

# Death of a Coupon Queen



JENNA  
HARTE

A Sophie Parker Coupon Mystery



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A SOPHIE PARKER COUPON MYSTERY

JENNA HARTE

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*To Sassy, a cat who's name fit her, and who  
I miss interrupting my writing to demand attention.*

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# Chapter One

“Hey, Warrior Princess.” AJ Devlin’s bright blue eyes and brilliant smile greeted me through the video on my phone. My heart did a little dance at the sight of him and the nickname he gave me after I saved his life, almost. It was amazing to me that my high school crush was now my boyfriend. Fairy tales do come true.

“Hey, Flyboy. Repo any planes today?” I gave him a nickname too. AJ made his living reposing airplanes, and in fact, that was how we’d reconnected after ten years apart. We ran into each other in the grocery store where he saved me from a coupon fiasco, and invited me to go flying. We didn’t get together right then. We might have, except for the fact that Joseph Cullen, the deadbeat debtor who AJ repoed the plane from was murdered, and both AJ and I were suspects. Being accused of murder puts a damper on romance.

“Not today. In fact, Patch and I are getting ready to head to Texas.”

I flopped back on the couch that doubled as my bed as my spirits sank. I’d hoped he be coming home tonight. “I thought the plane was in Florida?”

“It was. I guess he knew we were coming and he took off. We’ve tracked him to a private strip in Texas. We plan to steal it tonight.”

“Steal?”

“Repossess.” He grinned. “There will be skulking and sneaking involved to take it without him having a chance to escape. So, it’s like stealing.” There was a gleam in his eyes that suggested he was going to enjoy this adventure.

“Is Bull there with you?” Bull was built like a tank and worked with AJ at the repo firm run by a guy named Gordo. Bull was a good guy to have around if skulking and stealing were involved because his size and appearance lived up to his name.

“No. It’s just me and Patch. We’ll be okay, Soph. Don’t worry.”

“Who’s worried?” I was, but he didn’t need to know that.

He grinned. “How’s Dutch?”

Duchess or Dutch for short, AJ's Great Dane, stayed with his neighbor, Mrs. Kaczynski, when he was out of town. I usually tried to visit to make sure everything was okay since his neighbor was about as old as my great-aunt Rose, who I watched over because she was pushing ninety.

"She's fine. Did you know Mrs. Kaczynski lets Dutch sleep on the bed with her? How's that possible? Your dog is as big as a horse." More than that, I worried that Dutch might roll over and squash the poor woman to death.

AJ shook his head causing a strand of his dark auburn hair to fall on his brow. "I tell her not to do that, but you know Dutch. She always gets her way." More now that she saved both AJ's and my lives.

"Someday she might not want to go home with you again."

"You're right." He laughed. "So, what have you got planned today?"

"I'm taking Aunt Rose to enter one of her pies in the county fair, and then this afternoon I'm going to visit one of the ladies in my coupon group." Marla was the newest member of the group, and the greatest couponer to ever live, as far as I was concerned. I felt lucky that she'd agreed to mentor me. "She's going to teach me how to use shopping apps to save money."

AJ didn't roll his eyes, at least not outwardly. His expression suggested that on the inside, they made the full circuit in his sockets. "You have two jobs now, why do you need to become a coupon queen?"

"My library job is only part time, and I've got a few more weeks probation before they decide to keep me or not." I felt pretty confident Mrs. Wayland, the head librarian, would keep me on. My month-long program on King Arthur was a big hit with the kids. Of course, even if the library hired me, that didn't mean I'd get more hours. Being recently broke with debts meant I had to make money. "I can't quit working at the Booty Burgo until my finances are better."

"Will you keep the waitress outfit when you quit?"

I didn't hide my eye roll. "You like the wench uniform?"

His grin faltered a bit, suggesting he recognized that fantasizing about me in the skimpy pirate outfit wasn't a good thing. "Well . . . I like *you* in the wench outfit. You could wear it just for me."

I hated that outfit, and stopped wearing it the minute I stopped being a waitress to become a bartender. Still, I couldn't deny the titillating shiver that ran over my skin at the gleam in his eyes. I wouldn't call myself a raving beauty, but there were people of a certain generation who would look at my



petite stature, short dark curls, round cheeks and large eyes and tell me I looked like Betty Boop, especially in the wench outfit. It was a bit annoying; however, in this moment, I liked that AJ was attracted to me. So far, our relationship involved kissing . . . lots of kissing, but that was it. More and more, especially when he was out of town, our talks included innuendo suggesting we were both ready to go to the next level.

I gave him a coy smile. "Maybe just for you."

His grin widened, and because he had a spectacular smile, I was ready to give him whatever he wanted.

"When I get back, I'll make you dinner."

"Okay." I wasn't a big fan of AJ's cooking, but sometimes it was a nice change from the traditional southern fair Aunt Rose made. It was a wonder I could fit in my wench uniform with all the starch and gravy added to something fried in lard.

"Then maybe we can go skinny dipping." AJ owned a fixer-upper on the shore of Jefferson Lake. The house was a wreck, but the location couldn't be beat. And nothing was better than a cool swim on a hot summer night.

"Maybe."

"Then I can make you breakfast." He waggled his brows.

I huffed out a breath, because there was no way I could spend the night. "I can't leave Aunt Rose overnight."

I was sorry to see the excitement in his eyes dim. "Even one night?"

"She's started sleep walking. Once I found her putting her coat on at three in the morning." It was lucky I heard her before she walked out into the dark, and since then I'd been trying to think of ways to put a bell on her so I'd know when she was up in the middle of the night.

"Hey Devlin." A voice came through AJ's phone. He turned his head. "Be right there." When he turned back to me, a piece of his auburn hair dropped across his forehead and I wished I was there to push it back. "Sorry, Princess. I have to go. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Be safe, Flyboy." I put my fingers to my lips, kissing them and then blowing toward him. He winked, and then he was gone.

I sighed, a little annoyed at the limitations in my life as Aunt Rose's babysitter. At the same time, if I hadn't come back to Jefferson Grove to take over the care giving duties from my father who was now doing time for a Ponzi scheme, I'd have never run into AJ.

At first, being home was miserable. It wasn't easy being from a small town when your life is embroiled in scandal. Fortunately, after I helped the police solve Joseph Cullen's murder a few months ago, people in Jefferson Grove didn't seem suspicious of me in general. Even so, those who had jobs to fill didn't want to hire me just in case I was a thief like my parents and brother. Only the library took a chance on me, but let's face it, libraries didn't have a lot of money in the first place. I think it helped that the head librarian remembered me as her number one customer when I was a kid, which endeared me to her.

"Sophie?" Aunt Rose's shrill voice was followed by a bang on my bedroom door. "Stop making goo goo eyes at AJ and take me to the fair. This pie won't last forever."

I scanned my room to make sure it was clear of any sign I lived here, just how she liked it. "I'm coming." I bounded from the bed and opened the door. "Let me grab my keys and we'll go."

"It's about time." She grumbled as she made her way up the hallway. Aunt Rose was often a lesson in opposites. She was a slight woman with short silvery hair accented with lavender, who today she wore bright yellow pants, with a flowery shirt and her go-to accessory of pearls. Her sunny clothes were in contrast to her usually surly attitude. To be fair, after a bumpy start, Aunt Rose and I settled into an amicable relationship. Aunt Rose wasn't an easy housemate, but she'd been on my side when it counted during Cullen's murder investigation. In fact, she was actually entertaining when her sharp tongue was targeting someone else.

She still intimidated me, but every now and then I saw signs of a grandmotherly type. I'd never say that to her though because I was certain she'd deny it. She had a reputation to uphold.

The ride to the fairgrounds was uneventful for a drive with Aunt Rose. She fussed about the Snyder's gnome lawn decorations and the Thompson's unruly children whose bicycles were abandoned on the sidewalk. She had something to say about many of the stores we passed as we drove through town. At least she wasn't fussing about me.

I pulled through the fairground gates to the large building that housed the baking and art contests. The fair didn't officially start until tomorrow

evening, so the only people around were those dropping off their entries and fair ground staff. It was early in the day, but the heat and humidity were already building indicating it would be another hot sticky August day typical for Virginia.

"If this pie doesn't win first place, I'll know Carl is taking bribes. He's always been a cheater," Aunt Rose mumbled as she carried her pie toward the building. Aunt Rose's opinion of Carl Jackson wasn't new. He was always cheating at something, according to her. Usually it was at Bunko, which they played at the senior center. I had a feeling her dislike for him was deeper than cheating at dice. I wasn't brave enough to ask her about it though. Maybe I'd ask my dad the next time I went to visit him in prison.

"It's hard to imagine any pie better than yours, Aunt Rose." That was the truth. Aunt Rose's pies were famous in Jefferson Grove.

"I know it. You know it. The whole town knows it, except that dimwit cheater Carl Jackson."

I held the door open for Aunt Rose.

"Ah Rose, there you are. The fair wouldn't be the same without one of your wonderful pies." Mrs. Conner, a tall willowy 60-something woman, hurried toward us with a clipboard. "What is it this year? Blueberry? Pecan?"

"Huckleberry."

"Ah, did you pick them yourself?"

"Now do I look like I can go traipsing through the woods?"

Mrs. Conner's friendly expression faltered slightly. She took a breath then sighed. It was the response most people had to Aunt Rose's sharp tongue. "I don't know, Rose. You look healthy and spry to me."

"Well, I'm not. Sophie got them for me."

Aunt Rose left out the part where my huckleberry picking was a date with AJ. Although she wasn't as bent against me seeing him as she was at first, it wasn't something she advertised either. AJ was a Devlin, who came from a family with a reputation for trouble. AJ had never been the cause of trouble and his siblings hadn't either. Unfortunately, in the south, stories and traditions lasted forever, which meant AJ was often judged by the antics of his moonshining forefathers.

Mrs. Conner smiled at me. "It must be wonderful to have Sophie home."

"You know she had to come home because her dad's in prison. Someone has to look after her."

“Well, Rose, let me get your pie entered for you.” Mrs. Conner took the pie from Rose and set it on a table.

Aunt Rose wagged her wrinkled finger at her. “You keep an eye on Carl Jackson. I don’t trust him.”

“Yes, I know.” Mrs. Conner picked up her clipboard and started writing.

“If y’all know about him, why is he still a judge?” Rose’s face contorted into a scowl. It made her look a little bit like Yoda.

“I don’t know, Rose. You should take it up with the fair committee.”

“Bah.” Rose waved Mrs. Conner’s comment away. “They’re as corrupt as Carl.”

Rose took care of the paperwork to enter her pie and then we started back to my car.

“Rose, aren’t you lovely as ever.”

*Speak of the devil.* Carl Jackson walked toward us. I found something compelling about him, with his immaculate white suit, silver hair, sparkling blue eyes that hinted at mischief, and a white fedora. Not many men wore hats like that anymore. To Aunt Rose though, he was pond scum.

“Don’t talk to me Carl unless you’re apologizing.”

He smiled, more amused than annoyed. I didn’t know Carl well, but every time I saw him around Aunt Rose, I got the feeling he purposefully poked at her. He appeared to enjoy it.

He took his hat off and nodded in a slight bow. “What do I need to apologize for this time?”

“For being born.”

“I think I’ve already apologized for that. Several times.”

Aunt Rose made a “fttt” sound.

He smiled and put his hat back on. “You’re here to drop off your pie?”

“Yes. And if I don’t win, I’ll blame you, Carl.”

“Of course, Rose.” He winked at me. He acted nice enough and my curiosity about Aunt Rose’s hate for him grew. He was a widower for many years and a part of me wondered if his continued poking at Aunt Rose was a sign that he liked her, in the same way schoolboys pull little girls’ braids. I pushed that thought away. Rose wasn’t the type of woman to endear men to her.

“And you, Miss Sophie, how are you?” Carl asked me.

“I’m fine.” I might have said more, but talking too much with Carl might

make Rose mad, and since I had to live with her, I opted to keep my comments short.

“And your family?”

“Now why would you ask about them?” Rose thwapped Carl on the chest. “You know they’re in prison.”

“Just making conversation, Rose.”

“Well stop it. Come on Sophie. I’m too old to waste what remaining time I have left on the likes of him.”

He nodded, still smiling, eyes still twinkling. “As always Rose, it’s been a pleasure.”

As we drove back to town, I battled with myself about whether or not to ask about Carl. Sometimes talking to Aunt Rose was like poking a snake. It was usually better to not do it. Still, her hate for him was so over the top and yet, he clearly found her amusing.

“I know you’ve taken a shine to AJ Devlin, Sophie, but if you ask me, men aren’t worth two seconds of your time,” Aunt Rose said from the passenger side of the Brown Bomber, my thirty-year old Volvo wagon.

“Oh? All men or just Carl?” I held my breath in case she was about to strike.

“Don’t get me started on Carl Jackson. He’s the worst of all.”

I turned my blinker on as I approached our street. “Maybe you shouldn’t play Bunko with him anymore.”

“I like Bunko. He’s the one who shouldn’t play. He shouldn’t judge pie contests either. I think that old wife of his burnt his taste buds away before she died.”

I couldn’t figure out what to say to that. Since we were home, I didn’t have to respond.

I checked my watch and determined I should get my coupons and head out if I was going to get to Marla’s on time. “I’m going to see one of the ladies in my coupon group. Do you need anything while I’m out?”

Aunt Rose picked up the remote and plopped down in her chair turning on a game show. She waved a hand toward me, which meant don’t bother her. I went to my room and grabbed my coupon binder since Marla always let me look through her coupons when I was there.

I made my way to the front door. “I’ll be home in a few hours, then I have my coupon group tonight.”

“Don’t know why you bother with all that Sophie, but if it keeps you out of trouble, then okay.”

## Chapter Two

Monticello Heights was a gated community sitting on a hill just outside and looking over Jefferson Grove. The most affluent of the town's folk lived there. A few homes were weekend escapes for the rich who wanted to get out of Washington, D.C. or Richmond to enjoy the nature of the Blue Ridge and Appalachia. I grew up in this neighborhood, but now an invite was required to get through the guard at the gate.

Marla lived on a cul-de-sac that butted up against the woods. Her street was quiet as most people were at work. A Mason Landscaping truck was parked two houses down from Marla's. As I pulled into the driveway, Ellie Tappen, Marla's neighbor, came down her drive toward her mailbox.

As I got out of my car, she called, "Hello Sophie."

"Mrs. Tappen. How are you?"

"Oh, I can't complain."

That was the funny thing about Ellie versus Aunt Rose. My great-aunt had a pretty good life, but always found something to complain about. Ellie and her husband lost money investing with my father in what turned out to be a Ponzi scheme. Fortunately, she was smart enough to stay diversified, so she retained enough of her wealth to stay in her home. But, not long after losing the money, her husband suffered a debilitating stroke, and she now spent her days caring for him.

Despite all the hardship, she was always friendly and in good spirits. She didn't get out much, nevertheless, she always looked like she was ready for company. Her gray hair was combed into a sleek bob, and her makeup was fresh including bright red lipstick.

She walked up to me after getting her mail and glanced toward the Marla's house. "You're good friends with Mrs. Naylor?"

"We're in a coupon group together." I couldn't say we were good friends. I liked Marla, and I'd learned a lot about couponing from her. However, after all the time I'd spent under her tutelage, I didn't feel I knew her very well.

She and her husband moved to the area from Pennsylvania after they won the lottery. I'd never met anyone who won more than two dollars from the lottery. Marla and her husband won enough that they didn't have to work. She certainly didn't have to coupon, and yet she did.

Her husband was gone a lot visiting his family back home in Pennsylvania. Apparently, his mother was ill and he had to attend to her. It was odd that Marla never went with him, but you never knew about families.

"Why do you ask?"

"Oh well, it's none of my business, but she's so quiet. And that husband of hers is never here. I've tried to be friendly, but she keeps to herself."

That was my impression too. Except for the coupon group.

"And coupons. What need does she have for coupons? She's got enough money to buy this town." Ellie's face squinted into a look of confusion.

"Really? That much?" I couldn't understand why someone with all that money would decide to come to Jefferson Grove. Sure, it was a nice town, but it wasn't the Riviera.

"Well, I don't know the exact amount. Powerballs are usually big pots."

"I think she just enjoys couponing."

"Why?"

I shrugged. "The challenge of it, maybe."

"Huh. Did Rose enter a pie in the fair this year?"

I nodded. "Huckleberry."

"Sounds delicious. I wonder what Carl Jackson will think." She gave me a little nod and wink.

I laughed. Aunt Rose's beef with Carl was well-known throughout the county. "Yes, she does have a problem with him. I'm not sure why."

"Well it's on account that when Carl left for the military fifty years ago, he and Rose were engaged. When he came home, he had a wife."

How had I never heard that before? "Really?"

"Oh yes. At least that's what I heard. No one talks about it. No one wants to get on Rose's bad side, as I'm sure you know."

Oh, I know. Now I understood why Aunt Rose was bitter. I hadn't been seeing AJ for very long, but if he flew home from one of his repos with a wife, I'd be bitter too. Especially if we were engaged. "Sounds like she has a good reason to dislike him."

"She definitely knows how to hold a grudge."



I laughed. "Yes."

"It's sad too. You know she never married. I don't think she ever dated even. I think Carl was the love of her life."

That *was* sad.

"Now she has you. It's good that you're home." Ellie patted my forearm.

"Thank you."

"Well, I'll let you go. Say hello to Rose for me."

"I will."

I wanted to ponder the idea that Aunt Rose was once engaged to her nemesis, but that would have to wait. When it came to couponing, I had to put all my focus into it. Granted, it wasn't necessary to be rocket scientist-smart to succeed at discount shopping; however, couponing did have many moving parts. It was much more than simply saving fifty cents off toothpaste. There was matching, stacking, doubling, and checking the sales circular.

This week's lesson was going to be on using smartphone apps to save, which I was pretty excited about. I didn't like cutting, sorting, and culling coupons. I didn't have a computer or printer to download and print coupons. I especially didn't like lugging my coupon binder around the store. Not that the apps would replace coupons entirely. At least not in the short run. Still, I wanted all the resources I could get my hands on. My financial situation was tight and unless the library came through with more hours, I was stuck with a dead-end job bartending at the Booty Burgo. When I'd left for college to study folklore, I didn't have a clear vision of my future career, nevertheless, serving beer at a pirate themed sports bar wasn't something I'd ever thought I'd be doing.

I walked up the brick path edged with mums Marla recently planted in preparation for fall. Marla had become quite the gardener since moving to Jefferson Grove. She told me once that having money wasn't as easy as she expected because without work, she got bored. Having grown up with money, I'd always been able to keep myself occupied, so I didn't quite understand her difficulty.

To fill her time, she continued with her couponing, spending as much as 20 hours a week researching, clipping, matching, and preparing elaborate shopping plans. The rest of the time she gardened.

I knocked on the front door and waited. After a few moments, I knocked

again, peeking through the side window to see if she heard me. A lawn mower was cutting grass nearby, but it wasn't loud enough to drown out my knocking.

I rang the doorbell and then peeked again. The house was quiet. Eerily so. I frowned and tried to think of where she might be. Maybe she was in her vegetable garden. That had been her biggest endeavor and it was impressive. She hadn't bought a single vegetable all summer, instead harvesting her own. Admittedly, home grown were much better than store bought, and I briefly considered starting a garden myself, but I wasn't sure Aunt Rose would approve of me digging up her yard, and I didn't have the kind of free time Marla had to invest in gardening.

I rounded the back of the house and looked over to the vegetable garden. It took up much of the yard running from the other side of the house towards the back woods. It formed a natural barrier between Marla and Ellie's house.

The tomatoes were dripping off the vines. She had most other salad fixings including carrots and bell peppers. Plus, there was squash, eggplant (yuck), beets (double yuck), and green beans. Not far from the garden she had a few apple trees that were bearing fruit as well. However, I didn't see Marla.

I stepped onto the back patio and peered through the French doors. The house was dim, with the only light filtering in from outside. The area immediately inside the doors, Marla kept clear. She had told me that she liked to open the doors early in the morning and do yoga in that spot. Right now, it was empty.

Beyond the empty space was a large open living area. The back of a couch faced the French doors, and bookending each side were oak tables. I knew from being there before that there was a coffee table and a matching love seat on the other side of the couch.

I scanned the living area and then strained to see the formal dining room that Marla used as her coupon office. On first pass, I didn't see anything. I looked again and my eyes stopped on a heap on the floor by her couch. Marla was a meticulous housekeeper, which made it odd to see something cluttering the floor. I squinted to get a better look and realized it wasn't a heap. It was two feet.

Why would she be laying on the floor in front of her couch? Did she lose something under it? Except, she wasn't moving. A sick feeling formed in the

pit of my stomach.

I knocked on the square pane of the door. “Marla?”

Nothing.

I rapped a little harder. “Marla!”

Again, nothing. I looked to the right and left. I’m not sure why. Maybe to see if the landscaper or Ellie was there to help. I was on my own. I tested the door. It was locked.

“Marla.” I knocked again but there was no movement. I scanned the patio and saw a small shovel like tool sitting on the outdoor table. I picked it up and hit the glass pane just over the door handle. The glass shattered inside her yoga area. I reached through, unlocked the handle and opened the door. I stepped over the glass and hurried toward the couch.

“Marla!” I rounded the couch and my heart stopped.

Blood. Everywhere . . . blood. It looked like someone had turned on a hose and sprayed it all over Marla’s rug and couch. It covered the coffee table and some even made it on the opposite couch.

And in all the blood, Marla lay on the floor, with her coupon sheers sticking out of the side of her neck.

I covered my mouth, either to keep the scream in or my breakfast down. *Oh God, oh God*, ran like a mantra through my brain.

I poked the bottom of Marla’s flat covered foot with the toe of my shoe, praying that she would open her eyes. In the back of my mind, I knew she wouldn’t. There was a lot of blood. Too much blood.

I staggered back, my mind reeling. It took a moment for me to get my bearings. Finally, I did, and pulled my phone from my purse to call 9-1-1.

## Chapter Three

“Let’s go over it again.” Sergeant Lawson Davis scowled down on me as I sat with my head between my knees on the bench in Marla’s front yard.

“Why don’t you ever believe me?” This wasn’t the first time I’d been questioned by Sergeant Scowl, as I called him. He didn’t buy my story then either.

“I just want to make sure I’ve got it down right.”

“Maybe you should record me, so I don’t have to keep repeating myself.” I sat up, discovering annoyance and frustration was an effective remedy to panic and nausea. He was the epitome of a bulldog sheriff’s investigator with his buzz cut, square jaw, and signature scowl.

He ignored my comment. “What time did you get here?”

“Around twelve thirty.”

“She was expecting you?”

“Yes. She was teaching me about coupons.”

“What did you do when you got here?”

I told him what I’d said just a few minutes before. “I knocked on the door. When she didn’t answer, I went around back thinking she might be in her garden. When she wasn’t there, I looked in the window and saw her lying by the couch.”

“How’d you get in?”

“I broke the window because the door was locked.” I was concerned that he’d arrest me just for that, but what else could I have done? She might have needed help.

“Did you touch her? Move anything?”

“I ah . . . yes. I think I touched her foot to see if she was . . . if she’d move.”

“What else did you touch?”

“Besides the door? Nothing.” I always thought it was strange that witnesses couldn’t remember details of what they’d seen. Now I knew why. I couldn’t

wrap my brain around this whole situation.

“How about when you got here? Did you see anyone?”

“No one suspicious. I spoke to Ellie, her neighbor, for a couple of minutes. The landscaper was mowing a few doors down.”

Sergeant Scowl jotted in his notebook. “So, you’ve been here before?”

“Yes.”

“Would you know if anything was missing?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe in the living area and the dining room she used as her office. Her husband . . .” I looked up at him. “He’s out of town. Have you called him?”

“Don’t worry about that, Ms. Parker. Would you notice if anything was missing?”

“Like I said, maybe in the living area or her office. Those are the only places I ever saw.”

“Let’s look.”

“Now?” I didn’t want to go back in the house. Marla was still there, although there were a host of law enforcement people as well.

“You got some place to go?”

I wasn’t sure if he was poking at me or asking a real question. “No, I . . . I’ve never seen a dead person before.” Just then, two men wheeled a gurney with a long dark bag on it out the door. I began to shake as I watched them wheel Marla’s body toward an ambulance.

Sergeant Scowl put his hand on my head and pushed. “Put your head down. You’re looking green again.”

“Why would someone kill her?” I managed.

“That’s what we’ll find out.”

The gurney passed by.

“That’s not Mrs. Naylor is it?”

I looked up to the new voice and saw Junior Junior Mason of Mason Landscaping. Junior Junior was nearing forty, and handsome with a deep tan from working outside, dark hair peppered with gray, and a sculpted goatee with moustache. His father, Junior Mason, had started the business, and was now retired leaving it to Junior Junior to run.

“Junior Junior,” Sergeant Scowl said by way of a greeting. “Do you know Mrs. Naylor?”

Junior Junior’s brows drew down and he bit his lip. “So, it is her?”

Sergeant Scowl gave a curt nod. "Did you know her?"

Junior Junior swallowed and nodded. "When?"

"Sometime this morning. Did you see anything?"

He was shaking his head before Sergeant Scowl was done asking the question. "I was here."

"Here as in the house?"

"No." Junior Junior pointed to Marla's other neighbor. "The Tisdales. Tuesdays is the Tisdales."

"Did you see anything suspicious?"

He looked at me and then back at Sergeant Scowl. "No, sir."

"Will you be around a bit, Junior Junior? I'd like to talk to you more."

"Yah sure." Junior Junior seemed a bit disjointed about the news. I couldn't blame him. It wasn't every day you were close to murder.

Sergeant Scowl returned his attention to me. "Now that she's gone, I want you to look and see if anything is missing."

I sat up and blew out a breath. "Yah, okay." I followed Sergeant Scowl into the house and did my best to not look at the large blood splattered all over her carpet and furniture. I scanned the living room but wasn't sure I'd be able to notice if something was gone. The stuff of value; her TV and DVD player were still there. She had some figurines and other doodads, but I didn't know if they were worth stealing. If they were, whoever killed her left them behind.

I went to her coupon office. I knew this area better because I'd spent several hours over the last few weeks at the table learning everything there was to know about coupons. On the far side of the room was a file cabinet filled with coupon circulars. She had a cutting board, a computer, and printer, all dedicated to coupons sitting on a desk. What I didn't see were the two large coupon binders she owned. I scanned the room, thinking maybe she'd put them on a shelf.

"Her coupon binders are gone."

"Coupon binders?"

I turned to him. "She organized all her coupons in them. She had two that I know of."

"Coupon binders." Sergeant Scowl's features were skeptical. "Are they valuable?"

I shrugged. "In the right hands, with someone who knows how to use

them, they can save a lot of money.”

“How much money?”

“I don’t know.” Although I’d had plenty of time to study Marla’s coupons, I’d never tried to determine how many she had or what they were worth. I scanned my brain in an attempt to do just that. “Couple thousand dollars maybe.”

Sergeant Scowl sputtered. “Couple thousand in coupons?”

“She had a lot of coupons and knew how to get the most bang for her buck. That file cabinet is filled with them too.”

Sergeant Scowl walked over to the cabinet and with his glove-covered hand opened the top drawer. He turned to me. “This isn’t ‘filled’”

I frowned as I walked to the cabinet and peered in. He was right. Most of the contents were gone.

“Normally this is filled with folders that have coupon circulars organized by date,” I explained to him.

Sergeant Scowl stared at me like I was speaking Greek. “Would she keep them somewhere else?”

“I don’t know. The binder could be in her car, but she knew I was coming. I think she’d have them here. She usually let me look through them. She was pretty generous in sharing her coupons.”

Sergeant Scowl crossed his burly arms over his barrel of a chest. “It doesn’t look good, Ms. Parker.”

“I know. She’s dead.”

“I don’t mean for Mrs. Naylor, I mean for you.”

My head snapped up. “Me? Why?”

“For one, you’ve broken into her home. You’re prints are on the door. My guess is your prints will be all over this coupon area, and her coupons are gone.”

“You think I killed her over coupons? And why would I break in if I was already invited over?” And why was this happening to me again?

“Murderers aren’t always rational.”

“Neither are cops,” I muttered to myself. “I didn’t kill her. I called 9-1-1. Why would I do that if I killed her?”

“You’re forgetting that Mr. Cullen’s murderer called 9-1-1 too.”

Oh yeah. “Are you arresting me?”

“Not yet.”

Not again.

His steely gaze bore down on me. "Tell me again, when did you get here?"

I wanted to yell in his ear, because clearly, he wasn't paying attention. "Around twelve thirty."

"Where were you before that?"

"I was home and then I took Aunt Rose to the fairgrounds to deliver her pie."

"Anyone see you?"

"Yes. Aunt Rose was home with me. We saw Mrs. Conner and Mr. Jackson at the fairgrounds."

Sergeant Scowl pulled out his notebook again and scrawled something down. "Do you have any idea who'd want to hurt Mrs. Naylor?"

I shook my head. "She was quiet and pretty much kept to herself."

"She never mentioned any trouble with anyone? Her husband?"

I scanned my brain for anything that she might have said at coupon group or while I was spending time with her, but she never gave off a vibe that she was in trouble. "No."

"Okay. You can go, but I might want to talk with you again. Oh, and I want your shoes and clothes."

My jaw dropped. "Right now?"

Sergeant Scowl rolled his eyes. "I'm not asking you to undress right here, Ms. Parker. I'll send a deputy to follow you home. Put the clothes and shoes in the paper bag she'll give you and she'll bring it in to evidence."

I didn't understand. They didn't take my clothes when Mr. Cullen was killed. "I didn't do it."

"If the M.E.'s report confirms the estimated time of death between eight and ten, and your alibi checks out, you'll be in the clear."

"Why do you have to take my clothes?"

"Because I do." He said it the same way my mother used say, "Because I said so."

"You don't believe me."

He heaved in and then blew out a breath. "Actually, I do believe you. But it's my job to collect evidence. You admit to breaking into the house and touching her—"

"Just her foot—"

"All the same, I have to collect everything that could be related. I can see



that odds are you didn't kill her." His gaze took my shirt and pants. Not in a pervy way, but in a cop's assessment kind of way.

"You can?"

"Whoever killed Mrs. Naylor would have had blood all over them."

That was an image I didn't want in my head. I blew out a breath, a little relieved that Sergeant Scowl didn't think I was the murderer. And yet, I couldn't completely trust him to let me off the hook.

I'd just driven out of the gate of Monticello Heights when my cell phone rang. I poked the answer and speakerphone buttons. "Hello."

"Oh my God, is it true?" Lani's voice hissed through the phone. Lani was my best friend in high school and my first friend after I returned home to Jefferson Grove. She worked at the sheriff's department, so it was no surprise that the news about Marla had reached her.

"Yes."

"I can't believe it. Who'd want to hurt Marla?"

With both hands on the wheel, I continued down the hillside towards the center of town pondering the same question. "I don't know. Her coupon circulars and binders are missing."

"What? She was killed for coupons?"

"I don't know. Sergeant Scowl asked me to look around and they weren't there."

"Maybe they're in her car?"

"I don't think so. Marla knew I was coming. Although our focus for today's tutorial was on shopping savings through phone apps, she always let me rifle through her coupons when I was there. I couldn't imagine she wouldn't have had them in the house."

"I still don't get who'd want to kill Marla. She was always so nice," Lani said.

"I don't know."

"It must be her husband. Except for the group, I got the feeling she didn't know anyone else in town."

"Her husband is out of town." I explained. "If you think about it, we didn't really know her. She was always nice and helpful, but I don't remember her ever sharing anything deep about her life."

"I guess she didn't. And if she did, it would have been with you because you spent the most time with her." Lani was silent for a moment. "How did it happen?"

"Someone stabbed her in the neck with her coupon scissors."

"Ew . . . oh God."

That had been my response at finding her.

"What did Sergeant Davis say?" Lani asked.

"He just asked me about her and if I thought anything was missing. I think I'm on his suspect list again." I checked my review mirror to see if the deputy Sergeant Scowl had sent to get my clothes was still behind me. She was; fortunately, not on my tail. I didn't want the whole town thinking one more of my family was on the way to jail.

Lani laughed. "You have to admit, it's strange that you'd be at the scene of two murders in as many months."

I thought it was strange to have been at *one* murder, much less two. Didn't most people go through life never having been around murder? "Bad juju I guess."

"Well, I'm sure you're just a witness."

"Then why does he want my clothes?"

"What?"

"He's making me give him my clothes."

Lani was silent for a moment and it gave me a sinking feeling.

"Did you get blood on them?"

"Not that I can see." I glanced down just to be sure.

"Then I'm sure it's routine. I'm no expert, but I've heard that stabbing in the neck is quite messy. Chances are the killer got blood all over them."

"Then why take my clothes? I don't have blood on me." I turned on my blinker to make the right turn into Aunt Rose's neighborhood.

"Actually, that could be a good thing."

"I can't imagine how."

"When the killer goes to court, his attorney might try to blame you since you were there. Since your clothes will be taken and tested, it will prove it wasn't you. Davis is being thorough. I know you don't like him, but he's a good cop."

I had to give her that. He did save my life a few months back.

In the background I heard someone talking.

“Oh hey . . . I’ve gotta run. I’ll see you at coupon group tonight?” Lani asked.

“I’ll be there.”

As I drove toward Aunt Rose’s house, I wondered if I should tell her about Marla, assuming the Jefferson Grove grapevine hadn’t notified her yet. She’d have the same response as Lani. I could already hear Aunt Rose’s voice, “How do you keep getting yourself involved in murder, Sophie?” I wondered the same thing.

The first time I got embroiled in murder, it was dumb luck. Although, since the victim had turned my father into the Feds for running a pyramid scheme, the cops might have coming knocking on my door anyway, whether I’d been at the scene or not. However, in that case, I’d have had an alibi. Instead of being at the airport with AJ when Mr. Cullen was murdered, I’d have been home with Aunt Rose.

I couldn’t complain too much about the situation. Had I not gone with AJ that day, he and I might not be an item now. I’ve come out the other end unscathed and with a fine beau.

What was strange about Marla’s murder, compared to Mr. Cullen’s, was that, as far as I knew, there wasn’t anything in her life that would lead someone to kill her. There were many people who didn’t shed a tear when Mr. Cullen died.

Marla, on the other hand, was quiet, and except for the coupon group, kept to herself, preferring to putter around her home and garden. Why would anyone want to kill her for that?

My research into sleuthing the last time taught me that money was a big motivator for murder. Marla was newly rich from winning the Powerball in Pennsylvania, where she and her husband lived before coming to Jefferson Grove. I suppose that would make her husband a suspect since he’d get all the money, except he was out of town.

As I turned on to my street, I shook my head of thoughts of solving a murder. Sergeant Scowl might think that my finding Marla’s body suspicious, but I had an alibi this time. Aunt Rose, Carl Jackson and Mrs. Conner saw me at the fairgrounds. That meant, I didn’t have to sleuth to clear my name. Instead, I could think about what to do to help Marla’s husband. Perhaps the ladies of the coupon group could make him freezable dinners or assist in setting up a memorial.

I pulled the Brown Bomber into Aunt Rose's driveway. I left my coupon gear in the car since I'd be going to group a little bit later.

The deputy got out of the car and walked with me up to the door. I might have wanted to put off telling Aunt Rose what was going on, but with a deputy in tow, I had no choice, I had to let her know what happened.

I opened the door. "Aunt Rose?"

I was met with silence. I went to the entry table and saw a note that said she was at Betty's house. Hallelujah. Of course, it didn't say when she'd be back.

"My room is this way." I hurried down the hall.

I changed my clothes, giving the deputy the ones I was wearing. She put them in a brown bag, then I rushed her to the front door and out, hoping Aunt Rose wasn't on her way back.

Of course, I'd have to tell her what happened, but it would be better without a sheriff's deputy hanging around asking me for evidence.

