remember being so...content,” he said. “I love the interaction with my customers, being so close to the bay, not chasing after the next buck. I love the simple life. This is my Green Acres. What happened in Kansas turned out to be life-saving. Tony Conti did me a favor.”

Sam looked at me to see if he’d told the truth. I nodded.

“Thank you, Mr. Underhill,” Sam said.

“M.C., please. I changed it when I bought the store. My middle name is Charles. So M.C. You ask anyone here if they know Mathew, and you’ll get a blank stare. New name, new life. I couldn’t possibly be happier.”

“Okay, thanks, M.C.,” Sam said. “If I have any other questions, do you mind if I call?”

“Any time. Here’s my business card.” He handed her an embossed card with both the business number and his cell. We started to leave, but he stopped us. He handed Sam a snow globe of the coastline of the bay with the blue water beyond. “My gift to you. Come up in the summer. You’ll love it here. Bring your boyfriend.”

Sam didn’t correct him.

We headed back to Shawano.

FORTY-ONE

As we drove along Highway 42, we noticed substantial police activity as we neared Egg Harbor. A County Coroner van was among the vehicles making their way toward the inlet just south of the city.

A day later, we read that a young boy had gone to Egg Harbor Marina to ice fish and saw a shadowy outline of what appeared to be a large object beneath the ice. When he got home and told his father, they went to examine it. The father, suspecting it may be a body, called the police. Rescue agencies removed the body of a woman in her mid-fifties from the icy water. She was identified as Janice Underhill, the wife of Michael “MC” Underhill of Fish Creek.

A few days later, MC Underhill was arrested for her murder. The authorities theorized that Janice had been rendered unconscious with a stun gun and thrown into the bay. Currents carried her body to the inlet area where she remained until the bay froze over and then found her four months later, badly decomposed.

Michael Underhill claimed he never owned a stun gun. Yet the police discovered one hidden in the storage area of his store, behind boxes of the snow globes similar to the one he’d given Sam. He claimed it wasn’t his and that the real killer must have planted it.

Upon hearing the news, Sam said, “This isn’t good.”

“Huh? How so?” I asked.

She didn’t answer me directly. “Are you sure you read him correctly?”

I thought back to our talk with MC. “Yeah. Well, ninety-nine percent sure. Reading people is hardly an exact science. Why?”

“Because I need to be sure.”

After discovering the stun gun and knowing the connection between Underhill and Sam’s father, the police were looking at Underhill for Tony’s murder, as well.

“If I’m right,” I said, “it kind of gets your father off the hook.” When Sam didn’t acknowledge what I’d said, I added. “C’mon, leave it be, and let’s go back to Milwaukee.”

I knew by Sam’s reaction that she wasn’t, and we weren’t.

“Grab some clothes,” she said. “We might be there for a few days. Something’s fishy, and I need to know for sure.”

I chuckled. “That’s a good one. ‘Something’s fishy.’ Fish Creek. Something’s...”

Sam offered me a hard scowl.

I went and packed.

We drove back to Door County and the Homestead Suites.

FORTY-TWO

As I drove, I said, “I don’t understand. Why are you doing this? If you prove that Underhill didn’t murder his wife, the spotlight goes back on your dad or your...or Rainey.”

“First, I need to find out who actually killed Tony. I just can’t let it go. You of all people should know that by now. Second, I don’t like seeing innocent people go to jail for something they didn’t do.”

I knew she wasn’t finished, so I prompted her with, “And three?”

“And three, I liked the new M.C. Maybe it’s because he was so different from the way I’d pictured him. He seemed genuinely happy with his new life.” She paused to give some more thought to what she’d just said. She glanced in my direction and asked. “What was your take on him?”

“The same as yours, I guess. He didn’t seem bothered by his wife leaving, but I also didn’t see him as hiding some deep dark secret. He was way too calm and relaxed.”

“When we get to Fish Creek, I need you to subtly take pictures of every person I interview while we’re there.”

When I asked her why, she said, “I’m starting an album.”

“Everybody?”

“Everybody, everyone, every person...”

“Okay, okay, I get it.”

We drove to the Door County Sheriff’s Offices in Sturgeon Bay, where Underhill was being held. We asked the desk sergeant if we could talk to whoever was in charge of his case. A man in his early thirties came out to meet us. He was buff and tanning-bed tan, with light brown hair cut military short and arms that strained his shirt.

“Yes,” he said, “how can I help you.”

“I’m Samantha Summers, and this is...”

“Samantha Summers? Really. I’ve heard about you.”

When Sam seemed taken aback, he added, “I followed the Trey Williams case. I’m Officer Jake Hammond.”

Sam gave him a quizzical side-eye.

He chuckled. “There’s not much else to do up here in winter.”

After a moment, Sam said, “I was wondering who is representing Mr. Underhill.”

It was Hammond’s turn to seem confused. “Underhill? Why?”

“We met with him a few days before his arrest. We’re convinced that he’s innocent.”

“Why?”

Sam glanced in my direction before she said, “We talked to him about the Shawano murders. While doing so, he voluntarily said his wife had left him. He was quite upfront, and we believe he was being truthful.”

Hammond shook his head in disbelief. “So, based on talking to him *once*, you think he’s innocent?” He cocked his head sideways and squinted. “Summers? You wouldn’t happen to be related to Stan Summers, the police chief of Shawano?”

“Yes. I’m his daughter.”

“But this could clear him.”

“Yes, but I want ... I need to find out who did kill Tony D’Aquisto. I don’t want any doubt hanging over my dad’s head for the rest of his life. You know how people can talk. He needs his reputation back. I’m going to make sure he’s cleared beyond any reasonable doubt.”

“Okay,” he dragged the word out. “So, how can I help?”

“Does Underhill have a lawyer?”

“Yes. It’s Evan McCloud. He’s a local guy. He doesn’t specialize in criminal law. At least on the level of murder. We don’t have much need for that up here.”

“Can you direct us to his office?”

“Sure. It’s just up the street. Go north about two blocks. It’s on the left-hand side, in an old, dark-gray building. You’ll see his name painted on the storefront window.”

“Thanks, Officer Hammond. I’m sure we’ll be seeing you around.”

“My pleasure,” he said.

As I buckled into the car, Sam asked, “Pictures?”

“Of Officer Hammond? Yeah.” As Sam and he had talked, I pretended to be checking my email on my phone, surreptitiously taking pictures instead.

“How about the desk sergeant?” Sam asked.

“You wanted the desk sergeant, too?”

“What part of everybody, don’t you understand?”

“Um. Oh, shit. Sorry.”

Sam burst out laughing. When she settled down, she said, “You are way too easy.”

“So not everybody?”

“Just those we talk with. Make sure you get some of McCloud.”

“Mc... Will do.”

Sam’s eyes held a mischievous spark.

We found McCloud's office, but there was a sign on the door that said he'd be back after lunch. We went to a diner nearby and sat down in a booth. When the waitress came, Sam asked, "Do you know Evan McCloud?"

"Yeah, sure. He's sitting at the counter." She pointed to a mousey looking man hunched over his food. He wore a beige suit, black horned rimmed glasses, and a comb-over. He looked like he couldn't weigh more than a hundred-twenty pounds with ten-pound weights in each suit coat pocket.

Sam said, "Could you ask him to join us?"

"Please," I added. "Tell him we'll pay for his lunch."

"Ah, sure." The waitress left and talked to McCloud. He glanced over his shoulder and said something to her. She glanced our way and shrugged. He gave us one more look and returned to hovering over his food as if someone might snatch it from him at any second.

The waitress started to come back to our booth. "Go get him," Sam said.

I slid onto the stool next to him and introduced myself. I pointed at Sam and told him who she was.

"What does that have to do with me?" he asked, guarded.

"We think we can help your client. M.C. Underhill."

"Underhill? How? He's guilty."

I shrank away from him. "Did he confess?"

"No. But he did it. The sheriff is pretty certain."

"So your client claims he's innocent, but you don't believe him?"

McCloud shrugged. "I hear that every time. Nobody ever did what they're accused of. They could have five video cameras showing that they just robbed a place and they'd claim they were set up."

"You sound a little jaded," I said.

"You say jaded, I say realist."

Sam took the seat on the other side of McCloud. "You're wrong, you know," she said. "Your client *is* innocent. And we intend to prove it."

"How?" McCloud asked.

"By finding out who did."

"Yeah, good luck with that, lady. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to finish my lunch in peace."

Sam picked up his plate and moved back to our booth and placed it on the table near the window. After a few seconds, he meekly followed Sam back to where she was sitting and slid onto the bench seat. I sat next to him so he couldn't bolt.

“Listen,” Sam said, “I used to be a lawyer. You won’t have to do a thing, except what I tell you. You hire me as your private investigator. I will handle all court briefings and filings, if it even comes to that. You sit back and collect your fee. If he’s guilty, which you’ve already determined in your mind, you lose nothing. But when I prove he’s innocent, you benefit. It’s a win-win for you.”

“What are your fees? And who’s going to pay them?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m doing this pro-bono.”

He looked my way. “What about this guy? Where does he fit in? And how much does he charge?”

“He’s with me. He’s also the reason I can do this for free.”

He looked in my direction. I’m sure living and working in Door County, he’s seen his share of wealthy people. It didn’t take an expert in body language to see that in his mind, I wasn’t one of them. He turned back to Sam and shrugged. “As long as it doesn’t cost me any money…”

“It won’t. Just a little of your time,” Sam said. “And we hear there isn’t much to do up here at this time of year, anyway.”

“Sure. Fine,” McCloud said. “Now, can I get back to eating?”

Sam gave me an upward head nod letting me know she wanted to leave. Before we did, Sam said, “We’ll see you in your office at two o’clock this afternoon.”

That received another shrug from McCloud as he leaned over his plate and went back to eating. Then he remembered. “Hey,” he said, “the waitress told me you were going to pay for this.”

“Chancy, go take care of the bill.”

FORTY-THREE

We met at McCloud's office a little after two. We were on time. He was late. I drove the three of us to the County Sheriff's offices, and Sam expressed our interest in speaking with M.C. Underhill. We were shown into a small room, and ten minutes later, Underhill was led in, chained. Sam and I sat on one side of the table while McCloud sat at one end. They rechained Underhill to the desk and let us have some privacy.

Upon seeing Sam and me, Underhill forced a smile, and asked, "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

McCloud started to speak, but Sam cut him off. "You don't have the brightest lawyer working for you. Chancy (Sam moved her head in my direction) believes that you were telling us the truth when we saw you a few days back. I concur. We're here to help you. But we need to know some facts first."

Underhill, not knowing that Sam had finished speaking and that she was waiting for an answer, didn't say anything at first, and then, "Oh. Great. What do you need to know?"

"When we talked to you last time, you said your wife left you a note and disappeared."

Underhill nodded.

"Do you still have it?"

"I'm not sure. I know I had it for a while. But I don't remember if I threw it out or not."

"Where would it be, if you didn't?"

He gave it some thought. "If it's still there, it would be in my receipt drawer. That's in the back office. On the shelf above my desk." He shrugged, letting us know he still couldn't recall if he had kept it.

"Okay, we'll look. You didn't appear too upset that your wife left. How come?"

He shrugged once more. "We had grown apart. Even in Lawrence, we didn't have much to do with one another. The only reason I think she stayed with me was for the lifestyle. You know, the nice house, her friends from the country club, being a big fish in a small pond."