# Chapter Four

Later that evening, I parked the Brown Bomber in front of Aggie Parnell's home. It was her week to host to the coupon group. There were six of us, well, now five, in the group, and each member took turns hosting the meeting. Since Aunt Rose didn't want any part of "coupon nonsense," I held my meetings at the library, which fortunately was open later in the evenings on our coupon nights. Marla was new to the group, and only hosted the meeting once.

The red Mercedes parked in front told me my nemesis, Vivie Danner, was already there, most likely with her sister Tracy. A few months ago, I discovered that Tracy was probably having an affair with Vivie's husband, Randy. It might seem mean of me not to say anything to Vivie, but to be honest, I wasn't sure she'd believe me if I did. Vivie has had it in for me since high school, when I dated Randy for a week. Ten years later, she continued to hold a grudge, even though she'd been broken up with Randy at the time I saw him, and he and I were done nearly as quickly as we started. It wasn't likely he'd ask me out again after I kneed him in the family jewels. It was less likely I'd say yes if he did.

Randy was my boss right now, and I needed the job. I didn't want to do anything that might get me fired, which is why I kept my mouth shut about him and Tracy. I've had a few moments over the last couple of months when I've felt bad about keeping the secret, and then Vivie would say or do something that reminded me that I didn't owe her anything.

I pulled my coupon binder out of the car and slung the strap over my shoulder. Closing the door of the Brown Bomber, I headed up the sidewalk toward Aggie's house. I walked past Vivie's Mercedes glancing in the passenger window as I did. I took two more steps before what I saw registered in my mind. I stopped, took two steps back, and looked again. In the front seat were Marla's two binders. I shook my head because it couldn't be right. I leaned closer, tilting my head to the side to get a better look. They

were the same size and color as Marla's coupon binders. I straighten as I processed what this meant. I didn't like Vivie. She was mean as a snake. But I found it hard to believe she was a murderer. And yet, there were Marla's binders in the front seat of Vivie's car.

"You're not keying my car, are you Sophie?" Vivie's voice came from Aggie's front porch.

I turned to look at her. I was probably gaping. I certainly didn't know what to say.

Her eyes narrowed. "What's wrong with you?" She strode down Aggie's front walk toward me. Her fake blonde ponytail swishing behind her. Vivie was the clichéd soccer mom with perfect make-up and nails, the tone body from hours a day at the gym, and casual clothes that cost more than the Brown Bomber.

I pointed toward her car window. "Those are Marla's coupon binders."

She stopped short; panic flashed in her eyes. "No."

I nodded. "Yes. They are. Why do you have Marla's binders?"

Vivie looked back toward Aggie's front door, and then hurried toward me. "She gave them to me."

I shook my head. "No, she wouldn't have."

Vivie was charging toward me. The fierceness in her eyes had me stepping back. After all, she may have killed Marla for coupons. If that was true, she'd have no problem killing me. I had the feeling she had liked Marla. I knew she hated me.

I glanced around to see if anyone would notice if she attacked me. Except for a few kids playing kickball several houses up the street, no one was around. "Geez Vivie, did you kill her? For coupons?"

She stopped short. "What? No." She glanced around too, probably wondering who'd heard me. "I didn't kill her. I told you she gave—"

"Why would she give you her main binders? That makes no sense." I should be calling Sergeant Scowl.

"Sophie." Vivie hissed. "I didn't kill her." She leaned closer to me. "She was already dead."

My stomach twisted. "What?"

She huffed out a breath. "I went to visit her and she was already dead." She straightened and pushed a loose blonde tendril of hair out of her face. "She wasn't going to use them."

I had a strong urge to punch Vivie. Who did that? Steal from a dead person? “That’s sick.”

Vivie pursed her lips at me. “Like you wouldn’t want her coupons.”

“When I found her, I called the police. That’s what normal people do, Vivie.”

“Good for you miss goodie two-shoes. What does it matter? Whether I call or you call.”

“It matters because when the police asked me if anything was missing, I told them her coupon binders were gone.”

It took a second for the meaning to register with Vivie. “I didn’t kill her.”

As if on cue, a sheriff’s SUV pulled up behind my car.

“You called the cops?” Vivie eyes widened in fear.

“No.”

“You hate me that much you’d send me to jail.” She hissed.

“No.”

“Then why are they here?”

I glanced at Sergeant Scowl as he got out of the SUV. “Probably to interview Marla’s friends and to ask if we know about her missing coupons. He’s investigating a murder and we knew her.”

Panic shone in Vivie’s eyes as she reached out and grabbed my arm. Her fingers ground deep; I was sure I’d have bruises. “Sophie, I swear to God, I didn’t touch Marla.”

Funny thing was, I believed her. Vivie was greedy enough to steal from a dead person, but I couldn’t imagine her killing anyone. At least not in the way Marla was killed. Vivie struck me more as the type who’d poison someone.

“Good evening ladies.” Sergeant Scowl strode toward us.

Vivie turned her body to block her car window. She put on a big smile that probably helped her get her way in life. “Sergeant Davis. How are you this evening?”

His eyes studied Vivie, probably wondering why she acted chipper considering a friend of hers was just murdered. “I understand you ladies are part of a couponing group that Marla Naylor belonged to.”

Vivie’s face dropped to feign the appropriate sadness. “Such a tragedy. I introduced her to the group. Didn’t I Sophie?”

I nodded. Vivie lived in the name neighborhood as Marla and had

befriended her. I'm not sure they would have been such great friends if not for Marla's couponing expertise, but that didn't change the fact that Vivie had introduced Marla to the group.

"What's going on?" Aggie's voice called from the front step. "Sergeant Davis?"

"Yes, ma'am, Mrs. Parnell."

Aggie was the matriarch of our group. She old enough to be our mother, and most of us had had her as a teacher in elementary school. She was tall and robust, with dark skin, short white hair, and a no-nonsense attitude that often made me think of Tyler Perry's Madea.

She made her way down the steps and behind her Tracy, Vivie's sister, and Lani and Gwen, the other members of the group followed. "Is there a problem?"

"He's here about Marla." Vivie's voice was calm, as if she hadn't a care in the world.

"Terrible, terrible thing about Marla. She was such a sweet woman." Aggie shook her head.

"Is this everyone from your group?" Sergeant Davis' eyes scanned each of us.

"Yes." I wasn't sure if Aggie spoke for the group because it was her house or because she was like a mother hen to us.

"When was the last time you saw Mrs. Naylor?" He looked at Aggie when he asked.

"I saw her last week at our coupon group. It was at Lani's house." Aggie nodded toward Lani.

"Me too," Gwen chimed in. Gwen would have been striking even without the severe dark bob with purple tips. She was about six feet tall and not afraid to say what she meant.

"I ran into her at the nursery two days ago," Lani stated. Of all of us, Lani was the most attractive, with her exotic cat-shaped green eyes, caramel skin that hinted at her mix-raced parentage, and her million-watt smile. I was sure she could have been a model if she wanted. Instead, she stayed in Jefferson Grove, marrying her high school sweetheart, Dwayne, and working in the sheriff's department where Dwayne was a deputy.

"I saw her two days ago. She was helping me with my coupons." I'd already said this to him, but it couldn't hurt to remind him.



"And you, Mrs. Danner?"

Vivie flinched. "Me . . . ah . . . last week at the coupon group. Just like Aggie and Gwen."

"I was there too." Tracy's sideways glance at Vivie made me wonder if she knew Vivie had taken the coupon binders.

"You all are sure about that?" Sergeant Scowl asked all of us, but his beady eyes stayed on Vivie.

No one said a word, as we all looked at one another.

"Sophie was there today," Vivie blurted out.

*Really?* She was going throw me under the bus when I knew she had Marla's binders in her car?

"I've already taken Ms. Parker's statement." He looked at each of us and then returned his gaze onto Vivie. "And you Mrs. Danner. Are you sure the last time you saw Mrs. Naylor was last week?"

Vivie shot me a look and shifted on her feet. "Yes, sir."

"Because we have a witness that suggests you were there today."

All eyes turned to Vivie. Her lips trembled. "They must be mistaken."

"Nevertheless, I'd like to have you come down to the sheriff's office and answer a few questions."

The stares of disbelief turned into gapping mouths. Except for Vivie, who turned on me. "You called the cops on me?"

"No."

"I didn't kill her, Sophie. You hate me so much you turned me in."

"Why would you think Ms. Parker was our witness?" Sergeant Scowl's piercing eyes locked on Vivie.

"Vivie, maybe you should keep your mouth shut and call a lawyer," Tracy said. Tracy was older than me, my brother Will's age. She was a rounder, duller version of Vivie. She was pretty, more so now that she was wearing more make-up and having her hair done. I supposed that was for Randy's sake.

Sergeant Davis turned his signature scowl on me. "Why would she think you called the cops?"

*Ugh.* Vivie was in the hot seat, but I didn't want to be the one to reveal Vivie's secret. What would the coupon group think? The town? I had lost friends and some respect because my father's illegal activities, who's side would people take if it was found that I'd narked on Vivie?

I shrugged. "Vivie doesn't like me." I hoped I couldn't be arrested for lying. Although, that wasn't a lie. She really didn't like me. Could I be arrested for withholding information?

"Who said they saw her? Maybe they were lying," Tracy said.

"That's easy enough to ferret out. All Mrs. Danner has to do is tell us what she knows."

"I don't know anything." She backed away from Sergeant Scowl.

He took a step closer. "It's in your best interest to talk to me Mrs. Danner."

She shook her head and stepped back again. Sergeant Scowl stepped closer, this time putting himself next to the passenger side of Vivie's car. "Your response is making me suspicious."

"You should talk to him," I advised Vivie. "He's like a dog with a bone. He won't let it go."

He shot me a glare. As he turned his attention back to Vivie, he did a double take toward the window of Vivie's front seat. "What are those?" He tapped his knuckle against the door window.

Vivie swallowed. "Nothing."

He turned to me. "Do you know what those are?"

I closed my eyes not wanting to answer him.

"How about any of you?" he asked.

"They're just my coupons," Vivie blurted.

Aggie and Gwen moved forward to look into Vivie's car.

"Ah lordie." Aggie gasped.

Gwen shot a look at Vivie.

"I take by your reaction that these aren't Mrs. Danner's binders."

The two women stood back, apparently feeling the same way I did; they didn't want to out Vivie.

"Oh, for goodness sake." Tracy muscled her way through the women to the car and peeked into the window. Her head jerked up. "Oh my God, Vivie. Did you kill Marla?"

# Chapter Five

Vivie went with Sergeant Scowl, although not quietly. She started by shouting insults at me for getting her arrested.

“You’re not under arrest.” Sergeant Scowl’s voice was surprisingly calm considering the state Vivie was working herself into. I suppose he was used to people protesting being taken to the sheriff’s station.

She started yelling that I was jealous of her couponing skills when Sergeant Scowl told her he had to take the coupon binders. Eventually, she started yelling at Tracy for not doing anything, and at Sergeant Scowl for embarrassing her in front of the neighborhood. Seriously, no one would have noticed though if Vivie hadn’t been making a scene.

We all stood on the sidewalk and watched as Sergeant Scowl drove off with Vivie fuming in the back seat.

“Let’s go inside ladies,” Aggie said. “We don’t need the whole neighborhood knowing our business.”

Aggie, Gwen and Lani started up first. I waited a moment to gather my bearings. When I finally turned to go up, Tracy grabbed my arm with the same force Vivie had.

I pulled my arm away and rubbed at the red marks she left. “What?”

“Why would you do that to her?” Tracy stepped closer to me, invading my space.

“I didn’t do anything to Vivie.”

“She’s in the coupon group. We should be helping her. Looking out for her. She needs her friends.”

I’m not sure what Tracy was thinking. Even on the best days, no one would have confused Vivie and me as being friends.

“I didn’t do anything to her, Tracy. I found Marla and called for help. Vivie is the one that stole Marla’s coupons instead of calling the police. And you’re the one that revealed that they were Marla’s binders to Davis.”

Tracy huffed out a breath. “She wouldn’t have done that to you, Sophie.”

“Are you kidding? She told him I’d seen Marla today.”

“She needs us to look after her.”

I should have simply walked away, but I was annoyed that Tracy was blaming me, and believed I owed Vivie something. I thought I’d test that theory out. “So, you think I should look out for Vivie?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think I should also tell her what you and Randy are doing behind her back? That would be looking after her, wouldn’t it?”

Tracy jerked back. The shock on her face gave away at what I’d only suspected before. Tracy was sleeping with her sister’s husband. She quickly recovered. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Girls, are you coming in or not?” Aggie called from the doorway of her house.

I hitched my coupon binder strap up and turned to go inside.

“There’s nothing to tell,” Tracy hissed at me as I headed up the walk.

I shrugged. “Whatever.”

“Tracy, why are you still here? Shouldn’t you call Randy?” Aggie asked.

Tracy’s eyes bugged out. “Why would I call him?”

Aggie looked to me in confusion and then back at Tracy. “Because your sister has just been carted off by the police. I think you should let her husband know.”

“Oh, yeah. Right.” Tracy gave me the death stare before she turned to leave.

I ignored her. I passed Aggie and headed to the dining table where Gwen and Lani were seated. I unloaded my binder on the table and sat, blowing out a breath. Gwen and Lani had confused, dazed expressions on their faces, suggesting they were feeling as discombobulated as I was.

“Well, that was something.” Aggie sat in her chair across from me.

“Do you think she did it?” Gwen asked.

“No.” Aggie and Lani said at once without much conviction behind it.

“What do you think, Sophie?” Lani turned to me.

“We all know what Sophie thinks.” Gwen interrupted before I could speak.

“What do you mean?” I didn’t like the tone Gwen had used.

“You don’t like Vivie. You two snipe at each other all the time. You’re biased. Plus, you brought the police to arrest her.”

I couldn’t deny I had a bias that leaned toward disliking Vivie, but that

didn't mean I thought she was a murderer. "I work really hard to ignore Vivie. If we snipe, it's because she starts it." The statement came out sounding childish, but that didn't mean it wasn't true. I never initiated things with Vivie.

"That's true." Lani nodded.

"And, I didn't bring the police to arrest her. Vivie is in trouble because instead of calling the police when she found Marla, she stole her binders." It boggled my mind how Vivie's actions were my fault. "Sergeant Davis is investigating so of course he'd come talk to us."

"Don't get upset Sophie." Lani patted my hand, her exotic green eyes offering sympathy.

"That's right. We don't know as much about dealing with the police as you do." Aggie stood. "Anyone want a drink?"

"Before couponing?" Gwen looked hopeful. Aggie never allowed alcohol before the coupons were exchanged.

"I think maybe we should pass on couponing tonight, under the circumstances. First, poor Marla and now Vivie." Aggie opened the door to her buffet and pulled out a bottle of bourbon.

"I'd like a drink." I wasn't much of a drinker, but the events of day called for one.

Aggie went to the kitchen and brought back a pitcher of lemonade and glasses. A few minutes later, we all had lemonade spiked with bourbon. The alcohol did offer a welcomed dulling effect of the senses.

"What do you think will happen to Vivie?" Gwen asked after taking a sip of her drink.

Everyone at the table looked at me for a response. Sure, I'd been investigated by the FBI and the sheriff's department, but that didn't make me Columbo. "I guess Davis will ask her a bunch of questions."

"It doesn't look good that she had the binders." Lani played with the condensation on the side of her glass.

"So, you think she'll be arrested?" Gwen's eyes widened.

"I think they'd require more proof. Her fingerprints will be there, as will all of ours," I said.

Aggie and Lani's eyes rounded to match Gwen's.

"You said there would have been a lot of blood, Lani. Maybe they'll look at her clothes too," I explained.

“She would have had time to change.” Lani finally took a sip of her drink. “So, he’ll probably search her house.”

“I wonder where she dumped them?” Gwen finished of her drink.

“Now Gwen, I doubt Vivie killed Marla. She had no reason to. I’m sure Sergeant Davis will realize that and let her go.” Aggie reached for the bourbon bottle and topped off her drink. Gwen pushed her glass toward Aggie.

“You planning on spending the night, ‘cause you can’t drive home if you’re all boozed up.”

“Just a tad more,” Gwen said.

Lani covered her glass when Aggie offered to top hers off too. “Hopefully Randy will get her lawyer and she’ll be out soon.”

“What was that little tête-à-tête with Tracy?” Aggie offered the bottle to me.

I shook my head to the drink. “She was blaming me like Vivie did.” There was no reason to tell the group about Tracy and Randy’s affair. Randy was my boss and I wanted to keep my job. Maybe now that Tracy knew that I was on to them, they’d stop canoodling and I wouldn’t have to worry about if I had a duty or not to tell Vivie.

# Chapter Six

Wednesdays were busy for me. It was my shopping day and it was back to work in the evenings at the Booty Burgo. The job wasn't as bad as it used to be for several reasons. One of the biggest was that I was no longer a waitress, which meant I didn't have to wear the wench uniform that AJ liked to much. Now that I was a bartender, I could wear shorts and a t-shirt. Not that my boss, Randy, wouldn't prefer that I wore the barely-there outfit. Not that my boss, Randy, wouldn't prefer that I wear the barely-there outfit. And it was possible I'd get more tips if I did, although Aunt Rose was right, people didn't need my boobs in their face.

Because I worked from five until closing, I liked to sleep in on the days I worked. I required all my wits about me to deal with some of the ruffians who frequented the Booty Burgo. It was easier to keep my cool if I wasn't tired.

Unfortunately for me, my phone rang early that morning. Normally I'd have ignored it, except the ringtone was Beyoncé's *Run the World*, which I'd assigned to Lani.

I reached over with my hand blindly patting the arm of the hide-away until it landed on my phone.

"Hullo." I kept my eyes closed. Maybe the call would be short and I could sleep some more.

"Vivie's in jail."

"Huh?" I'll be honest, waking up to news about Vivie wasn't how I want to start my day.

"She's in jail. Sophie? Are you awake?"

"Yes, yes." I dug the heel of my palm into one eye socket and scooted up to a sit. "Was she arrested?"

"No. Just detained."

"Because of the coupons?"

"Probably. There was a footprint at the scene and they think it matches her

shoe.”

That got my attention. I was near Marla’s body. What if I got blood on my shoe? “Did they take her clothes too.”

“Yes.”

“I thought you said it would be messy. She didn’t have any blood on her.”

“She wouldn’t have worn bloody clothes to coupon group.”

“Oh, right.” I shook my head of sleep fog.

“They’re searching her house for the clothes. Her mother is all in a tizzy, but at least Randy and Tracy got the kids to Vivie’s mother before the sheriff’s deputies arrived.”

I nearly asked why Tracy was at Randy’s early in the morning. Were they that daring that Tracy would sleep with Randy in the bed he shared with Vivie?

Instead, I asked, “I could have blood on my shoe. Will that make me suspect again too?”

“Except she was there before you and confirms Marla was dead.” The line was quiet for a moment. “Do you think she did it?” Lani’s voice was low, as if she didn’t want the universe to know of her suspicion.

“To be honest, I find it hard to believe. I suppose anything is possible.”

“Why would she do it?”

“I don’t know.” I thought for a moment. The only time I ever saw Vivie really mad was when she thought Randy was cheating on her. I knew Randy was cheating with Tracy, but that didn’t mean he didn’t have other women. However, I couldn’t imagine he’d ever met Marla, and I’m not sure she was his type. She wasn’t ugly, and in fact, if she tried a little bit, she could have been pretty. She was quiet and plain, and I’m sure Randy wouldn’t have noticed her.

“To be honest, I think Vivie could get violent, but it would be more likely she’d castrate Randy. I don’t see her killing anyone.”

Lani laughed. “He *is* a hound dog. I don’t know how you work for him.”

“We stay out of each other’s way.”

“Oh hey . . . I’ve gotta go. Work calls,” Lani said.

“Keep me posted on the case if you can.”

“Will do.”

I tossed my phone on the bed, flopped back, covered my eyes with my arm. Unfortunately, I was too awake to go back to sleep. So, I got up and did



my regular morning routine; wash, dress, close up the hide-away-bed, and clean up my room. Since it was a shop day, I pulled out my coupons and my phone to make my list.

In Virginia, students are required to take a personal finance class before they graduate. I think they should add couponing to the curriculum. Using coupons seems straight forward; 50 cents off of \$4.00 equals \$3.50. However, to really maximize savings, there are a boatload of hoops you have to jump through. So, I started jumping.

First, I checked the sales circular through my phone web browser for the grocery store to see what was on sale. From there, I had to match the coupons I had to the items on sale. More often than not, I didn't have coupons for what's on sale. Today, wasn't any different.

Next, I looked at the special store deals, such as "Buy 5 and save 5" where if I bought five of the items on the list, I could save \$5.00. It was a good deal if there were any items I wanted. Today, I found four items, and if I doubled up on one of them, I'd save \$5.

Finally, I opened my sales apps, which made me think of poor Marla who was supposed to teach me how to best use phone apps to save. What a way to die; with her own coupon shears jabbed in the neck.

I shook my head to get the image of her and all that blood out of my brain. Vivie was a vile person, but I couldn't imagine her getting in such a rage that she'd stab Marla. It made me think that the murder had to have been a spur of the moment thing. It didn't seem plausible someone would make a plan to go to Marla's, find the scissors, and stab her. The question was, who would be at her house that would get so mad they'd kill her?

It was common knowledge that spouses were the first suspect, at least that was what the experts said on all the forensic shows Aunt Rose liked to watch. But Marla's husband was out of town, which meant it couldn't have been him. Except for the coupon group, Marla didn't seem to get out much. She had a reputation for being a recluse. Who'd want to kill a homebody?

I wondered if her husband had been contacted and was home yet. What a terrible thing to come home to. He travelled a lot, but he would be the best person to know who would want to kill Marla.

*Stay out of it, Sophie.* My subconscious was right. I learned from the Cullen murder that I wasn't built to be a sleuth. Unfortunately, my curiosity usually won out. Marla's murder both fascinated and terrified me, the same

way natural disasters did. I supposed it was from my desire to make sense of the world so I could keep myself safe. At least that's what I told myself when I decided that since the grocery store was on the Monticello Heights side of town, I could stop by to see if there is anything Mr. Naylor needed, assuming I could get through the gate.

I quickly made my grocery list and gathered my coupons. I scanned the room to make sure it was spotless, and then made my way to the kitchen. Aunt Rose was puttering around, making jam from the remaining huckleberries.

"I'm going to the grocery store, Aunt Rose. Is there anything you want?" I decided not to mention Marla or my proposed detour to check on her husband.

"Now Sophie, I'm knee deep in huckleberries and can't think about lists right now."

"Okay." I would suggest that she call me if she thought of anything, except she never ever called me on my cell phone. If she wanted something, she'd call the grocery store. I didn't know why. I kept telling her that mobile phone meant I could get a call anywhere, but she insisted on calling the locations I was at if she wanted to reach me. Perhaps it was a generational thing.

I headed straight to Monticello Heights and hoped the gate guard would let me in even though I didn't live there and didn't have an invention by someone who did. Lucky for me, Susy Maynard was at the gate. Not that she'd let me in, but she knew me and maybe she'd give me a break.

"You can't be here to see Mrs. Naylor. You heard what happened, didn't you?" Susy looked down at me from the guard booth. I was surprised she didn't know I was the one who found Marla yesterday.

"Yes, I heard. I just thought since her husband was new and out of town a lot, he might want some help . . . you know . . . picking a funeral home or . . . help with Marla's things."

Susy studied me for a minute. "I guess that would be alright, although I'm not sure he's here. He hasn't come through today."

"I'll leave him a note if he's not in."

Susy shrugged and reached over to push the button that lifted the gate. I thanked her and drove through.

Monticello Heights was originally developed in the 1980s, and construction of new homes have continued. As a result, there was a

mishmash of old and new nestled together. The community was designed for the affluent, and whether the house was a ranch, a cape cod, or some version of colonial, it was large and sat on at least an acre of land.

Marla's home was a brick Tudor built sometime after I'd left for college. I was gone most of the time since then, so I didn't know the family that had lived there before her. All I knew was the rumor that their teenage daughter could sing, and they moved to Los Angeles. A famous person from Jefferson Grove would be a big deal. The fact that no one talked about it told me she hadn't made it.

I parked my car in the drive and walked up the path to the door. Even before I reached it, I could see the yellow crime scene tape zig zagging across the entry. Once I made it to the porch, I had to sidestep a package that was too big for the mailbox.

A card was shoved into the doorframe. I leaned closer to look at it. It was Sergeant Scowl's business card with a scrawled note presumably for Mr. Naylor to call him.

I frowned. Did that mean Sergeant Scowl hadn't reached Mr. Naylor? Why else leave a card and note to call if they'd contacted him by phone?

I looked back down at the package and wondered what would happen to the mail if Mr. Naylor didn't come back soon? Monticello Heights was generally a safe neighborhood, but that didn't mean someone wouldn't get burgled if it was obvious no one was home, crime scene tape or not. I decided I'd let Lani know and she could tell Sergeant Scowl.

As I headed back to my car, it occurred to me that no one had ever seen Mr. Naylor. Even traveling a lot, I'd think someone would have seen him.

When I went to open the car door, Ellie's house caught my eye. She'd know about Mr. Naylor. She was his neighbor.

I crossed the narrow-mulched area between Marla and Ellie's homes and headed to Ellie's door. I had second thoughts as I reached the porch. She had her hands full taking care of her sick husband 24-7. She didn't me poking my nose in her neighbor's business.

Before I could turn away, the door opened.

"Sophie? Everything alright?"

"Hello Mrs. Tappen. Yes. I was just next door to see if Mr. Naylor needed anything. Apparently, he's not home."

She glanced at the Naylor house and then back at me. "Sad business about

Mrs. Naylor. I haven't seen him."

"Ever?"

She looked a little surprised by my question.

"No one seems to have ever seen him," I clarified.

Her brows knitted together in thought. "I'm not sure I have either. I've seen his car. I'm pretty sure it's his car. I've been here nearly thirty years, so I know most people's cars. His was a sleek looking sedan . . . dark . . . Audi or Lexus maybe. It certainly wasn't the kind of car I'd have thought a middle-aged man newly rich from winning the lottery would drive though. A man like that would get a fancy sportscar."

"You never saw him?"

"Him. No." She opened the door. "Why don't you come in. It's getting mighty hot out there."

"Oh, I don't want to bother you."

She waved her hand. "It's no bother, Sophie. I could use the company. You know I don't get out much anymore with Al incapacitated. It's his naptime now. He sleeps more and more these days, bless his soul."

I thought it would be rude to refuse since she was probably lonely. The news around town was that she ordered everything she required online, and what she couldn't order, a group of ladies from the Baptist Church would deliver. I thought my world got small when I moved back to Jefferson Tavern from New York City. Ellie Tappen's world was miniscule.

I followed Ellie through the open door into her two-story Greek-revival colonial home, with giant white pillars that made me think of *Gone with the Wind*. Inside there was the traditional colonial floor plan, with the dining room to the left and formal living room to the right. A stairway with a powder room hidden underneath was along the central hallway that led back to an open kitchen and family room. The color scheme gave away the age of the home with its 80's dusted colors. The formal living room was mauve, the dining room a smoky blue, and kitchen and family room were accented in teal.

"Would you like some tea?" She motioned for me to sit at the eat-in section of her kitchen that had a view of the woods behind the house and glimpse of Marla's garden out to the side. Like her mail, I wondered who'd take care of Marla's garden. "It's sweet, of course."

"Yes, of course."

“Well I wasn’t sure. I know you’ve been living up north and I hear they drink their tea unsweet.”

“They offer both.”

Ellie made a face as she handed me the cool class of tea. “Tea isn’t right if it isn’t sweet.”

I smiled. “I agree.”

She sat across from me. “I heard that Vivie Danner was arrested.”

“Detained. I don’t think she’s been arrested.” I was sure Lani would have called or texted if Vivie was officially arrested.

“Can they do that?”

I shrugged. “I guess so. Up to seventy-two hours, I think.” I didn’t know that for sure. Chances were, I heard it from a TV show.

Ellie shook her head. “I tell you, Sophie, I feel guilty about that.”

“Why?” I wiped a drip of condensation from my glass.

“Well, after Mrs. Naylor was found, Lawson Davis was over here questioning me and of course, I had to tell him what I saw.”

I leaned forward. “What did you see?”

“I saw Vivie Danner traipsing along the deer path back in the woods from her house to Mrs. Naylor’s. I didn’t think anything of it, because it wasn’t the first time. I told him I’d run into you as well.” Ellie reached over and patted my hand. “I’m sure glad they didn’t detain you. Not that I’m glad they have Vivie, but well . . . I like you better, Sophie.”

I smiled. “Thank you.”

“Anyway, I told Lawson about seeing Vivie going over there.”

I frowned as I remembered a question from the coupon group the night before. “How did she get into the house?”

Ellie sat for a moment. “I assumed Marla let her in.” If Ellie told the police that Marla had let her in, no wonder they suspected her. It suggested Marla was alive when Vivie showed up. But Vivie had been adamant that Vivie was dead when she arrived.

“What if Marla was already dead? The back door was locked. I had to break a window to get in.”

“There’s a side door to the mudroom at the side of her house. The path between our homes practically goes right to it. That’s where she usually went.”

I wondered if Vivie knew Ellie kept such close tabs on the goings-ons on

her cul-de-sac. “It’s strange that such a quiet person would cause someone to murder them. As far as I can tell, everyone liked her. Was there anyone else who visited her?”

“Not really.” Ellie’s face scrunched up as if something was occurring to her. “She used to offer Junior Junior Mason something to drink after his work. He was known to spend time with his lady clients.” Ellie waggled her brows suggesting his visit were clandestine. “I think he had a thing for her.”

“Really? Why?”

“He often did extra things for her on days her home wasn’t on his schedule. He also looked like a schoolboy when he talked her, blushing and stammering.” Ellie laughed. “It was sort of cute, actually.”

“Did she return his affection?” I remembered running into Junior Junior after the murder. He gave the impression that he was concerned, but who wouldn’t be?

“Oh, I don’t know, like I said, she often invited him over even on days he wasn’t working on her yard. I never saw anything suspicious,” Ellie quickly added. “They’d sit on her back patio and talk.”

I looked out the window, but couldn’t see her patio and wondered how Ellie had seen them.

“Al and I sit out in the sunroom sometimes. That’s when I’d see Junior Junior at Mrs. Naylor’s,” Ellie said answering my unasked question.

“Maybe she was getting gardening tips.”

“I suppose so.” Ellie looked out at Marla’s garden. “For the life of me, I don’t know why she planted that thing there.”

“What’s wrong with where she planted it?”

“Gardens tend to expand, and hers is about to come into my yard.”

I studied Ellie. She didn’t seem the type to have a feud with her neighbor over boundary lines.

“It’s not that big of deal now, but at some point, Al will be gone, and I won’t be able to stay in this house. When I sell it, I don’t want any issues with the survey. Do you remember that hubbub a few years back when Godfrey Cramer wanted to sell his land, and there was the dispute about the trees his neighbor planted? Godfrey ended up setting those trees on fire and burning both their homes down.”

I snorted as I shook my head. “I hadn’t heard about that.”

“That’s right, you were gone. Crazy stuff happens, I tell you, when it comes

to land ownership, and I don't need any of that nonsense in my life."

"No. No one does."

"So, you don't think Vivie did it?" Ellie asked.

"I don't know for sure. I can't imagine why."

Ellie shivered. "Dreadful way to go."

"I do think it had to be someone who knew her."

"Really." Ellie's eyes widened in intrigue.

"I'm not a detective, but the killer used her scissors and was able to get close enough to stab her with them. It seems like a crime of opportunity."

Ellie nodded. "I bet it was the husband. I watch ID TV and husbands are always the main suspect."

"Was his car here recently?"

Ellie bit her lip as she thought. "I can't remember. That doesn't mean he didn't come in the dead of night. My days are full and once I go to sleep, I'm out like a light. I tell you, Sophie, I worry sometimes my Al will need me at night and I'll sleep right through it because I'm exhausted."

It was my turn to pat her hand. "You do so much for him."

"Al would have done the same for me."

I wondered if AJ and I would ever have that kind of love. Right now, we were in the phase where the relationship was exciting and new. I cared for him a lot, and I was pretty sure he felt the same. However, the 'L' word had yet to be spoken by either of us.

Ellie shook her head as if to rid herself of her troubles. "Now, tell me, rumor has it you're seeing a Devlin." Ellie's expression appeared curious rather than judgmental.

I nodded.

"My Al was a trouble-maker in his younger days too. Sometimes a woman wants a little trouble in her life, doesn't she Sophie?"

I laughed, although I'd had enough trouble in my life to last a lifetime between my family being criminals and my involvement in a murder a few months back. But I wasn't going to whine to Ellie about my woes when hers were much bigger than mine.

# Chapter Seven

My visit to the grocery store was uneventful. With my coupons, I saved a whopping fourteen percent. It wasn't my best shop. I once saved twenty percent, but every little bit helped.

Marla and Vivie were the queens of couponing. Vivie liked to brag that she got her groceries for free, although I wasn't sure I believed her. Marla had several receipts that showed free groceries, but she said that most grocery stores changed their policies, making it harder to do. Despite that, she often saved fifty percent or more.

However, I couldn't complain about my measly fourteen percent, especially considering Marla and Vivie's current predicaments. I was alive and free, they weren't.

I returned home and put my groceries away, then watched an entertainment news show with Aunt Rose before heading out to the Booty Burgo to start my shift. The Booty Burgo was nestled at the crest of the Blue Ridge, giving it great views of the Piedmont from the parking lot, and across the street was mostly wooded with a small lookout toward the Shenandoah side. From spring until fall, tourists enjoying the outdoors would pack the restaurant at lunch and sometimes dinner. But the nights, and off season, were usually for Jefferson Grove and other Blue Ridge town locals that wanted to get away. For some reason, there was an idea that what happened at the Booty Burgo would never filter down to town. I wasn't sure why they thought that. Small southern towns thrived on gossip. If we could turn it to fuel, we could power the state on it.

The restaurant was pirate themed and gaudy, but the regular crowds didn't seem to mind as long as the booze kept flowing. I suppose tourists were too hungry or thirsty after a long hike to care about the tackiness of the restaurant.

I entered through the front door and made my way past the bar with a wave to Spike. He taught me everything I knew about bartending. He was



also the manager most evenings, which was good for me because he and I got along really well, despite the fact that with his bald head, horseshoe mustache, and hooped earring, he really did look like a scary pirate.

I headed toward the back office off the kitchen to clock in. I opened the door and was surprised to see Randy intently studying his computer screen. In high school, Randy was the epitome of handsome, cocky, jock, with blond hair, blue eyes, strong body, and a smile that made teenage hearts swoon. Today, he was rounder, especially around the middle, giving him the appearance of a pretty-faced dough boy.

He glanced up briefly and then returned his attention to the computer. "Hey Sophie."

"Hey. What are you doing here?"

"Working, what does it look like?"

I pulled my timecard. "Is Vivie out of jail?" I couldn't figure out why he'd be working with his wife being held on suspicion of murder.

He shook his head but kept his focus on the computer. "No."

"Shouldn't you bail her out, or something?" I knew he and Vivie didn't have a good marriage, but he didn't strike me as the type of guy that would leave his wife in jail.

"She hasn't been charged and even if she is, there's no way I or her family could come up with bail on a murder charge."

"Wouldn't Denny Coker help?" Denny was the bail bondsman in Jefferson Grove. I once applied to work for him, but left before the interview when his wife accused me of being a temptress and a crook.

"The best I can do is try to find a good lawyer."

I wasn't sure that was true. Lawyers were expensive. All the money that the government didn't take when my father and brother went to prison went to lawyers. But I wasn't going to discuss money with Randy since I knew part of the reason Vivie's family wasn't as wealthy anymore was because of investments they had made with my dad.

"Maybe it won't matter. I can't believe she killed Marla." I noted the time on my card and put it back in my slot.

Randy shrugged. I couldn't decide if that meant he agreed or not. Perhaps he'd seen a side of Vivie that suggested she was capable of murder. Cheating on his wife with her sister might induce her kill.

"You must know a lawyer, Soph." Randy looked up from his computer

screen. "I've been researching but can't seem to find one I think we can afford."

"Why would I know a lawyer?"

"That whole business with your dad and more recently with Joe Cullen's murder."

"The business with my dad didn't have to do with murder, and I didn't have a lawyer when Mr. Cullen was murdered."

Randy frowned. "What about Devlin? Did he have a lawyer?"

Inwardly I made a face, because AJ did have a lawyer who had also once been his girlfriend. I might have been able to look past that if she hadn't told me I couldn't see AJ because it would look bad to the police during the Cullen murder investigation.

On the other hand, what were the chances I'd see her or that she'd see AJ if I gave her name to Randy to help Vivie? Randy and Vivie ran in completely different circles than AJ, and AJ did the best he could to stay away from Jefferson Grove unless he was seeing me.

"Becca Thoreau was his lawyer. I think she's out of Charlottesville."

Randy turned back to the computer and typed in Becca's name into the search bar. "Thanks Soph."

I turned to leave.

"Hey Soph."

"Yeah." I stopped and turned back to him.

He studied me for a minute and then shook his head. "Never mind."

I frowned. What was that about? I had a moment to wonder if he was going to ask me out now that his wife was in jail. I'd never do that again. It went poorly the first time when we were in high school. It was why Vivie hated me.

Then I wondered if Tracy had told him that I knew about them. That could cause me problems if he decided to fire me. But he turned back to the computer, so I let it go too.

I headed out to the bar, I waved at Tina as I passed by her. Tina had a rough start as a waitress a couple of months ago. She often got confused with orders, but she was friendly and all the customers liked her. Or maybe it was how well she filled out her wench uniform that got her great tips.

As I reached the bar, Spike held up a hand for me to high-five. It was our normal greeting, but I didn't like it. He had to be near six-four and I was

only five-three. I always had to jump, and even then, I mostly slapped his wrist. Tonight, was no different.

"I heard you've gotten yourself into some trouble again." He leaned closer. "I hear the lady was your friend."

"Yes."

"I'm sorry about that, Soph. You gonna be alright?" Spike was one of those guys who was terrifying on the outside, but all mushy on the inside.

"Yes." I was sad about Marla, and still a bit shaken from seeing her body, but I didn't feel I couldn't do my job. Did that make me a bad friend? "I'm doing fine."

"Well, you look better than old Junior Junior over there." Spike nodded toward the other side of the bar. "He's halfway to slobbering drunk as we speak."

"That's not like him." I peeked around Spike to see Junior Junior. He sat with his forearms on the bar, his hands gripping his drink, and his head hung low. If he had a dog, he'd be the perfect protagonist for a country song.

"Even when he comes his usual nights, he doesn't get that lit. He was here last night too."

"Really?" I looked back up at Spike. "He usually only comes on weekends."

"I know. Weird. I've already called his son, Tri-J, to come get him." Spike stopped. "What will Tri-J call his son? Quad-J?"

I snorted. "How about Junior Junior Squared."

Spike let out a loud "ha." "Good one, Sophie."

I glanced at Junior Junior again. "You know, he was in Marla's neighborhood when she died. Maybe it shook him?"

Spike shrugged.

"Maybe I should talk to him."

Spike's eyes narrowed on me. "Maybe you get him some water. You're here to serve drinks, not counsel."

"I thought bartenders were pseudo shrinks."

"Only if they keep serving the drinks."

I saluted Spike. "Yes, sir." I grabbed a high ball glass, put in some ice and then filled it with water. I set it on the bar. "Hey Junior Junior."

His head appeared to weigh a million pounds the way he strained to lift it. "Hey." His eyes were glassy and unfocused.

"Here's some water. Tri-J will be here soon."

He dropped his head in response. I decided he wasn't in any mood or condition to chat. I started to turn away when a hand grabbed my arm.

"You found her."

"Marla? Yes. You were there too."

He shook his head. "She was such a nice lady. Who'd do that to her?"

"I don't know." Was Junior Junior really all torn up over Marla? I felt some guilt that I wasn't more upset. Then I wondered what his relationship with Marla was. While her husband was gone, was she canoodling with the landscaper? It was a cliché, but clichés were based in truth. My own mother was a cliché; she ran off with her trainer. I wondered if she'd tried to seduce AJ, since he'd done a lot of work around the house when he was a teen.

I pushed that scary thought aside and focused on Junior Junior. He didn't have all his faculties at the moment, and I knew Sergeant Scowl had interviewed him, but I was curious. Who'd get through the gate into Monticello Heights and stab Marla with coupon sheers? "Did you see anyone there?"

He took a deep breath. "Nah. Just the usual."

Maybe just the usual killed her. "Like who?"

"Well . . ." He scrubbed his hands over his face, and I took the opportunity to push the glass of water closer to him. "There was you. And I saw you talking to Mrs. Tappen."

"Anyone else?"

"Not on that street. There were kids playing on Lafayette when I drove in." He looked up at me. "Kids wouldn't do that."

"No. I don't think kids would do that." I waited a beat. "Were you friends with Marla?"

"Yes. She was real nice to me. She'd give me tea or lemonade, even on days I wasn't working on her yard." There was a reverence in his voice that suggested affection.

"She was very generous."

"I gave her tips on her garden." He let out a long sigh.

"It's some garden, Junior Junior."

He frowned and waved a shaky finger at me. "Don't get no ideas about it though."

"About the garden?"

"About me and Marla. I know how all you snooty toots are with the gossip."

We was just friends.”

Snooty toots. That was a new one. “Okay, Junior Junior.”

“Not that I wouldn’t have liked to take her out to a nice dinner . . . but she was married.”

“Did you ever see him? Her husband?” Had anyone in Monticello Heights ever seen the elusive Mr. Naylor?

“Sure.”

“Recently?”

“Ah . . . I don’t know. I don’t remember.”

“You don’t remember seeing him?”

Junior Junior frowned into his water. “I don’t remember.”

“So maybe you didn’t see him?”

“Parker!” Spike barked at me. “Paulie needs a refill.”

I jumped at the command and with a quick goodbye to Junior Junior, moved down the bar to where Paulie sat with his buddy, Walt. Both had to be nearing their hundredth birthday. They both had wrinkled faces and bright twinkling eyes as if they had a naughty secret. Rumor was that their friendship and drinks at the Booty Burgo were their secret to their long lives.

Paulie grinned when I arrived. “There’s Miss Boop.”

They were also the only ones that got away with calling me Betty Boop.

“Boop-oo-a-doop. What can I get you two fine gentlemen?”

My shift was typical for a Wednesday night, not crazy busy, but steady enough that I wasn’t able to talk to Junior Junior again before his son escorted him home. By two a.m., Randy had left, and Spike and I were left to close up, which we did, and then he escorted me to my car and I headed home. All and all a typical day.

# Chapter Eight

The Top Gun theme playing on my phone woke me sooner than I'd have liked. Normally, I ignored early morning phone calls, but Top Gun was AJ's ringtone, so I reached for my phone sitting on the arm of my rollaway couch/bed. I opened my eyes enough to see that it was six o'clock, and to swipe the answer button, making sure video chat was off.

"Hullo."

"Good morning lazy bones," AJ's chipper voice greeted me.

I wasn't awake enough to explain to him that since Randy left the Booty Burgo early last night, I'd closed up with Spike, which meant I didn't get to bed until close to 3 am. Three hours of sleep doesn't make one a lazy bones. I grunted in response.

"I'm sorry, Soph. I know you like to sleep in on Thursdays, but this is the only time I had to call you today."

I might have been too tired to talk, but I wasn't so out of it that I couldn't smile at the idea that AJ didn't want to go a day without being able to talk to me. I was glad the phone wasn't on video because I didn't want AJ seeing my goofy grin, alongside bedhead, and morning breath, which I'm convinced can be seen. "S'alright."

He laughed. "Do you miss me?"

"Mmmhmm."

"I should be home Saturday."

That perked me up a bit, although not enough to open my eyes. "When?"

"I'm not sure. I'll give you call when I can. In the meantime, go back to sleep."

"Kay."

"Will you dream of me?"

"Probably."

He laughed again and I could see his big smile and sparkling blue eyes in my mind. "Stay out of trouble, Warrior Princess."

“Be safe Flyboy.”

My Thursday was uneventful, except for Aunt Rose learning that while she won her category in the county fair’s pie contest, Carl Jackson had said her pie had a soggy bottom. Aunt Rose was livid, so I avoided her, staying in my room to finish my library program plan for Friday and Saturday, and later that night, work my shift at the Booty Burgo.

On Friday, I was up at 8:30. I showered, dressed and put my room back in order, and then headed to the kitchen. Aunt Rose was sitting at the table drinking her coffee and reading the current issue of People Magazine.

“Good morning, Aunt Rose.”

“Good morning, Sophie.” She cut me a look that made me look down to see if I forgot to dress. “How long are you going to be working at that den of sin? You come in all hours of the night smelling like cheap beer.”

“Hopefully not too long.” I poured myself a cup of coffee and put a slice of bread in the toaster. “The library should let me know soon if I can have more hours.”

“You’re a walking contradiction, you know that?”

“I am?”

“A librarian and a bar maid. It’s enough to give me whiplash.”

I shrugged and then put peanut butter on my bread. Ten minutes later I was out the door heading to the library. I arrived at ten, giving me an hour to set up for the pre-school program. Both my preschool and school-age programs would be on Ivan and Koschei the Deathless, but for the little ones, I’d leave out the darker bits, like how Ivan is cut up into pieces and thrown into the sea. This was one of my favorite tales because it was about a warrior princess Marya, who, in my mind should have been able to save herself. Instead, Ivan is the hero, but he wouldn’t have had to save his wife Marya if he’d listened to her and not opened the dungeon door that held the evil sorcerer Koschei the Deathless, who then escaped and kidnapped Marya.

“All ready this morning?” Mrs. Wayland, the head librarian, stopped by where I was setting up pictures and props to use in telling the story of Ivan and Marya. She’d fostered my love of fairy tales and folklore as a child as an enthusiastic new librarian. Today, now in her forties, she encouraged me to share my excitement of stories in the children’s groups.

“Yes.”

“Any thoughts on October’s programming?” She sat in one of the little chairs I’d set up for the kids to sit in, pulling her reading glasses down over her nose to look at my materials.

“October is Halloween. I originally thought about witches.” There was fantastic folklore around witches.

Mrs. Wayland’s face scrunched up, which was the response I thought I might get. I’m not sure if it’s a southern thing, but there are a lot of people who equate witches with the devil, which is also appropriate for Halloween, but a problem for many parents.

“But now I’m thinking monsters.”

“Not demons, I hope.”

“No. I’m thinking of current lore, like the Loch Ness monster, Sasquatch, the rougarou and then—”

“Rouga-what?”

“It’s a Cajun monster with the body of a man and the head of a wolf in Louisiana. I thought the kids could then create their own monster and lore,” I explained.

Mrs. Wayland thought for a moment. Her expression suggested she wasn’t convinced my idea was good, but she nodded. “It is Halloween, I suppose.”

“The kids will love it.” How could they not? Who wouldn’t want to create their own monster?

“Well, I’ll let you finish up.” She stood. “I’ll be talking with the Library Board of Trustees about making some position changes here that would allow me to give you more hours when Mrs. Kohler leaves.”

Mrs. Kohler was the children’s librarian. I liked her and she knew a lot about children’s books, but she wanted to run the same programs she ran when my father was a kid. “She’s leaving?”

“She’s retiring and moving to North Carolina to be closer to her grandchildren. As you know we’re a small library in the middle of nowhere. It’s hard to find qualified librarians.”

I didn’t know that, but I could have guessed it.

“Only one person with a library degree is required, which of course is me. So, I’m going to talk to the board about hiring you for children’s programming, and you’d be in charge of children’s department, although of course you wouldn’t be a librarian, and you wouldn’t get paid what Mrs. Kohler or a degreed librarian would earn. But I suspect it would compete



well with what you earn at the Booty Burgo.”

Hope and excitement made my heart flutter. “Thank you, Mrs. Wayland. That would be wonderful.” It would be like a dream come true. Maybe I could make a living telling fairy tales after all.

“I can’t make any promises at this time, but I wanted to let you know.”

I nodded.

She took a deep breath. “It won’t look good if you’re involved in a murder case, again.”

My heart kerplopped to the pit of my stomach.

“I know Mrs. Naylor was a friend of yours, Sophie, and I’m sorry for your loss. But as you know, the library is a pillar of the community and we can’t have someone working here that might sully things.”

“I was just a witness. I’m not involved.”

“I didn’t think so, but I have to say these things.”

“Yes, ma’am. I understand.”

From behind Mrs. Wayland, two children ran toward me. “Miss Sophie!” They launched themselves into my lap.

I laughed. “Kimmy and Austin, how are you?”

Mrs. Wayland smiled. “Have a good program today, Sophie.”

My pre-school age program went well. Afterwards, I had an hour until the older school age kids’ group. I used the time to review my plans and set up their activities. While I always covered the same topic with both groups, because of the age disparity, I planned different discussions and activities. The second group went well even though Jeremy Smith asked me how much blood I’d seen when I found Marla. I glanced toward Mrs. Wayland’s office hoping she hadn’t heard and wished parents would pay more attention to where their children were when discussing adult topics. It wasn’t a surprise that people were talking. Murder was a big deal in Jefferson Grove and people here liked to gossip. But kids don’t need to know stuff like that.

After my second program, I had another hour at the library which I spent shelving books. I was in the young adult section shelving Cassandra Clare’s novels, when I heard a woman say, “Now that Vivie Danner is in jail, maybe I’ll look into that coupon group.”

I peeked between the shelves to see Jennifer Babbitt sitting at a table sifting through the coupon box.

“Do you think she killed that woman?” Karen Weir, sitting with Jennifer,

tossed a coupon back in the box. I knew of the two women because they'd been in high school with my brother. Will had dated Jennifer for a time and they had even planned to stay together while they both attended University of Virginia. They didn't stay together, and Jennifer ended up marrying a man who wasn't from around here. She moved back eight years ago, Lani told me when I was catching up on town gossip, when she and her husband had their first child so she could stay home and be close to her family.

Karen had left for college after high school as well, but returned home and eventually married Steven Weir. He was ten years older than her and worked as the high school English teacher. In fact, he was *our* high school English teacher, which often brought speculation about Karen and his relationship when she was his student.

"I don't know. I wouldn't put anything past Vivie, although she's too meticulous to kill in such a messy fashion." Jennifer studied a coupon and then set it in a pile next to a small pouch.

"I hear Marla's coupons were worth a lot."

"It seems more likely her husband did it. Did you ever meet them?" Jennifer reached into the box and pulled out a small stack of coupons.

Karen shook her head. "No. She didn't seem to get out much, except for the coupon group, I hear."

"That's weird, don't you think? I heard they won the lottery. Why would she still be wasting time on coupons?"

"Habit?" Karen opened a small plastic coupon box and sorted her new coupons.

"I heard she was having an affair with Junior Junior."

"No." Karen's eyes were wide with surprise as she stopped her sorting to look at her friend. "Him?"

Jennifer cocked her head. "What do you have against Junior Junior?"

"Nothing except he's always dirty and smelly." Karen scrunched her nose as if Junior Junior's odor was right there.

"He's a landscaper. He works outside in the heat and dirt, so of course he's dirty and smelly during the day. But he cleans up well, and his family is loaded."

I frowned as I wondered about Junior Junior and his response to Marla's death. Mrs. Tappen suggested that he and Marla had been friendly. He did seem overly distraught at her murder. Was that grief or guilt?

I thought about Jennifer's comment about his family's wealth. Yes, the Mason family was well off. Junior Mason, Junior Junior's father, not only owned the only landscaping company in town, but also the only hardware store now that the one downtown went out of business, and the largest HVAC and plumbing business as well. Was she saying that money trumped stinkiness or did it have something to do with Marla's murder?

"Why would he kill her?" Karen went back to sorting her coupons.

"I don't think he would. Junior Junior is a sweet man, but a bit dim, bless his heart. I think maybe her husband found out and killed her for it."

"And took her coupons?"

Jennifer shrugged. "Maybe he set Vivie up? Or maybe she gave them to Vivie."

I knew that wasn't true, but I kept my silence as I spied from behind the Mortal Instruments series.

"How do you know about Junior Junior and Mrs. Naylor?" Karen asked.

"Ellie Tappen told me the other day when I brought her some lasagna." Jennifer shook her head. "It's sad about her husband. He's so far gone; he doesn't even come out of his room hardly at all."

"Why doesn't she put him in a home?"

"Whenever I suggest she should, she says she could never do that to her Al." Both women shook their heads in pity.

They worked in silence for a minute and I was about to go back to shelving, when Jennifer said, "You know, Vivie could have killed her over Junior Junior."

I nearly dropped the book I was clutching. Vivie and Junior Junior? No way. Jennifer was right, Junior Junior was rich and decent looking after a shower, but he was a bit too simple for Vivie. He wasn't dumb, just unworldly and guileless. Vivie would eat him alive.

Karen's jaw dropped. "Vivie and Junior Junior?"

Jennifer nodded. "Yes."

"Since when?"

"On and off since Vivie and Randy moved into Monticello Heights about eight years ago. The Masons do all the landscaping up there. In fact, rumor is that Vivie's second son could be Junior Junior's."

"No way."

I had the same reaction. How hadn't I ever heard this before? I knew Vivie

had cheated on Randy, just as Randy cheated on her. And it wasn't out of the realm of possibility that she'd sleep with her landscaper. My mother had an affair with Junior Mason, the father, before settling on the trainer that she eventually ran off with. That sort of gossip is big news and not something that would stay secret.

"Why would she kill Marla?"

Jennifer leaned closer to Karen. "Because Vivie wanted Junior Junior." She sat back. "It's no secret that the Danners are having money and marital troubles. Junior Junior might not be the brightest bulb in the pack, but his family is the richest now that the Parkers are broke."

I flinched at hearing my family name, even though she wasn't wrong.

"Vivie is conniving. I can totally see her divorcing Randy and sweet-talking Junior Junior into marrying her."

Jennifer wasn't wrong about that either. Vivie did seem like the type of person who might do that, except I'd never gotten any inkling that she'd been thinking about leaving Randy in all the months I'd been seeing her at coupon group. Not that she'd tell me because she didn't like me. But she might have said something to the group.

"Speaking of the Parkers," Karen started, and it gave me an ut-oh sensation in the pit of my stomach. "You must be glad you didn't end up with Will."

"Oh, I don't know." Jennifer had a coy smile.

"Really? He's in prison."

Jennifer shrugged. "He wouldn't be if I'd been with him. I'd have kept him from following his father's lead."

"Does John know you still carry a torch for your ex?" Karen asked about Jennifer's husband.

"No." Jennifer bit her lip and her eyes lit up suggestively. "He doesn't know I've visited Will either."

"No!" Karen's wide eyes matched mine.

"I feel bad for him. Will is really a nice guy who just got caught up in his dad's schemes. You know he's trying to get his sentence reduced. He could be out in a year or so."

"Oh my God . . . you're not going to . . ."

Jennifer shook her head. "I love John and my life, but I won't deny I wouldn't mind spending time with Will. You should see him. There apparently isn't much to do except workout, which he does. A lot. He's really,

really buff.”

I suppose it’s because Will is my brother that I don’t think of him in terms of being buff, but Jennifer was right. He did spend a lot of time working out. He had packed on twenty-five pounds of muscle. But more than his physique, I wondered what he’d do when he got out of prison. He hadn’t been able to avoid going despite my father’s attempts to take all the blame. But he got a lesser sentence than my father. Once he got out, where would he go or do? I had a hard-enough time coming home and finding a job simply being related to my crooked father and brother. He’d fare much worse. I shook the thought from my head. He had a few years before that would be a problem.

I turned my mind back to Vivie and Junior Junior, and what they might have to do with Marla’s murder. Did Sergeant Scowl know about the affair, if it was true? Was he going to take a closer look at Junior Junior, who, I had to admit, was acting strange? Sure, it could be grief, but it could be guilt too.

I finished shelving the books and ended my shift with all this new information swirling in my brain. I wanted to call Lani, but she was at work and I didn’t think this was the type of discussion to have over the phone. Instead, I went home and got ready for my shift at the Booty Burgo wondering if Junior Junior would be there tonight.

# Chapter Eight

After a short rest and changing into shorts and a t-shirt, I headed to the Booty Burgo for my shift. As I walked past the bar, I looked for Junior Junior, but he wasn't there. Probably just as well. I wasn't sure how I was going to ask if the rumors about him and Vivie were true, and about the nature of his and Marla's relationship.

I walked into the back office to clock in. Randy was sitting on the love-seat sized couch his head titled back and his fingers digging into his eye sockets. He was disheveled and it was possible he was wearing the same clothes he had on last night.

He lifted his head. "Oh, it's you, Sophie."

"Just signing in." I dealt with my timecard, pushing away the natural instinct to ask him if he was okay. I tried to avoid anything personal with Randy because I didn't trust him not to read more into it. He might be banging his wife's sister, but I had no doubt he'd move on to a new woman if the opportunity presented itself. I didn't want him to think that woman could be me.

I was heading toward the door to leave when his head popped up again. "I want you to do something for me."

I stopped. "Oh?"

He stood, running his hands down his shirt as if it would eliminate the wrinkles. "Vivie kicked me out."

I quirked a brow. Although he and Vivie had marital problems for some time, it didn't seem like either of them had been eager to get out of the marriage. Plus, if Vivie made him leave, that meant she was home.

"What happened?" I moved closer to the door and away from him. I didn't want him to get any ideas about me comforting him.

"She found a pair of underwear under the bed."

I stared at him not sure what he meant. She did keep a clean house. Was it possible she was angry he didn't do the housework while she was in jail?

“They weren’t hers,” he clarified.

The first thought in my mind was that they must have been Tracy’s underwear and I wondered if Vivie knew that. The second thought was how it was possible a woman could get up, get dressed, and leave the house without knowing she didn’t have her underwear on.

“You had a lady friend in your home . . . in Vivie’s home.”

“Vivie was gone and the kids were at their mema’s,” Randy said referring to Vivie’s mother. With Vivie and the kids gone, I supposed in Randy’s world, that was an invitation to bring his mistress into his home . . . into his and his wife’s bed.

“This morning I got the call that Vivie could come home, so I went and got her.”

“I see.” I waited to see what he thought I could do about his predicament.

“Can you talk to her, Sophie?” He stepped toward me.

I retreated closer to the door. “Why?”

He gave me an exasperated expression as if I was being dense. “Because you’re her friend. You’re in that coupon group with her.”

I shook my head. “Vivie and I aren’t—”

“You helped us get her a lawyer.” He paused a moment. “She’s really hot, Sophie.”

My chin dropped to the floor and I couldn’t stop the snark from escaping. “Randy, do you hear yourself? You’re boo-hooing that your wife kicked out and in the same breath lusting over her lawyer.” I kept the part about sleeping with his wife’s sister because I didn’t want to push my luck. Randy was my boss, after all.

He rolled his eyes. “A man can look. Besides, Vivie’s no saint.”

“So, what’s the problem? Maybe if the two of you can’t be faithful, it’s not a marriage worth saving.”

His face dropped, and for a moment I felt bad. “I’ve done a lot for you Sophie.”

He hadn’t done much, actually, but I suppose he’d allowed me to have a job. “I’m just not sure what I can do. Vivie and I aren’t close.” I was about suggest that he enlist Tracy’s help, but caught myself. I scanned my brain for other possibilities, but Aggie, Gwen and Lani would probably encourage her to divorce Randy.

“You’ve been through the same thing when the police suspected you in

Cullen's murder."

I wanted to point out that I wasn't held overnight, but kept my mouth shut.

"You can help her."

"That's what her lawyer is for."

He stepped toward me again, and I bumped into the doorjamb when I stepped back.

"Can't you just go and talk to her? Calm her down. Remind her that I hired the lawyer. That I didn't get mad about her fling with Cullen."

A question about her and Junior Junior sat on the tip of my tongue, but I stopped it from slipping out. It was a better question for Junior Junior, or Vivie.

I blew out a breath. "Alright. I'll visit her, but I won't have time until Sunday. I have my library job and here tomorrow."

He shook his head. "You can have tomorrow off."

"I need the money, Randy."

He reached out and took my forearms in his hands and smiled, like he was giving me a gift. "I'll still pay you your full shift."

I wanted to ask about tips but was afraid how he might construe it. Instead I wrangled myself free of his grip. "I'll stop by tomorrow after the library."

"Thank you, Sophie."

I shook my head at Randy's odd request and made my way to the bar. Spike was already there serving a beer to a patron I'd never seen. Along with locals, the Booty Burgo was often busy with tourists visiting the Blue Ridge. There was a lull in the season at the moment, but it would pick up again when the leaves turned vibrant colors of red, orange, and yellow.

Junior Junior wasn't there, but it was early in the evening.

"Did you see Randy?" Spike nodded to me as I walked behind the bar.

"Yes."

"Do you think his wife will take him back?"

I shrugged. "I don't know." I worked hard to stay out of the inner workings of the Danner family.

Spike wiped the bar with a rag. "I almost feel sorry for the guy."

"Almost?" I quirked a brow at Spike.

"Well, we all know he's not faithful."

"True."



“But he does seem like a lost puppy.”

I laughed and shook my head. “Randy isn’t that cute.”

My shift was normal with all the usual suspects including Paulie and Walt. The only regular customer to not show was Junior Junior. I was disappointed not to have the chance to talk to him, and yet, it was probably best that he wasn’t pickling his liver a third night in a row. His son, Tri-J, had probably found a way to keep him home.

Randy left around eleven, saying he was going to try to go home, but if not, he’d be at his parents’ house. He reminded me that I was off tomorrow. Spike arched a brow at me. His expression appeared to ask about my relationship with Randy. A giant “eww” moved through my body. “He just wants me to visit Vivie.”

“None of it is my business.” Spike went back to filling a beer glass.

I helped Spike close up, and then headed out to the Brown Bomber to go home. It was a long day and, except for the visit with Vivie, I was looking forward to not having to work tomorrow.

As I got close to my car, I saw a familiar truck parked next to it.

“Hey Warrior Princess.”

“AJ.” Fatigue floated away, replaced with a bubbly excitement. I’d missed AJ while he was gone, but until that moment I hadn’t realized how much. Or maybe it was less about the missing him and more about the needing him after the emotional few days I’d had.

I rushed to him, and he swooped me up into his arms and spun me around. Then he sat me on the back bed of his truck, where his dog, Dutch, nuzzled me. She’d have to wait for her pat though, because AJ bent his head for a hello kiss. I held him close as his lips seared mine. AJ was the best kisser, and I’d have been happy to spend the rest of my days right there in a lip lock with him.

He pulled away. “Did you miss me?”

“Maybe a little.”

Dutch nudged me, and I patted her. “How are you, Duchess?” Then I looked back up at AJ. “I thought you weren’t going to be home until Saturday.”

“It is Saturday, Princess. It’s two a.m. on Saturday.” He leaned forward and kissed me again. My heart swelled at the idea that his feelings for me were as strong as mine were for him. After all, he clearly couldn’t stop kissing me.

When he pulled away, he frowned. "You look tired." His fingers traced my cheek.

"It's been a long day."

"Oh yeah, today is your library day too."

I nodded, but my fatigue was more than physical. It had been a crazy few emotional days as well. It made me even more glad AJ was back.

As if he could see there was more going on than just a long day, he asked. "You okay?"

I'm not sure if it was fatigue or just everything from the last few days coming to a head, but my eyes filled with tears.

"Hey Sophie, what's going on?" He pulled me close and held me, giving me comfort and strength.

When he pulled back, I looked up at him through watery eyes. "Marla, from my coupon group."

He nodded that he knew who I was talking about.

"She was murdered."

His auburn brows drew together. "What?"

"I went to her house for help on coupons and found her."

"Are you alright?" His eyes scanned my body apparently for signs I might have been hurt.

"She was stabbed . . . it was . . ." The image of all the blood and Marla's lifeless body flashed in my brain. "Horrible."

"Sophie, I'm sorry." He pulled me close again. "Do the police know who did it?" He rubbed my back.

"No. They've held Vivie Danner."

AJ pulled back and looked at me quizzically. "Really?"

"Yes. She had Marla's coupons. I don't think she did it, but she was seen there."

"You're not in trouble, are you?"

I understood why he'd ask that. Only a few months ago, both AJ and I were people of interest in a murder.

I shook my head. "No. But I wasn't too happy about having to see Sergeant Scowl again."

AJ gave me a lopsided smile at my nickname for the investigator.

I shook my head of the memory of Marla's dead body, and the last few days. "Did you get your airplane?"

AJ studied me for a minute as if he wanted to be sure I was okay. Then he nodded. "It was quite an adventure, Soph."

"Oh?"

"I'll tell you all about it once you get some rest." His fingers brushed my cheek again.

I didn't want to leave him now, but he was right. I was tired and it was late.

"Same time, same place?" he asked.

"I have tomorrow night off."

A slow, seductive smile spread on his face. "Can I make you dinner, Warrior Princess?"

"Yes, Flyboy."

## Chapter Nine

The next morning, I woke early. Early enough that I could visit AJ before my library job. I knew I'd see him for dinner, but with my crazy work schedule, and his job that took him out of town every few weeks, our time together was often fleeting. In fact, in the few months we'd been dating, most of our time together was spent in the parking lot of the Booty Burgo after work.

I showered and dressed in khaki walking shorts and a white sleeveless button shirt appropriate for the library. I slipped on sandals and then headed to the kitchen. Aunt Rose wasn't up, so I left her a note that I was going to visit a friend before work and wished her luck in her Saturday Bunko game at the senior center. Hopefully she'd beat the pants off Carl Jackson.

I purposefully didn't mention seeing AJ. While she accepted my dating him, that didn't mean she wouldn't hassle me about it.

The air was warm, but less humid now that fall was around the corner. I stopped at Jefferson Java Joint downtown to pick up two coffees, a spiced pumpkin muffin for me, and a chocolate éclair for AJ. Then the Brown Bomber and I lumbered up the mountain on the eastern side of town toward Jefferson Lake.

As I pulled into AJ's driveway, I noticed another car parked next to his truck. I wondered who'd be visiting him early in the morning. I knew it wasn't Bull's car because he drove a bad ass motorcycle.

I grabbed my coffees and bag of yum yums and excited the car. Then I made my way up the walk, which was nicer now that much of the big work of renovating AJ's home was done, leaving the yard free of debris.

We had gotten past the point where we had to knock at each other's homes. Actually, AJ didn't come to the door when he picked me up at Aunt Rose's. But I was able to walk into AJ's without knocking.

"Hello?"

I was first greeted by Dutch, who ran up to me and planted her butt

waiting for a pat. “Hello sweetie.” My hands were full, so I couldn’t pet her, but I did give her a quick hug, since as a Great Dane, she was huge and could look me in the eyes. All I had to do was reach out with my arm to give her a little snuggle. She rested her head on my shoulder before I pulled away.

I heard a noise and looked up. In the entrance from the back hall to main living area, Becca Thoroux stood. I didn’t think anything of it until I realized she had long, dark tussled hair and was wearing one of AJ’s button shirts. It appeared that that was all she was wearing, as her long legs were bare.

There was only one other time in my life when I felt like everything I thought I knew about life turned out to be a lie and that was when I learned my father was not only arrested but was actually guilty of running a pyramid scam. As I looked at Becca, who eyes widened at the sight of me, I had that same feeling. Disbelief. Anger. Pain. All of them vying for equal intensity.

“Sophie.” Becca mustered a smile.

“Becca.” I made the decision right then and there that I’d play this out. I’d seen enough rom coms to know that things weren’t always how they look. Perhaps there was an innocent explanation. It didn’t seem likely, but I was also determined to not be the woman that went hysterical. “I’ve got coffee and pastries. I only brought two though, I didn’t know you were here.” See, I could be rational.

“I . . . ah . . .”

“Who’s at the door, Bec—” AJ walked into the living area wearing jeans. Only jeans. His chest and feet were bare.

I held the coffee and bag up, and tried to smile like I was clueless as to what I was seeing. “Just me.”

“Sophie.” His expression mirrored Becca’s. Surprise and then ut-oh. It was the ut-oh that had my gut clenching and my resolve to be strong fading.

I swallowed. “Here.” I thrust the breakfast food at Becca since she was closest to me. “You take it. I hope you like pumpkin spice muffins, unless AJ is willing to share the éclair.” Of course, he was willing. It appeared he’d shared his éclair with her during the night.

“Sophie. It’s not what it looks like.” AJ held up a hand. “Give me a minute to get my shirt on and we’ll talk.”

Was that what Randy told Vivie when she found another woman’s underwear under her bed? “It’s not what it looks like.”

What really sealed the deal that something was wrong was his leaving the

room to put his shirt on. Why was he okay with walking around shirtless with Becca, but not me?

“Actually, I’ve got to get to work.” I turned to rush out the door, nearly stumbling over Dutch.

“Soph!”

I was almost to the car when AJ caught up to me.

“Sophie, please.” He reached out to take my arm, but I pulled away. “She has a client in town and was looking for a place to stay. That’s it. I swear.”

My head was telling me not to believe him, but my heart was tearing and not wanting to think the worst. “Okay.”

“Okay? You believe me?”

I didn’t know what to believe, but I wanted time and room to think, and I didn’t want to be the hysterical woman. “Of course. I trust you.”

He studied me probably because my words didn’t match my tone. “She was here when I got back from seeing you last night. It was late and I let her have the guest room.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

His jaw clenched as annoyance crossed his face. “Okay. That’s it?”

“What do you want me to say, AJ? You gave me an explanation. I have to trust you because without that, we have nothing.”

He raked his fingers through his thick auburn hair, and I couldn’t help but picture Becca’s hands there. I turned away to get in the car.

“How come you’re not mad?”

“You want me to be mad?”

He let out an exasperated breath. “Do you care about me? Because you act like what you just saw doesn’t bother you.”

“I never said it didn’t bother me, AJ.” I wanted to light him up with my words, and maybe a slap or two. He was upset at me for not being mad? How was I the bad guy in this situation? “But I trust you.” I bit the words out.

I looked across the tranquil water on the lake, the complete opposite of the blood roaring through my brain. I finally looked back at him. “If it were reversed. If you walked in on me and Randy—”

“I’d beat the crap out of him.”

“Even if I said, ‘it’s not what it looks like.’” I gave him back the same words. “He just needed a place to stay.”

“You’d never let Randy stay with you.”

Ugh. “That’s not the point. The point is either you believe and trust me, or you don’t. You’re saying I should go in and punch Becca,” which a part of me wanted to do. “But that would indicate I didn’t believe you. Which is it, AJ, we trust each other or we don’t?”

As he stared at me, my head began to overrule my heart. *He doth protest too much*. It didn’t make sense, because I would have never thought in a million years AJ would cheat. But his reaction had me rethinking that.

“I’ve got to get to work.”

“Sophie.”

Within seconds, I was in my car and heading down the mountain without a look back, my heart and mind in whirl.

“No!” I slammed my palm on the steering wheel. Even if it was true that nothing happened, I had to admit that there was a familiarity between them. A familiarity AJ and I didn’t have. He and I had never been intimate. Sure, there was kissing and heavy petting, but I’d never seen him naked. Except for a few times we went swimming, I’d never seen him without his shirt.

I couldn’t help but wonder if AJ had been faithful, but reluctantly so. Maybe deep down he missed Becca. I wasn’t there long enough to see more than surprise in Becca’s expression, but the chances were good that if AJ was interested in rekindling things with her, she’d light his fire.