"And when you moved here?"

"As I said, she wasn't happy. She wanted to go east. Not some small peninsula in Wisconsin in the middle of Lake Michigan. She told me she thought I'd get tired of running

the shop and we'd move on. Recapture our old life. When she realized I was happy, she pulled even farther away. There'd be days, if not weeks, when we wouldn't speak. She was miserable and getting more so each day."

"And you?"

"I told you, I was content. More contented than I'd ever been. We had separate bedrooms. There were nights when she didn't come home. Then one day, I found the note, and she was gone."

"Do you remember what it said, exactly?"

"No. Not really. It just said that she wasn't happy and didn't want to live like this anymore. She said she was going to start a new life. Find someone she could love like she used to love me."

"Find or found?"

Underhill recoiled. "You think she might have been having an affair?"

"Anything is possible. We'll try to find out for sure," Sam said. "Okay, how much would she have gotten from the divorce?"

"A couple of hundred thousand. I sank a good portion of my assets into the store. I would have had to buy her out. So in total, maybe half-a-mil."

"That sounds like grounds," McCloud said.

The three of us looked at him.

"From now on," I said, "pretend you're a child."

"Huh?"

"Be seen but not heard. Let Sam handle this. You play Helen Keller while we're on the case."

McCloud wasn't offended. He sat back in his chair and pulled out his phone.

Underhill stared at him, but McCloud was too engrossed in retrieving his emails to notice.

Sam broke his trance. "Did she ever help you in the store?"

"At first. But then she grew restless. She would take her car and leave. I'm not sure where. To be honest, I didn't care. By that time, it was easier to do everything by myself. We'd grown so far apart that we hardly spoke, which was fine by me."

"The thought of having to give her a half-mil," I asked, "didn't bother you?"

"No. As I said, I was content. I'd been chasing the almighty dollar ever since I'd graduated from college. It didn't buy me happiness. In fact, usually just the opposite. I was obsessed with it. If I lost a few thousand, I worked harder to make it back. My only source

of enjoyment was golf on weekends, and the people I hung around with at the club.” He shook his head. “Fake friends. Who needs them?”

“We uncovered that Jim Wilson hired someone to find you,” Sam said. “Has anyone contacted you? Asked you questions regarding your time in Lawrence? Seemed more interested than they should about your personal life?”

Underhill shook his head to every question asked. “No. None of that. Most people who came into the store were simply interested in getting a souvenir to take back home as a keepsake or to give someone else. I wanted it to be special. So I’d work with them. I’d ask who the gift was for and what they hoped it symbolized. I really got into it. That’s when Janice knew I’d never leave.”

“You don’t seem upset that she was murdered,” I said.

“I am. I’m not a very emotional person. I keep everything wrapped up inside. When they told me, I was shocked. At first, I was sure they must have misidentified the body. It was so badly decomposed that it could have been anyone. But they did the DNA and dental, and it was her. I was numb when they confirmed it. I thought back to when we were young and in love and the good times that we’d shared. You don’t spend twenty-four years of your life with someone and not feel some kind of emotion when something happens to them. But…”

“But,” Sam asked.

“We never had kids, which is something both of us said we wanted. Well, something she wanted. It didn’t matter one way or the other to me. Even then, I knew she’d be raising the child more or less by herself. I think she was still hoping, but at fifty-three… You know. Plus, we’d stopped having sex years ago. Neither of us seemed bothered by that. We’d joke with the other couples about it. We all seemed to be going through the same thing. Chasing the dream.” He paused before adding, “Now, the dream has turned into a nightmare.”

“What happened when you left Lawrence? Did it help? Maybe bring you closer?”

“Uh-uh. She was pissed. Blamed me for ruining her life. I kept hoping she’d get over it. That’s why I suggested we stop here. Maybe recapture our old feelings for one another. But, as I’ve told you, she didn’t want any part of it. I found myself not caring after a while. I was happy. She wasn’t. Finding that note was actually a relief.”

“Where did the stun gun come from?”

Underhill shook his head. “I’ve got no idea. It’s certainly wasn’t there when we took over the store. I don’t think Janice bought one. It’s relatively safe up here. She could have, I suppose, but…”

“Did you ever let anybody into your storage area?”

“A couple of delivery guys, my wife, of course, but I can’t think of anyone else.”

“Someone from in town maybe. Someone you’d gotten to be good friends with?”

Underhill shook his head as he thought about it. “No. No one.”

“Did anyone else have a key to the place?”

“No. Just me and Jan...” Underhill stopped abruptly. “Janice.” He looked at Sam, wondering if she’d come to the same conclusion as he.

“Did she leave it or take it with her?”

One more shake of his head before Underhill said, “I never even thought of checking. It might be there. But I don’t remember seeing it. She used to keep it on her keychain that she kept in her purse.”

“If she did leave it, where would it be?”

“She kept everything in a little dish on her dresser.”

“We’ll look for it,” Sam said. “We’ll see if it turns up in the police report of items they took from your home.” Sam studied Underhill for a few seconds, and then asked, “Is there anything else you can think of that might help us?”

“Like what?”

“People she’d made friends with in town? Places she liked to go? People she talked to on her phone? That type of thing.”

Underhill gave thought to Sam’s questions and said, “She liked to go to the diner down the street. She hung out at the Barrel Room on occasion when we first moved here. But she said she preferred Mr. Helsinki’s Restaurant and Wine Bar. There were two women she made friends with, Peggy Stover and Kim Harrington. I have no idea who she talked to on her phone. It wasn’t in the store or the residence. I would have noticed it. So she probably took it with her.”

“Who’s your carrier? And what’s her phone number?”

“We use Verizon. Her phone number is 785-555-8383.”

“Okay,” Sam said. “We’ll be back. I’m sure I’ll have some more questions. We’re headed to the Sheriff’s offices to get our hands on their preliminary report.”

“Thanks,” he said. “I appreciate you offering to help.”

Sam stood and began to walk out of the room. When McCloud didn’t move, Sam said, “Hey, we’re leaving, but you can stay here if you want.”

He looked up from his phone and jumped to his feet. He followed us out and got in the backseat, his phone still in hand, and his eyes still glued to it.

FORTY-FOUR

Sam collected the preliminary crime scene report, and we returned to our hotel to discuss it.

Janice Underhill had drowned. She'd been stunned three times with the gun found in the storage area of Underhill's store. They determined that she'd been murdered sometime just after Labor Day, although the frigid waters of Lake Michigan made it hard to determine the exact date of her death. There were marks on her body consistent with snow chains from a car. The police theorized that they'd been wrapped around Janice Underhill's body to weigh it down.

Furthermore,...with the current moving her bloated body back and forth, the chains eventually worked free, and her body was carried to the inlet where it was discovered. That area of the bay had started to freeze over in late November around Thanksgiving. She had not been sexually molested, and no physical injuries were discovered other than the stun marks.

Her body had severely decomposed, and fish had eaten parts of her flesh and appendages. The police identified her through her dental records, and general height and weight, along with the coroner's assessment as to her approximate age and eventually DNA.

The police had removed a few items from the Underhill residence, including a hairbrush, to help verify her DNA. No phone was found on her or in the flat above the store. And the police never located her keys.

Upon searching the residence and the garage, the police found two items that incriminated Underhill. First, the stun gun. No fingerprints were found on it.

"That sounds strange," I said. "Who'd wipe their fingerprints off a stun gun?"

A single bob of her head was Sam's response.

The second incriminating item was a single snow chain that matched that of the marks found on Janice Underhill. It had been discovered on the uppermost shelf in the garage, and, unless a stepladder was used, impossible to see.

When Sam read that part of the report to me, I said, "This doesn't look too good for Underhill."

"You think?" Sam said but without her usual bite. It was closer to someone throwing out an off-handed comment.

"What's next," I asked.

“I’ll send Janice Underhill’s phone number to Adrianna. Ask her to send us a list of the people she called over the summer. See if she can trace those numbers to the people she talked to. I’ll also have her see if she had a credit card in her name that she used and where.”

“And what do we do in the meantime?”

“We investigate.”

Our investigation began with finding Peggy Stover and Kim Harrington, Janice’s Fish Creek friends.

Peggy worked at Coldwell Banker. She was the realtor who’d handled the sale of Life’s a Beach Store to the Underhills. We called her at her office and made an appointment to talk with her over lunch. We met her at 1:00 p.m. at the Blue Horse Beach Café. Stover was in her early to mid-fifties, approximately five-foot-six, with short dark hair and a curvy figure. Her eyes were hazel and sad.

After introductions, she said, “I miss her so much. We’d become close. The three of us: Janice, Kim, and me.” A tear rolled down her cheek. “Sorry,” she added.

“That’s okay,” Sam said. “We know this must be tough on you.”

Natalie, our waitress from before, came over and took our drink and meal orders.

Stover wiped her eyes and said, “I can’t believe M.C. killed her. I know they weren’t close anymore. But she never mentioned that he was violent or upset enough to do something like that.”

“Did she ever say that she was thinking of leaving him?”

“No. Well, not seriously. Half-heartedly she’d say things like, ‘I should just move to New York and start a new life.’ I knew she wasn’t very happy here, but she seemed to be settling in.” Stover became pensive as if something had just occurred to her.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Nothing probably. It’s just that the last few months she seemed, I don’t know... happier? No. More enthusiastic. No, that’s not it.” She gave it further thought and said, “More aflame.”

“Aflame?” I asked.

“Yeah. More passionate.”

Sam asked, “Was she seeing someone?”

Stover answered Sam’s question with one of her own. “You mean like having an affair?” She started to shake her head and stopped. Her expression showed a level of recognition, of enlightenment. “Possibly. The three of us weren’t getting together as often.

She said she was helping out more in the store. That the summer had gotten really busy for them.”

“Was there an increase in tourism?” Sam asked.

“No, not really. At least none that I noticed. It seemed like most summers. People flock here for three months, and then the place goes dead.” When she realized what she said, she started to cry. “Sorry,” she said again.

Sam reached across the table and held her hand. “Did she mention any names? Did you happen to see her with anyone? Did she let something slip that seemed out of character or out of place?”

“Now that you mention it, she did say something odd. She said, ‘I’d forgotten what it felt like to be young and in love.’ ”

“How did Janice sound when she said it?” Sam asked. “Sad? Happy? Wistful?”

“More...dreamy. Like she was watching a movie that brought back old memories.”

Later that afternoon, we had coffee with Kim Harrington. We met at Leroy’s Water Street Café. Harrington was a brunette in her late forties and stood about five-feet-eight, with a pointed chin and a wide jawbone. It made her look like she’d stepped out of a Salvador Dali painting.

She fidgeted the entire time we talked, twisting a napkin in her hands until it was in shreds. Harrington refused to make direct eye contact at any time.

Sam introduced us, then said, “We were told you were good friends with Janice Underhill.”

Harrington offered a tentative nod.

“Can you tell us if she talked about her relationship with her husband?”

She shook her head.

“You can’t, or you don’t know?”

Another shake.

“Okay,” Sam said, “Let’s try this again. Did Janice ever talk about her marriage?”

Harrington nodded.

“Did she say it was falling apart?”

Another nod.

“Was she going to leave M.C.?”

Shrug.