By the time I reached Jefferson Grove, I’d convinced myself that I had to let him go. He had to explore what was going on with him and Becca. I even decided I was lucky to find out before I’d fallen for him more. If I hurt now, imagine how much I’d hurt later.

Somehow, I made it through story time and reshelving books without weeping. The busy work helped keep my mind focused elsewhere. When I was done, I didn’t want to visit Vivie and yet, I knew going home would give me too much time to ruminate over what I saw and what it meant.

I left the library and headed to my car in the parking lot, my mind and emotions weighing down on me now that my brain wasn’t occupied.

“Sophie.”

Startled to hear his voice, I looked up to see AJ standing next to his truck, parked by my car.

“AJ.” My heart leapt at the sight of him, but it was immediately followed by the image of him and Becca that morning. Why was love so cruel? I stopped

short. Love? Oh God, I did love him. I'd never told him, but that didn't mean the feelings weren't there. No wonder my heart was breaking.

"You said you weren't working tonight. I hoped we could talk now."

I should talk, but I wasn't ready. I couldn't believe I was happy that I had plans to visit Vivie. "I have a . . . thing."

He stared at me a moment, his eyes sad. "You have to know that I'd never cheat on you. You know me, Sophie."

There was a part of me that believed him, and yet, my brain reminded me that anyone can betray another person. "I never thought my family would lie, cheat, and steal . . ."

He cursed, "So now you can't trust anyone, is that it?"

Seeing AJ and Becca tapped into the same sense of betrayal I'd felt when I learned that not just my father, but also my mother and brother had cheated people. If my own family could hurt me, anyone could. Including AJ.

I'd warned myself when we first connected not to get too attached to him. To not come to rely on him. I had to make my own way in the world. And I was. But I realized now that I'd come to depend on him emotionally. Whether he was faithful or not, the scene that morning reminded me that I couldn't afford to rely on others for my security or happiness.

He stepped closer to me, but still kept some distance. "Why did you say you believed me if you didn't?"

I didn't have an answer for that. Instead, I responded with a question of my own. "Why did you get mad at me for not being more upset?"

"Because it didn't seem like you believed it. Even now, you're detached, which means either you think I cheated, or you don't care if I did."

*Don't care?* My heart was ripping, and he thought I didn't care?

"What are you really thinking and feeling, Sophie?"

"I do care, AJ. I care that I allowed myself to need you when I know I can't rely on anyone but myself."

His breath hitched, and he started to say something, but I kept going. "I care that seeing you and Becca together made me realize that you and her still have something—"

"No. Sophie, no." He stepped closer again, and one arm stretched out, but I moved out of his reach.

"Then why were you both so comfortable being around each other half naked, yet you felt you had to cover up with me?"



“Is that why you’re upset?”

“Don’t dismiss my feelings.”

“I’m not. The only reason I didn’t have a shirt on is that I was asleep when you arrived. When I heard you, I got up and hurried out, dressing enough to be decent. I wanted to put my shirt on when I saw you because the situation was awkward and I was afraid you’d read more into it.”

“So, this is my fault?”

“No.” He gave a growl of frustration, followed by a deep breath, as if he was trying to calm himself. “It’s just a misunderstanding. Becca and I are friends. Her dad is my boss and I didn’t feel I could kick her out at three in the morning. She was already there when I got there after seeing you.”

I could understand doing a favor for a boss. After all, wasn’t that why I was going to endure Vivie; to help my boss Randy? While I’d dated Randy for a week in high school, my situation wasn’t the same as Becca and AJ. They’d had a relationship. And I’d never be caught dead nearly naked around Randy.

“Why was she in your shirt?”

He blew out a breath. “It wasn’t mine. It was Adam’s.”

“Your brother?” He had an answer for everything. So, had my father, until he finally admitted the truth.

“He stays in the guest room when he comes to visit. He must have left it and she found it and wore it to bed. I swear, Sophie, there’s nothing between me and Becca.”

“Why not?” We’d never talked about our past relationships. I’d known about Becca but not how or why it ended.

AJ’s auburn brows drew together. “What do you mean?”

“You’re friends. You’re very comfortable together.” Half-naked comfortable. “Maybe there are still feelings there.”

Annoyance flashed on his face. “I drove like a bat out of hell last night when we got back to Virginia just to see you because I couldn’t wait any longer.”

My heart betrayed me, doing a flip at the idea that he’d had to see me, even though his words came out angry.

“I missed you. But it doesn’t seem like you care.”

“I care.”

“Do you, Sophie?”

Annoyance went from a simmer to a flare. Why was I turning out to be the bad guy again? “Why are you angry with me? I’m not the one who had a nearly naked woman in my house this morning,”

“I’m angry and hurt, Sophie, because you dismiss my feelings for you.”

“No, I don’t.”

“You’re accusing me of cheating. You’re ready to let this thing between us go without hardly a fight. Maybe you don’t care for me as much as I do for you. That’s the only explanation.”

That couldn’t be right.

“I love you, Sophie.” He spat out as he glared at me, and then stepped back as if he needed a moment.

I, on the other hand, was reeling. We hadn’t used the L word. Before this morning, I’d have been elated that he had. Now, I was just confused.

Finally, he turned his attention back to me. He stared as if he was waiting for my response, but I couldn’t form any words. Not that I didn’t have any thoughts. Many were tumbling through my brain, but I couldn’t decide which to go with. Did I tell him I loved him too, and then let everything that happened that morning go? Did I tell him I wanted time to think because I was afraid to trust him?

“I . . . I have an appointment.” As the words came out, I knew they were the wrong choice.

He jerked back as if I’d slapped him. And I suppose that’s what it felt like.

“AJ—”

He waved his hand as he retreated. “No. That’s the answer.” He shook his head, scoffing. “I should have known.” Then he glared at me. “It turns out I shouldn’t have trusted you. I thought we really had something, but I was what . . . a little fling with the guy from the wrong side of the social economic line? I thought you were different.”

“What?”

“I’m an idiot.”

“AJ—”

“Go Sophie.” He turned away and headed to his truck.

“No.” I marched up to him. “You don’t get to make me the bad guy. I haven’t done anything wrong, AJ Devlin.”

“Neither have I, except to fall in love with you.” He scoffed as he got into his truck. “You know where I am if you change your mind.” He slammed the

door shut.

He was going to drive off, and my heart that had been tearing, was now completely shattered. He loved me. I loved him. So why did this seem like the end?

# Chapter Ten

I didn't want to see Vivie, and yet, I was glad to have something to do. I drove to Monticello Heights. There was no one at the gate, but when I pressed the buzzer on the check-in building, security picked up the phone and let me in when I explained who I was there to visit. I'd never been to the gated community when the front gate hadn't been manned. People who lived there had bar codes on their cars that would open the gate. The guard was only necessary for guests and work services such as the plumber or cable guy. Looked like the community found a way around that through a call-in system.

I drove to Vivie's and parked in front of her home. Both Vivie and Randy complained about money issues, but they had their nice colonial style home in the gated community. Things couldn't be all that bad.

Vivie opened the door, and for once, she didn't look like the perfect Stepford wife. I wondered if that was because she'd spent time in jail or because of Randy's cheating.

She pursed her lips at me. "I don't know why you're here."

That made two of us, but I plastered on a smile. "I've been where you are and thought you could use some support."

Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. I didn't blame her. If she all of a sudden was nice to me, I'd be suspicious too. "I don't remember you being in jail."

"No, but I was questioned and a suspect. Twice."

She opened the door to let me in. The house smelled of lavender cleaner.

"I've been cleaning Randy's latest skank from the house." She whirled on me. "Do you know who she is? I thought you were watching him at the restaurant."

My mind grappled with whether or not I should tell the truth. "He doesn't cheat at the restaurant."

"No, he does it in my house." She turned away and headed back toward her family room.

“The kids are still at their mema’s?” I wasn’t sure what conversation we were going to have; murder or cheating, but neither was something kids should overhear.

“Just until five.” She walked into her kitchen. “Do you want tea or a real drink?”

I wanted a real drink, but it probably wasn’t a good time to get tipsy. “Tea.”

She poured a glass of iced tea for me and a white wine for herself. I got the feeling it wasn’t her first glass of the day.

“It’s happy time somewhere,” she said as she sat on the couch.

I sat in a chair across from her. “I didn’t call the sheriff on you.” I didn’t know why I felt it was important to let her know that I wasn’t the one who told on her, but it was.

“I know. Randy said you recommended the lawyer.”

The image of Becca in AJ’s shirt flashed in my brain and I wished I’d asked for wine. Instead I took a sip of tea. “She’s AJ’s lawyer.”

“She seems on the ball.”

I nodded.

“I’m sure Randy would boink her in a minute.”

I nodded again.

Her head cocked. “You don’t think it was her, do you?”

Becca was too smart and sophisticated for someone like Randy, and I’m certain they’d never met before. Besides, she had her claws in AJ. “I doubt it.”

Vivie shrugged. “She got me out of jail so I’m not going to complain.”

“Are you still a suspect?”

She inhaled a breath. “Yes.” Then she leaned forward. “You were there, Sophie. At Marla’s. Did you see anyone else?”

“Junior Junior was there.” I watched her for her reaction.

Her head tilted. “He wouldn’t kill her.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Vivie waved a hand. “He was in love with her.”

My brows narrowed in curiosity. I don’t know why. Vivie was always on top of town gossip, especially the tales being told in Monticello Heights. “How do you know?”

“Because he told me. He does our yard work too.”

“I didn’t know you and Junior Junior were friends.”

She rolled her eyes. “You don’t have to pretend you don’t know, Sophie.

Everyone knows he and I have had a few good times.”

“I wouldn’t think he was your type.”

“All that yard work makes him strong . . . buff. Junior Junior may not be the smartest guy, but he does know his way around a woman.” She waggled her brows suggestively.

I swallowed the ‘ew’ that bubbled into my throat. “Vivie, I have to be honest. I don’t understand why you’re upset at Randy when you have your own side dishes.”

“Of course, you wouldn’t understand. You’re a spinster.” Her eyes rolled at my naivety. “Randy brought a woman into our home. Into my bed, which, by the way, is out back and I plan to burn.”

Once again, the image of Becca and AJ, in his bed, came to mind. I wondered what he’d do if I burned his mattress. “So, you and Junior Junior . . .”

“Not in my house, no.” She pursed her lips as if I was being dense. “His family has that guest house at the back of their property where Junior Junior lives.”

“I see. So, you and Junior Junior were having a relationship, but he was in love with Marla?” I began to wonder if fidelity was a myth, all just fairy tales. Did everyone cheat?

“He and I were more like friends with occasional benefits.”

“Does the Sergeant Davis know this?”

Her eyes narrowed. “It’s none of his business.”

I winced, not wanting to tell her that the sheriff’s investigator would likely disagree. “It’s just that, it could give you motive.”

“What, why?”

“Jealousy.”

She laughed. “I’m not jealous of Marla. She was a couponing queen, but she didn’t have a lot going on for her outside that, bless her heart.”

“Do you know anything about her husband? No one I’ve talked to has ever met or seen him.”

Vivie thought for a moment. “You know, I haven’t either. He could have killed her.”

“Why, if he’s never there?”

“Maybe because of Junior Junior.”

“So, were they . . .?” I let the question hang.

She shook her head. "Nah, he wanted to do everything by the book with her."

I sat back. "Does that mean there were no benefits for you anymore?"

"That's right." Vivie frowned. "Maybe she turned him down and he killed her." But even as she said, her expression appeared to dismiss it and she shook her head.

"Ellie Tappen says they spent a lot of time together."

Vivie's eyes flared with heat. "Ellie Tappen should mind her own business. She's the one that told on me, you know."

"I'd heard that."

Vivie pursed her lips and scoffed. "Talk about unseen husbands. No one has seen Al in ages."

"He's sick, Vivie." Whenever I thought I could have a normal conversation with her, she always ended up being insensitive.

"If I had to live with her, I'd go cuckoo in the brain too."

There was no use in trying to appeal to her sense of empathy or pity, because she didn't have any. Before I could figure out what to say, the sound of the door opening had Vivie looking up toward the hall.

"Vivie?" Tracy's voice floated to us. A moment later, she appeared. When she saw me, her face fell a little bit, and she immediately looked at Vivie as if to gauge if I'd told on her.

"Did you bring the lighter fluid?" Vivie asked.

Tracy nodded. "Yes. What are we burning?"

"My mattress. Oh." She got up and went to the kitchen. She returned with a pair of black panties. Tracy went still and pale.

"Can you believe it? Whoever she is, she's a cow. Look at the size of these." Vivie dangled the panties between her thumb and forefinger like they had cooties.

For the first time that day, I laughed. It wasn't appropriate. It just burst forth. Vivie smiled.

Tracy tensed. "Not everyone can be a size two, Vivie."

"If it's the last thing I do, I'm going to find out who these belong too." Vivie waved the undergarment.

"Well, I should probably go. You and Tracy have things to do." I stood.

"Get me some wine, Vivie. I'll walk Sophie out," Tracy said.

I figured she was going to try and talk me out of telling on her. I hadn't

told on her, so I didn't know why she was worried. "She'll figure it out, Tracy."

"Not if you don't tell her." Tracy looked up the hallway presumably to make sure Vivie couldn't hear. "It's over between me and Randy."

"That's probably a good thing."

Tracy gripped my arm. "Promise me you won't tell."

"I'm not going to promise anything." I continued on before she could respond. "But I have no interest in any of this. Vivie wouldn't believe me anyway, you know that."

Tracy glared at me for a moment.

"Hey Tracy, let's go set fire to my cheatin' husband's clothes. It will make good kindling for the mattress."

I saw my chance to leave and took it. I wondered how long before a neighbor called the fire department. While outdoor burning was common in rural Virginia, it wasn't approved in backyards of Monticello Heights.

I'd done my duty at Vivie's although I wasn't sure Randy would think so. I didn't understand the two of them at all. Then again, I was no expert in relationships. Somehow, I'd gone from being blissfully happy with AJ to being single, I think.

I wanted to be angry that he'd turned this situation around to be my fault. I was mad, but the anger couldn't replace the pain.

Needing a friend and an objective point of view, I headed to Lani's townhome. I hoped she and Dwayne weren't in the middle of anything important as I showed up unannounced. I couldn't call because I couldn't trust myself to not weep, and crying wasn't conducive to driving.

"Hey girl." Lani's smile greeted me at the door. Immediately, her smile faded. "What's wrong?"

"I think AJ and I broke up." Saying the words out loud was my undoing, and I burst into tears.

"Oh honey." Lani pulled me inside and into a hug. "Come in and tell me what happened."

"I'm not interrupting?"

"When my friend's in pain, I always have time." She led me to the kitchen where she pulled out a bottle of wine and two glasses. Then we went out on her back patio,

"Where's Dwayne?" I asked as I sat in one of the resin chairs.



“He’s napping. I wore him out earlier.” She wagged her brows suggestively. I was happy that Lani and Dwayne had a good marriage. I was beginning to think they were the only ones that did. Except maybe Aggie and Earl. They appeared happy. Everyone else? It seemed like cheating and discontent was rampant. Even Aunt Rose, if Ellie’s story was right, was the victim of cheating. I was beginning to understand why she simply gave up on men.

Lani’s expression was sympathetic as she asked, “What happened?”

I explained about visiting AJ that morning and seeing him and Becca barely dressed, and how he got angry with me for not being more upset. I finished the story with his visit to the library and how he drove off angry at me.

“I don’t get how I’m the bad person here.” I looked into my wine glass and decided it probably wasn’t going to be enough as I took a large gulp.

“He said he loved you, right?”

I looked up at Lani. Of course, that’s the one bit of the story she’d focus on. She was a romantic. I suppose that’s partly why we were friends. She liked happily ever after stories like I did. However, in this moment, I could only stare at her.

She gave me a compassionate smile. “Honey, he was wrong to react the way he did, but it makes sense.”

“Really? How?” Maybe I just wasn’t cut out for having a relationship. Perhaps I should plan a life like Aunt Rose. She never married, and she was happy enough. She had friends and a full life.

“He interpreted your reaction to seeing him and Becca as not caring.”

“I told him I believed him. Should I have yelled at him?”

Lani smiled. “Probably. How did you say it?”

“What do you mean? I told him I believed him.”

“Were you sincere?”

AJ words came back to me. *It seemed liked you didn’t believe it.*

“He doesn’t seem to think so.”

“I know this is going to sound crazy, but many people equate the level of jealousy to depth of love. I know what you’re saying is that with trust you wouldn’t be jealous. The fact that your reaction was non-existent could make him think you’re not invested in the relationship. That you don’t love him back.” Lani cocked her head to the side. “You do love him, right?”

I nodded.

“Did you tell him that?”

Guilt pinched my gut as I shook my head. “In my defense, he was angry with me when he said he loved me.”

“That was the first time?” Lani’s voice pitched up in surprised.

“Yes.”

“You two have been dating for over two months and that’s the first time you’ve talked about feelings?”

I nodded.

“Honey, you need to go back and the two of you have to have a serious talk about how you’re feeling.”

“It didn’t go well in the library parking lot.”

“Except you two weren’t really talking, where you? At least you weren’t.”

I shook my head. “How come I’m the bad guy?”

“Oh honey, you’re not.” Lani patted my hand. “But you’re guarded. I don’t blame you. You’ve been through an emotional roller coaster. You have every right to feel wary about trusting someone. And seeing AJ and his lawyer like that, and his bad reaction, doesn’t help. I get that. But if you believe him and trust him, you should open up to him.”

“I did.”

“Did you? You didn’t tell him you loved him. You said he didn’t think you believed your own words when you said you trusted him.” She poured me another glass of wine. “Dwayne and I had all sorts of problems in the beginning of our relationship. It wasn’t until we agreed to lay our hearts out on the line, to be totally honest in sharing our feelings, good and bad, that our relationship really gelled.”

What she was saying made sense, but my stomach pitched at the idea of laying my heart on the line. Or giving my heart 100% to another. The data I had on love and romance skewed on the side of heartache. Maybe that was because most didn’t do what Lani and Dwayne did. I wasn’t sure Randy or Vivie knew what they were feeling, much less have the ability to share it.

I took another sip of my wine. “What if he’s done with me?”

“Then he’s an idiot and you’re better off without him.”

By the time I left Lani’s it was nearly six in the evening. AJ and I had planned to have dinner together. It looked like that wasn’t going to happen. Then again, I had to talk to him. I wanted to know once and for all where we stood and whether this fracture could be mended.

I looked in my review mirror and saw my weary bedraggled face. Deciding to regroup and clean up before heading to AJ's (or maybe I was just procrastinating), I drove home. I hoped Aunt Rose would be occupied by the TV, because I didn't think I could survive listening to her rant about how men were no good. She wasn't necessarily wrong, but I wasn't ready to give up on AJ.

As I reached the house, I saw AJ's truck parked out front. My heart skipped a beat. Could it be he wasn't ready to give up either?

In all our months of dating, AJ had avoided Aunt Rose, opting to wait for me outside. As I passed the truck to pull into the driveway, I looked at the driver's side. It was empty. Was AJ in the house? With Aunt Rose?

I made my way up the walk and opened the door wondering what the heck I'd find when I did. I stepped through the door and looked to the living area where Aunt Rose and AJ sat at her dining table, each holding a hand of cards.

They both looked up as I entered. AJ stood, making me think of an 18th century gentleman.

"It's about time you got home. AJ here said you didn't have to work tonight. So, where you been, Sophie?" Aunt Rose drew a card from the pile in the middle of the table.

"I went to see Vivie and then I went to Lani's." My gaze held AJ's or maybe his held mine. Whatever it was, I was transfixed.

"Vivie? I thought you didn't like her." Aunt Rose put the card in her hand.

"My boss asked me to check on her." I didn't want to mention Randy's name as it might upset AJ.

"Well, AJ here has been waiting a long time. You're not going to keep a boyfriend, Sophie, if you make them wait."

"I'm not going anywhere." His voice was soft, but firm.

My breath hitched as the grip of fear and pain on my heart loosened.

"Not until you play. It's your go," Aunt Rose told him.

AJ looked torn. I nodded that he should finish his card game. After all, it appeared Aunt Rose liked him, and she didn't like anybody.

"I'm just going to get cleaned up," I said.

"I should beat him by then," Rose responded.

AJ gave me a wan smile and then sat. "You're pretty sure of yourself, Ms. Parker."

“I beat you the last two hands, why would this be any different, AJ?”

AJ looked over his cards. “You’re probably right.”

With a light heart, I went to my room, grabbed a change of clothes and then went into the bathroom. I looked bedraggled, but the spark was back in my eyes. I washed my face, combed my hair, and changed into white capris and a teal green sleeveless blouse. It was nice enough to go out to dinner, if that was still an option.

When I got back to the living room, Rose was stuffing the cards back into the box.

“Thank you for the tea, Ms. Parker.”

“You know you’d be better at cards if you focused more. But at least you don’t cheat.”

The word hung in the air.

AJ’s bright blue eyes looked directly into mine. “No, ma’am, I don’t.”

Aunt Rose put the cards in the drawer of her side table. “I’m going to make some dinner. You’re welcome to stay AJ. But no hanky panky.”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you.”

Aunt Rose went to the kitchen, leaving AJ and me alone. The moment was awkward. I wanted to go hug him and tell him I was sorry, even though I was mad that he’d turned things around to make me look bad. He appeared unsure, as well, standing still, as if he was waiting for me to make a move.

“We can sit out on the porch, if you want. To talk.” I jerked my thumb over my shoulder pointing toward the porch.

He nodded.

Once outside, I sat on the wicker love seat, while AJ remained standing as he looked down on me.

“You’re pretty brave to play cards with Aunt Rose.” I wanted to lighten the mood, hoping it would make the conversation go easier.

His lips twitched upward slightly. “I think she likes me.”

“I think she does too.”

Aunt Rose earned her reputation as a cantankerous old bitty. She had no time for nonsense and wasn’t afraid to let people know it. The truth was, she was a good judge of character. I was sure she initially thought I was a crook like my family, and when she determined I wasn’t, she thought I was a ninny. Over time, she has come to realize that while I was sheltered and naïve, I was smart and resourceful, and our relationship has improved. Not that she

won't put me in my place if she thinks I've stepped out of bounds, but it was actually refreshing. I never had to guess what Aunt Rose was thinking or feeling about me, unlike AJ.

AJ remained quiet for a minute and then said, "I owe you an apology."

"Oh?"

"I was angry, Sophie, and I took it out on you. I know how things looked and I hated it because I'd never cheat."

My heart told me that was true, even as my brain reminded me that my own family was made of cheaters and thieves.

"Your reaction . . . I couldn't figure it out. You said you believed me, but it didn't sound true. I wasn't sure if you didn't believe me or was angry or if you just didn't care. The idea that you didn't care . . . when I care about you so much . . . I just went a little crazy."

"A little?" I smiled.

"Okay, maybe a lot." He sat down next to me. "I swear nothing happened. Becca and I are friends, and she's my boss' daughter, so I let her stay. That's it."

"I believe you." I hoped my voice conveyed the truth of my feeling. "And I guess I should apologize too."

He shook his head. "You don't have anything to be sorry about."

"I do. The truth is I hated seeing you and Becca this morning. I wanted to scratch her eyes out and punch you in the face."

AJ grinned.

"Except, I didn't want to be that jealous crazy woman. I didn't want to believe what I saw. But then you went to put your shirt on, and it highlighted how close you'd been to her. Closer to her than me."

"No, that's not true Sophie."

I gave him a look that said I didn't believe him.

He blew out a breath. "Did she and I ever . . ." He didn't say the words, but I understood that he was referring to intimacy. "Yes. But I wouldn't say she and I were closer. I cared about her. I love you Sophie." He took my hand, and the combination of his words and touch had the last bit of my resistance melting away.

"I thought maybe there were still feelings between you two, especially when you got mad at me. I thought maybe your guilt—"

"I did have guilt. Not because anything happened. I felt guilt about my bad

judgment in letting her stay.”

“There’s one more thing I need to say to you.”

He inhaled a breath as if he was shoring up his nerve.

“Ready?”

He nodded.

“I love you too.”

It took a moment for my words to register. When they did, his eyes softened, and his smile spread as wide as I’d ever seen it. Then he pulled me into his arms. “I’m sorry, Sophie.”

“I know. Me too. I should have expressed my true feelings. We need to do that.”

“Absolutely.” Then he kissed me, and it was glorious, filling all the emptiness I’d felt during the day.

He pulled back. “For the record, anytime you want me to walk around without my shirt . . . or without anything else, I’m happy to do so.”

I laughed.

“Except here, because I promised your aunt there wouldn’t be any hanky panky.”

AJ told me he loved me and his willingness to deal with Aunt Rose proved it. Up until now, AJ was like most people in town, avoiding Aunt Rose if possible. I was important enough that he’d come here and even played cards with her. He’d stayed for dinner, and earned extra brownie points from Rose when he took her plate and said he’d do the dishes. Turned out Aunt Rose was mush around AJ too.

Later, as she watched one of her game shows, AJ and I returned to the love seat on the porch.

“I don’t know what all the fuss is about with your aunt. She’s perfectly pleasant to me.”

I pursed my lips. “Tell me that after she calls you on your nonsense.”

“I never do nonsense.” He grinned at me.

I just shook my head.

“Did your thing this afternoon go okay?” He took my hand.

“I don’t know.”

“I take it your visit to Vivie was at Randy’s request.”

“Yes. I’m pretty sure I didn’t do anything that made it better for him. When I was leaving, she and Tracy were getting ready to burn the mattress.”

AJ arched a brow.

“Randy had his mistress over while Vivie was in jail.”

“Ah.” He gave a nod as if that made perfect sense.

“I don’t understand them. While I’m there, she’s railing on Randy’s cheatin’ ways, and in the next sentence is telling me how good Junior Junior is in the sack.”

AJ laughed. “Junior Junior always did have a way with the women.”

I turned to look at him. “You know about Junior Junior?”

He nodded. “Sure. I used to work for Masons, remember? That’s how I ended up working at your house. Your parents used them for their landscaping.”

I smiled at the sweet memories of AJ working around my house and how I always made sure to be there when he did.

“It was a big help to me that your dad hired me on for more work. I was able to pay for school and help my family.” He squeezed my hand. It was a reminder that my father had some redeeming qualities.

Then a thought occurred to me. “You weren’t like Junior Junior, were you?”

“What do you mean?” He acted innocent, but I could tell he was feigning that he didn’t know what I was talking about.

I smirked. “Entertaining lonely housewives.”

A dreamy expression crossed his handsome face. “There was one woman who I used to entertain.”

Jealousy flared hot even though his antics were over ten years ago, and I’d had no hold on him then.

“Or maybe she entertained me.” He smiled at me. “She used to tell me stories.”

He was talking about me. The green monster melted, replaced by that soft gooey sensation of love.

I rested my head on his shoulder. “You must have thought I was annoying.”

“No. I liked you. You never talked down to me. There were moments I thought maybe you had a crush on me.”

Heat flared on my cheeks.

"I nearly tested that theory when you were a senior."

I jerked up straight and stared at him. "No? Really?"

"I told you that before."

I bit my lower lip, not sure I wanted to know the answer to the question ripe in my mind. "Why didn't you?"

"For one, you were only seventeen and I was twenty. Two, I was from the Hollow—"

I gave him a light whap on the arm. "You know I don't care about that."

"Other people would. And three, there was the fact that I was going into the military while you were going to college."

That I could accept. I snuggled closer to him. "Things turned out okay."

"I think so."

"So, you don't feel like you missed out on sowing your oats like Junior Junior."

"No. I'm surprised he's still at it. Or is he just back at it?"

"I don't know. Vivie says he was in love with Marla, my friend that was murdered."

"Oh God, Sophie, I'd forgotten about that. And here I was being an insensitive ass."

"It's alright." I turned to look up him. "Do you think Junior Junior is the murdering type?"

AJ studied me for a moment. "You're not sleuthing, are you? Because that didn't go well last time."

"What do you mean? I helped stop a murderer and drug dealer." I was actually pretty proud of that.

"And you nearly got killed in the process." He tugged on one of my curls.

That was true. I occasionally had nightmares about it. "No. I'm just curious. It's a strange case. Marla didn't get out much. She didn't know a lot of people here. Who would want to kill her?"

"Maybe it was someone from her past."

I hadn't thought of that. "I think it must be her husband, but no one has ever seen him."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean no one has ever seen him. Marla said he was out of town a lot, but even her neighbors never actually saw him. What sort of marriage it is that he's never home?"



"Maybe he doesn't exist."

"What?"

AJ shrugged. "Maybe she made him up."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

I couldn't imagine that, and yet, it made as much sense as anything else.

"Are you sure Vivie didn't do it?" AJ asked.

I laughed. "Am I sure? No. But I can't imagine it. She says Junior Junior was in love with Marla and she acted like she accepted it."

AJ scoffed. "I don't think that was love."

"Vivie said it was different with Marla. She said he wanted to do things right with her." I frowned. "If she was married, why would he bother?"

"Marriage didn't stop him before."

"I don't understand that either."

"What?"

"Cheating."

AJ stiffened. Considering the ordeal we'd been through that day, it probably wasn't wise to bring it up again, but infidelity baffled me. If people didn't love their partner enough to be faithful, perhaps they shouldn't be together.

"Why are Vivie and Randy still together? Neither of them is faithful."

"Don't they have kids?"

"Yes, but it can't be good for them that their parents don't much like each other."

"I don't know." AJ took my other hand, holding both of mine in his. His features grew serious. "You have to know I'd never cheat. I've never cheated."

"Good to know."

After AJ left later that evening, I entered the house, wondering if and what Aunt Rose might have to say about him. For as long as I could remember, Aunt Rose had the same attitude about people from the Hollow as most of the town did. Tonight, however, she didn't treat AJ like pond scum. Sure, she was her same contrary self, but there wasn't the hint of disdain I would have expected. Heck, she invited him for dinner. And he'd accepted. If that wasn't love, I didn't know what was.

Aunt Rose sat in her chair watching an episode of *Deadly Women*. I decided not to bother her, and she apparently had nothing to say to me, as she kept her eyes glued to the television. While my day ended well, I was exhausted from the emotional roller coaster, and decided to retire to my room. I changed into my PJs and got ready for bed. As I settled under the sheets, my phone pinged that I had a text.

*Goodnight Warrior Princess*

I'm sure my grin was goofy as I texted back.

*Goodnight flyboy*

# Chapter Eleven

The next day I went to church with Aunt Rose. I think she hoped attending services would cleanse the taint of the Booty Burgo from me.

Later, AJ texted, inviting me to lunch, which we had as a picnic alongside the lake. It was such a lovely afternoon that I hated to leave, but I had my last shift of the week at the Booty Burgo. Randy wasn't there, thank goodness. I wondered if that was a sign that he and Vivie had made up. Or maybe they were out mattress shopping. Whatever the reason, Sunday night at the Booty Burgo was uneventful.

Mondays and Tuesdays were my day off. I usually spent those days preparing for my library programs, and if AJ was home, we'd get together. On this particular Monday, AJ didn't have a repo, but he said he had to do some research work for his boss Gordo, so we made plans to get together for a picnic on the lake later in the evening.

I spent the morning jotting down ideas for October's monster theme at the library, and then finished planning for this week's program on Awilda, a Scandinavian Pirate princess.

After that, I culled my coupons and spent some time studying the savings apps on my phone to figure out how and when to use them. Some offered coupons while others were rebate programs in which I had to take a picture of my receipt and submit it to earn points towards a rebate. Working on my coupons made me think of Marla and her tragic end. Who would have done such a thing? I couldn't believe anyone in Jefferson Grove would kill a nice quiet woman in such a brutal way.

Maybe it wasn't someone from Jefferson Grove. AJ suggested it was someone from her past. Had she moved here to hide from someone?

Or was it possible that a stranger killed her? Maybe it was robbery gone bad. Except, what robber wouldn't steal anything of value from her home? That brought me back to her husband. Had he ever returned to town? Did he know what had happened to Marla?

I considered calling Lani to see if there was anything she could share about the case, but then I remembered AJ's warning about not getting involved. I pushed that aside because my curiosity was piqued. Plus, what if the town was in danger? What if this was a random murder done by some crazed killer? It happened if the crime documentaries on IDTV were to be believed. The residents of Jefferson Grove could be in danger.

I picked up my phone to call Lani, and then reconsidered because she was at work and I didn't want to jeopardize her job, especially by asking her for information she was likely not allowed to share. Instead, I decided to drive out to Monticello Heights to see if Mr. Naylor had finally come home.

As I drove up to the gatehouse guarding the elite residence of Monticello Heights, I ran through my head options for what I could say that would gain me entrance into the private community.

"Here to see Mrs. Danner again?" the guard asked.

That hadn't been my concocted excuse, but I'd use it. "Yes."

The gate opened. "Have a blessed day."

I waved as I drove forward.

I parked on the street outside Marla's house. I got out of the car and started up the walk. I could see the police tape on the door, a sure sign that Mr. Naylor hadn't been home. I stopped to consider my next step. Surely, they'd let him in his own home. Then again, it was messy. Maybe he was staying at a hotel. I didn't think I could live in a home that had blood splatter all over the living room.

Deciding there was nothing to see or learn there, I turned to leave when I heard a woman scream from the back of Marla's home. Instinct had me hurrying to the side of the house and then back.

Common sense warned me to be careful. Normally I might not consider something evil related to a scream. In the rural area of a Virginia, a scream could mean spiders or snakes, falling off a ladder, or something that could be bad, but not necessarily sinister. However, just a few days ago, a brutal murder took place in this house. A scream out back could mean the murderer had returned.

I stopped near the backside of the house and peeked around the corner toward where I thought the scream had come from. Vivie stood at the edge of Marla's garden with horror in her eyes and a shovel in her hand. At her feet, a body lay.

I came around the corner.

Vivie's gaze jerked to me. "Oh God, Sophie. It's Junior Junior."

"What'd you do?" I moved toward Vivie, but not too close. After all, it appeared that she wacked Junior Junior with a shovel.

Her eyes showed confusion. "What?"

I nodded toward the shovel. "What did you do?"

She looked down at her hand. She dropped the shovel as if it burned her. Then her gaze returned to mine. "It wasn't me. I found him like this."

I knew I should check on Junior Junior. Perhaps he was just knocked out, although the blood and dent in the side of his head suggested a serious injury. I kicked the shovel away from Vivie. There was no way I was going to bend down with my back to her with the shovel in easy reach.

I bent my knees and used my fingers to search for a pulse on Junior Junior's wrist, just like I saw in the movies. I couldn't feel anything. Or maybe I did. I was shaking a bit and couldn't be sure. I didn't want to touch his neck as it was covered in blood. I noticed a faint lift in his chest, as if he'd taken a breath. I stood, pulled out my phone to call 9-1-1.

"What are you doing?" Vivie's voice quivered.

"I'm calling for help."

"Is he . . . is he dead?"

"I don't think so." The dispatcher picked up my call on the second ring. I told her my emergency and she gave me instructions on what to watch for and what to do.

"Who would do this?" Vivie's eyes turned sad as she looked down on Junior Junior.

"I don't know." I studied her for a moment trying to decide if she was a great actress or if she was really upset and sad about her sometimes lover. "It can't be a coincidence."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean Marla was killed in this house, and now Junior Junior, who you say loved her, has been attacked too."

It took a moment for Vivie to register what I said. Then the ramifications followed. "I didn't do this."

"I didn't say you did. But . . . Vivie . . . you touched the shovel."

"What?"

"If he was hit with the shovel . . . you touched the shovel."

The fear, terror returned to her eyes. In the distance, sirens sounded. She stepped back and for a minute I thought she was going to run. To be honest, that would have been my instinct too.

“Sophie, you have to believe me, I didn’t hurt him. The shovel was on him and I picked it up.”