Sam was getting pissed, so I held up my hand to stop her from asking another question in a tone that would push Harrington further into her shell. I reached across the

table and gently tipped Harrington's face my way. "We're not here to get you into any trouble. We're trying to uncover the truth. To do that, we have to ask the people closest to the two of them about their relationship. Anything you say won't hurt Janice, anymore. But it might help M.C."

When I took my hand away, she dropped her head but gave another tentative nod.

"Please tell us about your relationship to Janice," I said. "How did you meet? What did you talk about? What was she like? That type of thing."

In a near whisper, Harrington said, "We met at Lautenbach's Orchard Country. There was a wine tasting. We, my husband Hank and I, had gone there with the Stovers, Peggy and Phil. Peggy Stover is very outgoing. She recognized them from the store."

She looked up momentarily and said, "She was the one who sold them the place."

I nodded that I knew.

Harrington lowered her head once more and said, "Peggy saw the Underhills sitting by themselves and went over and talked them into joining us."

"So you and Peggy became good friends with Janice," I said.

Another nod. "Not right away. But soon. We ran into Janice again at the Barrel Room. Peggy and I used to go there every Thursday afternoon. She was there, and Peggy invited her to join us."

"What was she like?" I asked.

"Peggy?"

"No, Janice."

"Oh, yeah. Sorry. This whole thing has got me jumbled."

"Jumbled?"

"Yeah, upset, freaked out, confused. I'm having trouble sleeping at night. You know, jumbled."

"Because...?"

Harrington shrugged. "I don't know. She was murdered. Here. In Fish Creek. Plus... I guess I can't see M.C. doing something like that. He seemed so nice. He always treated her with respect. I knew she wasn't happy. She'd often make comments about missing her old life. But..."

"But?" I asked.

"He didn't get upset. Like...like...he was being patient. Letting her work it out. As if she'd come around."

"Did she?"

“Yeah, kind of. The last few months, she changed. She wasn’t quite as upset. Made fewer comments about how she disliked living in such a small town, so far removed from everything. She stopped talking about moving to the East Coast.”

“Do you know what happened that changed that?” I asked.

Harrington shook her head. “No. It was just a change in the way she acted or how she said things. She was more upbeat. Happier. But I have no idea why. I just thought that maybe after being here for a few years and finding good friends in me and Peggy that she’d settled in.”

“Did you always meet at the Barrel Room?” Sam asked.

Sam, having spoken, startled Harrington as if she’d forgotten she was sitting at the table with us. Harrington shook her head.

“Where did you meet?” I asked as I signaled once more to Sam to let me question her.

“The first few months, we’d meet there. Then Janice suggested we go to Mr. Helsinki’s Wine Bar.”

“Why?”

Another shrug. “Something to do with it being quieter. But that didn’t seem to be the real reason.”

“What do you think was the real reason?”

Harrington shook her head once more. “For some reason, she didn’t seem as comfortable after awhile at the Room.”

“How so?”

Another shrug before she said, “We’d be talking, and she’d suddenly glance at the bar and not hear a word we said. She always seemed distracted.”

“Did you and Peggy ever talk about it? Why you thought she was distracted?”

“Peggy believed it was because it was too close to the store. That M.C. might see her there. The few times we were all together – the husbands and wives – M.C. was always overly concerned with how much Janice was drinking.”

“Did she drink a lot?”

“Sometimes. But she handled it pretty well. I never saw her stumbling or slurring her words. I saw it as a typical husband-wife thing. That’s all.”

“So you think that Janice suggested you three meet at Mr. Helsinki’s because she was afraid that M.C. might see her there and chastise her for it?”

“Something like that. Yeah.”

Sam could no longer restrain herself. “Do you think she might have been having an affair?”

Harrington went wide-eyed. “What? No. No.” A look came over her that I read as her rethinking the last few months the trio had hung out together and Janice’s change in attitude. She looked at Sam and said, “You think she was having an affair?”

It was Sam’s turn to shrug. “We’re just asking. Everyone seemed to notice her change. We’re checking any and all possibilities.”

I jumped back in. “Was there anyone she seemed exceptionally friendly towards? Had a different look when she was around them?”

“No. Not really.”

“How about somebody at the Barrel Room?” Sam asked.

“Uh-uh.”

“How about Jimmy?”

“The bartender?”

Sam nodded.

Harrington grinned. “Jimmy flirts with every woman who comes into the bar. Always makes it seem like they’re special. Whichever one of us went to get our drinks, he’d pretend he was enchanted with. Always told us how pretty we were and how jealous of our husbands he was. He was really good at it. I hear during the summer months he made close to six figures, mostly through tips. Most of that came from the women he flirted with.” Harrington paused to reflect. “If she was having an affair, I think she would have said something to us. We shared everything. I don’t see it.”

Sam stood.

“Thanks, Kim,” I said. “You’ve been a big help.”

I rushed to catch up with Sam.

FORTY-FIVE

“Where to?” I asked as I started the Tesla.

“Mr. Helsinki’s.”

Sam asked for directions from Siri, and we drove down Main Street. It took us longer to buckle in, start the car, and ask for and get directions than it did to get to Helsinki’s. It was a little more than a block away.

“I’m exhausted from that drive,” I said. “I think I need a nap.”

As Sam threw open her door, she said, “You can sleep when you’re dead. And if I hear any more of your sarcastic, smart-ass remarks, that may be sooner rather than later.” She gave me a double eyebrow raise and a tiny smile. Progress.

Mr. Helsinki’s Restaurant and Wine Bar was more upscale than most of the places I’ve been to in Vegas. We sat at the polished wood bar, and Sam asked the bartender for a glass of Chablis. I ordered unsweetened iced tea. The bartender narrowed his eyes and said, “Seriously? Iced tea? In Winter? In a wine bar.”

“I just got back from the Arctic. I need something to warm me up.”

He looked at me through hooded eyes and went to get our drinks. The place was quiet, and we were the only patrons at five in the afternoon.

When the bartender returned, Sam said, “Nice place. I’m Samantha Summers. And you are?”

“Josh Sullivan.”

They shook hands.

Sam asked, “Have you worked here long?”

“A couple of years.”

Sam glanced around the bar and said, “It seems a little slow.”

“Yeah. The summers get so busy that it’s hard to keep up. But the money is good. That’s the only reason I hang onto this job. I make enough over the summer to keep me going for the rest of the year.”

“So you stay here year-round?”

“I usually take a few months off right after Thanksgiving. Go south and bartend in Key West. This year, I started dating someone, so I stayed.”

“Do you know Peggy Stover and Kim Harrington?”

“Yeah. They used to come in here a lot. Janice Underhill usually came with them.” He watched Sam to see if Janice’s name sparked any recognition. Not seeing what he sought, he added, “She was the murdered woman whose body was found in the bay.”

“Did you know her?” Sam asked.

“Sure. You get to know the locals pretty well around here. It’s like we share this bond from dealing with all the tourists.” He realized he might have insulted us, wiped a spot on the bar that was already sparkling clean, and said, “Sorry. No offense. It’s just that...”

“They can be rude and entitled,” Sam said.

“Yeah. Some of them.” Sullivan studied Sam once more to see if she was one of those rude and entitled people. He relaxed when she offered him a small smile.

“We’re here looking into M.C.’s case. Did you know him, too?”

“Yeah. You’re here long enough; you get to know all the business owners. He runs Life’s a Beach shop down the street.”

“Do you think he killed her?”

“Nah, but then again, it’s always the ones you don’t suspect, right?”

“Right,” Sam said. “What can you tell us about Janice Underhill?”

“Nice enough lady. They were always nice to me. Tipped reasonably well.”

“We were told that they used to go to the Barrel Room but changed their minds and came here.”

“Yeah. They said it was quieter. They could hear one another when they talked.”

“Is it?”

Sullivan shrugged. “I’ve never been there. But if this place is quieter, that place must be loud. We can get noisy when it fills up with the out-of-towners.”

“What did they do when they came here? Other than drinking?” Sam asked.

“Sat and talked,” Sullivan said. He pointed toward a table near the window. “They always sat at that table.”

“What did they do if it was occupied?” I asked.

“Then they’d sit at the bar until it opened up.”

Sam walked down to the look at the table and then stared out the window.

When she returned, she asked, “Did the women sit in the same chairs every time?”

Sullivan gave her question some thought before he said, “She did. The other two didn’t seem to have a preference.”

“Which chair?” Sam asked.

“The one on the right,” Sullivan said and pointed.

“Did you happen to notice how Janice acted?”

“I’m not sure what you’re asking.”

“Was she engaged with the other two, or did she seem distracted? How was her mood? Dark and depressed, or light and happy? That type of thing.”

Sullivan gave it some thought. “I didn’t really pay that much attention to them after the first few times they came in. But I’d have to say, she didn’t seem to be paying attention every once in a while. She looked like she was staring off into space. She’d watch the tourists and the cars passing by. She seemed happy enough. Didn’t appear upset or depressed. At least, not that I noticed.”

“Thanks, Josh,” Sam said. “You’ve been very helpful.”

We went back to the Barrel Room and took seats at the bar. When the manager came to take our order, Sam asked, “Is Jimmy Walker around?”

“No. He took off.”

“Took off?” Sam asked. “For the day, his shift, or permanently, as in out of town?”

“Yeah. The last one.”

“So he quit,” I asked.

“Yeah. Just said he needed to get away from here.”

“When did he leave?”

“A couple of days ago. In the middle of his shift. Went in back and told me he was quitting. Pissed me off. I know this place is dead in the winter, but who does that? Now I’m stuck picking up his shifts on top of all my other duties.”

“Can you be more specific as to the night and the time?” Sam asked.

“Yeah, sure. It was a week ago, Tuesday night. About six-thirty.”

Sam turned to me. “That was the night we talked to him. He bolted right after we left here.”

“Two more things,” Sam said to the manager. “Can I get your name?”

“It’s Brad Lester. Why?”

“I like to know the names of the people I’m talking with. That’s all.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Would you have a picture of Jimmy that we could keep?”

“You want a picture of Jimmy?” By the way he asked it, I knew he thought Sam must be another one of those women infatuated with Jimmy.

Sam caught his look. “Get real,” she said. “He was an ass. We’re working on the Underhill case. I need Jimmy’s picture for our investigation.”

His face got a yeah-right look. With a hint of a cynical smile, he said, "Sure. We often take pictures of our guests with our staff."

He walked over to a wall and searched for a picture of Jimmy. He turned back to Sam. "They're all gone. He must have taken them with him."

"You don't have any others? An I.D. picture, maybe?"

"Oh, yeah. I'll be right back."

He went into the office and returned a few minutes later. "Here you go." He handed Sam a picture of Jimmy smiling at the camera with that same leer he'd offered Sam when he'd met her.

Sam took the picture and turned to leave. I grabbed her sleeve and nodded at the bartender. She looked at him and said, "Thanks. You've been a big help."

FORTY-SIX

We rushed to Sturgeon Bay and the Sheriff's station, hoping it wasn't too late to catch Officer Jake Hammond. Fortunately, he was still there. Sam told him what she suspected and why. Because he'd followed her cases in the past, he wasn't too quick to discard her theory that Jimmy Walker was having an affair with Janice Underhill and killed her. He put out an APB on his car, a midnight blue Chevy Impala, and his license plate, which Sam had gotten from the manager of The Room.

"You know it's been days since he left?" Hammond said. "He's probably thousands of miles from here by now."

"Focus on the Upper Midwest," Sam said. "Kansas in particular. We suspect he was hired to track down M.C. Underhill."

"Why?"

"M.C. and some friends were taken in by a scam. They each lost \$500,000. When M.C. left, one of the friends believed that M.C. was in on it. I believe that same friend hired Walker to get his money back."

"I'll make sure the authorities in Kansas are on high alert," Hammond said. "But, so you know, we're not letting Underhill out until we have conclusive proof."

We went back to our hotel. The first thing Sam did was call her father to let him know what she'd been up to the last few days and to warn him that he and Rainey may come under renewed suspicion and be prepared. She also assured him that she was still investigating Tony's death and believed that she was close to solving it.

When she got off the phone, I asked, "You are?"

She didn't answer. Instead, she asked me to download the pictures to her computer that I'd taken during our interviews. She sent them off to Adrianna and asked her to do a background check on each, with particular attention paid to Jimmy Walker.

We went to the Wild Tomato Wood Fired Pizza to eat dinner. We ordered an iced tea for Sam and an Arnold Palmer for me. We also ordered a large Paisano Pizza and the wood-fired bread basket.

We talked about the case, mainly discussing Jimmy and where he might have gone.

"You think Jimmy was the guy hired by Wilson to track down Underhill?"

"Weren't you paying attention...again, when I was talking to Hammond?"

“Weren’t you paying attention to my statement? It wasn’t a question.”

“Good point,” Sam said with a hint of a smile.

“He doesn’t look like a contract killer,” I said. “Just some horny asshole that screws anything that doesn’t own a penis.”

“Looks can be deceiving,” Sam said, but I could tell by her tone that she was struggling with seeing him as some ruthless killer, as well.

Our bread basket came, and Sam dug in. It had been a long day, and she needed to refuel. She’d just stuffed a whole wedge of the flatbread into her mouth when her phone dinged, indicating an incoming text.

She stopped chewing and went wide-eyed. She swallowed her half-chewed bite and looked at me with anticipation as if I was aware of what she’d just read.

“What? What?” I said.

“Adrianna sent back her findings on Jimmy Walker. His real name is Jerry Walden. He’s from Michigan. Lansing. He’s on the run.” Sam took a dramatic pause, letting me think we’d found our killer. When she read my mounting excitement, she added, “But not as a hitman. He has four kids. He owes seven years in back child support.”

“So, he’s not our guy?”

“Maybe, maybe not. Who knows what people turn into when they’re desperate.”

“But?”

“I don’t think he is. He graduated from high school. Got married at nineteen. Had the four kids. His wife filed for divorce when she caught him sleeping all over town. Five affairs. At least according to the divorce decree.”

“Was he ever in Kansas?” I asked.

“Adrianna couldn’t determine where he went, but six other places employed a Jimmy Walker as a bartender. A bar in Lafayette. A few months after he quit there, a Jimmy Walker showed up in Springfield, Illinois. From there, he moved to Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, and on to Fish Creek.”

“Do you still think he was having an affair with Janice Underhill and killed her?”

Sam got lost deep in thought.

I asked, “What’s his motive?”

Sam still didn’t answer.

She punched in a number on her phone. “Officer Hammond. I just received a text from my assistant.” ... “It seems Walker’s real name is Jerry Walden.” ... “You can stop the APB for the Kansas area. He moved from Michigan to Illinois, then Wisconsin. He’s been employed as a bartender for the last nine years.” ... “He owes thousands of dollars in

back child support.” ... “Not unless Janice Underhill found out and threatened to turn him in. But who knows for sure, people have killed for much less than that.” ... “Let me know.”

Sam hung up and said, “We’ll have to keep looking. There’s a good possibility it’s not him.”

Early the next morning, Sam received an email from Adrianna. She had looked into the background of the other people Sam had given her to research.

Josh Sullivan, the bartender from Mr. Helsinki’s, was born in Oconto Falls, Wisconsin. He attended college at Milwaukee School of Engineering but dropped out after his sophomore year. He went to UW-Green Bay, where he got a degree in Computer Science. He worked for seven years at a company, located in Green Bay, that developed security software. He left and moved to Fish Creek, where he had been tending bar at Mr. Helsinki’s for the past six years. He was never married and owned a small home a few miles east of the bay.

Because Sam believes I would have trouble finishing the kid’s maze on the back of IHOP menu, she said, “It’s not him.”

“Are you sure? He sounds pretty sinister to me.”

Sam ignored me once more.

Next on Adrianna’s list was Peggy Stover, nee Sullivan. She had grown up in Egg Harbor, Wisconsin, in Door County. She was a B+ student in high school, went to Northeast Technical College and picked up thirty-six hours of general studies courses. That’s where she met Donald Stover. They were married two years later and moved to Fish Creek, when he bought the local Coldwell Banker Real Estate office. Peggy got her realtors license and joined the staff of three. They had no children.

When she finished reading it out loud, I said, “She sounds like a terrorist. Let’s call Homeland Security.”

Sam placed her hands alongside her head and squeezed as if she was fighting off a migraine.

She then read about Kim Harrington, nee Abbot. Harrington also grew up on the peninsula in Bailey’s Harbor. She met Joseph Harrington when they both attended UW-Stevens Point. He got a forestry degree. She, a degree in homemaking with a teaching certificate.

They lived for a few years in the Upper Peninsula. He worked for one of the forestry companies, while she taught at the local high school. They had two kids – one of each. When Joseph’s dad died, he left him the family business in Fish Creek – a B&B that

charged \$200 a night and had room for eight couples. Like most businesses in Door County, it thrived in the summer. Every room in their B&B was booked from Memorial Day to Labor Day. Sam did a quick calculation and said, "That's approximately \$150,000 for the summer alone. You add the weekends in spring and fall where the weather is nice, and it's closer to \$190,000." As with every other business in Door County, the late fall and winter months were slow. Kim helped with the books and oversaw the housekeeping and kitchen staff.

"We have a winner," I said when Sam finished telling me the Harringtons' backgrounds.

"How do you figure?" Sam asked, knowing I was screwing with her.

"She's the closest thing to a butler in our investigation. And everyone knows the butler is always the killer."

"You are something else," Sam said. "No. Let me amend that. I wish you were something else."

I gave Sam a toothless grin. The right side of Sam's lip lifted a millimeter.

She started to read what Adrianna had to say about Natalie, the waitress from the Blue Horse Café and stopped. "Let's go," she said.

"Where?"

"The Blue Horse Café."

I assumed it was for a reason other than Sam was hungry. We drove to the restaurant and took our usual booth.

Our waitress came over and said, "Hi, I'm Daphne. Can I get you something to drink?"

"Coffee, please," Sam said. Before Daphne could leave, Sam asked, "Is Natalie around?"

"No, sorry, She called in sick. Flu or something." Daphne left to get our coffee.

"Okay. So what's up?"

"Natalie isn't Natalie. She's Andrea Howard. Goes by the name of Andy. She was born in Stillwater, Oklahoma. Joined the army right out of high school, with her sights on becoming an Army Ranger. When she received the highest marksmanship scores in her class, she applied for admission to the program. But at that time, the army had a ban on women serving in direct combat units. She applied every year for the next five years. After six years, she gave up and disappeared. Ironically, the year after she left, the army allowed women to apply to join the Rangers. The only reason Adrianna was able to uncover that "Andy" and "Natalie" were one and the same was due to an article in Stars and Stripes

online. There was a picture of Andrea Howard and a story of her as an outstanding marksman.”

When Sam finished, she looked at me and said, “Guess who her commanding officer was?”

It took a second, but it hit me, “Wilson. Jim Wilson from Lawrence. That’s how he knew to get ahold of her.” I stopped and gave it some more thought before adding, “But... We figured Janice was having an affair.”

“What? Married women can’t have affairs with another woman?”

She had me there.

Before I could ramble on nonsensically, Sam said, “It fits. Remember, Janice wanted to switch from the Barrel Room to Helsinki’s.”

I thought it was rhetorical, but when she stared at me waiting for an answer, I nodded.

“It wasn’t because she was seeing Jimmy. It was because she wanted to be able to watch Natalie.” Sam pointed out the window. Helsinki’s was across the street.

“It’s why she always insisted on sitting at the table near the window. It’s also why she always wanted that particular chair. It has a clearer view of the restaurant. She wasn’t preoccupied with watching the tourists, she wanted to keep an eye on Natalie.”

When I continued to look confused, Sam explained. “When Natalie-slash-Andy left the army, she became a contract hit man...person...woman. Anyway, Wilson found her again and hired her to track down Tony. When she, at first, couldn’t find Tony, she went in search of the Underhills. She found them, much like Adrianna had, and came here. She needed a cover, so she took a job as a waitress because it was close to the store. I’m sure she was hoping that they might come in here from time to time. Eventually, they must have.

“I suspect her initial plan was to seduce M.C. But that didn’t work because he was too wrapped up in getting the business going. So she came on to Janice. Being lonely, she bit.

“After a while, like all involved couples, they shared their backgrounds. Natalie probably made hers up, while Janice spilled everything. When the topic came up as to why they had moved, it gave Natalie the opening to ask about the scam.”

“But why kill her?” I asked.

“The most likely scenario is something along the lines of: Natalie pushed Janice for more information about the Underhills role in the scam, and if they had the money. Most likely, in doing so, Janice became suspicious of Natalie’s true intent for getting involved with her, and the reasons behind all of the questions.

“Or maybe, when Janice confirmed that they didn’t have the money, Natalie pulled away and Janice became clingy. There are a host of possible reasons. We won’t know for sure until we find her. But whatever it was, it was enough that Natalie felt it necessary to kill her.”

Sam paused, giving her theory some more thought. I could tell by Sam’s reaction that another piece of the puzzle had fallen into place. She said, “Peggy and Kim told us that Janice had seemed more upbeat. They thought she’d come around and decided to stay. But Natalie had told us that Janice seemed more and more unhappy.”

I sat up straighter and added, “To cover her tracks and give a plausible reason for Janice’s disappearance.”

“Yes,” Sam said. “When Natalie didn’t have any luck finding the money here, she somehow found Tony was in Shawano and went there to confront him and to get the money back.”

“That makes sense,” I said.

Sam was too busy seeking a plausible explanation for what had happened that she didn’t bother to chastise me for my remark, as would be her norm.

“How she found him, I’m not sure. She or Wilson might have a resource in the government who located him in Shawano. My guess is he used one of his fake I.D.s to rent the cabin, and it popped up on someone’s radar. It’s close enough to here, as you said, for her to drive down, find Tony, and seduce him because he was such a horny dog. Once she had him restrained, under the guise that she was into S&M, she pulled out the stun gun and asked him where the money was. Before he could tell her, he died. But all of that is just conjecture on my part.”

Our waitress came back with our breakfast. Sam asked her, “Does Natalie live nearby? We’re leaving town, and we’d like to say goodbye.”

“Yeah. She rents a room from Hannah.”

“Hannah?” I asked.

“Yeah. Hannah Davidson. She’s lived here forever. Has a house around the corner. Big old light blue house. Sticks out. You can’t miss it.”

“Thanks, Daphne,” Sam said. “Can we get our check?”