“I believe you.” It was the truth even though I had no rational reason to trust her. The sirens sounded out front along with a screech that suggested help had arrived. “I should let the paramedics know where we are.” I had told the dispatcher we were out back, but it couldn’t hurt to make sure they knew where to look. Junior Junior didn’t look good and every second had to count.

“What’s going on?” Ellie Tappen appeared on her back porch.

“Something happened to Junior Junior Mason,” I answered as I headed toward the back corner of Marla’s house. Before I got there, two sheriff’s deputies rounded the side of the house.

“I called for medical help.”

“Because of an assault,” Deputy Lafferty, Lani’s husband said. “We need to check the area. The paramedics are right behind us.”

I looked toward the road where a red rescue vehicle and an ambulance pulled in. The deputies searched the area, telling me, Vivie and Ellie to stay where we were. When they were done with their check of the area, they motioned for the paramedics to help Junior Junior.

“Over here.” I pointed to where Junior Junior lay at the base of Marla’s tomato plants.

“Stand back,” The female paramedic said to Ellie who was moving toward us.

“Vivie.”

She was transfixed on Junior Junior and I wondered if she was in shock. “Vivie. Come over here. Let’s get out of the way.” I put my hand on her forearm and gently guided her away from the body and toward Ellie.

“Goodness gracious, who’d do such a thing to poor Junior Junior?” Ellie watched the paramedics from the side of her yard.

“It must have something to do with Marla.” I guided Vivie to stand next to me alongside Ellie.

“Could be a jealous husband. Maybe Marla’s jealous husband,” Ellie said.

I turned to her. “Has he come home?”

"Surely he must have."

"Have you seen him?" I pressed Ellie.

"No. The only person who's been to the house is Junior Junior. Bless his heart, still keeping her garden."

I looked over the garden. For a moment I wondered if there was something about the garden that would cause Marla and Junior Junior to be attacked. Were they growing marijuana or something? I didn't know much about plants. A quick glance over the garden suggested that everything growing in it was legal.

"I hope he'll be okay."

"Is he alive?" Ellie asked the paramedics.

"Yes ma'am."

"Well, that's good. I pray that he'll pull through without any problems."

"He can't die." Vivie's voice was soft, and I started to feel sorry for her. I think she really had a thing for him.

"What were you doing here?" Ellie looked at me and then Vivie.

"I was stopping by to give Mr. Naylor my condolences and see if he needed anything."

Vivie didn't respond.

"Vivie, why were you here?" Ellie asked her.

"I . . . ah . . . I wanted to see Junior Junior."

Ellie's brow lifted as she gave me look. I got the feeling she suspected Vivie of whapping Junior Junior. Before I could say anything, the paramedics moved Junior Junior to a gurney, and in coordination, lifted him and started back toward the front of the house where the ambulance was parked.

"Can I go with him?" Vivie asked.

"You should stay here." I rested my hand on Vivie's arm. "The sheriff deputies will have questions."

"I didn't do this." She hissed at me, reminding me of the old Vivie.

"You're a witness, Vivie. I am too. We should stay."

"I'll call Junior Mason and let him know about his son." Ellie looked at me. "I'll be next door if you ladies want to come by when the police are done."

"We don't want to bother you, Mrs. Tappen."

"No bother." She waved her hand as if she was brushing my comment away. "Al is sleeping. And after all this, you two look like you could use a little support."

I nodded. "Thank you."

Ellie turned back to her house just as Sergeant Scowl appeared from the corner of Marla's house.

He looked at Vivie and then at me. His facial features remained stern, but I was certain on the inside he was shaking his head.



# Chapter Twelve

I sat across from Sergeant Scowl in the small drab interrogation room. He shook his head slightly as if to say, “how do you get yourself caught up in trouble all the time?” It was the same question running through my head. I’ve tried to toe the line and keep my head down, so why did I once again have to endure questioning by him?

“Is Junior Junior okay?” I asked.

“I don’t have an update. Maybe by the time we’re done here, I’ll be able to let you know.”

I blew out a breath and sat back awaiting his questions. He started with the usual. Why was I there? What did I see and hear?

“Why would Vivie Danner want to kill Junior Junior Mason?”

“I don’t think she does.”

He leaned back slightly in his chair. “You just said you saw her standing over Junior Junior with the shovel in her hand.”

“She says it was on him and she picked it up.”

“You believe her?”

I moved my head in a way that was a cross between a nod and a shake.

“You don’t appear convinced.” He studied me for a minute. “Do you know why anyone would want Junior Junior dead?”

“Not specifically. I’ve heard that he has relationships with many of the business’ clients. Maybe it was a jealous husband.”

“Was Mrs. Danner one of his clients?”

“Yes.” And once again I was putting Vivie in the hot seat.

“Did they have a relationship?”

I nodded, but quickly said, “She says it was over. He was in love with Marla Naylor. Maybe Marla’s husband found out. Have you found him?”

“If Junior Junior had moved on from Mrs. Danner to Mrs. Naylor, it could be Mrs. Danner killed her and attacked Junior Junior.”

I couldn’t argue that point. I had made the same connection at one point.

“Why don’t you think she did this?”

I shrugged, knowing my reasoning wouldn’t hold much weight with him. “I’ve seen Vivie jealous and angry over Randy, and he’s not dead nor are any of his mistresses.”

“So.”

“So, Vivie wasn’t angry about Junior Junior and Marla.” Then again, her reaction at finding Junior Junior suggested that her feelings for him were stronger than I’d initially suspected.

“What is your relationship with Vivie Danner?”

I wasn’t sure how to respond. We weren’t friends, that was for sure. “Vivie and I went to high school together. She and I are in the same coupon group.”

“So, you’re friends?”

I shook my head. “I wouldn’t say we’re friends.” I realized that Vivie’s continued grudge against my dating Randy in high school might help her. After all, she hadn’t touched me much less tried to kill me. “She’s never forgiven me for dating Randy in high school. Normally she’s just mean to me. She’s never tried to hurt me physically.”

Sergeant Scowl looked over a few papers. “You work for Randy Danner, correct.”

I nodded.

“Is he aware of his wife’s affair with Junior Junior?”

“He knows she’s had affairs, but I don’t know if he knows with who. Except Joseph Cullen. He knew about that.”

“Is he the jealous type?”

Normally, I’d have said no. But his reaction to being kicked out of the house had me thinking he cared more about his marriage than he let on. “He has his own affairs and he’s never acted jealous. He was upset that she made him leave.”

Sergeant Scowl’s head cocked to the side. “Leave?”

“Vivie found evidence that Randy had his mistress over at the house while Vivie was in jail. I guess their rule is that philandering can occur, just not at the house. Anyway, she kicked him out.”

“And he was upset.”

“He asked me to talk to her.”

Sergeant Scowl frowned. “I thought you too weren’t friends.”

“We’re not, but he thought I could help and he’s my boss.”

“Did Mrs. Danner have any other response to his bringing his mistress home?”

“When I was leaving, she was getting ready to set their mattress on fire.” As I said it, I knew it made her sound crazy and violent, and yet, she took her anger out on an inanimate object, not Randy. That had to count for something.

“Any chance Mrs. Naylor was one of Mr. Danner’s friends?”

That took me by surprise. I wasn’t sure why Sergeant Scowl would ask that unless he was just trying to look at this case in all angles. “I doubt it.”

“You’re not sure.”

I couldn’t be sure, and because I wasn’t, I thought I’d just given Vivie motive to kill Marla and hurt Junior Junior. “What about Mr. Naylor?”

“What did Mrs. Naylor tell you about him?”

“She said he traveled a lot. But no one has ever met him.”

“So, you’ve never met him?”

“No. Have you found him?”

“We found him. He says they’re divorced. Why would she lie about that?”

That didn’t make any sense. “I don’t know. Are you sure? Maybe he’s lying.”

“I talked to him and both their lawyers.”

I didn’t know Marla well, but I was realizing just how little I did know her. Why would she lie about her husband? Was she hiding more about her life? Then I remembered how she’d won the lottery. “She won the lottery. Maybe this is about the money.”

Sergeant Scowl studied me for a moment as if he was trying to decide what to say to me. He gave a small shrug and said, “Hell of a thing. She won the lottery just after he left her for another woman. Her lawyer was shrewd and her husband didn’t get a cent of it.” Sergeant Scowl shook his head. “Millions of dollars lost because he left his wife one day too early.”

Wow. “Wouldn’t that give him motive to kill her?”

“It could, except he still wouldn’t get the money.”

“Maybe he killed her because he was mad about it.”

Sergeant Scowl rolled his eyes. “I’ll try not to be offended that you don’t think I know how to do my job, Ms. Parker.”

I guess that meant he was looking into that angle. “Sorry.”

“So, Mrs. Naylor never gave any indication that she was divorced?”

I shook my head.

“Were she and Junior Junior having an affair?”

“Vivie said he loved Marla, and her neighbor, Ellie Tappen, said they spent time together, but I don’t know that they were having an affair. I think they bonded over her garden. He was probably taking care of it when he was attacked.”

Sergeant Scowl put his pen down and stood. “Well, I think that’s it for now. If you think of anything—”

I narrowed my brows in thought. “So, who *does* inherit her Powerball winnings?”

“That’s being determined, and none of your business.” His voice was stern, which made no sense, when he’d just explained her husband wasn’t getting the money. Maybe he decided he said too much. Or he wanted me to mind my own business.

Like that was going to happen. “What’s going to happen to Vivie?”

He cocked his head to the side. “For someone who isn’t a friend, you seem concerned.”

“I just don’t think she did it, and if she didn’t, a murderer is loose in Jefferson Grove.”

“She doesn’t have very nice things to say about you.”

“No.” I groaned because I suspected her statement somehow implicated me. “What has she said?”

“She says you’re setting her up. That you want her husband all to yourself.”

I rolled my eyes, then worry niggled at me as I wondered if Sergeant Scowl might believe her. “I have no interest in Randy.”

“And, of course, you have an alibi for Mrs. Naylor.”

“Yes.” Whew.

“We’ll keep Mrs. Danner here until her lawyer arrives. After that . . .”

He didn’t finish his statement. That was okay. I didn’t want to know about Vivie’s lawyer Becca anyway.

As I left the station, I looked for Lani. Maybe she could take a break for coffee with me and I could thank her for her relationship advice and let her know AJ and I were good. I found her hiding behind a stack of papers giving me a look that suggested she might never get free. I sent her a little wave and headed out.

I had time before meeting AJ. I could have gone home and worked on my library programs, but Sergeant Scowl's info about Marla's husband piqued my curiosity. While Ellie Tappen didn't seem to know much, she was the best person to know more than most of us. Since she was home all the time, she'd have seen more.

She didn't have to come in for questioning with Vivie and me because she couldn't leave Al, and because she told Sergeant Scowl she hadn't seen or heard anything regarding Junior Junior's attack. Nevertheless, I wondered if she might know more about Marla's husband.

I steered the Brown Bomber back to Monticello Heights and I was somehow allowed back in the gate. The word about Vivie's second detainment must not have reached here.

I parked in front of Ellie's house and made my way to the door.

"Sophie. What a surprise. I was worried when you two were taken to the sheriff's station." Ellie held the door open for me.

"I was questioned." I followed her back to her bright kitchen.

"Would you like some tea? I have a few minutes before Al's next meds."

"If now is a bad time--"

"No, no. It's fine. You know I can always use the company."

"Tea would be nice, thank you."

I sat at Ellie's kitchen table and looked out over her yard toward Marla's garden. "Junior Junior sure had a thing for Marla, didn't he?"

"I think he did, bless his heart. It's about time too. You know he has a reputation with the ladies around here."

"I'd heard that."

"I suppose that's why Marjorie left him. Of course, they never married, even after she had his son." Ellie shook her head as she handed me a glass of iced tea. There was a lot of talk about old values and traditions in the rural south. In reality, it was like most other places when it came to the birds and bees.

Ellie sat across the table from me. "Poor Junior Mason. I asked him to keep me updated on Junior Junior's condition. I haven't heard anything. Have you?"

I shook my head. "I wonder why someone wanted both him and Marla dead."

"I know this sort of thing happens elsewhere, but here in Jefferson Grove?"

In Monticello Heights? What's the world coming to?"

"I don't know." I took a sip of the cool iced tea.

"What about Vivie? I suppose she's one of Junior Junior's conquests. Goodness, he must be fifteen years older than her." Ellie leaned forward conspiratorially. "Did she do it?"

"Attack Junior Junior?"

Ellie bobbed her head. "Yes. And kill Marla. Maybe in a jealous rage."

"The police seem to think so."

"So, they have evidence." She sat back in her chair pondering the news.

"I guess. But I have a hard time thinking Vivie did this."

"Really? I've always found her a bit unhinged."

That wasn't an inaccurate description. After all, Vivie set her mattress on fire.

"Did you know the fire department had to go out to her house the other day? She nearly burned the place down." Ellie pursed her lips in disgust. "I told Alice Danner when her son Randy set out to marry that girl that she'd be nothing but trouble."

I wanted to tell Ellie that Randy was no saint, but I was certain I'd get the 'boys will be boys' speech. Ellie seemed to have come from the era of double standards.

"If it wasn't Vivie, who do you think it could be?" she asked.

"I keep wondering about Marla's husband. It's weird that no one has ever seen him."

"You know, I've been trying to think back when he was here. I just can't remember."

"Sergeant Davis says they were divorced. I wonder why she'd lie about that?"

"Really?" Ellie's eyes shone with interest. Gossip wasn't nice, but I supposed for someone like Ellie, it was her only link to the outside world, and entertainment.

I didn't learn anything from Ellie; however, I could see she enjoyed the company and I was happy to spend time with her. In some ways we were the same. We both had significant changes in our families.

I left her house and drove the thirty minutes to Jefferson Lake. As I pulled into AJ's drive, I saw Becca's car. Immediately a tight ball formed in the pit of my stomach. I parked and started toward the front door, stopping just short

of it to determine if I could hear them inside. I knew it was wrong to eavesdrop, and I suppose it suggested I didn't trust AJ. I pushed that bit of guilt away, as I lingered outside the door.

"You said she believed you about the other morning. So, what's the problem?" For a moment, Becca's words had me wondering if I'd been duped after all. Was Becca saying that I'd bought their story?

"You can't stay here."

"If she believes and trusts you, then why not? Are you worried you'd give her reason to doubt you?" There was a purr in her voice that nearly had me tearing the door down.

"No."

"Then come on, AJ. It's just for a couple of days, a week tops while I deal with my client here."

Did that mean Vivie was officially arrested?

"Becca. I'm sorry, I can't help. It's really not that far from Charlottesville that you can't drive. Or if you insist on staying in town, there's a nice hotel in Jefferson Grove. It's even close to the courthouse."

"So, she doesn't trust you."

I wanted to throttle Becca, and I was about to knock on the door, when AJ said, "Would you trust me if I'd had an old girlfriend staying here when we were dating?"

"If she were a friend and needed help—"

"You're full of it." He scoffed. "Bottom line is that I love her, and I don't want to give her any reason to question that."

The romantic part of me melted a little bit.

"So, it's serious?"

"Yes."

"Like marriage serious?"

My heart stopped in my chest as I waited for AJ's answer.

"Maybe. Probably."

My mouth hurt from the giant grin that spread on my face. I tiptoed away from the door and back to my car. I sat on the hood and waited for Becca to get a clue and finally leave. A few minutes later, the door opened, and Becca stepped out.

Her eyes widened when she saw me. "Sophie."

Behind her, AJ's gaze jerked to me, his eyes round with surprise as well.

Dutch bounded out the door toward me.

"I saw you were busy so I decided to wait." I patted Dutch as she nuzzled me.

AJ's eyes studied me, and I was sure he was looking for a clue as to what I was feeling. I sent him a big goofy grin.

"Well, I'm off to town to see about a hotel room." Becca opened the door to her car.

There was only one hotel in Jefferson Grove, so I knew where she was going. "It's nice. They have free continental breakfast there."

As she drove off, I slid from the hood of my car and strode to AJ. Before he could say anything, I jumped into his arms, wrapping mine tight around him and kissing him. He grunted, his arms banding around me as he stepped back from the momentum, hitting the door jam.

"What's that about?" He looked surprised but happy at my enthusiasm.

"Does it matter?"

He shook his head. "No." This time he kissed me.

"You know, you told me I could see you without your shirt whenever I wanted."

There was a flash in his blue eyes as he let go of me and whipped off his shirt. Warmth washed through me as my blood heated at the sight of his bare chest. All that work he'd done on the house kept him tone and fit.

I swallowed as I returned my gaze to his. "I think you might have said something about being willing to walk around without anything else on—"

Before I could finish, AJ grabbed and pulled me into the house and back toward his room. "You'll return the favor, right?"

A thrill ran through me. "If you want."

"Oh, I want."

As we got to his bedroom, Dutch greeted us. It was as if she could feel the electric charge in the air and wanted to be a part of the excitement.

"Sorry Dutch. You'll have to sit this one out." With that, AJ used his foot to shut the bedroom door.



# Chapter Thirteen

A good while later, AJ, Dutch and I went for an evening swim, and then lounged alongside the lake having a picnic dinner of leftover grilled chicken and potato salad Mrs. K had made for AJ.

I sighed with a contented smile and lay back on the blanket.

AJ lowered himself on his side next to me propping himself up with his elbow. "Are you happy, Sophie?"

"I think the right word is blissful."

"It's because of me, right?" He flashed me a cocky grin.

"I'd say you've contributed."

He gave me a quick kiss.

"This is certainly a better ending than the beginning of my day."

"Oh. Something happen?"

I realized in all my lust and afterglow and beach bathing, I hadn't told AJ about Junior Junior and Vivie. I remained relaxed, laying on my back with my eyes closed, as I recounted my day.

"What were you doing at your friend's house in the first place?" AJ's tone had an edge of annoyance. I peeked open my eyes to see if his expression matched his tone. Yep, it did.

"I was going to offer my condolences to her husband."

AJ pursed his lips in an expression that told me he didn't believe me. "You're looking into the murder, aren't you? I thought you weren't going to do that. You can't be getting involved Sophie"

I didn't think I was poking my nose in like I did with Mr. Cullen's murder. Even if I was, it wasn't AJ's business. "Are you telling me what to do? Because you're not the boss of me, AJ Devlin."

He exhaled a frustrated breath. "I'm not bossing. But Sophie, you're not a trained detective. You were nearly killed last time."

"So were you." I sat up, the blissful feeling fading away into irritation.

"Right. I'm not trained either. The only reason we were involved last time

is that we were suspects. You're not a suspect, are you?"

"No. I'm a witness." Surely that gave me a right to be curious.

"That's because you keep being where you shouldn't be."

"I don't set out to get involved. Vivie isn't a very good person, but I don't think she killed Marla or attacked Junior Junior."

"If that's the case, the sheriff's investigators will figure that out. They're trained for that Sophie. You're not."

Inside my emotions were cluttered and I couldn't quite sort them out. I looked out over the lake trying to figure out why AJ's attitude bothered me as much as it did.

"I just want to keep you safe."

With his words, came clarity. "It's not your job to look after me. I know I was sheltered growing up and maybe I'm not as worldly wise as I should be, but I'm not inept. I can take care of myself."

"This isn't about whether or not you can take care of yourself."

I shook my head. "I know what you and everyone else thinks about me."

His head jerked back. "What do I think?"

I shook my head, as I found a rock and pitched into the lake. Dutch watched, but decided not to chase after it, and instead lowered her head back down to rest.

AJ levered up next to me. "Tell me, Sophie. What do I think about you?"

"Y'all think I'm naïve and don't have basic life skills." I supposed that wasn't completely wrong. At least about the life skills. I had yet to master couponing after all.

"Why would you believe that's what I think?" His face contorted into an expression that suggested I was being unreasonable. Maybe I was.

"Do you know how many people keep telling me to stay out of trouble? As if I set out to find it. I can't get a real job, at least not a full time one. I can hardly figure out my coupons. If it wasn't for Aunt Rose, who knows where I'd be."

"I don't think that." His voice was clipped, as if he was offended. He turned away, picking up a twig using it to poke at the sand.

"I don't blame you. You're not wrong." The energy from being annoyed waned into resignation. Truth was, I wasn't quite the master of my universe. "I can't learn those things if you and everybody else keep telling me what to do."

“When have I ever told you what to do, outside of suggesting that you don’t get in the path of a murderer.” His stormy blue eyes bore down on me as he waited for my response.

When I had no answer, he turned his gaze back toward the water. “I thought so.”

I was beginning to have that ut-oh feeling again that our relationship was heading into stormy waters.

He returned his attention back to me. “The truth is, I’m proud of you Sophie. You came back to a town that you knew would treat you differently after your family went to jail, and you got a job . . . two jobs actually. You moved in with your Aunt Rose, something no one in town would be brave enough to do. And yes, you helped solve the Cullen murder, showing you’re smart and brave, which I already knew you were. You’re carving out your own life despite hardships, with grace and dignity and humor. That’s what I think.”

I blew out a breath, feeling like a complete ingrate.

“As far as your friend’s murder,” he continued. “The reason I’m asking, not telling, you to stay out of it is because I just got the opportunity to tell you and show you that I love you. I’d like to be able to keep doing that.”

Several months ago, I was called out by Mrs. Wayland for thinking the town hated me, when in fact it was my own fear and anger at my family that clouded my opinion. After AJ’s statement, I was pretty sure the same thing was going on. I was projecting my insecurity and feelings of ineptitude onto others.

There was only one thing left to do. I stood and walked back up the hill toward his house.

“Sophie. Where you going?”

I looked at him over my shoulder. “You just said you wanted to keep showing me you love me.” I nodded toward his house. “Are you coming?”

It took him a millisecond to understand what I was saying. Within the next seconds he was up, scooping me into his arms, and whisking me into his house.

I woke the next morning having a delicious dream about AJ. I panicked when I thought I’d fallen asleep and stayed the night at his home. A quick

look around confirmed I was home in my own bed. Whew. Aunt Rose was okay with me seeing AJ, but I'm pretty sure she wouldn't be supportive of my staying the night.

I got ready to start the day, getting dressed, picking up my room, and then heading out for breakfast.

"You were out late last night Sophie," Aunt Rose said by greeting. She sat at the 1950s yellow Formica table with her coffee and an entertainment magazine.

"I'm sorry. I lost track of time."

She turned to look at me. "I know AJ is a nice enough boy, but he is a Devlin and you don't want the town thinking you and he are doing things you shouldn't be."

I wanted to tell her it wasn't anyone's business, but why bother?

"This town is filled with people just waiting to think the worst of you—"

"Me?"

"Of everyone. It's always best to not give 'em anything to talk about."

"Yes ma'am."

"Speaking of talking about you, what's this I hear you and that Danner woman whacking Junior Junior Mason with a shovel?"

"I didn't—"

Aunt Rose held up her index finger. "Not that Junior Junior couldn't use a smack upside the head, but not with a shovel."

"Someone attacked him. Not me, and I don't think it was Vivie either."

"You sure?" Her whole face drew in as she gave me stern look.

"Yes ma'am."

"You never took up with him, did you? He gets around you know."

"So I've heard."

"I guess your mother did, huh."

I believed she had with Junior Junior's father, but I had no idea about Junior Junior. I wouldn't be surprised. My mother ran off with her personal trainer after all. "I don't know."

"You're a good girl, Sophie. Keep it that way."

"I will." I suspected Aunt Rose wouldn't approve of my liaison with AJ. What she didn't know wouldn't hurt her.

"What are you doing today? The ladies are coming over."

"I don't have plans. I can get out of your way if you want. I just have

coupon group tonight.” I poured myself a cup of coffee.

“I don’t know why you bother with that.”

Sometimes I didn’t know either. Aunt Rose went back to her magazine, which was my cue that our conversation was over. I took my coffee back to my room to organize my coupons, separating out the ones I’d trade at the group. I wondered if Vivie would be at group or if she’d been arrested.

I pushed the thought away. AJ was right. I had no business getting involved in Marla’s murder. I was curious, but Sergeant Scowl would figure it out.

My phone rang with the theme to Top Gun as I was putting my binder away. I was grinning even before I swiped the video call.

“Hey beautiful.” AJ’s face smiled at me through the phone.

“Hey handsome.” My cheeks flushed, remembering our evening together yesterday. Was he calling for a replay?

“You doing anything this afternoon?”

“I don’t have plans.”

“My sister is coming into town before she’s deployed to the Middle East. I’ll be busy a few days with her and my mother. I’d like to see you before she comes and I get busy with family.”

“How nice. How long has it been since you’ve seen her?”

“Six months or so. It’s going to be hard on my mom so I need to be available.” AJ didn’t have to explain to me. His mother’s quirks were well-known around town. I didn’t know if she had trouble because of mental illness or what, but she was unpredictable and AJ arranged to have her live in an assisted living community so there was someone always keeping an eye on her. It seemed to have been working. Then again, I’m not sure any of her antics would be known here now that she was in Charlottesville.

“Yes, of course. I understand.”

“I can come by or maybe . . . you could come here.” He waggled his brows suggestively. It made my whole body tingle.

“I can come by.”

That night I tried to walk into the coupon group at Gwen’s apartment looking normal. It was hard, because I was flying high with love and the afterglow of an afternoon with AJ. There was no way it wasn’t showing on

my face.

One of Lani's brows arched high when she saw me. "I guess all is okay with AJ?"

I was grinning like a loon. "Oh yeah."

Her second brow joined the first one and her mouth formed an "Oh."

Gwen looked up from her coupons and stared at Lani and then me. Her face contorted as if she was trying to decipher what was up and then she grinned. "Oh yeah, you and AJ did the deed."

Heat flushed my cheeks.

"What deed?" Aggie entered from the kitchen carrying a drink.

"The dirty deed." Gwen wagged her brows.

Aggie frowned and then looked at me.

I shrugged. "It wasn't dirty." Creative, maybe, but definitely not dirty.

Aggie shook her head. "I keep forgetting all y'all are grown women. You know how to take care of yourselves."

"You're not worried about Rose?" Lani asked.

I sat next to Lani. "You won't believe this, I came home the other day to find Aunt Rose and AJ playing rummy, and then she invited him to stay for dinner."

"Pigs flew and I missed it?" Aggie laughed.

I nodded and held my right hand up like I did when I was in court during my dad's trial. "Swear to God."

"Well I'm glad someone is happy." Tracy's voice was laced with disdain directed at me as she entered the dining area.

"Is it true then?" Gwen asked. "Is Vivie in jail again?"

"She's been arrested, no thanks to you, Sophie."

"What did I do?"

"Oh please. You're not a little princess Sophie. You told them Vivie took Marla's coupons."

"No, I didn't. You did." How quickly they forgot. She was the one that saw the binders and then asked if Vivie had killed Marla.

Tracy's head jerked back as if I'd hit her. Then she re-gathered her vigor. "You told them she tried to kill Junior Junior."

"No. I told them what I saw and that I didn't think Vivie did it."

"I know Vivie hasn't always been nice to you, but she never lied."

I tried to be calm and understanding, but even I had my limit. "The only

thing I've lied about is you."

"What?" Gwen sat back to watch like we were a live reality show.

Tracy's gaze shot to the other women at the table, and then back to me.

"You promised."

"No, I didn't. You have a terrible memory Tracy." Vivie did too if she was telling people I was to blame for her incarceration.

"Now, now girls," Aggie said in her teacher's voice. "Let's not get ourselves all riled up. Come in and sit down, Tracy. I'll get you something to drink. Tea?"

"I can get it, Aggie," Gwen stood, ready to become the hostess.

"Sit down. I'm already up." Aggie waved Gwen back down.

Tracy gave me the evil eye as she sat at the table. "Thank you, Aggie." When Aggie left the room, Tracy whirled on me again. "You've always had it out for us."

I shook my head, not able to wrap my brain around Vivie, and now Tracy's, dislike of me. "No, I haven't. I'm not the one to blame for all your and Vivie's problems."

"We never had any problems until you came back. No one wants you here Sophie."

A few months ago, those words would have hurt more and likely sent me packing, if I could have afforded it. Today I could only gape at Tracy.

"That's not true." Lani came to my defense.

I leaned closer to Tracy wishing we were alone so I could remind her that I knew her secret. "I'm not the one who took the binders. I'm also not the one betraying Vivie." I shook my head. "Blame me if it makes you feel better, but you and Vivie are your own worst enemies." Done with the conversation, I started stacking my coupons getting them ready to go into the exchange pile.

Aggie re-entered the dining area. "Here you go Tracy. Just take a moment. I know it must be difficult with Vivie's situation."

Tracy glared at me but did as Aggie suggested.

"Now what's this I hear about Junior Junior?" Aggie asked as she sat at her chair at the table.

All eyes turned to me, but I wasn't about to give Tracy more fodder for the fire. Finally, Lani explained that someone had attacked Junior Junior and that Vivie's prints were found on the shovel used to hit him.

"Great day in the morning!" Aggie huffed out the southern expression of

surprise. “Why would she do that?”

“Why don’t you ask Sophie?” So much for Tracy taking a moment.

I groaned inwardly. “I don’t think she hit him.”

“That’s not what you told Davis.”

“Actually, Tracy, it is.”

“Why would Sergeant Davis be talking to you,” Gwen asked me.

I blew out a breath. “Because I showed up at Marla’s right when Vivie started screaming at finding Junior Junior.”

“Wait, this was at Marla’s?” Gwen’s brows drew together in confusion. “Why were you guys there?”

Deciding that we weren’t going to get to exchange our coupons anytime soon, I told them everything I’d learned about Marla, her husband, Junior Junior, and how Vivie fit in.

“Well goodness.” Aggie sat back when I finished.

“Why did she tell us she was married?” Lani pondered.

“Why did she come here after winning the Powerball? And why keep couponing?” Gwen shook her head. “That’s crazier than saying you’re married when you’re not, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Strange as that may be, it doesn’t explain why someone would kill her,” Aggie said.

I nodded, because that’s where I was stuck too.

“Davis doesn’t have any other suspects?” Gwen asked Lani.

“Not really. He doesn’t seem to think the ex-husband did it.”

“I don’t know, if my Earl won the Powerball and left me, I’d be mighty mad,” Aggie said.

That’s what I’d thought too.

“What was up with Marla and Junior Junior?” Lani asked.

“He does have a reputation for getting around,” Aggie shared. I cast a glance at Tracy wondering if she knew about Vivie’s relationship with him.

“Why would anyone think Vivie would want to hurt Junior Junior?” Gwen asked.

I looked over my coupons. I didn’t want to have to field this particular question.

“Why don’t you tell ‘em, Sophie, since you’re at the center of all this. In fact, it wouldn’t surprise me if you set Vivie up.”

“Now that’s enough Tracy. We know you’re upset about Vivie but taking it



out on Sophie isn't going to fix things." Aggie used her stern teacher tone.

"Why *do* you know so much?" Gwen asked me. "I get why Lani would, since she works at the sheriff's department."

I rolled my eyes. "I found Marla, for one. Two, I was there when Vivie found Junior Junior. I've talked a little with Marla's neighbor, Ellie Tappen. That's it."

"Does she have any ideas who'd kill Marla?" Aggie asked.

I shook my head. "She's the one that told the police that Vivie was there the morning Marla was killed. Not me." I glared at Tracy. "She says Marla mostly kept to herself. Except for Junior Junior. I guess he helped her with her garden."

"Her garden, right." Tracy scoffed.

"So, Marla was having a fling with Junior Junior?" Gwen asked.

"I don't know. Vivie said he loved Marla."

Tracy's gaze swung to me. "When did you talk to Vivie?"

"The day you two burned her mattress."

"That's why the fire department was called?" Lani laughed.

"Burned her mattress? What for?" Gwen asked.

I looked at Tracy. "Why don't you tell them." It was mean, but my threshold for putting up with Tracy had met its max.

She looked like she was going to toss it back to me. Perhaps she thought better of it. "Randy had a friend over when Vivie was in jail."

"Douch." Gwen muttered.

"Hound dog," Aggie shook her head.

Funny how none of them made a comment about a woman who'd take the place of an incarcerated wife.

Tracy looked down at her coupons.

"You know, given how she was killed, it does seem like a spur of the moment, heat of passion type of thing," Lani said.

"So?" Gwen asked.

"So, it has to be someone who knew her or was mad or jealous of her."

"Like who?" Aggie asked.

Lani shrugged. "Normally I'd say her husband, or I guess he's her ex-husband."

I remembered Ellie mentioning Junior Juniors baby mama. "What about Marjorie?"

“Why would she want Marla dead?” Gwen asked.

“She used to be with Junior Junior. She’s Tri-J’s mom.”

“That was a long time ago,” Aggie said. “Marjorie done left Junior Junior and his open zipper ways a long time ago.”

I snorted at Aggie’s depiction of the philandering landscaper.

“Any chance she was one of Randy’s women?” Aggie asked. “That would give Vivie a better motive than coupons.”

“Vivie didn’t kill Marla.” Tracy spat.

“I don’t think she did, I’m just tossing out ideas on why Vivie is considered a suspect,” Aggie explained.

“I don’t think Marla was Randy’s type,” I said. Then again, Tracy wasn’t quite his type either. She was attractive enough, although not like the woman he was usually ogling at the Booty Burgo.

“Maybe Junior Junior did it,” Gwen suggested.

“Then who attacked Junior Junior?” Lani asked.

Gwen shrugged. “We knew her best. You’d think we’d be able to solve this one.”

“Well if any of us think of anything, especially if it can help Vivie, be sure to let Sergeant Davis know.” Aggie set her coupons in a pile in the middle of the table. “Now, does anyone have any razor blade coupons? Earl is looking a little scruffy these days.”

Fortunately, everyone got the hint and we focused on exchanging our coupons. I made out pretty well. I even got a few coupons for baking goods, which would allow me to get Aunt Rose flour and other ingredients to make more pies.

Later, after we finished, I was about to get into the Brown Bomber when Tracy cornered me again.

“You’re not going to get away with this.”

“Tracy, not everything bad that happens to you and Vivie is my fault. Let it go.”

“You’re wrong. You’ve been nothing but trouble since you got back to town.”

Trouble did seem to find me. However, I wasn’t the source of their trouble. I huffed out a breath. “You can stop the fake concern over Vivie. No one is watching you right now.”

Tracy’s eyes flashed with anger. “It’s not fake.”

"If you're so worried, why were you sleeping with her husband while she was in jail? What's really going on here?" I began to wonder if Tracy's lashing out at me was to handle her own guilt. She could blame me instead of dealing with the fact that she was betraying her sister. Or had been. Didn't she say it was over between them?

"You just keep out of our business."

"Who's? Yours and Vivie's or yours and Randy's." If looks could kill, Tracy would have murdered me right there with her laser stare. I waved a hand, realizing this conversation would never end well. "I have no interest in being in your business. If I did, I'd have told Vivie about you and Randy."

Tracy's eyes darted around as if she wanted to be sure no one heard me. Finally, she glared at me. "Just stay away."

She stormed off to her car. I shook my head, confused by her actions. This was behavior I'd have expected from Vivie, not Tracy. Tracy was always the level-headed one. So, what was her deal?

I'd just arrived home when my phone rang with Lani's ring tone.

I poked the answer button. "Hey."

"What was the deal with Tracy tonight?" Lani got straight to the point.

"I don't know." I put my binder away and then sat on the rollaway bed in my room.

"She's acting weird."

I tucked my feet underneath me. "I guess she's just upset about Vivie and wants to take it out on someone."

"Yeah, but why you?"

I shrugged. "I'm Vivie's favorite punching bag."

"She is mean, but I feel bad for her. She's in jail, Randy is a terrible husband and her family isn't being very supportive."

*And her sister is . . . or was . . . sleeping with her husband.* Even I started to feel sorry for her.

"There must be something we can do to help." Lani finished.

"She has a lawyer. I think unless another suspect turns up, that's Vivie's best option."