Daphne glanced at our uneaten food and said, “Do you want a doggy bag?”

Sam shook her head and then looked at me. I took out my wallet and gave her two twenties.

“Keep the change,” Sam said.

FORTY-SEVEN

Daphne was right. The house did stick out. It was a three-story – kind of – Colonial Revival. I say “kind of” because there were two main stories and two dormer rooms on either end of what would have been the third floor. They looked like catbird seats on either end of a riverboat.

Sam rang the bell, and a silver-haired woman in her eighties answered the door. She was wiping her hands on a dishrag and smiled warmly at us through the storm door. She pushed it open and asked, “How can I help you?” It was evident she thought we were a couple looking for a place to stay.

“Hi,” Sam said, “We’re looking for a friend of ours, Natalie. We were told she wasn’t feeling well.”

The woman stood a bit straighter. “You just missed her. She said she was leaving town for a while. Said her father had taken ill and was going back to see him.”

“In Kansas?” I asked.

The woman offered me a strange look as if she was questioning our cover story. “She wasn’t from Kansas. She was from Georgia.”

“She was an army brat,” Sam said. “They moved quite often. We knew her when the family was stationed in Kansas. She probably meant Fort Benning.”

Sam’s quick thinking seemed to soothe the woman’s concerns.

“When did she leave?” Sam asked.

“Last night, right after her shift at the restaurant. She got a phone call from her mother. Her father had a heart attack. A mild one. She packed a few things and left.”

“Is she still driving that old Chevy truck?” Sam asked.

“No. She has a Ford Ram.”

Sam turned to me, “She finally bought her dream truck. Good for her.” Sam turned back to the woman. “Was it red? She loved that color for her vehicles.”

“Yeah. Although it was a very dark red.”

“You wouldn’t happen to know the license plate number, would you?”

“License plate number?” The woman was back to being skeptical.

“We were hoping to catch up with her. It’s a personal matter. It involves a great deal of money. An old boyfriend of hers died and left her over \$200,000.”

When the woman continued to look unconvinced, Sam added, “They were engaged to be married. But she broke it off. He never got over her. You know those curly straws that are a big hit with kids?”

The woman nodded.

“He invented those. Made millions. The idea came to him when he was being treated for depression. Said his heart was all twisted up inside.”

“Oh, that’s so sad,” the woman said. “Did he ever find out she was a lesbian?”

“Why do you say that?” Sam asked. Her tone carried a hint of pride in knowing Hannah was about to confirm Sam’s suspicions about Natalie’s seduction of Janice.

“She was having an affair with that woman who got killed by her husband.”

“Janice Underhill,” Sam said.

“Oh. You’ve heard about that? Yeah, they spent many a night together here. I felt bad for M.C. But Janice assured me he didn’t care. And that she finally had the courage to be who she truly was.”

She leaned in closer to Sam as if she was about to share a secret. “That stuff used to bother me. The whole queer thing. But I’ve seen so many same-sex couples up here over the last few years, and most of them seemed so happy, that I eventually thought, why not? If two people love one another, who cares?”

“I’m sure Natalie must have been heartbroken,” Sam said.

“That was what was strange,” Hannah said. “When Janice went missing, it didn’t seem to bother Natalie. She told me that they’d had a quarrel and that Janice said she was leaving her and the town.”

“What was her reaction to Janice’s body being found?”

“She seemed shocked. Like everyone else around here.”

“Would you happen to know her license plate number?” Sam asked again. “We’re going to try to catch up to her. And so many cars and trucks look so much alike these days. It would really help.”

“It was 389 KG1.”

“Does she have the same phone number?” Sam asked.

“I don’t know.” Hannah gave it some further thought and added, “Probably not, because it had a 920 area code. She must have gotten it when she moved here.”

“Can I have it please?”

The woman recited the number.

We thanked her and left.

“I recognized the phone number Hannah gave us,” Sam said. “It showed up more than a couple of times on Janice’s call log that I sent to Adrianna.”

Sam got into the passenger seat. “Let’s go back to the hotel,” she said. “If she left last night, she’s long gone by now.”

Sam called the County Sheriff’s offices and talked with Officer Hammond. She explained what we’d discovered and asked him to put out an APB for Natalie’s Ford Ram and gave him her license plate number.

FORTY-EIGHT

As we approached the turnoff for our hotel, a black Subaru Outback shot out from a side street. The driver never slowed down. I watched in horror as I realized that the nose of the car was going to ram into Sam's door. I froze.

Sam leaned away from the door and grabbed my knee. She pushed down on it. Violently. The Tesla shot forward, pushing me back against my seat. The Subaru grazed the rear bumper, sending both cars spinning.

I looked out Sam's window and saw a gun in the hands of Natalie, aka, Andrea Howard, aka Andy, aka our waitress. Sam threw her arm across my chest and pulled out her gun. "Back up," she yelled. I reacted a bit slow, so Sam threw the Tesla into reverse and pushed down on my leg once more. The car lurched backward as Natalie opened fire.

"Lean back as far as you can," Sam ordered.

I reached down and moved my seatback down electronically. It seemed to take forever. I heard multiple shots, only one of which hit my car, blowing out the front right headlight. Sam had a poor angle, so she shifted the gun to her left hand and returned fire, not wasting time to open her window. The first shot, besides shattering the passenger side window, blew an inch-wide hole in the Subaru's windshield. I saw Natalie flinch – a shard of glass must have pierced her right eye. Blood streamed down her cheek and off her face. Sam's second shot caught Natalie in her right shoulder near her joint because Natalie grabbed that area as blood seeped through her fingers. Natalie took off. The Subaru roared east on Main Street. Sam fired once more, but I saw no damage to the disappearing vehicle.

"Move," Sam said. "I'm driving."

By the time Sam and I had changed places, and she'd returned the seat to its upright position, we'd lost sight of the car. A few blocks later, we came to an intersection where Highway 42 turned north, and Highway F continued east.

We sat at the intersection for a few moments before Sam floored the Tesla, choosing to go straight on F. Within a few seconds, we were doing close to seventy miles per hour.

"Keep your eyes open," Sam commanded. "See if you can spot her car."

We hit one hundred twenty miles per hour and kept gaining speed. A few seconds later, I glanced at the speedometer and saw that we were doing one-fifty. Every little bump or rise felt like I was at Great America riding the American Eagle Roller Coaster. I cinched

my seat belt tighter. A minute later, I saw the Subaru about four hundred yards in front of us. "There," I said.

Sam nodded. Her way of telling me she'd spotted it before I had.

Natalie had gotten every mph she was going to out of the vehicle and was pushing one-thirty. Sam gained ground. Natalie made a wide right turn onto highway A and headed south.

Sam broke hard and nearly missed the turn. At the same time, Natalie had slowed down enough that she was able to turn and fire out her rear window using her left hand. The bullet pierced the center of my windshield, causing it to spider web and block Sam's view.

Sam stopped the car.

"Kick it out," Sam commanded.

Another shot rang out, dinging off the roof of my Tesla.

"What?" I yelled. "She's shooting at us."

"I can't see, goddamnit. Use your foot and kick out the windshield."

It took me six tries, but eventually, the glass fell away.

Natalie took advantage of us sitting in the middle of the road and took off once more. We could no longer see her car.

Sam floored the Tesla once more.

I noticed that Sam still had her gun in her right hand. "You want me to hold that?" I asked. "So, you can drive with both hands?"

"And have you accidentally kill me? I don't think so."

"But, I'm a better shot than you. Remember?"

She didn't react. She either thought my comment wasn't funny or she was too focused. I'm sure it must have been the latter.

We were soon riding on the bumper of the Subaru. My eyes were watering from the frigid air rushing in through the missing windshield, and I could feel my face getting frostbite. I reached over and turned the heater to its max setting and opened the passenger vent, so it was blowing directly on me. I hoped the car chase would end soon because the heater was no match for the wind rushing into the car.

Sam, on the other hand, looked as if she was out for a Sunday drive in West Palm Beach.

Sam gently bumped the Subaru in an attempt to force Natalie to lose control and stop. It didn't work.

We reached Highway EE, and Natalie took a hard right back toward the bay.

“She’s heading to Highway 42,” Sam said. “Call Officer Hammond and notify him where we are and what’s happening.”

“Give me your phone,” I said.

“Are you crazy? At this speed? Google the Sheriff’s Offices.”

I did as instructed. When someone answered, I said, “This is Chancy Evans. Samantha Summers and I are chasing the person we think killed Tony D’Aquisto and Janice Underhill. We’re headed east on EE. We think the woman is headed for Highway 42. It’s a dark blue Subaru. License number 418 DLR.”

I listened to the officer who had taken my call, then said, “Talk to Officer Hammond. He knows all about it.” ... “Yeah, Highway 42.” ... “We’re driving a silver Tesla S.”... “Thanks.”

I disconnected and, as I watched the telephone polls fly past, said to Sam, “He said he’d get ahold of him. They’re going to put up a roadblock going south. He said if she heads back north, she’ll be cornered because there’s no place she can really go.”

Sam nodded her head about half an inch.

Both cars had to slow down as we hit a curve in the road then accelerated once more. As we got to Highway 42, Natalie turned left, heading south as we’d thought. Up ahead a couple of hundred yards, I saw the blue and red flashing lights of the Sheriffs’ cars. Natalie didn’t slow down.

“Is she going to ram them?” I asked, not expecting an answer.

“It certainly looks that way. She’d be committing suicide, though. Unlike the movies, those things are heavy. It’d be like crashing into a concrete barrier.”

Natalie swung her car to the right and onto Egg Harbor Road. Approximately one hundred yards later, she made a hard left onto Dock Road and into Egg Harbor Marina. I watched in horror as she pulled a Thelma and Louise, minus Thelma. The car sailed off the boat launch then nosedived toward the water. It was the same area where a week ago, the body of Janice Underhill had been found.

The police searched the marina for two days before they recovered the Subaru. The windshield had been shattered, and Natalie’s body was nowhere to be found. The police believed that Natalie, not wearing a seatbelt, had catapulted through the already weakened windshield upon impact with the foot-thick ice that had covered the marina and that her body had drifted away before they were able to locate and extract the car. They hoped to have better luck recovering her remains once the bay and the marina had thawed.

Back at the Sheriff's Office, Sam told Officer Hammond what she'd discovered and her theory of how Janice and Natalie had been having an affair so that Natalie could see if the Underhills had taken the money.

"But why kill her?" Hammond asked.

"My guess is Janice Underhill must have become suspicious of Natalie's interest in what had happened in Kansas and the money. Janice probably said something about telling M.C. It would have blown Natalie's cover. She stunned her, chained up her body, and dumped her into the bay."

Sam went on to share her theory that Natalie thought she could get M.C. out of the way by planting the evidence on him. She suggested that Hammond check the serial number on the stun gun to see where it was purchased and by whom. Sam also proposed that they check with the auto parts stores in the area to see if any of them could verify that Natalie had been the one to purchase the chains."

In their follow-up search of the Underhill home, the police found the note Janice Underhill had left, saying she was leaving. The handwriting, although very similar, didn't match Janice's. It matched Natalie's. They also discovered that the stun gun had been purchased in Kansas, and the tire chains were from a store in Sturgeon Bay. Janice's keys were nowhere to be found.

With all the evidence pointing at Natalie – aka Andrea Howard – M.C. Underhill was released from prison, and all charges were dropped.

FORTY-NINE

We left the Tesla at a car repair shop in Sturgeon Bay. The mechanic said it would be a couple of days to get the windshield, the passenger side window, and the headlight from Tesla. And that it would be another day or two to install everything properly. We rented another Impala.

On the drive back to Shawano, I asked Sam, “Why would Natalie have used two stun guns on Tony. That makes no sense.”

“She was using one to torture him to find out where the money was,” Sam said. “It must have run out of juice. She most likely had a second one with her, and after she shocked him once too often, he had a heart attack from the stress.”

“But the Viagra? And the whiskey?”

“She was a nice-looking woman. And we know Tony was a horny bastard. I suspect she spiked his drink.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Sam knew I wasn’t convinced.

“Yeah,” She said. “That does sound a bit thin. We’ll figure it out. At least my dad is off the hook.”

The last word was barely out of her mouth when she got a call from Adrianna. For over fifteen minutes, Sam listened as Adrianna shared with her what she’d uncovered. Sam, being Sam, never took notes. Every word, locked into her brilliant mind.

“Thanks, as usual, you’re the best.”

Adrianna asked Sam a question, to which Sam replied, “I’m rethinking that. I’ll let you know.”

Sam sat back in her seat and stared straight ahead.

“Are you going to share?” I asked.

“Tony was married six times.”

“Let me guess. The women whose names he had put checkmarks next to in his little black books?”

“Precisely.”

“He’s in Henry VIII territory.”

“Yes and no,” Sam said. “Henry VIII either divorced or killed his wives.”

I turned my head so fast, I jerked the car to the right.

Sam reached over, grabbed the wheel, and put us back in our lane. “Keep your eyes on the road.”

“Sorry.” I concentrated on the road ahead. “He never divorced any of his wives? *That’s* why he had all of those fake IDs.”

“That, and I’m sure he also needed them as part of his cons. Each place issued arrest warrants for whatever Tony he’d passed himself off as. If he’d used his real name, the authorities would’ve been on to him long ago.”

“Holy shit!”

“You have to come up with a better catchphrase. How about, ‘Do you feel lucky, punk?’ Or, ‘Play it again, Sam.’ Something that hasn’t been overused.”

“You mean like, piss off?”

“Like that. On second thought, please don’t use the Play-It-Again one.”

I laughed. “What’s our next move? Do you think one of the wives found out and killed him?”

“It’d take more than one,” Sam said, then froze. In a near whisper, she added, “Unless she drugged him first.” I stole a quick peek. Sam’s eyes had glazed over as she relived her too real nightmare.

“Did they find any drugs in his system?” I asked. “Other than the Viagra?”

It took a few seconds for my question to register before she said, “No. A little alcohol. Other than that, just the Sildenafil.”

“So, more than likely, more than one woman.”

“Unless he allowed himself to be tied up. But why use two stun guns?” Her last question directed more to herself than me.

“So, two women, then?”

“At least. Maybe more.” Sam gave it some further thought, then said, “Henry described the two women he saw as, ‘One was young. In her early twenties. The other – closer to fifty. The younger woman had wavy brown hair under a pink stocking cap. She had on regular shoes – not boots. She wore a long coat that didn’t look very warm. Like she wasn’t prepared for the winter. More like something you’d wear in the low forties. That’s what first drew my attention. The other woman – the taller of the two – was blond. She was dressed warmer, although she didn’t have boots either. She wore a flapper hat.’

“While Lizbet told us, ‘One was about my height. The other about five-eight. Early forties. Although these days it’s so hard to tell. They both had on winter coats and stocking caps. One had blond hair, the other was a brunet.’

“So there were at least four different women in Shawano around that time. And if four, why not five or six or more?”

I thought back to the two conversations that were now days and weeks old and realized Sam had quoted Henry and Lizbet verbatim.

“But wouldn’t four or five or six strange women be conspicuous?”

“They were,” Sam said. “I’m sure if we asked around, more people would remember them. Plus, Henry remembered seeing the passenger van. If there were only four of them, why not use a car? A passenger van sticks out more.”

“You think they somehow tracked Tony down and decided to kill him? A woman scorned, type of thing? Or in this case, women scorned?”

Lost in thought, Sam didn’t respond.

“If that’s the case,” I asked, “how’re you going to find out for sure?”

“That’s what I was trying to determine when you so rudely interrupted me. Again.” Sam said, playfully.

I smiled to myself. The focused, sarcastic, smart-aleck Sam had returned. I knew for the next few months, and even years, she’d relive the horror of Coon Rapids. But she was making progress. I let her be.

FIFTY

St Paul – Tony Bianchi-Alora Taylor

When we reached the outskirts of Shawano, Sam said. “Let’s stop at the liquor store.”

“You want to celebrate finding Janice Underhill’s murderer?”

“No, I need something to dull my senses. I want to know what it’s like to be you.”

“Good idea. I’m going to buy some bitters because I want to know what it’s like being you.”

Sam grunted a laugh.

Sam directed me to pull into a spot in front of The Store. “Another creative name. I bet it took the owner quite some time to come up with it.”

Sam ignored my comment and entered the liquor store. As I caught up to her, I asked, “How do you know this is the store that Lizbet Carson meant?”

“It’s the closest one to the cabin.”

“Oh. Yeah, right.”

Sam walked up to the counter and said, “Hi Dave, how’s it going?”

It took a second for Dave to recognize Sam. When he did, he brightened. “Well, if it isn’t my best high school customer. How’re you doing? And what brings you back here? Dave paused a second, then said, “Oh, yeah. Your dad. How’s he doing?”

“He’s good. He should be exonerated any day now.

“Good, good. So how can I help you?”

“We were told a couple of women came in here the day that Tony D’Aquisto was murdered. Do you remember them?”

“Let me think.” He looked heavenward and squinted. He looked back at Sam and said, was that New Year’s Eve?”

Sam nodded.

“We had a lot of customers here that day, as you can imagine. I’m not sure.”

“These would have been women you’d never seen before. We were told that one about five-four, the other about five-eight. Both in their early forties. They had on winter coats and stocking caps. One was blond, the other was a brunet.”

“Yeah, they do sound familiar.”

“Do you remember what they purchased?”

Dave gave Sam a get-real look.

“I know,” Sam said, “but try.”

Dave gave it some thought and brightened. “Yeah, they got some Glen Scotia. I don’t sell much of that.”

“Did they say anything?”

“Come to think of it, one of the women was questioning why they were buying such an expensive bottle of liquor. It’s about \$90 a bottle. The other said something like it’s the only brand he drinks.”

“Thanks, Dave. You’ve been a big help.” Sam said.

“No problem. Make sure when your dad gets out, you come back here for your celebratory booze.”

“We will,” Sam said, and we left.

Once we were in the car, I said, “Best high school customer, huh?”

“Yeah. Being the police chief’s daughter had its perks.”

“Where to now?” I asked.

“Temptations. Go up two blocks and turn left.”

When we entered, Sam asked the guy behind the counter, “Hi, we were wondering if you could help us?”

The guy in his mid-to-late fifties said with a professional air as if he was running a medical clinic, “Certainly. What are you looking for? We have a complete assortment of toys, lubricants and body oils, lingerie, and specialty items for couples.”

“How about bondage gear?”

“Ah, yes.” The guy smiled for the first time since we’d entered the shop. “Let me show you some of our finer items.” He moved to another area of the store and pointed to a wall that had things I’d never seen before and couldn’t imagine what half of them were for.

“We’re primarily interested in restraints,” Sam said.

The guy turned to a wall and pulled some satin-lined wrist and ankle cuffs off the shelf. “These are our finest and our top seller.”

“Great,” Sam said. “Did you happen to sell something similar to this to two women, one quite a bit younger than the other, probably in her early twenties. The other woman being closer to fifty. The younger of the two had wavy brown hair under a pink stocking cap. The other woman – the taller of the two – was blond and wore a flapper hat.”

The guy stood a bit straighter. “Who are you two?”

“I’m Samantha Summers. Police Chief Summers’ daughter. This is my associate. We’re trying to track down leads as to who might have actually killed the man at the cabin the day you sold the two women something like that.”

He grew nervous. "Listen, I don't know anything about that. All they said was they wanted something that would restrain a partner. I thought it was for them like they wanted to experiment. They didn't say anything about killing a guy. I didn't even put the two together until you just said something."

"So, they did purchase restraints?"

"Yeah. They got the ones I just showed you." The guy hesitated then asked, "Were they the ones who killed that guy?"

"Quite possibly," Sam said. She turned to leave.

"What's that for?" I asked. I pointed to a box that said, Do It Doggie Harness.

Before the guy could answer, Sam grabbed me by my collar and yanked me out of the store.

"Come on, Fido, we have more important things to do."

I got back into the driver's seat and asked, "Where to now?"

Sam pointed west down Highway 29, and said, "Just keep going, until I tell you to stop."

She didn't tell me to stop until I hit St. Paul, where she directed me to Alora Taylor's house. We pulled up at her front door at just after four in the afternoon.

"What are we doing here again?"

"You'll see," Sam said. "Play along."

What else could I do? Hanging with Sam, I'd become pretty good at improv.

Alora answered the door. She took one look at Sam and knew why we were there. I, on the other hand, still didn't have a clue.

Alora stepped back, leaving the door open, and we followed her into the front room. We took the same seats as before and waited.

"So you know?" Alora said.

Sam nodded. "Everything."

"Everything?" The disbelief in Alora's tone told me that even *she* didn't know everything.

Alora wept. "We didn't mean to kill him. It started as a revenge thing."

"How did you find out?" Sam asked. "About the other marriages?"

"I got a call from Shauna Ward Lane."

"The detective in Sioux Falls?" I asked.

Fearing I'd blown it, Sam pinched the skin behind my bicep.

"Ouch!" I yelped. "Sorry. The detective in Sioux Falls. Go on."

I glanced at Sam to catch her reaction. It was subtle, but I knew what Alora had just revealed about Shauna Ward was news to Sam, as well.

Alora missed Sam's reaction, and said, "Shauna said that when she did a background search on Tony, she'd come across his other scams. That led her to look into it further. She discovered he had six wives. Doris in L.A., C.C. in Montana, Sydney in Tulsa, Debbie in Wichita, besides her in Sioux Falls. And me here."

"Shauna made it sound as if nobody knew Tony in Sioux Falls," I said.

"They didn't. They met on a cruise ship touring the Bahamas. Got married in Congo Town. He confessed to her that he was a wanted man. So they kept it quiet. Lived in Brandon. Northeast of Sioux Falls."

"But she's a cop," I said.

"That shows you the power he had over women," Alora said. "None of us were thinking straight, I guess."

Alora must have had a flashback of being with Tony because she got a faraway, dreamy look in her eye.

Sam brought her back. "All of you came together here to discuss what to do."

"Yeah."

"Because this was the last place he'd surfaced."

"Yeah."

"With him moving further east each time, you figured he'd moved on to Wisconsin or Illinois."

"Yeah."

"Tony used his credit card as Tony D'Aquisto to rent the cabin," Sam said. "And Shauna found out."

Alora nodded.

"You then rented a passenger van to take you there," Sam said. "You knew he had all that money. You planned on getting your share."

One more nod from Alora.

"What went wrong?" Sam asked.