"I went to see her today. She's keeping up a brave front, even though she's really scared."

I'd be too.

Lani sighed. "There just has to be someone else who killed Marla."

“Sergeant Davis doesn’t think so.”

“It’s weird that Marla didn’t tell us about her husband. It makes me think she had other secrets.”

“Me too.” I agreed.

“We could talk to her husband. He’s coming down to talk to Davis.”

I thought Lani and I were having a conversation. Now I realized she was wanting to look into things. I thought about AJ and his desire that I stay out of it. But like Lani, I was curious about Marla and who she really was. How did Junior Junior fit in? And was Vivie just unlucky, a scapegoat, or a murderer?

“Sure.” I decided AJ couldn’t get too upset. Sergeant Scowl had already told me the husband wasn’t the murderer.

“Oh, I gotta go. Dwayne just walked in from his shift.”

I hung up with Lani and right after a text came in from AJ.

*Goodnight Warrior Princess.*

How long would I get a goofy grin from little gestures like this from AJ?

*Goodnight Flyboy.*

# Chapter Fourteen

Wednesdays were for me what Mondays are to everyone else; the first day of the workweek. Fortunately, I didn't start work until the evening, so I had the day to get things done and psych myself up for my shift at the Booty Burgo.

That morning, the sun was out and the temperature was mild. I decided to sit on the porch to have my coffee and work on my upcoming library program. I had many activity options for covering a tale like Awilda, from pirates to Scandinavian culture and food.

I was sitting on the wicker love seat, my Awilda materials piled next to me, when the sound of a car had me looking up. My notebook nearly fell to the porch floor as Vivie's red Mercedes parked in front of the house. Even more shocking was seeing Vivie get out of the car and make her way up the walk.

"Sophie."

"Vivie." I searched her face for a clue as to why she was here. All I saw was fatigue. "You're free."

"No thanks to you." She plopped down in one of the resin chairs on the porch. Had she really come over to fuss at me? "Fortunately, I have a good lawyer."

I nodded. "Good." I frowned. "How did she get you out?"

"Something about the position of my prints on the shovel and no real proof connecting me to Marla's murder."

"Well, that's good."

She eyed me.

"Vivie, it's not my fault. You can blame me if it makes you feel better, but I'm not the reason why this is happening to you." Truth is, I remembered what it was like to be a suspect in murder, and as much as I didn't like Vivie, I wouldn't have wished that type of stress and fear on anyone.

"You haven't helped."

"I can't lie to Davis."

"He thinks I did it. I didn't Sophie."

"I believe you," I said.

"Do you really?" For the first time I saw vulnerability in her eyes.

"Yes."

"Then you have to help me."

No, *I don't*. "Why would you want my help? You blame me for getting you in trouble."

She waved the comment away. "I know you didn't do it on purpose."

"I still don't see how I can help."

"You've been in this situation and you got yourself out of it. You can help me get out of this."

"How?"

"I don't know. What did you do when Davis thought you were a killer?"

"I tried to find the real murderer. But," I added quickly, "I nearly got killed. It's not the safest solution."

"Murder is a capital offense, Sophie. I'm dead either way." She turned away, but not before I saw her eyes fill with tears.

Crimany, now I felt sorry for her. I blew out a breath. "What do you want me to do?"

She sniffed before turning back to me. "Help me get Davis off my back. Then I can get back to my life, my kids, Randy."

"I thought you kicked Randy out."

"I can't keep him out if I'm not there. Besides, we've talked and we're going to try and work it out."

"What about his most recent affair?"

"He says it's done."

I studied her. Vivie wasn't one to let things go, Maybe the fear of prison or worse, execution, had her needing Randy. Vivie didn't endear people to her so it wasn't likely she had many friends that would help her. Heck, she was asking for my help, proof positive she didn't have many friends.

"So, you don't want to know who this woman was?" I blame my annoyance at Tracy for asking the question. I could have just let it go.

"Well, I'm curious of course, but at this point, it's over and we have to move on."

I nodded. If she didn't want to know, I wouldn't tell her.

She slanted her eyes at me. "Why? Do you know who it is?"

I sat back and looked out over the lawn knowing Vivie's piercing gaze would be hard to ignore. "You and Randy have decided to move past it. That's what's important."

"You *do* know. Tell me Sophie. Tell me the name of the skank that slept in my bed."

I closed my eyes to gather strength and decide if I really wanted to do this. The truth was, while I didn't feel it was essential to tell Vivie, I didn't have a reason to keep the secret either. I didn't owe Tracy anything. I supposed it could cause problems with Randy, but the truth was, the longer I held it, the more it kept me in their business. I didn't like being in their business.

"Sophie. Tell me," Vivie demanded.

"You're not going to believe me."

"Tell me."

I looked her in the eyes, so she'd know I was telling her the truth. "Tracy."

Her expression went blank. "Tracy who?"

I gave her look that said, *you know who*.

Realization finally dawned in her eyes. "No. She wouldn't do that."

I shrugged and sat back in my seat. "I told you you wouldn't believe me."

"She's not even Randy's type."

I couldn't disagree, but it didn't change the fact that Randy had an affair for several months with his wife's sister.

"How do you know?"

"I've suspected for most of the summer." It was an admission that would likely get me in more hot water. "I didn't know for sure until last week."

"What proof do you have?"

"They told me."

"No." She sagged into her chair as if the air was let out of her. I would have thought she would rage. "Why would they tell you?" Her voice held no affect.

"Tracy admitted it to me and later told me to not to tell you."

"When?" Vivie's gaze whipped to mine. "When did you see her?"

"She told me not to tell you the day she helped you burn your mattress."

Vivie shook her head, but I couldn't tell if she was on the verge of exploding or crying.

"If it's any consolation, Randy was pretty upset when you threw him out "

"He told you too?"

I shrugged. “Not in so many words. It was clear to me that Tracy told him I knew.”

She inhaled a breath and then stood. “So, are you going to help me stay out of jail?”

I wasn’t prepared for the change in topic nor her taking the news so well. “Sure.”

“Where do we start?” She set her hands on her hips, looking like she was ready to take on the world.

“I heard Marla’s husband was going to be in town, maybe we should talk to him.”

“Good. I’ll meet you at my house. Say in an hour?”

I stood. “Okay.” I cocked my head to the side, wondering what was going on in her head. “What are you going to do about Tracy and Randy?”

“It’s probably better if you don’t know.”

An hour later, I drove through the gate at Monticello Heights, glad that Vivie remembered to call the attendant to let me in. I drove to her street and parked the Brown Bomber in front of her house. Since it was a weekday, I figured her kids were in school and Randy was at his day job as an accountant.

After Vivie left that morning, I had a moment to wonder if I’d done myself a disservice by telling her about Randy and Tracy, since he was my boss at the Booty Burgo. There was nothing I could do about it now.

I knocked on Vivie’s door and she answered a few moments later. She’d changed and redone her makeup, making me wonder if she’d come to my house straight from jail. She didn’t look crazed or ready to burn their house down. I figured everything was okay.

She held the door open. “We can take the back trail through the woods to Marla’s.”

I nodded and followed her through the hallway to her open kitchen with family room. The area was clean, cleaner than I might expect for someone with three kids. Or just having learned her sister and husband had betrayed her.

“Did anyone drop off a casserole or something for Randy and the kids why you were gone?”



Vivie's lips pursed and her eyes narrowed. "Isn't Randy paying you enough that you need my handouts?"

I tried not to roll my eyes. "I was thinking that bringing one to Marla's husband would give us a good reason to be there." In the south, death and food went hand-in-hand. If someone died, especially a wife or mother, neighbors brought food. I suspect it worked if the wife or mother was incarcerated as well.

"Oh. Yah, right." She went to her freezer and pulled out a white covered dish. "This is probably Mrs. Nelson's lasagna." She headed to her French doors. "I hope you know what you're doing."

This time I didn't stop the eye roll, but she didn't see it since she was going out the door. I had no idea what I was doing. I didn't when I was trying to clear my own name either. I kept my mouth shut as I followed her over to Marla's.

The question was, what *was* I doing? For one, Vivie was untrustworthy, and I could see many different ways this could turn out bad, and I'd be blamed. Then there was AJ and Sergeant Scowl's stern warnings to stay out of Marla's business.

The only thing I could hold on to was that Sergeant Scowl had said that Marla's husband wasn't a suspect, so we shouldn't get in trouble.

I followed Vivie through her backyard to the woods. A narrow deer trail wove through the trees eventually coming to the back of Marla and Ellie's house. We walked along the edge of Marla's garden toward the house. There were a variety of vegetables that looked ready to pick. It made me think of Junior Junior and how he'd been tending Marla's garden.

"Have you heard an update on Junior Junior?" I asked Vivie.

"He's still knocked out."

Did that mean a coma?

"Poor Junior Junior." She shook her head.

"You were pretty distraught the other day."

She huffed like I was the dimmest bulb in the pack. "Well of course I was Sophie. I'd never seen a dead person before."

I didn't remind her that Junior Junior wasn't dead and instead pointed out that she had, in fact, seen a dead body before him. "What about Marla?"

"That was different."

"That's what I mean. You're close to him."

She stopped and turned to me. "I know what you're thinking. Junior Junior isn't that smart, but that's part of why I like him. He doesn't lie. What you see is what you get."

While her explanation made sense, she didn't seem to connect the fact that she was the opposite of what she'd just described liking about Junior Junior.

"That doesn't mean I love him and all that. He's my only real friend. The only one I can be honest with."

For a moment I felt bad for Vivie. Of course, I also knew that her difficulty in relationships was mostly her fault.

"Sophie? Vivie? What are you two girls doing here?" Ellie Tappen stood on her back patio.

"Oh God, just what we need," Vivie hissed under her breath.

I ignored her. "Mrs. Tappen, we heard Mr. Naylor was here and wanted to pay our condolences."

Vivie held her casserole dish up for Ellie to see. She plastered on a fake smile to go with it. It made me think of a clown. Not that it looked funny. No, it was a bit creepy.

"Yes, I saw that. I'd thought I'd call you, Sophie, but I don't have your number and I didn't want to bother Rose."

"Have you talked to him?" I asked.

Ellie shook her head. "No. I haven't really seen him. My Al keeps me busy, you know."

Vivie scoffed next to me.

"You two should stop by when you're done. I'd love to hear about your visit."

"Sure."

"Ugh." Vivie groaned.

I wondered if the smile I mustered was as creepy looking as Vivie's. "See you in a few. Come on Vivie."

Ellie went back into her house and Vivie and I continued along Marla's yard to the side of the house.

"What is your problem with Ellie Tappen?" I asked as we continued toward the front of the house.

"What we do is none of her business."

"Maybe not, but she's in a tough situation. She doesn't get out much."

"I tell you what, if Randy ever gets sick, I'm putting him in a home."

It was cold, but not surprising. I was curious what, if anything, she was going to do about the news I'd given her.

"That's if he lives long enough to get sick."

I reached out and took her arm. "Tell me that's just your anger talking."

Her eyes flashed with annoyance that I'd dare touch her. "Why?"

"Because you're already on the hook for one murder. If Randy shows up dead or maimed, I could be in trouble too since you just suggested you might kill him."

She pursed her lips. "Do you really think I can kill anyone?"

"I don't know, Vivie."

Her head jerked back. "I thought you said you believed me."

"I believe you didn't kill Marla. I don't know that you won't kill Randy."

She blew out a breath. "I'm not going to kill Randy. I might castrate him. I'm pretty sure that's not fatal."

I studied her, focusing on her eyes, to determine if I could believe her.

"Are we going to do this or not?"

I nodded and we finished the journey to Marla's front door.

# Chapter Fifteen

I knocked on the door of Marla's home wondering what I was doing. Sure, I'd been over here before to do exactly what I was about to do, but not with Vivie in tow. I hoped she would behave.

The door swung open and young woman with bleached blonde hair wearing a short white skirt and a painted on knit top over substantial breasts stared at us with a bored expression.

"We're not buying."

"We were friends of Marla's," I said.

"She's dead."

I jerked back at her direct yet flat tone. I looked at Vivie whose face pinched in disgust. I turned back to the woman wondering who she was. She was probably twenty, but barely. She was too old to be Marla's daughter, although Marla never said she had children. Maybe she was a niece.

"Who is it?" a masculine voice called out.

"Old friends of Marla's."

There was a shuffle and then a trim man in tan khakis and a navy golf shirt appeared. He was like Marla in that he wasn't homely, but not handsome either.

"Can I help you?" He looked from me to Vivie. His eyes lingered on Vivie longer, giving her an appreciative once over.

She turned on the smile, which I hoped wasn't genuine and instead a way to get us into the house. "We brought you a casserole." Her lips tilted down. "We're sorry for your loss."

"Thank you." He stepped back opening the door wider. "Will you come in?"

Vivie muscled me to the side and handed him the dish.

He gave the dish to the young woman. "Can you put this in the fridge and make us some coffee." He looked to us again. "You drink coffee?"

"We don't want to put you out," I said.

“Nonsense. I never got to meet any of Marla’s friends here.” He turned back to the woman. Was she his maid? “Coffee?”

The woman pouted like a teenager, making me wonder if maybe she was his daughter, perhaps from a previous marriage. Although he would have had to have been in high school when she was born, as the wrinkles around his eyes and pepper gray wasn’t very prominent.

“Pookie,” she whined. Okay, not daughter.

“Please.” He smiled, but this voice was strained.

“Fine.” She grabbed the casserole and stomped off.

“Back this way.” Mr. Naylor held a hand out a hand directing us toward the living area. “We’ll sit out on the back patio. It’s lovely out there this time of year.”

I led with Vivie behind me. I tried not to look but couldn’t help myself, and saw the large blood stain on the creamy white carpet. I also saw moving boxes strewn throughout the living area, some packed up and taped, and others still being filled. Was he allowed to pack up and take Marla’s stuff? Sergeant Scowl had said Mr. Naylor wasn’t in her will. Maybe the woman was.

When we were seated on the patio, I introduced us. “I’m Sophie Parker and this is Vivie Danner.”

He shook our hands, holding Vivie’s a little longer than mine. Vivie gave him a knowing smile. I rolled my eyes.

“I’m John Naylor.” He shook his head. “I can’t believe she’s gone.”

“It’s a shock,” Vivie agreed. “We found her.”

I suppose that was true, although she made it sound like we were together.

“Do you know who would do this?” John asked.

Both Vivie and I shook our heads.

“Marla didn’t get out much. I’m not sure many people knew her here,” I said.

“Just us in the coupon group. And we adored her,” Vivie said. “She was such a help to our Sophie here, who struggles with coupons.” That was true although it made me sound like an idiot. “Of course, I don’t understand why she did coupons after winning the lottery.”

“Old habits.” John shook his head.

The other woman walked in with two mugs of coffee. Was she part of John’s old habits and that’s why they were divorced? Of course, John hadn’t

called Marla his ex-wife. Strange that the both of them would hide that.

The woman put a mug in front of me and John, and then glared at Vivie. "I'll be back with yours."

So, it wasn't just me thinking John and Vivie were making goo goo eyes. But we had other things to deal with. I decided we should go along with him at this point and not ask about his marriage.

"Marla said you traveled a lot."

Both his brows rose. "Did she?"

"I tried to invite y'all for dinner a couple of times, but you were always out of town," Vivie said.

He nodded. "Truth is, Marla and weren't together anymore."

"Oh?" I tried to act like this was news to me. "She never said anything." That wasn't a lie.

He looked over his shoulder toward the house as if he wanted to make sure the other woman wasn't there. Then he leaned forward and spoke in a quieter voice "We were trying to work things out."

"Kind of hard to do with an extra friend," Vivie said with a nod toward the house to reference the young woman.

I winced. I wasn't an expert in sleuthing, but it didn't seem wise to antagonize the person being questioned.

"Debbie is new." He sat back and smiled at Vivie. He didn't say anything further, but I got the feeling he was giving her the vibe that Debbie was disposable.

"Do you think you'd have worked things out?" I asked. Because I didn't want to appear too nosy, I added. "It's sad that you didn't have the chance."

He nodded. "Yes. I think we'd have worked it out. We were hashing out the logistics. You know, where we'd live. She liked it here."

"Had you visited her here before?" I asked.

"A couple of times."

"We don't know why on earth she'd pick little ole Jefferson Grove to live after winning the lottery. Me? I'd go live on a tropical island. There's nothing like being able to enjoy sun and surf and wear nothing but a cute bikini, huh Sophie?"

I could think of several other things that would be better. "It does sound nice."

John thought so too if the gleam in his eye as he looked at Vivie meant

anything. “Marla always liked the mountains. And seasons. She always wanted to live where there were four seasons.”

“There aren’t four seasons in Pennsylvania?”

“Yes, but she likes to see it in nature. Before she left, we lived in the city.”

“Were you planning on moving here?” I asked.

He looked at the door again. Debbie was taking a long time with Vivie’s coffee.

“I was trying to negotiate that we’d live part time in each place.”

Marla was smart with her money and I wondered if she was also negotiating how to protect her riches. I didn’t know how to ask that without being rude.

The side door opened, and Debbie appeared. She put coffee in front of Vivie, and moved a chair close to John and sat down. “What are you talking about?”

“These ladies were friends of Marla’s.”

“Was she as stingy with you as she was with Jonny?”

John laughed nervously and patted Debbie’s thigh. “Now, now honey bear, be nice.”

“Why? She wasn’t nice to you. You deserved some of that money. At least now you get it.”

I tried to keep a straight face, even as my brain whirled with curiosity on how he’d get the money if he wasn’t in the will. Vivie wasn’t as good at hiding her surprise. She turned to me with both her brows arched skyward.

John shifted in his seat. “Honey bear, can you get us some cream, please?”

She pursed her lips at him, but after a second got up and went to the house.

“I’m sorry about that. She’s young and not very sensitive.”

I didn’t know what to say.

Vivie eyed her coffee but didn’t take a sip. She probably wondered if Debbie put poison in it, or maybe spit. I know I did.

“I’m sure she has other qualities.”

I tried to hide my snort behind my coffee mug. “So, you’re here to talk to the sheriff’s investigator?” I asked.

He nodded. “I don’t understand how something like this can happen. This is a gated community for goodness sake. It took forever for the gatekeeper to let me in here. She should have been safe.”

“It’s a terrible, terrible thing. We’re as upset as you. Marla was such a lovely woman.” Vivie showed her sympathetic face.

“I should have been here.” John looked down and I tried to determine if his guilt was real. After all, honey bear Debbie just suggested they were getting Marla’s money. Sergeant Scowl said that wasn’t the case, and that John knew it. Maybe he only learned it after Marla died, giving him motive to kill her.

“If I’d been here, I’d have been able to protect her.”

“I thought you were here.” Debbie came out on the patio with a carton of milk.

John stiffened. “No, honey. Remember we were at Ohiopyle Park, enjoying the outdoors.” He turned to me and Vivie. “I like nature too, although I also like living in civilization.”

Vivie bristled. “I assure you, Mr. Naylor, we’re very civilized here in Jefferson Grove.”

“Someone savagely killed my wife.”

“Ex-wife,” Debbie sat next to John.

I watched Debbie and John. Did she just ruin his alibi? Debbie wasn’t a rocket scientist, but neither did she seem like a complete ditz. Had she forgotten where she’d been last week, or had she forgotten the alibi story John asked her to tell?

“There are some nice outdoor spaces here.” John changed the subject.

“Have you hiked here?” I asked.

“Just around the house.” He nodded toward the back woods. “There are some deer trails back there that make for a nice walk. I imagine Marla took a lot of walks back there. I wonder if she’d like her ashes there?”

“If you want help making arrangements for Marla, let me know. I’m good friends with the Wallers. They run the funeral home here in Jefferson Grove,” Vivie said.

“Thank you, Vivie. That’s very kind, but she wanted to be cremated.”

I shivered. The idea of being burnt to ash creeped me out. Although being buried didn’t have much appeal either.

“I was thinking she might like to be spread over her garden. Maybe she’d rather the woods.”

It was a nice thought, although I wasn’t sure about eating veggies that had remnants of Marla on them.



We chatted a few more minutes but didn't learn anything helpful. We thanked John and Debbie and, leaving out the front door, began making our way along the front of the house toward Ellie's.

"Ugh." Vivie did a whole-body shiver.

"You okay?"

"I've got to take a shower. Did you see the way he was coming on to me?"

"I did. Why did you encourage it if you didn't like it?"

She gaped at me, "Because we were there for information. Don't tell me you never use your girlie assets to get what you want?"

I never thought of myself as the feminine wiles type. Not that I was ugly. I wasn't one that men openly try to seduce as John did with Vivie. Except for AJ, but that was different.

I hadn't given Vivie much credit and, as it turned out, using her girlie assets had helped. "You did good, Vivie."

Her eyes narrowed as if she's unsure why I'd praised her. "Thanks. Do you think we got anything to help me?"

"Maybe." Before I could elaborate, Ellie's front door opened.

"I've got tea, girls. Come by and say hi."

Vivie rolled her eyes.

"Ellie sees and hears a lot. She might help you too."

"Fine," Vivie said with a huff.

We followed Ellie into her eat-in kitchen. She had the tea and glasses on the table all ready for us.

"We can't stay long." Vivie sat in the chair facing the window. "My kids will be home from school soon." She didn't say it, but I realized that she hadn't seen them since yesterday. Vivie was impatient and insensitive. I cut her some slack in this case.

"Your children are getting so big." Ellie poured iced tea into the glasses. "Time does fly doesn't it?"

"Yes."

I sat next to Vivie and Ellie took the chair across from me. "So, did you learn anything interesting?"

"Mr. Naylor is a player." Vivie's face contorted into disgust.

"What does he play?"

"She means he likes women. He has a young woman there with him." I took a bite of cookie.

“In Marla’s house?” Ellie’s eyes widened with shock. “The nerve of him.”

“Men are pigs.” Vivie said under her breath.

“Of course, being a . . . what did you say . . . player . . . doesn’t make him a murderer.”

“No, but there was something odd about his alibi. Did you notice that, Vivie?”

She nodded. “His girlfriend forgot what she was supposed to say, although she didn’t seem the type to keep a detailed account of her activities.”

“It was only a week ago. How could she forget about being in Ohio Pyle Park last week?” I asked.

Vivie shrugged as she sipped her tea.

Ellie looked intrigued. “So, you think he could have killed Marla?”

“Maybe. But how would he have gotten in the gate? There would have been a record of it, and Sergeant Davis says he has an alibi.”

Ellie frowned as if she was thinking on this new conundrum.

“There’s a fire road about a half mile behind the Laymans’ home, two doors down from Marla’s. That road leads to Route 712,” Vivie said.

She was right. Someone could have walked in. But how did she know that? Vivie wasn’t an outdoorsy type to take hikes. Did she use the trails through the woods to snoop on her neighbors? My expression must have been one of incredulity.

“What?” she asked.

“I’m surprised you’d know it.”

“Every kid in the Heights knows it. It was how we sneak out without the gate police being able to tell our parents.”

“You kids.” Ellie laughed.

I nodded in concession. “The question is, would John know about it?”

“He said he liked walking in the woods.”

“If he knew he was going to kill her, he’d have researched a way in,” Ellie said.

“I’m not sure her murder was planned. It feels like a spur of the moment thing,” I said.

“What about the will?” Vivie asked. “They made it sound like they were owed some money. And he’s packing up her stuff. Can he do that?”

“I don’t know. Sergeant Davis said John wasn’t entitled to any of the money while she was alive, and that he wasn’t in the will.” I huffed out a

breath as I realized what that meant. “He doesn’t really have a motive.”

“Except being angry,” Ellie said. “If my Al won the lottery and I didn’t get any of it, I’d be mad enough to stab him. Of course, my Al would never do that.”

I thought through the situation, taking a drink of my iced tea as I did. “What if he didn’t know he wasn’t in the will?” I looked up at the ladies. “He said they were trying to work things out—”

“I don’t believe that for a moment,” Vivie scoffed.

“Maybe he wasn’t sincere. There was a lot of money involved. Money Marla was being stingy with, according to Debbie. Maybe he pretended to want to work things out and that morning, she told him no and he killed her thinking he’ll get the money.”

“Or because he’s just mad,” Ellie said again.

“Right.” I nodded in agreement.

“It makes sense,” Vivie said.

“I wonder what he did when he learned he wouldn’t get the money.” If he did kill her, I’d have liked to have seen that moment. It would serve him right, even though it would be tragic that Marla died for nothing.

“He’s making the most of it by raiding her house.” Vivie sipped her tea.

“Do you think she had things worth value?” I asked.

“She had a couple of nice pieces of jewelry. The rest, I don’t know.”

Ellie frowned. “Who does get the money?”

“What?” Vivie and I asked in unison.

“Who is in the will? Maybe the sheriff should look into that person.”

Vivie and I looked at each other and shrugged.

Ellie sat back in her chair and studied us for a moment. “I’m an old bored woman, so I’m a busy body. What are you girls doing poking your nose in this?”

“I didn’t kill Marla or hurt Junior Junior and Sophie is going to help me prove my innocence.”

“Are you now?” Ellie looked at me with intrigue.

“Sophie has experience since she cleared her name when Joe Cullen was killed.”

“An amateur sleuth?”

I shook my head. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

“I would,” Vivie said in a rare show of confidence in me. “You notice

things and you've got the ear of Sergeant Davis."

I snorted. "I annoy him."

"He knows you're smart and respects you."

I wanted to ask her what she'd done to Vivie because this woman wasn't her. "I hope your confidence in me is rewarded."

"I know it will be." Vivie had more faith in my ability than I did.

"Oh lordy." Ellie jumped up from the table to look out the window. "What is she doing?"

I followed her gaze to Marla's garden where Debbie was picking tomatoes. "Looks like she's getting some vegetables."

"That's not her garden." Ellie was incensed. "She can't invade Marla's home and her garden."

"Here, here." Vivie lifted her glass in salute.

"We have to go, so we'll ask her to stay out of it." It was an unreasonable request, but I knew Vivie had to get home, and, to be honest, I also felt a sense of invasion for Marla. Debbie had the husband, and probably her jewelry, but the garden was Marla's pride and joy. We could try to reserve that for her.

We left by Ellie's back door and headed toward Marla's garden.

"Hey Debbie," I said as we approached.

She looked up from a tomato plant. "Yah."

"Listen," I started, not sure what to say.

"Stay out of Marla's garden," Vivie snapped.

I shot her a glare. Why couldn't she be civil? That whole "get more flies with sugar than vinegar" thing.

Debbie's eyes widened in surprise, then her expression turned to disdain. "It's not like she's here."

"All you yanks are so rude."

I shook my head, dumbfounded by Vivie's inability to see her own hypocrisy. "No, she's not here. This garden was something she really enjoyed, and for the time being, we all want to try and preserve it for her."

"I can do that." Debbie rolled her eyes at us.

"Yes, well, the thing is . . . you're with Marla's husband and some folks around here see you being in her home and garden as . . ." I couldn't figure

out what to say without sounding as rude as Vivie.

“Being in poor taste.” Vivie tossed out.

“We’re just asking for you to respect that. For now.”

Debbie let out a huff. “Fine. I don’t like vegetables anyway.”

“Then what are doing out here?” Vivie asked.

Debbie shrugged and walked back toward Marla’s house. Vivie’s question stuck with me. Was there something about Marla’s garden? It made sense for Junior Junior to be there, but not Debbie. Had Marla buried something there?

“Come on, Sophie. Let’s get out of here.” Vivie headed toward the trail that would take us back to her house.

Ten minutes later I was in the Brown Bomber and sorting out my next step. I knew I had to let Sergeant Scowl know about John packing things in the house, or did I? Someone would have to do it, and maybe there wasn’t anyone else in Marla’s family to do it. Then again, if John wasn’t in the will, he had no right to go through it. I decided that wasn’t for me to decide if something was important or not. I’d call Scowl and he could decide if it was important. Except I didn’t want him to know I was nosing around again.

Instead, I called Lani and explained how Marla’s husband and his girlfriend appeared to be staying at the house and packing things up. She could tell Sergeant Scowl. I gave her a quick call and then left Vivie’s.

I arrived home fifteen minutes later. Aunt Rose wasn’t there and was likely at the senior center. I wondered what game she’d accuse Carl Jackson of cheating in today.

I pulled out my plans for the Awilda program I was planning at the library when my phone rang. The caller ID said it was the library. Maybe it was good news about a real job.

“Hello.”

“Sophie?” Mrs. Wayland asked.

“Hi Mrs. Wayland.”

“Do you have a minute?”

“Yes.” There was something in her tone that made my stomach sink.

“The library board is very happy with the work you’ve been doing, but . . . well we heard that you were questioned by the Sheriff’s office about Junior

Junior Mason's attack."

Ugh! "I was a witness, not a suspect."

"Oh, well that's good to know. As I've told you before, it's important to the library that our staff maintain a quality reputation."

"Yes." I pinched the bridge of my nose. Why is it that everyone thought I set out to get into trouble?

"The board has put off making a decision about you taking on the children's facilitator role full time; however, I was able to convince them to add an additional after school program. How about Tuesdays, noon to five?"

It wasn't the steady regular job I wanted, but it was closer to it. My heart jumped in excitement. I was one step closer to being able to leave the Booty Burgo. "Yes, I'd love it. Thank you, Mrs. Wayland. Is there anything I should do now?"

"Stay out of trouble."

"Yes, ma'am."

# Chapter Sixteen

That evening, my shift at the Booty Burgo went smoothly. Wednesday nights were ladies' night, which meant things could get a bit raucous with all the men there to check out the women. Tonight though, we didn't need to call a cab for anyone, no one got punched, and the bathrooms were free from puke. All in all, a quiet night.

Randy wasn't there, and I wondered what torture Vivie was inflicting on him.

"Ready to head out, Parker?" Spike asked once the bar was closed and we'd finished all the closing duties.

"Yep. I just need to clock out. I filled out my timecard and then followed Spike out the door.

"Looks like you have company." Spike nodded toward my car.

AJ's truck was parked next to the Brown Bomber. My heart did a little flip. I hadn't expected to see AJ since his was sister in town.

"I'll see ya tomorrow." Spike peeled off and went to his car parked on the other side of the building.

"Bye Spike."

AJ sat on the bed of his truck with Dutch.

"I wasn't expecting you." I made my way across the parking lot toward him. Spike's car roared to life and he drove off.

"My sister has a friend over." AJ jumped down from the back of the truck waiting for me.

I reached the back of the Brown Bomber when loud bang burst from the woods on the other side of the road. Almost immediately, I felt a whoosh and heard a ping as something hit my car.

"Sophie!" AJ grabbed my arm and yanked me toward his truck. He dragged me around to the front of the vehicle and forced me to squat down.

Confused I looked to AJ. "What's going on?"

"Someone is shooting at you." AJ pulled his phone from his pocket and

began dialing.

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Just stay down.” He put the phone up to his ear and then peeked around the hood of the truck. The moon was bright and high in the sky, but it was pretty dark. I couldn’t imagine he’d see anything. A chill ran down my spine. Whoever was shooting could be stalking toward us and we wouldn’t see him.

“Yes, I’m in the parking lot of the Booty Burgo and someone is shooting at us,” AJ said into the phone. He turned to me. “Do you know the address?”

Who didn’t know where the Booty Burgo was? “I don’t know the number. It’s on Route 520 just at the top of the mountain.”

AJ spoke into the phone again.

I didn’t like the loud noise of the gun; however, the silence of the night was equally as chilling.

AJ must have felt my unease because he said, “Just stay down, Sophie.”

We huddled in the shelter of his truck, and I tried to figure out why someone was shooting. Maybe it was a stray shot from someone hunting. Except, who hunts at two in the morning, and it wasn’t hunting season. Then again, if someone was illegally hunting, maybe the middle of the night was the best time to do it. I liked that idea much better than someone was trying to kill me.

A single sheriff’s deputy showed up first, and then another two arrived. One questioned AJ and me, while the others investigated the area across the street. We gave our statements and waited for the other deputies to report back, when another sheriff’s car pulled in and Sergeant Scowl stepped out. That ut-oh feeling I always got when I saw him clinched in my stomach. It was rarely a good thing when Sergeant Scowl showed up.

“Ms. Parker, Mr. Devlin.”

“Sergeant,” I said. AJ nodded his greeting.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“Well, I heard on the scanner that Sophie Parker had been shot at it and I couldn’t help but wonder if I was right in thinking she was the anonymous tipper about Mr. Naylor this afternoon.”

AJ’s eyes narrowed as he looked at me. I did everything I could to keep a



neutral expression until it dawned on me that John might be the shooter. He would have motive if I was right in that his alibi was bogus. For him to be the shooter, he would have to know I worked at the Booty Burgo and would be here tonight. Was it possible he'd found that out?

"What were you doing there?" Sergeant Scowl put his hands on his hips as he waited for my answer.

AJ's brows lifted as if to say, "Yeah, what were you doing there?"

"Vivie Danner and I brought him a lasagna."

Sergeant Scowl's expression was dubious.

"We wanted to pay our respects."

He scoffed. "I doubt it."

I shrugged.

"He said you all talked about Mrs. Naylor's murder."

"Well it came up, of course, because we were there to offer our condolences." None of what I was saying was untrue. It just wasn't the whole truth.

"I thought I told you to stay out it."

"You said you'd cleared him."

The sergeant's scowl deepened.

Since I had his ear and he didn't believe me anyway, I decided to let him know what we'd learned. "You should talk to him again. I'm not sure he's telling the truth about his alibi."

"Now why would you think that?" Sergeant Scowl's voice was tight, like he was holding back what he really wanted to say.

"His girlfriend, Debbie, commented that she thought he was here around the time Marla was killed. And he had to remind her that they were at Ohiopyle Park."

"Maybe she forgot."

I rolled my eyes. "It was last week."

"There's no record of him at the gate." Clearly, Sergeant Scowl had considered some of the things Vivie, Ellie and I had.

"He could have walked in."

Sergeant Scowl huffed out a breath. "Unlikely." But there wasn't the same bravado behind it making me wonder if he'd already been looking into it. If that was the case, why was he busting my behind?

"What does this have to do with someone shooting at Sophie?" AJ asked.

“Are you sure she was the target?” One peppered brow rose on Scowl’s face.

AJ’s face hardened at the Sergeant’s suggestion that maybe he was the target. Jefferson Grove society, especially the sheriff’s office, didn’t hold people from Cooter’s Hollow in high esteem. The residents of that area had a long history of crime, starting back in the bootlegging days.

“The bullet hit my car. AJ was over by his truck. And, you obviously thought I’d done something to deserve this if you heard it on your scanner and decided to come out to question me in the middle of the night.”

“You don’t deserve it, but you do seem to find trouble.” He shook his head. “It’s possible you weren’t a target at all and some numnut was shooting in the woods. Given that your friend was murdered, and you were there when Mr. Mason was attacked, and now today, you were questioning Mr. Naylor, it’s possible someone doesn’t like your snooping.”

“What about Vivie?”

“We’ll be checking to see if she has access to a firearm.”

*What? No.* I shook my head vehemently. “Not as the shooter. To make sure she’s okay. She was the one who found Junior Junior and she was with me today.” I understood why Scowl would suspect Vivie was the shooter; however, I knew it couldn’t be her. Unless Randy told her a lie about me to deflect blame from him and Tracy onto me. But even then, she was more of the scratch my eyes out type of person, not shooting from the woods in the middle of the night.

“Now would be a good time for you to stay out of it and let me do my job.” He nodded at me as if he were putting a final exclamation point at the end of his sentence.

I glared at him. “Vivie didn’t do this or kill Marla or hurt Junior Junior.”

“You’re an ardent defender of hers. I’m not sure she’d be so loyal if the situation was reversed.”

She wouldn’t be, but that wasn’t the point. “It’s someone else.”

“Okay, who do you think it is?” Sergeant Scowl widened his stance and crossed his arms waiting for my answer. I’m was sure he was just humoring me.