We handcuffed him to the bed and found the money. Then, someone, I think it was C.C., suggested we all get one last...turn." Alora went scarlet.

"Have sex with him one last time?" I asked, stunned.

Alora lowered her head and sobbed harder. "We didn't want him to die. Just leave him spent, with no money."

"It was in the hidden compartment," Sam said. "In his suitcase."

“Yeah,” Alora whispered. She raised her head and went on. “Sydney wanted to make sure he could keep it up. So we gave him some Viagra. None of us knew how much. We figured there were six of us, a half a pill for each.”

Alora gulped in some much-needed air. Sam handed her a tissue to wipe her eyes and the mucus running from her nose.

“How many?”

Unlike me, Alora understood what Sam had asked. “Four. We tied him down so he couldn’t get away. C.C. and Doris had purchased some restraints at Temptations. Then we picked cards to see who would go first, then second, and so on. Doris went first. We watched.”

Alora stopped.

I couldn’t help myself. “What happened then?” I asked.

In a sheepish voice, Alora said, “We kind of got into it. We started cheering each other on. Tony, at first, seemed to really enjoy it.”

“Yes?” I said.

Sam pinched my arm again. I was too engrossed in Alora’s story to notice.

“After Doris, Sydney, and C.C., he looked worn out. I thought maybe we should give him a little rest. But Shauna said she wasn’t going to wait. Halfway through, he groaned. We thought, you know. But then, Shauna got real panicky. She knew he was having a heart attack. We didn’t know what to do.”

“Who brought the stun guns?” Sam asked.

“Shauna had one. Debbie had the other.”

Further enlightenment hit Sam. She turned to me. “Those were the two women who attacked us in Tulsa. That’s why one of them looked so familiar. It was Shauna Ward Lane.”

Alora nodded, even though the remark wasn’t directed at her. “We thought maybe we could jump-start his heart. Shauna shocked him. It didn’t work. C.C. suggested maybe the other gun would be stronger. It didn’t help. Then they tried to shock him at the same time. Sydney had become so upset; she kept pressing the trigger too early. She gave the gun to C.C., and they finally timed it right, but by then it was too late.”

“Why didn’t you call 911?” I asked.

Sam answered. “Because they wanted the money.” She said to Alora: “You felt after all he’d put you through, you deserved it.”

Alora bowed her head.

“Shauna took charge,” Sam said. “She knew what the police would look for, so she had the bedding washed to destroy the DNA. You guys cleaned the place using bleach to destroy any other evidence and thoroughly wiped it clean to get rid of all fingerprints.”

Alora nodded again. “So what happens now?”

“I suggest all of you get good lawyers.”

FIFTY-ONE

We headed back to Shawano. Along the way, Sam called and told Darryl to get ahold of the Wisconsin Division of Criminal Investigation officers and have them meet us at the Shawano police station.

Sam laid out the facts for everyone, including her dad, who was allowed to sit in on the presentation. When she finished, the WDCI people called the various law enforcement agencies around the country to tell them what Sam suspected. Much to their surprise, the WDCI people were told that all of the women had hired lawyers and turned themselves in.

They were brought to Wisconsin for a preliminary hearing. They described in great detail how Tony had tricked them, with each claiming she didn't know he was a conman, believing he was exactly who he said he was, a businessman who traveled a lot. Sam didn't bother to tell them what she'd discovered about their personal involvement.

The women returned most of the money, close to nine million dollars. They claimed it was everything they'd found and that Tony must have spent the rest.

Despite the holes in their stories, having six stunningly beautiful women tell the same tale over and over, the prosecutors suggested the women be given three-year suspended sentences and five hundred hours of community service. The judge agreed.

During the rest of our stay in Shawano, Sam spent every day with her parents. And, although the relationship with her mother would never be good, it defrosted some.

Sam promised to make regular yearly visits to see them, and they said they'd do their best to come to Milwaukee every so often.

We picked up my car in Sturgeon Bay and headed home to Milwaukee. Along the way, Sam kept talking to herself. As she did, she became more and more angry. She punched the dashboard and yelled, "That bastard!"

I thought she was reliving her nightmare from Minneapolis. Once again, I was wrong.

"Asshole Wilson," she said. "We can't let him get away with this."

I waited for more.

She went quiet. I could tell she was forming a plan of attack. She stayed silent for the rest of the ride back to our place.

FIFTY-TWO

Sam barely spoke for the next week. Sometimes at night, I'd hear her pacing the floor. Early one morning, she came into my room, woke me, and said, "Get dressed. Road trip."

I asked her where we were going and for how long.

"Lawrence, Kansas. Three, maybe four days tops. Oh, and pack a black suit and tie."

I jumped into the shower, packed a small bag, and headed out to the living area. Sam was patiently waiting. When she saw me, she motioned with her head toward the door and walked out ahead of me. Once again, she made me take the stairs. We threw our suitcases in the back of her Jeep. The nine-plus hour drive would have exceeded the maximum distance my Tesla could travel without stopping to recharge for six hours. Sam said, "Would you mind driving? I want to give my plan some further thought."

Along the way, we stopped just long enough to get coffee and breakfast sandwiches from a Kwik Trip, and to get gas and lunch at a truck stop just across the Iowa border. We arrived in Lawrence at five-thirty that afternoon.

"Where do you want to go?" I asked as we hit the outskirts of Lawrence.

"The hotel. I want a full day to do what I have planned."

We checked into the Town Place Suites in downtown Lawrence because it was central to Wilson's various gun stores and shooting ranges. Sam wanted Italian, so we grabbed dinner at 715, a restaurant not too far from the hotel. We stayed there for over two hours as Sam laid out her plan for the next day.

When we returned to the hotel, Sam said, "I'm going to bed. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow."

I watched TV until ten and then went to my room. I tossed and turned most of the night; Sam's plan invaded my sleep. I was sure we were about to make a huge mistake.

FIFTY-THREE

Early the next morning, Sam woke me out of my restless sleep. I felt groggy and disoriented.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“Paybackville,” Sam said.

“Huh? What?”

“Get up. It’s time for a little payback for Mr. Wilson.”

“Am I Dennis the Menace in this story?”

“I’m the menace. You’re her sidekick. Let’s call you, The Pest.”

“How about pestilence, like one of the four horsemen from the apocalypse?”

“We’re not ending the entire world, just Wilson’s.”

So Pest it was.

We went to Wake the Dead Breakfast Bar because Sam was intrigued by the name and also it fit the way she was feeling. She went over her plan once more as we ate. Sam could tell I wasn’t completely sold.

“You being nervous and looking jittery is going to blow this whole thing. Try to relax. Put on your best poker face. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Somebody might shoot and kill us?”

“There’s that,” Sam said and smiled. “I’m telling you, everything is going to be fine.”

I desperately wanted to believe her, but the little voice inside my head kept telling me something was about to go sideways.

We went to Tactical Guns and Gear because it opened first. Sam approached the counterman and gave him her best superior, smug attitude.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

“I certainly hope so,” Sam said. “I’m Special Agent Summers. This is my partner Special Agent Adams.” I flashed Sam’s Wisconsin State Private Investigator Shield. Sam showed him an ATF shield, leaving it open long enough for him to make sure he could read it.

The guy stood a bit straighter. “What’s this about?”

“What’s your name?” Sam asked.

“Tim. Tim Michaels.”

“Are you the manager?”

“Yeah.”

“How long have you worked here?”

“A couple of years.”

“Can you be more specific?” Sam asked.

“Ah, sure. I started in August. Two and a half years ago.”

Sam looked in my direction and said, “Good. That fits the timeframe.”

Michaels asked, “What timeframe?”

“How often do you speak to James Wilson?” Sam asked.

“Every day. Sometimes more. Why?”

“Are you aware of his background?”

“Sure. He was in the army before he bought this place. A lieutenant colonel.”

“Do you know why he was discharged from the army?”

“Said he was tired of the army life. Wanted to do something different with his.”

Sam looked my way and grunted a forced laugh. I returned it.

“Why are you laughing?” Michaels asked.

Sam pulled an article out of her inside jacket pocket, unfolded it, and handed it to Michaels. It was from a Stars and Stripes issue on the missing six M249 light machine guns and box of grenades. Sam had conveniently cut out the section that mentioned the weapons had been found.

When he finished reading the article, Michaels looked up, stunned. “Jim did this?”

Sam nodded. “We’re looking for the guns and grenades. Initially, we thought Wilson had nothing to do with it, but information has reached us that shows a connection of the missing arsenal directly to him.”

Michaels shifted his attention between Sam and me to see if we were pranking him. Sam squinted and gave him that hard stare that makes the person on the receiving end usually shrink.

Michaels shrank. “What does this have to do with me?” Michaels asked. His tone was a mixture of fear and defensiveness.

“We need to check your inventory. Make sure none of the items are on the premises.”

“Do you have a search warrant?” Michaels asked.

Sam turned to me and said, “He’s going to make this difficult.”

“Maybe we should tell him,” I said.

Sam acted as if she was giving my suggestion deep thought before she bobbed her head a single time. She turned back to Michaels and said, “We have information that Wilson has made contact with a terrorist group. They are planning to use the stolen

weapons on an attack someplace in the US, sometime soon. We're not sure where. Probably New York or LA. Although we've heard chatter that it could also be Chicago." She shrugged to emphasize her point.

"Jim? Really? He's a patriot."

"He's a patriot who's in debt up to his eyeballs," I said. "He's desperate."

"Jim?"

Sam looked at me and said, "I think you were going too fast for Mr. Michaels. He doesn't seem to be grasping the severity of the situation."

"But he's always talking about keeping America safe from Muslims," Michaels said. "Says we're at war with Islam."

To me, Sam said, "You're a Muslim. Are you at war with us?"

Michaels stepped back from the counter and studied me as if he could tell what faith I practiced by just looking at me.

"Not today, I'm not," I said and gave Michaels my best hard glare.

"Sorry," Michaels said. It sounded as if he had just drunk a glass of sand.

"Are the weapons here or not?" Sam said with a good deal of force. "We'd hate to have to arrest you as an accomplice."

Michaels shook his head so hard and fast it looked like he was mixing paint in his brain. He motioned for us to follow him into the back room.

Once we were in the back, Sam said to me, "You watch him. Make sure he doesn't run out of here or tries to shoot us."

Michaels froze.

I stared at him as if I expected him to bolt at any second. Sam came back three minutes later, and said, "They're not here," and walked out to the counter area.

She said to Michaels, "Thank you for your cooperation."

Michaels, unable to speak, nodded.

"We ask that you have no contact with Wilson, or communicate in any way with him until this matter has been resolved. Do you understand?"

One more nod from Michaels.

As we started to leave, he asked, "What should I do if he calls me, like he does every day?"

Sam looked at me as if I had the answer to his problem. I turned to Michaels and said, "If you talk to him, do not mention our being here or our conversation. We have a warrant. All of his phones are tapped."

Michaels nodded once more.

“You have a good day now,” Sam said, and we left.

FIFTY-FOUR

Our next stop was Paladin Gun Center. It was just after ten, and the place was rocking. We heard the guns' retorts as we opened the door. A tall young man was standing at the counter, talking to a squat guy with a shaved head in his mid-fifties behind it. They shared a laugh about something the older guy said, and then the young man paid for ammunition and a spot in the range. Sam stood at a short distance from the counter with her arms folded, tapping her foot impatiently. I stood at attention, my hands folded in front of my crotch looking very much like a secret service agent, or maybe it was more like a funeral director. Either way, I hoped I looked as intimidating as Sam. Who am I kidding? The Terminator doesn't look as intimidating as Sam.