“Maybe Mr. Naylor or his girlfriend.”

“Did you tell them were you worked and when you’d be here?”

“No.” My voice sounded dejected, because I knew that was a significant

reason to not suspect them. They didn't know me or this area. "It would be easy to find out. Everyone knows everyone's business here."

Sergeant Scowl pursed his lips. "Go home and go to bed, Ms. Parker." He looked at AJ. "Can you make sure she gets home safe?"

"Yes, sir." AJ set his hand on my lower back. "Do you think she's still in danger?"

"I'm not sure she ever really was."

I gaped at him. "Someone just shot at me."

"But they missed. I'm betting that was on purpose. You were a sitting duck out here. Even a bad shooter could have hit you. I think whoever it was missed on purpose."

"Why?" AJ asked.

"Probably to get her to mind her own business." Sergeant Scowl gave me a pointed look. "I suggest you heed the warning and stay out of this." He didn't wait for my response. He strode off toward one of the other deputies.

Alone with AJ, I waited for him to lay into me for snooping. Instead, he gave me a gentle push to start me walking to my car. He opened my door to let me in. I searched his face to see if he was silent because he was angry and holding it in until later, or worried for me.

"I'll follow you home." His tone wasn't angry, but there was a lack of affect to it that made me nervous. I nodded and got into my car.

As I drove home, I practiced all the things I could say to AJ when he questioned me on my visit with Mr. Naylor. I hadn't told him I would stop sleuthing, although he was clear on his opinion about it. I figured I'd have to have a good excuse.

When I arrived home, I parked the car in the driveway. By the time I'd gotten out, AJ had reached me and walked with me up to the door. He didn't say a word, which ratcheted up my worry. I didn't like being fussed at, but the silent treatment was worse.

At the door, I stopped to see if he'd say anything. He took my key and opened the door for me. I walked in with AJ following and shutting the door. I hoped he didn't unleash his anger on me now. Aunt Rose wouldn't like it that I had AJ in the house in the middle of the night, or technically the wee hours of the morning.

When I turned to him, his lips were drawn into a thin line, his jaw tense. When I was little, I watched a movie about an all-girls baseball league that

had a scene where one of the players messed up a play and the coach was not happy about it. He didn't want to get mad and make her cry, so he just stared at her. While he hadn't yelled, his facial features showed everything he wanted to lay into her about.

That's what AJ looked like. He was coiled so tight, he actually shook. His hard eyes were asking what the heck was I thinking, and why didn't I stay out of trouble. Like the woman in the movie, I nodded in understanding. AJ's expression of anger and annoyance came through loud and clear.

Finally, in a whoosh, the tension dissipated, and he reached out to pull me close. "You're going to be the death of me, Sophie. You scared the life out of me."

"I'm sorry." I rested my head on his chest, glad that the anger was gone.

"Why is it so important to you to get involved?"

I let out a breath. "Vivie asked for my help."

He pulled back and looked at me with a quizzical expression. "Since when are you and Vivie friends?"

I shrugged. "We're not really, but I've been in her situation and she thought I could help. I don't believe she killed Marla, so I thought I'd try. In my defense, Sergeant Davis had said Mr. Naylor had an alibi and didn't think he was involved. I didn't think we'd be in trouble."

"Why talk to him?"

"He might have known something about Marla that would help us figure out who'd want her dead."

AJ shook his head. "I love your sense of fairness and need for justice, but it's dangerous Sophie."

"I know." I rested my head against his chest again. "I'll stay out of it." And I meant it this time. There wasn't anything for me and Vivie to investigate anymore anyway, and I didn't like being used for target practice.

"You need to be careful. Someone may be trying to kill you." A shudder ran through his body.

"Sergeant Scowl said he thinks it was a warning."

"A warning that someone can follow through on." AJ pulled away, placing his hands on my shoulders. His blue eyes were piercing as he held my gaze. "I'm not being bossy or telling you what to do, but I'd love it if you'd keep your head down and stay out of it."

"I will."

His gaze held mine, as if he was seeking the truth of my statement.  
“On my honor,” I said hoping to relieve his anxiety.  
Finally, he gave me a lopsided smile. “My little troublemaker.”  
I grinned. “Face it, Devlin, you like trouble.”

# Chapter Seventeen

*All's well that ends well. That's what I told myself as I climbed in bed. I'm not dead. AJ and I are okay. And I'm one step closer to having a regular job at the library.*

I'd planned to sleep in since I didn't get to bed until nearly 4 am, but Aunt Rose woke me with a bang on my door at 9:30.

"Sophie! What's this I hear about you being shot?"

I groaned, sat up, and wiped the sleep from my eyes. "Come in, Aunt Rose."

The door swung open so fast, it hit the doorstop with a loud whap. "Tilly Watson just called and wondered what hospital to send you flowers. She says you were shot."

"I'm fine. See." I stood up, holding my hands out and turning in a circle so she could see that I was bullet-free.

"What's she talking about then?"

I sat on the edge of my roll out bed trying to ignore the warm sheets that were beckoning me back to them. "Someone fired a gun last night. It hit my car, but I'm fine."

Aunt Rose's face squished up. "Who wants to kill you?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. It could be just some kid out shooting for kicks."

"Hmmm." Aunt Rose's pursed lips suggested she didn't believe me. She wagged her finger at me. "You need to quit that job. It's dangerous."

"The library gave me more hours. Hopefully I'll be able to quit the Booty Burgo soon."

"Won't be soon enough." Something caught her eye out my window. She squinted, and then her eyes widened and she took a step back. "Ah lordy, Sophie. The reaper has arrived."

I swung my head around to see what had her spooked. A bulk of a man with dark wild hair and a bushy beard walked up the path toward the door. Tattoos ran from his wrists up his arms, under a white shirt and leather vest,

until reappearing on his neck.

“Lock the doors Sophie and call the sheriff.”

“It’s okay Aunt Rose.” I jumped from bed and looked for some clothes to throw on. “It’s Bull.”

“I beg your pardon?” Her hands went to her hips.

It took me a second to realize she thought I was being impertinent. “That’s his name. Bull. I know him.” I found a t-shirt and put it on over my tank top. My pajama shorts were cut high, but not risqué, so they’d have to do.

Her old beady eyes turned on me. “In what world do you know the likes of that?”

“He’s the one that fixed my car earlier in the summer.” I decided to start with information that might calm her down. “He works with AJ.”

“Doing what, stealing cars?”

I pursed my lips. “You know AJ doesn’t do that.”

Her gaze went back to the window. “I don’t know that.”

“He works for the same company that AJ does. The one that reprocesses airplanes and boats. I know he looks scary, but he’s really very nice. He takes good care of his mama.” I remembered that when I met him a few months back, he’d just bought his mother flowers for her birthday.

A surprisingly light knock sounded on the front door considering the hulk of the man doing the knocking.

“Get rid of him Sophie. I can’t have riff raff in my house.”

“Yes ma’am.” I had no idea why Bull would be here, and for a moment I was worried. Was Bull here to tell me something bad had happened to AJ?

I rushed out to the front door and pulled it open. “Bull, what are you doing here?”

He gave me a lopsided grin. “Aw now Ms. Sophie, is that any way to greet your old friend Bull?”

I smiled. “No. I’m sorry.” I stepped out onto the porch.

His eyes narrowed as he scanned the street and then turned back to me. “It’s not safe out here. Can I come in?”

“Why isn’t it safe?”

He cocked his head. “AJ told me someone shot at you last night. That’s why I’m here.” He stood up tall and put his hands on his hips like Superman. “I’m your bodyguard.”

I grinned, because it was cute. I loved how AJ thought to ask Bull to

protect me, and that Bull liked me enough to want to. Unfortunately, it wasn't likely I'd be able to get him in the house.

"I'd love to have you in, Bull, but my aunt . . ." I wasn't sure how to describe her attitude toward him without offending him.

"I know I look scary, Ms. Sophie. That's what you want, right? To scare away the bad guys. However, I can be nice to your aunt. Old ladies like me."

I wasn't sure Aunt Rose would be won over, at the same time, I was positive she wouldn't want Bull out on her porch too long where the neighbors could see him. I poked my head in the door.

"Aunt Rose. Bull is here to protect us. Can he come in?"

Aunt Rose stood in the entryway of the kitchen glaring at me.

The door was pulled from my hand and Bull looked over my head into the house. "Good morning Ms. Parker. I'm Bull." He stared at her for a moment and then said. "Lavender is your color. Did anyone ever tell you that?"

I thought for sure she'd see through his compliment, but her face softened and she pushed one of her silvery-purple curls back. "You don't look like a man who'd appreciate such things."

"Why Ms. Parker, I know I don't look like much, but I do like pretty things."

I rolled my eyes when he grinned at me.

"Well don't just leave him on the porch, Sophie, let the man in. I'm sure he can be good for something."

"Why yes ma'am I am." Bull stepped into the living room, his size filling the space.

I followed him in and shut the door. "I don't think I need a bodyguard. The sheriff thinks it was kids."

"Or maybe someone was warning you to mind your business." Bull grinned at me. "You sure do like to get in trouble, don't you Ms. Sophie."

"You can say that again." Aunt Rose pattered back into the kitchen. "Put yourself to good use here, Bull, and fetch me that pitcher up there."

"Yes ma'am." Bull hurried to the kitchen and retrieved the pitcher for her.

"Would you like some tea, Bull. I don't have the hard stuff." That was a lie. Aunt Rose loved her bourbon. She didn't know Bull, and probably thought it was better not to give a man of his size and scary-factor booze.

"I'd love some tea." Bull smiled as he handed her the pitcher.

"It can't hurt to have him around, Sophie." Aunt Rose put the pitcher on



the counter and then headed the back porch where she left her sun tea jars.

"I'm not going anywhere. I don't think I need protection here."

"You're not trying to get rid of me, are you?" Bull said it with humor, but I could also see in his eyes he wasn't going anywhere either.

"Do you play cards, Bull?" Aunt Rose said when she returned with one of the jars of sun brewed tea.

"Yes, ma'am I do."

"Something other than poker?" I asked.

"You cut me Ms. Sophie. I'll have you know that I'm a mean Canasta and Hearts player."

"Sophie, get the cards," Aunt Rose instructed me.

I pulled out a deck of cards from the table in the corner. "I have a few things I need to take care of." I set the cards on the dining table.

"I'm sure your Aunt and I can manage without you just fine." Bull's eyes turned serious. "Don't try any funny business like sneaking out your window."

"I had no plans to do that."

"Good. AJ asked me to watch out for you and I take my oath seriously."

I saluted. "I won't let you let AJ down."

Back in my room, I changed out of my pjs and into clothes, put my room back in order, and then started planning for my extra day of work at the library starting Tuesday, and finishing up my program for tomorrow afternoon. When I was done, I hung out with Aunt Rose and Bull, but didn't play cards. They were both a little cutthroat for me. I was considering a nap before having to get ready for my shift at the Booty Burgo when my phone rang.

The caller ID indicated it was the library.

"I'm going to take this in my room." I hurried up the hall to my room, shutting the door. Hello?"

"Sophie, It's Mrs. Wayland."

"Hi Mrs. Wayland." I didn't like the sound of her voice. It had that tinge of bad news to it.

"Listen Sophie, I hate to do this. We got word that someone tried to kill you last night."

"It's not clear if I was a target."

"I hope you weren't. The problem is that you might be, and we can't have

you here . . . around the children, if there's someone who wants to hurt you. What if someone tries again while you're here?"

I understood what she was saying, but it didn't stop all my hopes and wishes for a regular library job from crashing. All my strength left, and I sank onto my couch.

"Now, we're not letting you go. However, until this is resolved, we're putting you on a leave of sorts."

I interpreted that to mean no pay. At least I wasn't fired.

"Once this maniac is caught or we get more details that suggest you're safe, you can come back. Three days as we discussed before."

Somehow, I found my voice. "Yes, I understand."

There was a pause. "I'm sorry about this Sophie. You're a wonderful children's programmer."

"Thank you." I hung up and the tears that had been threatening gushed into a full-crying spell. Why hadn't I listened to AJ and Sergeant Scowl and stayed out of Marla's murder?

"Sophie?" Aunt Rose's voice echoed up the hall.

I wiped my tears, pulling myself together as I opened the door and called back up the hall. "Yes, Aunt Rose."

"Bull here just wanted to make sure you weren't sneaking out."

"No ma'am. I'm still here." The way things were going, it looked like I was going to living in my aunt's guest room, sleeping on a sofa bed for the rest of my life.

Working with the public, especially in a place that served booze, required a certain level of energy and wits. I had neither as I pulled into the Booty Burgo to start my shift. I had put much of myself and my future into my library job, and now I felt as if I'd lost everything. I'd be stuck in a dead-end job at a pirate-themed sports bar that sat at the edge of civilization.

Taking a breath, I got out of the car and was met by Bull who'd driven behind me and planned to hang out in the bar. He promised to be discrete. I'd been hassled before for having my involvement in a murder encroach on my job at the Booty Burgo. I was certain Randy wouldn't like my having a bodyguard, especially since there was no way a man like Bull could be discrete. Even if he didn't talk or move, just the bulk of him, along with the

tattoos and biker clothes made him stand out.

I propelled myself through the door and motioned for Bull to sit in a small table in the corner by the bar. I mustered a smile and waved to Spike as I walked by the bar heading to the back to stamp my timecard.

“Sophie.” Randy’s voice startled me. I don’t know why I hadn’t expected him to be at work, but seeing him sitting at his desk surprised me.

“Randy.” I pulled out my timecard.

“I need to talk to you.”

I nodded but figured I’d clock in first. Might as well get paid to listen to him.

“You don’t need to do that.”

It took me a minute to register what he was saying. “You’re giving me the night off?” I turned to look at him. Only when I took a close look did I see that he wasn’t the same usual Randy. His eyes were dark and his jaw was tense like he was angry. Then it hit me; Vivie must have told him that I’d given away his secret.

I swallowed as I realized I was about to suffer the ramifications of that action.

“You said you wouldn’t tell her.”

I couldn’t remember if I’d ever agreed to never tell. “She’s been having a hard time of it, Randy. You asked me to help her.”

His hand slammed down on the desk. “Not by telling her about me and Tracy.”

“Randy, I don’t understand you and Vivie. Neither of you are faithful. You have bizarre rules about infidelity where it’s okay sometimes and not others.”

“My marriage is not for you to understand.” He stood and for the first time I was afraid of him.

I stepped back. “She’s afraid she’ll go to jail for something she didn’t do.”

“You don’t even like her. She doesn’t like you. Why would you spend time with her, help her?”

I felt like I could say the same thing to him. “You asked me to. And I felt bad for her. I know what it’s like to be accused of something.”

“How do you know she didn’t do it?”

Huh? “If you think she did it, why are you mad that she knows about you and Tracy?”

“It’s none of your damn business. Just like it wasn’t Marla’s business.”

My heart jumped to my throat. “What?” The question popped out before I could stop it. Once it was out, I knew it was one of those things that always got me in trouble. I worked to take it back. “Never mind, I should get to work.”

“No. You’re fired.”

Strangely, being fired was a bit of a relief. The menace in his voice, the murder in his eyes, and the comment about Marla poking her nose in business that didn’t involve her made me wonder if I was next. Was Randy the one shooting at me? Had he killed Marla?

It turned out being fired was a good thing at this moment. I nodded. “Okay. I’ll go.”

“You do that. And stay out my business, Sophie. I’m not going to put up with it anymore.”

I didn’t know if that was a threat, but I took it as one.

I hurried out of the Booty Burgo without a goodbye to Spike. I got in my car and drove away as fast as I could until I returned back to the edge of town. I pulled into the parking lot of the ABC store, the state-controlled alcohol store in Virginia, not for a drink, but to cry. I stopped and burst into tears. It surged like a tidal wave crashing through me. Sadness, fear, pain, . . . all of it flooded my body. I pressed my palms over my face, hoping no one would see me.

A rap on my window startled me from my crying jag. I looked up to see Bull. His face was red with anger, but it quickly turned to concern as he stared at me.

I took in a breath to stave off more tears and rolled down my window.

“I was about to lay into you, Ms. Sophie, for running off like that. Now I see that something is the matter? What is it?”

I bit my lip to stop the tears that wanted to come.

Bull’s eyes turned dark. “Did someone hurt you? That Danner guy? AJ is always saying how he doesn’t trust him.”

I hiccupped. “He fired me.”

Bull’s eyes narrowed menacingly. “Should I go convince him to change his mind?”

I shook my head. “No. I just need a minute.”

Bull studied me and then nodded.

What I really wanted was AJ. I pulled out my phone. “I’m going to call AJ.”

Bull stepped back to give me privacy, but not so far that he couldn't protect me if necessary.

"Sophie?" AJ said when he picked up the call.

In the background I heard a woman laughing and was reminded that his sister was in town. "Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot your sister is there. I'll go—"

"What's wrong?"

"I ah . . . it's okay." It wasn't of course, but I could find someone else to talk to. After all, Bull was right outside my door. For a big gruff man, he'd shown a soft side. I'm was sure he'd let me unload my utter despair at the situation of my life.

"You don't sound okay."

"I was fired today. Twice."

"What?"

Saying the words out loud made my eyes drip again.

"Can you come to my house or should I come get you?" He paused. "Where's Bull?"

"He's here. What about your sister?" I said through hiccupping gasps.

"I'll come get you, or have Bull bring you. Where are you?"

His kindness and putting me ahead of his sister soothed, even as it made me feel guilty. "I don't want to be in the—"

"Sophie." His voice was sharp. "Come here or I'll come get you."

"I'll come."

"Are you sure you can drive? Maybe you should have Bull bring you."

"I'll be there in 20 minutes."

When I hung up, I wiped my tears. Looking into my review mirror, I winced at my blotchy face. I thought about going home first to clean up, but I didn't want to explain to Aunt Rose that I was unemployed, and seeing AJ wasn't a date. I didn't have to look my best.

I told Bull where we were going, and he followed me all the way until I parked in AJ's drive twenty minutes later. AJ and Dutch were through the door before I was out of the car.

AJ cocked his head as he watched me, as if he wondering what was up. His features were soft, concerned, and once again I wept.

"Sophie." He pulled me into his arms and held me. "I've got her now, Bull, thank you."

"You call if you need me," Bull said. "For anything."

I took Bull's words to mean he was willing to enact revenge on Randy. I wouldn't deny that I'd have liked to see what Bull might do, but it wouldn't change anything.

When I stopped convulsing, AJ guided me into the house and sat me on the couch. "Want wine? Or something stronger?"

"I don't know that I should drink."

"If you have too much, you can stay here."

I was about to remind him that I couldn't leave Aunt Rose overnight, but he continued. "Or I'll drive you home."

"Wine." I wanted something stronger, however, wine was a good compromise.

"I'll be right back and then you can tell me what happened."

I nodded. While he was in the kitchen, I scanned the living area and craned my head to see up the hall wondering where his sister Alison was.

"Where's Alison?" I called to him.

"She's out with friends. She won't be back until late."

At least I wasn't interrupting their reunion.

When he returned, he handed me a tall glass filled with wine and sat next to me. "Now, what happened? Who fired you?"

I took a large gulp of wine then rested my head on his shoulder. "The library and Randy."

"Both?"

I sniffed and nodded.

"Why?" His hand rubbed my arm. Even Dutch acted like she wanted to offer comfort, as she rested her head on my lap.

I gave her a pat with my free hand. "The library is worried I'll put the kids in danger since someone tried to shoot me last night. And Randy's mad that I told Vivie about his affair with Tracy."

"Tracy? Her sister?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, Sophie." He pulled me close and kissed my head. "Does your aunt know?"

I shook my head. "It won't be long, though. Bad news travels fast. She woke me up this morning because Tilly Watson called wondering what hospital to send flowers."

"Huh?"

“She heard I’d been shot.”

“Ah.” We sat in quiet and I was glad he didn’t immediately go into fixit or consolation mode. He couldn’t fix it and feeling bad for me wouldn’t make it better. Dutch lifted her head and looked at me, like she wished she could help. She then lay on the floor, resting her head on my feet.

Eventually AJ spoke again. “Once the shooting thing is solved, will the library take you back?”

“I think so. If it’s not too long.”

He was quiet for another moment and his expression had me wondering if he was contemplating if he should say what was on his mind. “I have to be honest, Sophie, I’m not sorry you won’t be working at the Booty Burgo. I never liked you being that close to Randy Danner.”

“I didn’t love it either, but I need the money.”

He shifted to look at me. “Maybe I can help.”

I shook my head and pulled away. “I don’t want a handout.”

His blue eyes flashed with heat, but he took a breath and spoke calmly. “It’s not charity, Sophie. And it’s not offered because I don’t think you’re capable of taking care of yourself. It’s an offer to help. That’s what people do when they care about someone. They help them when needed.”

“I don’t want to need it.” I suspect I was pouting, but I’d worked too hard to take care of myself to have to rely on AJ or anyone.

“I know.” He pulled me to him and kissed my head. “However, if you need it, it’s there.”

I took another sip of wine, rethinking my choice of drink, and the option to stay the night.

“Why did you tell Vivie about him?”

I shrugged. “I thought she should know.” I turned to him. “Do you think Randy could kill someone?”

AJ’s face turned fierce. “Did he threaten you?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

“He told me I should mind my own business and suggested that Marla hadn’t minded her own business.”

“Marla your friend that was killed?”

“Yes.” I turned away, feeling perplexed. “I can’t figure out if he knew Marla or why he’d think she was in his business.”

“Could she have known about him and Vivie’s sister?”

“I don’t know how, unless Tracy told her. I don’t think she would have done that. And why would I get off with being fired and she killed?”

“He could have taken that shot at you last night.”

“Maybe. He wasn’t at work last night. However, I don’t know that he really knew Marla.”

“What about Tracy?”

I shook my head. There was so much rattling around in my brain and I couldn’t sort it. “I don’t see why she’d try to hurt me after I told Vivie.”

“You should call Davis.”

I groaned. “He’ll just be mad at me again.”

“Why?”

I looked at AJ wondering how he could be so dense. “Because he also wants me to stay out of it and he’s always mad when I have information.”

“Except in this case you weren’t poking around. It could be nothing, but that’s for him to sort out, Sophie.”

“I guess.” I finished my wine and set it on the coffee table.

“Why don’t I get you another glass while you call Davis.”

Having drunk the equivalent of three glasses of wine, I wasn’t sure it was a good idea. I was feeling warm and fuzzy, so it was working. More than anything I just wanted to be with AJ. I might not want him to fix things, but I did like to have him here, giving me strength.

“I’ll call Davis, but I don’t want more wine.”

“Okay. I’ll get you water.” He went to the kitchen and I called Sergeant Scowl. I was glad when he didn’t pick up. I left him a detailed message and then hung up.

When AJ came back, I downed the glass of water.

“Thirsty?” AJ laughed.

I answered by taking his face in my hands and kissing him, hard and shifting onto his lap.

“Sophie.” His voice was a combination of interest and agony. “Honey, your head isn’t in the right place.”

“It’s on my shoulders where it should be.”

He rolled his eyes at me.

I stared into his blue eyes, hoping he’d see the conviction in mine. “I need a distraction, AJ. I want to feel safe and loved and like I belong.”



“Ah, Sophie.” He pulled me close and hugged me. “No matter what, I love you and you belong to me.”

“Prove it.” It could have been my emotions or the wine, but I wasn’t kidding that I needed him.

He stared at me for a moment as if he was looking for something. Then he smiled and stood up, reaching his hand to me. I took it and let him pull me up, and walked with him to the bedroom.

# Chapter Eighteen

I woke with a start, bolting upright and jerking my gaze around the room. Flowered wallpaper. Tiny secretary desk. I flopped back in relief. I was in my own bed. For a moment, I'd feared I'd fallen asleep at AJ's and spent the night. My life was in too big of shambles to have to deal with Aunt Rose's scolding me about propriety. It was going to be bad enough to tell her I'd been fired from my jobs. Well, the library didn't fire me. However, the end result was that I wasn't working.

I considered going back to sleep since there was nowhere I had to be, when my phone rang. It was my generic ring tone, meaning it could be anyone. Most likely a scammer or wrong number. Looking at it, I saw *Sgt. L Davis* on the screen. Worse than a scammer. I poked the talk button.

"Hello."

"Ms. Parker, it's Sergeant Davis."

"Yes, sir."

"I got your message."

It took me a minute to understand what he was saying. Then it came back to me; Randy's odd comment. "Yes."

"Are you home? I'd like to stop by."

"Yes." Did he hear I'd been fired? Is that why he thought I'd be home? There really were no secrets in Jefferson Grove, although admittedly, I knew less about local gossip than most.

"I'll be there in fifteen."

It didn't give me much time to get dressed, but since I had nothing to do all day, I didn't need to make a grand appearance. I dressed quickly and put my room back together. Shoring up my strength, I headed to the kitchen for coffee. If I was lucky, I'd be fortified with caffeine by the time Sergeant Scowl showed up.

I stopped short when I saw Aunt Rose and Bull working in the kitchen. Bull turned to me. He was wearing a pink apron with cherries on it, and had

flour dusting his dark beard.

He smiled. "I'm making sweet potato pie with Ms. Rose." His eyes softened. "How you feeling this morning, Ms. Sophie?"

I wasn't not sure which was stranger; Aunt Rose was making a pie with Bull or her allowing him to call her by her first name.

"I'm okay."

Aunt Rose looked over her shoulder. "Why wouldn't you be okay?"

I gave Bull a slight headshake. With Sergeant Scowl coming, I didn't want to deal with my unemployment issues at this time.

He frowned, but didn't say anything.

"Sergeant Davis is stopping by this morning to talk to me." I sucked in a breath as I waited for her response.

She turned her head, her sharp eyes drilling me. "What for? You in trouble again?"

I shook my head. "No. I heard something at work last night related to my friend Marla and he wants to ask me about it."

Rose was shaking her head as she turned back to mixing something in her bowl. "I don't know how you do it, Sophie, getting mixed up in all this stuff."

"I know."

"Bull, you need to roll out that dough." Aunt Rose motioned toward a blob of dough on the counter.

"Yes, ma'am." He turned but not before giving me a quizzical look.

I wondered why Aunt Rose hadn't asked me why I wasn't at the library. Then again, she often forgot the day of the week unless there was something going on at the Senior Center or she was having friends over. Bull was likely a distraction, which would allow me to share the bad news later.

I took my coffee and went outside on the porch to wait for Sergeant Scowl. He pulled up in his SUV parking in front of the house.

"Good morning, Sophie," he said as he climbed the few stairs to the porch.

"Morning." I motioned for him to sit in one of the resin chairs, while I sat on the wicker love seat. The fact that he did sit instead of tower over me suggested I wasn't in trouble.

"So, what's this about Randy Danner?"

I told him what Randy had said as he was firing me, including how he'd scared me, which was new. "I'll be honest, it wasn't his saying I shouldn't get into his business, like Marla did. It was how he said it. The way he looked at

me. I'd never seen him like that before."

"What do you think he meant? By the comment about Mrs. Naylor?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. I suspect he knew about her because of Vivie, but I can't imagine he'd have met her more than in passing." I looked at Sergeant Scowl, for a minute wondering if I should reveal the secret that got me fired. Then I thought why not? I had no reason to protect Randy or Tracy. "Tracy . . . did know her."

"I don't get the connection."

"Tracy is in the coupon group. She knew Marla."

"What business would Marla know about that involved Tracy or Randy?"

"The only thing I can think of is that Tracy and Randy were having an affair. I thought I was the only one who knew about it, and I didn't say anything until recently. I think Randy figured I wouldn't because he was my boss. What I don't get is why Marla would know or why Randy might kill her over it. It's not like people don't know his philandering ways."

"So, you think he killed Mrs. Naylor because she knew about him and Tracy?" Sergeant Scowl spoke matter-of-factly with no indication of an opinion one way or the other about my insinuation.

"It could be possible, couldn't it?"

Sergeant Scowl looked out toward the street where a neighbor was walking by with his dog. "At this stage of the game, anything is possible." His tone this time suggested he didn't think it was probable.

"It would explain the lack of forced entry and the fact that there's no record of a stranger coming in the gate since he lives there."

"True, and I'm not dismissing your theory. After your call, I checked out where he was during the time of the murder and his secretary and another accountant in the firm both say he was there."

"Oh." At first, I was disappointed. Then I realized I should be relieved. If Randy couldn't have killed Marla, then maybe it wasn't murder I saw in his eyes last night.

"I'll talk with Tracy and see what she has to say." He stood. "That doesn't mean Vivie Danner is off the hook. She's still the best fit for all this as well as Junior Junior Mason's attack."

I gave a slight nod to let him know I understood as I rose from my chair. "How is Junior Junior?"

"He's still out. The doctors think he'll live, but aren't sure of the extent of

brain damage he'll have."

"I hope he's okay."

He trotted down the stairs and then turned to look up at me. "You need to stay out of all this, Sophie." Using my name instead of Ms. Parker made it seem like he was being a friend instead of a Sergeant fussing at me to mind my own business.

"I wasn't investigating."

"I know. I also know you get curious or want to help your friends and I'm telling you to let us handle it."

I nodded. I'd already decided to keep my head down. It wasn't like he was telling me to do something I hadn't already agreed to.

When he left, I went into the house and prepared to tell Aunt Rose about my job situation. However, she and Bull were elbow deep in pie dough.

Instead I went to my room. For a long time, I sat on the rollway couch/bed, completely spacing out. I didn't know what to do with myself. I could deal with my coupons, but that made me think of Marla, and then Tracy and Vivie. I could work on my children's programs for the library, but what if I never get to teach them? I thought about calling AJ, but I knew he was doing some work with his boss and then would be with his sister and mom. Lani was at work. Aggie was a possibility, but I didn't want to burden her.

What I really wanted was to talk to my dad. It had been awhile since I'd seen him, because I worked weekends, and weekday visiting hours were generally in the evening. It was a long way to Petersburg, which would get me home late. It was one thing to drive twenty minutes home from the Booty Burgo late at night. However, I didn't want to drive my thirty-year-old Volvo three hours to and from Petersburg late at night. Tomorrow I didn't have to work, so I decided I'd make the trip.

I wondered if Bull would insist on coming with me to Petersburg. It would be nice to have someone to share the ride with. On the other hand, Bull struck me as the type of person to steer clear of prisons.

My phone rang the Top Gun theme interrupting my thoughts.

"Hi AJ."

"How are you?" He didn't use his usual greeting. I wondered if it was because he was worried or he had more bad news for me.

"I'm okay."

“Is Bull there?”

“Yes. He and Aunt Rose are making pies.”

There was silence. “Did you say pie?”

“Yes. Hold on. I’ll show you.” I quietly left my room, headed up the hall, and peeked around the corner. I stealthy pointed my phone towards Aunt Rose and Bull and snapped a picture. I sent the picture to AJ as I snuck back to my room.

“That’s not something I’d ever thought I’d see. Do you think your Aunt isn’t as curmudgeonly as we thought or she’s just softening in her old age?”

“A little of both, I think.”

He was silent again, giving me that ut-oh sensation. “Listen Sophie, I’ve been assigned a repo and have to leave this afternoon.”

“Okay.” That wasn’t new. Why did he sound hesitant about that?

“Bull has to come with me. I tried to get someone else because I feel better knowing he’s there.”

“It’s okay. I don’t really think I’m in danger.”

“Someone shot at you the other night.”

“I know, but like Davis said, they were probably just warning me off. I’m warned. I have nowhere to go and nothing to do, so I’m not likely in danger.” I didn’t tell him about my plans to see my father, knowing it would worry him.

“Promise me you’ll be careful.”

“I promise.” I shook my head, because he made it sound like all my troubles were on account that I wasn’t careful. The truth was, more often than not, I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Who can anticipate and avoid that?

“I’ll stop by in an hour to say goodbye and pick up Bull.”

“He has a car.”

“Well then I’ll just stop by to see you.”

An hour later, Bull and Aunt Rose were pulling the final pies from the oven when AJ knocked on the front door. AJ had called Bull who said he’d stay put until AJ arrived.

“Hey Warrior Princess.” AJ smiled when I opened the door. He looked across the living room toward the kitchen. Aunt Rose and Bull were

examining their pies. I suppose that was what AJ wanted, because he quickly pulled me into a hug and gave me a fast kiss before anyone would notice.

We stepped into the living area and Bull emerged from the kitchen. "I'm ready."

"Where you going?" I asked.

"Cleveland." AJ held my hand. "We could be back early tomorrow, but most likely it will be tomorrow night or the next day."

"What's in Cleveland?" Aunt Rose asked.

"A Gulf Stream." AJ's eyes sparkled a bit, making me think it was a nice plane. "That's why I need Bull. He's my co-pilot."

I turned to Bull. "You fly too?"

"You sound surprised?"

I didn't know how to say I thought he was just the muscle, so I shrugged.

"I have a license, but mostly I just co-pilot."

"Will Sophie be safe while you're gone?" Rose asked.

Bull looked down on me. "You'll keep your head down, right?"

I nodded. "Like I told AJ, I have nothing to do and nowhere to go anymore."

AJ squeezed my hand.

"Why not? What about your job?" Aunt Rose asked.

"We need to get going, Bull." AJ interrupted, allowing me to put off my employment situation a little longer.

I walked them out and gave AJ another quick kiss.

He gave me a gentle shake. "Please, don't do anything that could get you in trouble."

"You too, Flyboy."

# Chapter Nineteen

The next morning, I left early heading down out of the Blue Ridge Mountains, into the Piedmont and toward Petersburg, Virginia. Civil War buffs like this area as it was the location of the beginning of the end of the War Between the States. Of course, I wasn't there to tour history, I was there to visit my father.

I went through the requisite screenings and searches, and was led to the visiting area. The room had several other people visiting inmates.

The door opened and my father walked in. He always looked a little bit older than the last time I saw him and sometimes I worried he wouldn't survive his time. He smiled when he saw me, and it filled my heart. My dad did a very bad thing, but he was my dad.

"Sophie." He gave me a short hug, which was allowed by the inmates in low security prisons.

"Dad." We sat across the table from each other. "I brought you lemon bars." I put the box that had already been screened on the table. I had to buy them, as Aunt Rose continued her baking spree in the kitchen even after Bull left.

"Thank you, sweetheart." He opened the box and took a bite. His eyes closed and a look of bliss crossed his face. When he opened his eyes, they were bright. "They're delicious."

I smiled, happy to bring him a bit of joy. I thought my life was hard. His was worse. Of course, he'd brought it on himself by breaking the law.

"So, tell me everything Sophie. How's your new job?" Then he frowned. "Aren't you supposed to be working?"

I bit my lower lip to keep from crying as my emotions welled again. I managed to explain to him about Marla and how her murder led to my suspension from the library and firing from the Booty Burgo.

My father patted my hand, and I could see in his eyes that he felt bad and wished he could do more.



"I don't know how I always get into these situations."

"Because you have a kind heart, Sophie. You've always been the best part of me. I just wish I'd taught you more about the world."

I swallowed, because there had been many times I'd wish he'd done that as well.

"I also know that it's your goodness that will get you out of this."

"From your lips to God's ears."

He patted my hand again. "Is there anything good going on?"

"I'm still seeing AJ and that's going well." When I'd first told my dad about AJ, I wasn't sure what he'd think. Although my dad wasn't as negative about people from the Hollow as other townspeople, he did operate within in a social structure, and AJ had been hired help. Then I decided my father couldn't really talk because now he was in prison. In the end, he'd been supportive.

"What does Rose think?"

"She invited him to stay for dinner."

My father's graying brows rose nearly to his hairline.

I laughed. "That was my reaction too. She seems to like him."

"Well, that's point for him, I suppose." He took another lemon bar. "And what about your other friends. The coupon ladies?"

"They're all the same, except of course, Marla is gone and Vivie is in the hotseat. She asked me to help her clear her name."