Sam stepped forward as the young man moved away. She flashed her ATF badge one more time, as I did mine. "Special Agent Summers," Sam announced. She titled her head my way and added, "Special Agent Tariq Rashul."

"Yes? How can I help you?" the guy asked.

"You can start by telling us your name."

"It's Ben Harding. Why?"

"Because we're looking into the enterprises of one James Wilson. He does own this place. Correct?"

"Yes. What's this about?"

Sam pulled the article out of her coat pocket once more and handed it to Harding. His eyes grew wider with every line he read. "This can't be true."

Sam snatched the article back from him, and said, "I'm afraid it is. We suspect that Wilson is a secret terrorist sympathizer. These weapons were never accounted for, and we've heard chatter that he is in contact with a radical group planning an attack someplace in the United States." Sam let that sink in, before adding, "Do you have any knowledge of this?"

"What? Me? Uh-uh. No way. I'm an American. I'd never."

"That's what Benedict Arnold said too," I said. "Right up until the time he wasn't."

"You've got to be kidding me."

"We never kid," Sam said. "Have you seen any of the items listed in the article you just read?"

"Uh-uh. We only carry legal weapons. Handguns and rifles and a few products for self-defense. That's it."

“Would you be willing to show us your supply room?” Sam asked.

Harding looked at Sam then shifted his eyes to me. I could read the indecision raging inside his head – be a patriot and let us see the store’s inventory, or be a good employee and deny Sam’s request. He went with patriot.

Sam did a cursory inspection of the storage room, and we returned to the counter area.

“We’d appreciate it if you kept our little meeting to yourself,” Sam said. “It wouldn’t do us any good to have Wilson know he’s being investigated. As a patriot, we’re counting on you for your cooperation in this matter.”

Harding looked as if he had just been awarded the Medal of Freedom. “Whatever I can do to help.”

As we walked out, I took a look over my shoulder. Harding was slowly shaking his head in disbelief that he was working for a traitor.

FIFTY-FIVE

We drove to the Gun Store and Range. We'd called ahead first to make certain Wilson wasn't there. As we entered, we passed Charlie, the man Sam had the shooting contest with the last time we were present.

Sam nodded acknowledgment.

Charlie pivoted, not saying a word, watching Sam as she moved past him and into the store. I saw a spark of hatred in his eyes as if he'd spotted the Taliban lurking close by. As Sam walked toward the counter, I continued to watch Charlie. His eyes slid to me, and they narrowed. He abruptly turned and marched away.

I caught up to Sam and said, "Looks like you have another admirer. He couldn't take his eyes off you."

"I often got that same look from the most macho of guys at the police academy any time I beat them when we were at the range. Their male egos couldn't handle a girl beating them."

"You mean woman."

"I *was* a woman, but they saw me as a girl."

The guy behind the counter was the same one who was there the last time we'd stopped in and talked to Wilson.

"He's not here," he said when we got close.

"That's okay," Sam said. "We were in the area and thought we'd take a chance."

Sam stopped speaking but continued to stare at the guy. He grew uncomfortable.

"Is there something I can help you with?" he eventually asked.

"Did you know your boss is being investigated for what he did in the army?"

"Huh? What's that?"

Sam handed him the article.

He read it and handed it back. "That doesn't sound like Jim. He's as red, white, and blue as they come."

"He might have been. Now he's deep in debt. He can use every little penny that he can get his hands on. He's leveraged beyond his means, and lost \$500,000 in a scam that went bad."

"\$500,000?"

Sam asked, "What's your name?"

"Stew Stevens."

“I’m a private investigator. I was hired by the army to look into this.” Sam flipped the newspaper article up and down. “Your boss has been seen and heard talking to questionable people who wish to do our country harm. The machine guns and grenades have never been found. These people he’s been talking with would love to get their hands on them. Use the weapons in an attack on one of our major cities. We’re determined to stop him.”

Stew’s mouth hung open, and he stared in disbelief at Sam.

“That can’t be. I know him.”

“That’s what people said about Timothy McVey.”

That got a blank look from Stew, so Sam said, “The Oklahoma City bomber?”

“There was a bombing in Oklahoma City?”

Sam shook her head. “Do you have access to a computer?”

Stew nodded.

“Look it up.”

Stew turned to the computer sitting on the counter and started to type.

“Not now,” Sam said. “After we leave.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“We’d appreciate it if this conversation remained just between us three. We don’t want to spook Wilson and scare him off. But we thought you should know, so you have an idea of the kind of person you work for.”

It took a second for Stew to respond. “Yeah, sure. Thanks.”

As we walked out the door, I turned to see Stew hovered over the computer stunned at what he was reading.

FIFTY-SIX

“That went well,” I said as we drove away. “Think one of those guys will talk to him? Or did you put the fear of God into them so badly that they’ll keep their mouths shut?”

“Oh, he’ll find out, alright. Those three might not tell him directly, but they’ll talk to someone, who’ll talk to someone, who then talks to him. He’ll get the message.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” I mumbled.

“You’re such a wuss. What’s he going to do?”

“Shoot us, stab us, blow us up, poison us, infect us with the plague, smallpox, typhoid...”

“Don’t worry. We’re covered. Remember?”

“What do you want to do now?”

“Get something to eat and go back to our hotel and wait.”

So that’s what we did.

The next morning, Sam got a phone call from Jim Wilson. I could hear him shouting through the phone. Sam didn’t say much as he vented. She did give me an occasional smile: she was enjoying this way too much.

When she disconnected, she said, “He wants to meet at two this afternoon. Same place we met with the others the last time we were here.”

We had a date with destiny at two at the Lawrence Business Center. Sam checked her emails, made a few phone calls, and then we ate lunch at the Roost, ordering burgers and fries. I saw it as a fitting last meal. We stayed there until just past one-thirty and headed for the Lawrence Business Center.

We were shown into a small room with a square table, an office chair, and two cloth chairs in front of it. Wilson was already seated in the office chair, looking relaxed as if he didn’t have a care in the world. He motioned to the chairs, and we sat.

He stared at Sam for a long time before he asked, “Why are you spreading all of these false rumors about me? I fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. I would never betray my country. What happened with those weapons happened under my watch, but it was through the incompetence of men below me. Those weapons were recovered. All of them accounted for. But the army needed someone to blame, and I was it.”

Seeing the look on Sam’s face, he said, “But you obviously knew that already. So what’s behind this?”

“We know you hired Andrea Howard to track down Tony D’Aquisto and the Underhills. And seeing as you will probably never answer for those crimes, we thought you deserved a little justice for the deaths of two people you had a hand in killing. It would have been two more if we hadn’t moved quickly enough.”

Wilson’s smug smile told us Sam had been correct. But he refused to acknowledge it out loud.

Sam went on. “You knew her from your time together at Fort Benning, Georgia. She was a hell of a marksman. You also knew she was pissed that her request to join the Rangers was rejected because she was a woman. Did you stay in touch with her afterward?”

A staring contest broke out. I thought we’d be there until the sun set. Eventually, Wilson said, “I always thought it was a shame what the Army did to her. She was tougher than most of the men who came through there. She would have been a great Ranger. I told her that. Encouraged her to stay in the army, that one day, with where the military was headed, that they’d open a spot for her. But she didn’t want to wait. Thought by the time the army got around to it, she’d be too old. So she left after six years.

“Ironic, don’t you think? Two years later, the army changed its stance and agreed to let women join combat units. She was one of the best,” he repeated.

“You knew she’d become a contract killer,” Sam stated.

Wilson nodded. “Yeah. She contacted me one time and let it slip. She didn’t say it directly, but it was hard to miss the implication, all I had to do was read between the lines. Said she was putting the skills she learned in the army to good use. I knew that groups like Blackwater still refused to hire women, so I realized what she was doing. I did some research and saw how some very bad people were suddenly dying. Now that’s justice.”

“You had no trouble with her being judge and jury.”

“None whatsoever. She was still serving our country, just not in the way she had planned.”

“How much?”

“How much did she charge me? Not a penny. I offered her the money, but she said she felt like she owed me.”

“If she was such a patriot, what did you tell her to get her to do it?”

“Much the same thing you did. I said Conti and the Underhill’s were terrorist sympathizers. That they were running scams to get money to fund Jihadist groups. She was more than eager to help.”

“You don’t seem upset that she’s dead?” I said.

He shifted his attention to me. “She’s not. She survived. Her shoulder is busted up. So she’s learning to shoot left-handed. It may take a while, but I’m confident she’ll be just as good as before when she completely heals. She’s also learning to adjust to having only one good eye. That splinter of glass cost her the vision in her right eye. She’s really pissed at you two. Swears she’s going to get even someday. No matter how long it takes.” Wilson stood. “I hope you enjoy looking over your shoulder for the rest of your lives.”

The door swung open, and Assistant Director Jamison of the FBI walked into the room.

“And I hope you make great friends where you’re going,” Sam said.

Jamison read Wilson his rights as a second FBI agent cuffed him and perp-walked him out of the room.

Sam unbuttoned her blouse and removed the wire she was wearing. She handed it to Jamison and said, “It was beginning to itch. Thanks for your help.”

“No problem. Any time.”

“Do me one favor,” Sam said.

“What’s that?”

“Give Adrianna a raise. I think she’s earned it.”

Jamison chuckled. “I’ll see what I can do.”

We headed back to Milwaukee. Along the way, I asked, “Do you really think she survived the crash?”

“I guess we’ll find out when they’re finally able to search the bay. But it’s highly unlikely. She was hurt, and within minutes she’d have gone into hypothermia.”

The way Sam had said it, I knew there was something more. “What?” I asked.

“If what we’ve heard about her is correct, if anyone could have survived, she may have.”

“How do you think Wilson knew about the injuries if he wasn’t in contact with her?”

“He could have gotten it from the police report somehow.” She shrugged to indicate she wasn’t sure.

“He was pretty specific,” I said.

“Yeah, but he could have just made it all up to put me on edge. I’m not going to lose sleep over it.”

“Just be more vigilant?”

“I’m always vigilant. Haven’t you noticed?”

“Good point.”

We arrived at our loft just before one in the morning. Sam didn't say a word and went straight to her room. A few hours later, after I had just drifted off to dreamland, I heard her groaning and moaning. I tiptoed to her room and checked on her. She was crying and mumbling in her sleep, "No, don't hurt me anymore. Please don't hurt me anymore."

When I asked her the next morning how she had slept, she said, "Just fine."

I think she actually believed it.

Over the next few months, Sam – after deciding to keep her agency up and running – took on some high profile cases. We never discussed her moving out of our condo. Moreover, neither of us broached the subject of my feelings for her.

On those nights, when the nightmares returned, instead of crying herself back to sleep, she'd often crawl into my bed, and we'd cuddle. I'll settle for that.

GNM Books

Copyright© 2019 by R G Peterson

Tapped Out is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and events are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictionally. Any resemblance to actual event, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved

Cover Illustration by James A. Peterson

www.GNMBooks.com

Find us on Facebook @ GNM Books