"Isn't she the one that doesn't like you?"

"Yes, well, I wouldn't say that's changed. I also don't think she did it or attacked Junior Junior Mason."

"Someone attacked Junior Junior?" My father's expression was dumbfounded, probably at all the craziness going on in his little hometown. "Surely that's an angry husband?"

"It was in Marla's garden, so the investigators think it had to do with her murder."

My father shook his head. "Jefferson Grove used to be such a peaceful town."

"There are still good elements. I've been spending some time with Ellie Tappen. She's always positive even though her husband is sick." I left out the part where my father had taken their money. He knew that and I didn't need to remind him of it.

I was surprised when a scowl crossed my father's face. "Are you sure she doesn't have him chained in the basement?"

"What?"

"I never knew Ellie to be particularly positive, especially towards Al."

"Maybe she is now out of guilt. It's a 24/7 job to care for him."

My father waved away my comment with his hand. "Or she just wants his money."

I looked at him wide eyed. "I thought you took their money."

My father flinched, and I was about to apologize, but he shook his head. "I did take some of it. However, Al and his brother were beneficiaries of a trust. When Al's brother died, Al was the sole recipient."

"If she was all about the money, wouldn't she want Al dead? Then she'd get the trust since they don't have children."

My father leaned forward resting his forearms on the table. There was a little gleam in his eye as he said, "Rumor has it that Al put in his will that the trust will go to the Baptist Church. I guess he hoped to buy his way into heaven. Even if that didn't work, his wife, who put him through hell, wouldn't get it." My father appeared to like this story and I wondered if he'd have liked to pull something like that on my mom. I couldn't blame him. She ran off with her trainer, not only betraying and abandoning my father, but also escaping justice as she was as much a part of my father's scheme as he and my brother had been.

What he was saying didn't mesh with the Ellie Tappen I knew. "Are you sure? She's really nice."

My father shrugged. "Maybe she's changed." His tone suggested he didn't believe it. "Speaking of changed, are you going to see your brother?"

I nodded. Both my father and I were worried about how much prison was changing Will. My father had pulled my brother in to his scheme, which is not to say my brother shouldn't be held accountable. He was a grown man who could have said no. The once vivacious, fun loving older brother I'd grown up with was now a shell of a man. Yes, he'd spent most his time working out in the prison gym, which made him a bigger man, but his personality was practically non-existent anymore. "I'm bringing him the caramel brownies he loves."

My father's eyes turned soft as he took my hand. "You're a wonderful daughter and sister Sophie. We don't deserve you but I'm glad we have you."

The visit with my brother Will went well. He smiled when I told him about overhearing Jennifer Babbitt talking about him, but it was bittersweet. Will wouldn't be with a woman for a long time unless his new attorney was successful in getting him a reduced sentence. It made me more grateful for what I had. Sure, I was unemployed and someone might be trying to kill me. What I did have was Aunt Rose and AJ and my friends. I was definitively in a better place than Will.

I arrived home after dinner time. Rose was watching one of her shows, but stopped long enough to ask about my dad and Will. She listened, muttered something about being darned fools the both of them, and then went back to watching television. I was tired from the long day and decided to turn in. I'd just opened my bed and was getting ready to put my pjs on, when my phone pinged.

*Hello Warrior Princess*

I smiled. *Hello fly boy*

*Look out your window.*

I peeked through the curtain. AJ's truck was parked in front of the house and he was leaning against the passenger side. He looked up from his phone and grinned.

*Can you come outside to play?*

I laughed. *I can come outside, but there won't be any playing.*

I left my room. "I'm going to visit with AJ on the porch."

"Behave. I don't need my neighbors talking."

I opened the door. Immediately, strong arms wrapped me up and AJ's lips consumed mine. That was probably the behavior Aunt Rose was worried about her neighbors talking about, but I didn't say anything. How could I? I was busy being kissed.

"I missed you," he said when he pulled away.

"You've been busy." I tugged his hand toward the love seat. Before I could sit, he tugged me into his lap.

"I know. The repo went well and Ally leaves tomorrow, which will give me more time."

Deciding it was worth risking Aunt Rose's wrath I wrapped my arms around his neck. "That will be hard for your mom."

“Mom wants to see you.”

I leaned back slightly to look him in the eyes. “She does?”

“Yes. She knows we’ve been seeing each other. I think it’s time she got to know you. Afterall, your aunt had me over for dinner.”

Emotion welled in me. At first, I was embarrassed by it because I couldn’t figure out why I was feeling so gooey. Then I realized that while my family was gone, I had a new family of sorts with Aunt Rose and AJ. And AJ was inviting me to officially meet his mom, suggesting a deeper level of seriousness in our relationship. I remembered his response to Becca about his commitment to me and the possibility of marriage. “Maybe . . . probably.”

“Hey, you okay?” His brows knitted in concern.

“Yes. I’m just happy.”

“You sure?”

Of course, it was odd to be happy considering my life was in shambles. Except for him. “I visited my dad and Will today. It made me realize that I don’t have it too bad after all. In fact,” I tightened my arms around him. “I have it pretty good.”

“Do you?” His hands rubbed my back. “How good?”

I knew he was bantering but I decided to answer seriously. “If it weren’t for you, I think I’d feel completely lost.”

“You’d make it with or without me, Sophie. But you have me, and I’m here for whatever you need.”

I kissed him. “Back at you Flyboy.”

We sat on the porch like young lovers, talking, laughing and occasionally necking. It was normal and nice, pushing away all my problems. It also made me realize that I wasn’t powerless. My dad and Will could do little to improve their plight. The only limits I had were those I put on myself through defeatist thinking.

Truth was, I didn’t like working at the Booty Burgo, so getting fired could be a blessing in disguise. Being suspended from the library was tough, but I wasn’t fired. Eventually the situation about the gunfire and Marla would be solved and then I could go back.

Until then, I could email my program ideas to Mrs. Wayland. She could at least share the books and information with the kids until I got back. Maybe I could even video conference my program. I could continue to lead it without putting the kids in danger.

By the time AJ left and I climbed into bed, I felt happy and positive about my life.

## Chapter Twenty

The next morning, I went to church with Rose, and was the center of attention again about getting shot at. Afterwards, I returned home and pulled out my plans and started drafting a program proposal for Mrs. Wayland. My phone rang, playing Cruella De Vil from *101 Dalmatians*, Vivie's ring tone. I inhaled a deep breath to prepare myself for whatever she was going to assail me with and picked up.

"Hello Vivie."

"Sophie, you have plans today?"

"Not really."

"John and Debbie left all of Marla's coupons with me. I thought since you've been a big help, I'd share them with you."

"Thank you, Vivie. What about the others?" When Lani got a big a stash of coupons a couple of months ago, we had an impromptu couponing group as she shared with all of us.

"He left them with me. I'm only sharing with you because I owe you."

"When do you want me to come over?" I figured I'd take as many as I could and share them with everyone else later.

"The kids are at my mother's until dinner. Sooner is better."

I nodded. "Give me an hour."

"See you then."

I arrived at Vivie's house a few minutes early, but she was ready. She had her dining room table covered with Marla's cutting board, boxes and boxes of filed coupon flyer newspaper inserts, and her own couponing equipment.

"Davis has the binders," Vivie said with disdain.

"Any word on if he's looking at anyone else?"

"He talked to Randy and Tracy. I'm told you put him on them." The hint of satisfaction in her tone told me she wasn't mad at me for talking to Sergeant Scowl. "Why did you talk to Davis?"

I wondered if she knew I'd been fired. I told her about my meeting with

Randy, and how sinister he'd been, and his comment about Marla not minding her own business. "Davis said that Randy had an alibi."

"I don't why Davis would believe either of them. They're both liars."

"Do you think Marla knew about them and if so, would Randy have killed her?" On the one hand, that made sense. On the other, it didn't because they both knew that I knew their secret, and they hadn't shut me up. Then again, Randy was holding my job over my head, and someone did try to shoot at me the other night. Then I remembered that Davis had said he couldn't have killed Marla.

"I know she knew."

"How."

"Tracy told me that Marla caught them together at her place. Marla was giving her some coupons and he was there . . . like all there . . . full monty." Vivie shook her head. "This town knows everyone's business." Her lip quivered. "People knew but didn't tell me."

I felt bad for her. I was one of those people and I felt the need to defend my position. "I wasn't sure until recently."

Vivie waved her hand. "I know why you didn't tell me. I'm sure Randy threatened you with your job. Sophie, I know we're not great friends, but sacrificing your job for me . . . well . . . no one has ever done something like that for me." For a minute I thought she might hug me. I'd always thought it would be nice to be friends with Vivie just to avoid all the angst and animosity, but this touchy-feely stuff was weird. I wasn't sure to trust it. I also wasn't sure how to respond.

"Here, take any and all coupons that you want." She waved her hand over the table. I knew Vivie well enough to know she'd already have taken the coupons she wanted. Looking over the table, there were a lot of coupons and I had to accept the gesture for what it was. She was thankful.

"Thank you, Vivie." However, as I looked over the coupons, I had an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of my stomach. It just didn't feel right to be scavenging Marla's coupons. I looked at Vivie who was sorting through flyers. If I refused the coupons, she'd be offended. Normally I didn't mind offending Vivie, but she was showing her gratitude and I didn't want to appear ungrateful.

Maybe I could pretend I didn't find any I liked. Vivie would catch on to that. There were plenty of coupons for everyday items that I wouldn't pass

up. Finally, I decided I could pretend to take the coupons, and then put them in the overseas coupon box at the library. This box was for expired coupons that active duty military families could use when they're abroad. Once a month, the coupons were collected and mailed off to foreign lands.

I think Marla would like that her coupons were helping other families. She was always generous with her time helping me, and frequently donated coupons in the overseas coupon box.

Of course, I couldn't put them in the box until I was cleared to return to the library. Or maybe I could ask Lani to put them in.

We sat at the table and I began to sort through the flyers. "Vivie, someone took a shot at me the other night. It was the day I told you about Randy and Tracy. Would either of them have done that?"

Vivie looked up from her coupon binder. "I don't think so, but I don't know them." Tears filled her eyes, and I wondered if it was because her husband betrayed her or her sister. Vivie knew Randy cheated, so I had to think it was Tracy's betrayal that hurt her. She sniffed, and the hurt disappeared replaced by her usual smirk. "For once Tracy is in the hotseat."

"You think so?"

"She could have killed Marla easily. In fact, maybe she framed me." Her eyes narrowed and it appeared she was latching on to the idea. "Yea, she framed me to get Randy. Well she can have him for all I care. I don't even know why I married him."

Rumor was she married him because she was pregnant. I decided the question was rhetorical and didn't need an answer. "I'm sorry they hurt you, Vivie."

She looked up at me in surprise. "How come we never became friends?"

I cocked my head and gave her a look that said, you know why.

She shrugged. "Okay, I didn't like that you stole Randy from me in high school."

"I didn't steal him. You broke up with him and he asked me out."

"He only did that because he knew it would make me jealous."

I wondered if she realized how mean that statement was. Like Randy wouldn't have been interested in me otherwise. He was interested enough to try and get into my pants, for which he paid dearly with my knee in his groin.

"You were the only girl who was half as pretty as me."



My brow quirked up and for a moment I realized that was a compliment.

“And smart. You and I were always competing for the top grades, remember?”

I nodded. “I do.” In the end I beat her, however, Ethan Taylor beat us both and got valedictorian. I laughed at that, because Ethan turned out to be a terrible person.

“What’s so funny?” Vivie looked offended.

“I was thinking how Ethan Taylor beat us both.”

Her nose crinkled into distaste, and then as if she got the joke, she laughed. “The smartest kids in Jefferson Grove, and look at us. We’re all a disaster.”

I laughed. “At least you and I can improve.”

“True, sistah.” She held up a hand and I high fived her.

A week ago, if someone had told me I’d be able to spend hours one-on-one with Vivie, I’d have scoffed. But after three hours, I was loaded with coupons, had gotten some great savings tips, and had a very pleasant afternoon with Vivie. I wanted to think it was the start of a new friendship with her. There was a part of me that told me not to get too attached.

I was feeling pretty good when I pulled into my driveway that afternoon. That is until Tracy pulled up. She stormed out of her car slamming the door.

“Who do you think you are?”

There were several reasons for Tracy to be mad at me. I decided to wait to see which reason had brought her here.

I stepped back when she got into my space, leaning her fuming face into mine.

“You told the sheriff I tried to kill you?”

“Not exactly.”

She jammed her hands on her hips. “Then what, *exactly*, Sophie?”

I looked around the neighborhood to see if there was anyone about who would be a witness of Tracy tried any funny business. I wasn’t convinced she’d killed Marla or shot at me. I wasn’t sure she hadn’t either. “Someone shot at me the other night and Davis asked who’d want to do that.”

“And you told him I would? I’ve always been nice to you. Vivie’s the one that always hated you.”

“I hadn’t given Vivie a reason to hurt me.”

“That’s right, because you told on me and Randy. Why? After the way she

treated you, why would you take her side?”

“She deserved to know, especially with everything going on.” I laughed at her gall. “You slept with her husband in her bed while she was in jail, and I’m the bad guy?”

Tracy jerked back. “She doesn’t deserve him.”

“Personally, I think they deserve each other. He’s a cheater, Tracy. If you don’t think he won’t cheat on you, then you’re delusional.”

“Randy and I aren’t your business.”

I shook my head. “Randy isn’t your business either, Tracy. He’s your sister’s husband.” I stared at her, trying to understand how she couldn’t see how crazy her thought process was.

She pursed her lips and stepped back. “Just stay away from us.”

There was a hint of threat in the tone that nearly had me asking, “Or what?” Recent events, however, had me holding my tongue. Turns out I had a little self-control after all. Instead I left her in the driveway and went into the house.

The rest of Sunday was quiet. I watched TV with Aunt Rose, texted AJ and then I went to bed.

Monday, I woke up with new resolve to once again try to get my life back in order, starting with looking for a job. I couldn’t hope that the shooting incident would be cleared up, or that the library would hire me full time even if it was. Since being back in Jefferson Grove, I’d worked hard, helped solve a crime, and overall been a good citizen. Granted, I was in the middle of another murder investigation, but I wasn’t a suspect. I’d hoped that in the few months I’d been home, people with jobs would see that I was not like my parents and brother, and give the chance they hadn’t been willing to give me when I first returned.

I pulled the want-ads from the Sunday paper in Aunt Rose’s recycle bin and laid them next to the coupon inserts I’d taken yesterday. After I finished looking for a job, I’d clip and file the coupons from the Sunday circular, and find an envelope to take the coupons I received from Vivie to the library for the coupon box.

Jefferson Grove wasn’t that big and only has a weekly paper, which meant my only choice for want-ads was the Charlottesville paper. That meant most

of the jobs would be closer to there. I think my car could stand a short commute if necessary.

One of the challenges I had in job hunting was the lack of skills and experience. My degree was in Folklore, which didn't give me much practical knowledge for most job openings. With that said, I wasn't without skills. I worked well with the public and children. I was organized. I knew how to research. I was a quick learner.

I scanned the help wanted ads for jobs that required anyone with my limited skills and experience. I circled two office jobs, one with a legal office. Surely my experience being questioned by the FBI and sheriff's investigators could come in handy there.

An elementary school was looking for a part-time teacher's assistant and a high school advertised for an English teacher. I wondered how much time and money it would take to go back to school to get a teaching degree, as that might be the best way to put my folklore knowledge and love of fairy tales to use.

The rest of the day, I spent with Aunt Rose. I helped her deliver a few pies, which took some convincing since she was worried I might be a target and Bull wasn't around to help. My life had been quiet the last few days and if someone wanted to kill me, there would have been chances when I drove to Vivie's or while I was talking to Tracy outside the day before. I was beginning to suspect the bullet was either a stray from some crazy person hunting on the mountain or a warning, which I was heeding.

AJ called in the afternoon from his boss Gordo's office to say he'd just picked up another repo in North Carolina, and I wouldn't be seeing him today. He'd let me know about tomorrow.

Since starting to date AJ, his frequent travels never bothered me that much. I'd been so focused on getting my life together and learning to take care of myself. His being away meant it was impossible for me to get too used to him being around, which was good.

I'll admit I was a bit disappointed that I wouldn't be seeing him. I told myself it was boredom from having no job and no life that had me wishing he was home. Somewhere deep inside, I knew that I wanted emotional support from him. I didn't think it was bad to need someone, but I had to learn not to rely too much on it. I'd spent my whole life completely relying on my father emotionally and financially, and look where that got me. I was

way past the age that most adults were self-sufficient. I had a ways to go, starting with getting a job and eventually moving into a place of my own.

# Chapter Twenty-One

Tuesday, like Monday, normally would have been my day off, so it didn't seem much different. I could almost forget I was unemployed. Except it would have been the first day of adding an additional program to my library job.

I pushed that thought away, and spent the morning helping Aunt Rose get ready for her friends to come over for their weekly card game that afternoon.

While they were playing cards and drinking watered down Bourbon, I went to my room to search for jobs online and get ready for my coupon group.

"Are you sure you should be going out?" Aunt Rose asked as I prepared to go to Lani's house where the group was meeting this week.

"I think I'll be okay."

"I don't know how you stand it, Rose. I'd be scared to death if someone tried to shoot at my kinfolk," Betty said as she laid a card on the table.

"Sophie's a smart cookie. And strong. Aren't you, Sophie?"

"Yes ma'am." I didn't always feel it, but I read in some self-help book that sometimes you just had to fake it until you make it. It also said to act like the person you want to be. So, I'd pretend to act strong and maybe I would be.

Of course, strong didn't mean smart. If I was smart, I'd have more concern over my safety than I did. Instead, I was wondering if both Vivie and Tracy were going to be at the coupon group tonight and what would happen if they both came. Maybe for once, I wouldn't be the focus of Vivie's venom. It's not nice to wish that on someone else. I figured Tracy deserved it. She certainly deserved it more than I did.

I arrived at Lani's a little early, making me the first one from the coupon group there. I realized I hadn't talked to her in a few days and felt bad for not calling. Then again, she hadn't called me either.

Dwayne, her husband answered the door. He and I have always gotten

along, so I was a little surprised by the stern expression he gave me.

"Everything alright?" I asked.

"I'll be honest, Sophie, I didn't want you here."

"Oh." I tried to hide the shock and hurt.

"I know what happened the other night at the Booty Burgo, and I don't need that kind of danger around my home."

I nodded and prepared to leave. While I didn't feel I was in danger, that didn't mean I wasn't. And if I was, I could be putting him, Lani, and the other ladies in jeopardy.

Before I could leave, he said "Sergeant Davis said he didn't think you were in any danger, and of course, Lani would walk off a cliff with you."

A smile wasn't the right response; however, I felt good that Lani was my best buddy. She was the Thelma to my Louise.

"I just wanted to let you know how I felt."

"I understand, Dwayne, and if it will really make you feel safer, I'll skip coupon group until this is all straightened out."

"You will not." Lani rushed into the room. "I told you not to say anything, Dwayne."

"And I told you I would." His eyes stared at her with the same firm hard conviction as hers glared at him.

"I don't want to cause any trouble."

"Great day, Sophie," Lani said with exasperation. "Come inside. Dwayne is sticking around to keep us safe from the boogy man."

"Boogy men don't carry guns," Dwayne said, but he stepped aside to let me in.

Lani gave me a hug. "How are you? I'm sorry I haven't called." She gave Dwayne a look that suggested he'd been a part of her not calling.

"I'm . . . well . . . I've had a tough week actually."

Lani looped her arm through mine and escorted me to her kitchen. "Tell me about it while I pour us some wine."

I handed her the plastic pie container. "This is from Aunt Rose."

"Oh, a Rose Parker pie. I'm going to hide it and we can eat it later, when it's just the two of us." Lani set the container on the fridge. Lani usually was about fairness, but maybe she knew once I told her about my life, we'd need pie. And more wine. And ice cream.

We sat at her table and I told her all about my adventure with Vivie,

getting shot at, being suspended from the library, which earned a hand squeeze and more wine, and then being fired by Randy. I left out the part about the love triangle between Vivie, Tracy and Randy.

“You didn’t like that job anyway.”

“No, but it paid, and I need money more than I need not to work at the Booty Burgo.”

“You’ll find something. I know you will.”

I shrugged, because while I thought the people of Jefferson Grove might be more accepting and trusting of me than they had been when I first moved back home, they still might not want to hire someone that was always stepping into trouble.

Our conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Aggie, and then Gwen. They too had heard about the shooting, so I had to repeat my story.

“Lordy, lordy, Sophie, how do you always get yourself in trouble?” Aggie shook her head.

I shrugged. “If I knew that, I’d do better to avoid it.”

I got up to help Lani set out all the food and drinks, as we waited for Vivie and Tracy.

Vivie arrived, looking normal instead of like a woman who’d been to jail, twice, and was cheated on by her husband and sister. Her nails were shiny blood red, as if she’d just had them done, and her hair was slightly shorter and the roots blonder. I worried that normal looking Vivie would also be normal acting Vivie.

She stepped up to me, her eyes unreadable as I waited to see what she’d say. Finally, she gave me hug. “Randy is a pig, Sophie. The bar is already suffering since you’ve been gone. Would serve him right if he went out of business because of how he treated you.”

There was a low gasp from Gwen. I couldn’t blame her. Vivie had never been nice to me. Not even when we were in high school.

“Thank you Vivie.”

“And I’m giddy about your siccing Davis on him and Tracy.” Her smile was full of glee. “I’d have loved to see their faces. You’re brilliant putting suspicion on them.”

“It wasn’t on purpose.” Okay, I did call Davis to give him information about Randy’s behavior, however, it wasn’t in retaliation from being fired. “Randy was scary. I’d never seen him like that.”

“What in world are you two yapping about?” Aggie narrowed her eyes as she studied us.

“I haven’t told them about Tracy. Is she coming?” I said in a low voice to Vivie. I figured it was her business if she wanted the others to know.

“Not if she wants to see the sunrise tomorrow.”

I closed my eyes to gather my thoughts. When I opened them, I said, “Vivie, you really have to stop talking like that. If something happens to her, we all heard you threaten her.”

Vivie waved a hand. “You’re my alibi.” She walked to the dining table. “So, are we ready to swap coupons?”

Lani, Gwen and Aggie gaped at me. I shrugged and went to the table. Vivie went right to work, ready to get started exchanging coupons.

“Shouldn’t we wait for Tracy?” Gwen asked.

“No.” Vivie continued to make her piles of coupons.

Gwen looked at Aggie, then Lani and me.

“Did something come between you and Tracy?” Aggie asked.

Vivie looked up at the group of us. “Yes. Randy did.”

It took a moment for the others to understand. Like synchronized swimmers, their expressions flowed from disbelief, to shock, to concern.

“I’m sorry, Vivie,” Lani reached out to squeeze Vivie’s forearm.

“Is that a coupon for juice boxes, Lani?” Vivie leaned over to peer at Lani’s coupons. When no one answered she looked up. Then with a resigned sigh she said, “I don’t want to talk about it.”

There was another moment of silence.

“I have a juice box coupon.” I pulled the coupon from my stack and handed it to Vivie, hoping the others would take my lead and move on from the discussion of Tracy.

As if in a trance, Lani snapped back to life. “Yes, I have one too.” Once Lani joined in, Aggie and Gwen did too, and nothing was said further about Tracy.

We’d been swapping coupons for a half hour or so, when there was a knock on Lani’s front door. Dwayne answered it and returned a few minutes later looking perturbed. Then I noticed Sergeant Scowl behind him.

“What’s up?” Lani asked looking up from her latest coupon score of \$1.00 off Halloween candy.

“Sergeant Davis needs to talk to you.” Dwayne’s eyes scanned the group.



Sergeant Scowl stepped forward. "This is related to your friend Marla Naylor's murder."

"Did you find who did it?" Gwen asked.

He shook his head. "No. We have a new lead, and I need you ladies' input."

"Well, come and sit down, Lawson," Aggie said, apparently not feeling that it was necessary to show him the respect of his status. Aunt Rose was the same way. Anyone younger than her, which was just about everyone, was referred to by their first name regardless of title. "You're going to crick my neck if I have to keep looking up at you like this."

Sergeant Scowl thought on it a moment. I wondered if he thought he wouldn't be as intimidating if he sat. I guess he decided it wouldn't matter, and he took the chair Dwayne handed him from the corner and sat between me and Vivie.

"So, what's this new lead?" Aggie asked.

"Is it Mr. Naylor? He was sketchy." Vivie squinched her nose in distaste.

"No, this is new. We finally were able to get Mrs. Naylor's will."

This piqued my interest. It would answer the question about whether or not Mr. Naylor had any right to be going through Marla's things.

"I thought you already had the will?" Lani asked.

Sergeant Scowl shook his head. "No. We hadn't seen it. All we had was confirmation from her lawyer that her husband wasn't in it."

"So, she really cut him out of all that money?" Gwen said.

"Good for her," Vivie said. "Husbands are worthless."

Sergeant Scowl looked at her for a moment but didn't react. I knew he was divorced. The story I'd heard was his wife had run off with another man. Perhaps he didn't share Vivie's assessment.

"How does that involve us?" Aggie asked.

"Well, it turns out she's left each of you some money."

There was a gasp from all of us. Mine was coupled with an ut-oh feeling in my gut.

"How much?" Vivie asked. Apparently, she didn't realize that this gave all of us motive to want Marla dead or that this kept her at the top of the suspect list.

I looked at Vivie and tried to give her a silent signal with my eyes to be careful. She just stared at me like I'd grown a third eye.

"It's enough to be motivating."

There. He said it. Marla had left each of us enough money to be motivated to kill her.

“Now, wait a minute, Lawson, you can’t possibly think any one of us here would kill her. She was our friend.” Aggie’s dander rose as she glared, uncaring that he was suggesting she and the rest of us were suspects.

“A friend none of you knew very well. You, Mrs. Danner, stole from her.”

Vivie pursed her lips and turned away. “She wasn’t going to need the coupons.”

I shook my head.

“I’d like to talk to each of you individually.”

“You already talked to us,” Lani said.

“I’d like to talk to you again.”

“You can use the living area if you like,” Dwayne offered with a look to Lani that said, “Don’t upset my boss.”

“I should call my lawyer.” Vivie took her purse that she’d hung on her chair and pulled out her phone. The night was just about to get worse if Becca was going to end up coming over.

“I don’t need to talk to you or Ms. Parker. At least not tonight.” Sergeant Scowl stood.

Vivie and I looked at each other.

“Why not?” Gwen asked.

“I’ve already interviewed them several times. Mrs. Lafferty, how about I start with you?”

I frowned and Dwayne stiffened. Lani nodded and stood. She walked to the living area with Sergeant Scowl behind her.

Gwen leaned forward and whispered. “This isn’t good.”

“I wonder how much money we’re getting.” Vivie put her phone back in her purse.

“Ah lordy, Vivie. Now isn’t the time.” Aggie chastised her.

Vivie glared at Aggie and huffed but didn’t say more.

We continued our couponing in silence as Lani, and then Gwen and finally Aggie went to talk with Sergeant Scowl. None were gone very long, which I decided was a good sign. However, none said much when they returned making it hard to know. Not that Vivie didn’t try to get each of them to talk. Aggie in particular gave her a glare that said, “Wait ‘til later.”

When Aggie returned, Sergeant Scowl followed her into the dining area.

“Ms. Parker and Mrs. Danner—”

“I thought you didn’t need to talk to us,” Vivie snapped.

“I don’t. I just thought you might like to know that your friend, Junior Junior Mason came out of his coma today.”

Vivie’s head whipped to look at him. “Is he going to be okay?”

Sergeant Scowls eyes were penetrating as they studied Vivie. “It appears so.”

“Who hurt him? Did he say?” Lani asked.

Sergeant Scowl shook his head. “Whoever it was came from behind and surprised him.”

Disappointment washed through me. Not just that Junior Junior’s attacker was on the loose. I worried that his shovel wielding attacker was my shooter. All of this had to be related to Marla’s murder.

“I’ll be off now.” He started to step away from us.

“What about the money?” Vivie asked.

“Vivie!” Aggie hissed.

“Mrs. Naylor’s attorney will be in touch with you all soon. However, until her murder is solved, no money is going to anyone.”

He turned then and left Lani’s townhome.

We sat in silence, except for Vivie, who was looking over the pile of coupons available to take from the middle of the table. Once we heard the door close and it was clear Dwayne wasn’t going to interrupt us, everyone started talking at once. It was clear by everyone’s response, that Sergeant Scowl’s questions were fairly routine and didn’t give any indication of who might have killed Marla.

“Did he tell you how much money you’d be getting?” Vivie asked.

“Great day, Vivie,” Aggie blurted on an exasperated breath. “Have a little decorum.”

Vivie sulked for the rest of the evening as we finished our coupon swapping.

As I walked to my car to go home, Vivie pulled me aside. “Will you go with me to see Junior Junior tomorrow?”

“I don’t know, Vivie.” It didn’t seem like a good idea to visit Junior.

She frowned. “You have something against Junior Junior?”

“No.” What I had was a deep desire to stay out of this business. “I don’t really know him that well. Why do you need me to go?”

She scanned the area and stepped closer to me. "You know his reputation and how this town is. If I go alone, there will be talk."

"Can't one of your other neighbors go with you?"

"Who?" She said it in a way that suggested she had no neighbors. More likely she had no friends.

"I don't know."

"Come on, Sophie. I need someone to go with me. Why won't you go?"

"Because I don't want to get involved. He was attacked in the same location as Marla's murder."

"So?"

"So, someone shot at me the other night probably because they knew I was asking questions."

"We're not going to question him." Vivie studied me. "Besides, I was asking questions and no one shot at me."

She had a point.

I thought I was fairly safe at the moment, but I didn't want to tempt fate by giving the appearance of putting my nose back into this business. "I'm sorry Vivie, I just can't."

Her eyes narrowed and darkened. "After all I've done for you, you can't do this one little thing for me?"

I shook my head. "Sorry."

I arrived home late, and Aunt Rose was already in bed. I decided I had nothing better to do than go to bed either. I was just settling in when my phone pinged that I had a message.

*Goodnight Warrior Princess.*

I smiled. *Goodnight Flyboy.*

*I should be home Thursday. Lunch with my mom then?*

Knowing I had nothing else to do, I texted back, *I can't wait.*

*Sleep tight*

*Dream of me.*

He texted me a groaning face. *It's hard to work and think of you at the same time.*

## Chapter Twenty-Two

The next morning, I was having breakfast when my phone rang with Cruella de Vil's theme. I groaned.

"What's the matter with you Sophie? And what's that noise?"

I picked up the phone. "It's Vivie Danner." I poked the talk button. "Hi Vivie."

"Junior Junior is going to be fine, in case you were wondering." Her tone was snippy, as usual.

I wondered why she was calling to tell me all this when, one, I knew this from Sergeant Scowl the night before and two, I was back on her bad side. "I'm glad to hear it. Did he figure out who hit him?"

"No. He said he told Davis that he was certain it wouldn't have been me."

"Well that's good." Could I hang up now?

"You have to help me with something."

I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. I wanted to tell her, no, I don't have to help you. I figured I'd wait until I heard what she wanted help with, so I didn't come off being rude when I told her no. "With what?"

"Junior Junior is very worried about Marla's garden. He wants us to go take care of it."

"Us or you?"

"What does it matter, Sophie? It's important to him that someone look after it."

"Why don't you?" Although I didn't like being the target of Vivie's venom, I was finding I didn't like being her go-to-person when she was in need.

"I don't know anything about gardening."

"Neither do I." Why did she think I knew gardening?

She harrumphed.

"Besides, bad things happen at Marla's and I said I was going to keep out of all that business."

"Are you scared?" She had that tone second graders use when they're

daring someone to do something unsafe or that might get them in trouble.

"Someone tried to shoot me, Vivie, so yes, I'm a little scared."

"It's in Monticello Heights. You'll be safe."

"Vivie, someone killed Marla and whapped Junior Junior in Monticello Heights."

She was quiet for a moment. "Ellie can keep watch."

"Ellie has got her hands full with Al."

"Come on Sophie. There will be two of us. All we're doing is picking a few vegetables and weeds. Marla was really good to you. She even left you money and you can't take an hour to honor her by tending her garden?"

There was no way Vivie cared one iota about honoring Marla. She knew me well enough to know I would. My resolve to stay away faltered as I had to admit Marla had spent hours teaching me about couponing. I didn't know how much money she'd left to me and the other girls, but it didn't matter. The fact that she left anything at all deserved my gratitude. One way to show that was to care for the one thing that gave her joy.

I blew out a breath. "Alright. When?"

"After lunch. Around two. Meet me at my house."

"I'll be there." After hanging up, I had a sick feeling in my stomach. Everything bad that had happened lately, happened at Marla's, except of course for someone shooting at me. In those cases, Marla and Junior Junior had been alone. Maybe Vivie was right in that if we were together, whoever was attacking people wouldn't be emboldened. I hoped so, because I didn't know how I'd explain my going to the scene of the crime, so to speak, to AJ or Sergeant Scowl if something did happen.

An hour later, I parked in front of Vivie's house and then walked with her to Marla's taking the back trail.

"What about John and Debbie?" I asked as we made our way to Marla's patio to find gardening tools.

"They're gone."

"Home? To Pennsylvania?"

"I think they're at the Tavern Inn because Sergeant Davis had more questions for them, thanks to me."

"To you?" I wondered what she'd told Sergeant Scowl that had him keeping the couple in town?

"Well, you know how we've been wondering how he would have been able

to get into the gate?”

“Yes.”

“What if he was driving Marla’s car?” Vivie said.

“He’d have to get in the gate first to get her car. The guard would have seen him.”

“Or, he flew down and she picked him up in her car. And if it was after hours or the weekend, a guard wouldn’t have been there. Only the recording of the barcode opening the gate.”

Vivie was on to something. “How’d he get home?”

“I don’t know, Sophie. I don’t have all the answers. That’s Davis’ job.”

I nodded as another thought came me. “He could have used her car the other night to go to the Booty Burgo when I was shot at.”

Vivie’s eyes widened. “Yah. Maybe that’s why Sergeant Davis is keeping them in town. Maybe the car’s barcode was used.”

I frowned. “Why didn’t he come after you?”

“Because he likes me, dummy.”

“Right.”

We found a few tools, most of which appeared to involve digging but I wasn’t sure what each was for.

“Junior Junior said he cleaned up this front part. He was worried about that section in the back near the woods.” Vivie walked the area she indicated. “He said we should see if the beets and carrots are ready.”

“Ready for what?”

“Picking.” She sent me a withering glare that said, duh.

“What do we do with them if they’re ready?”

“Take them home, of course.”

They weren’t ours, but I couldn’t think of who else to give them to.

“I’m sure your aunt will find some use for them.”

The carrots maybe. Aunt Rose and I were in agreement that no matter how beets were prepared, they always tasted like dirt.

I scanned the section of garden that had green leaves sprouting from the dirt. I didn’t know about gardening, but I figured the leafy purple stems were beets. I wrapped my hand around a set and pulled until a purple bulb popped free. “How do we know if it’s done?” I craned my head back to look at Vivie who was standing behind me.

“How would I know?”

I shrugged. It looked like about the size I'd seen in the store. "Is there a bucket or something to put them in?"

Vivie looked around and then went back to the patio carrying a basket with her. "Will this work?"

"I guess." I took the basket and plopped the beet in and pulled another. I turned to look at Vivie who was watching me. "Are you going to help?"

"I just had my nails done. I don't want to mess them up."

It became clear why she wanted me here. She wanted me to do the work and take the credit. "Go see if Marla had gardening gloves."

Vivie gave one of those typical southern belle sighs, but finally went to search the patio for gloves. I watched her because I didn't trust her. Sure enough, she found gloves, and started to hide them behind a planter.

"I can see you Vivie."

"Oh, for Pete's sake." She huffed and brought the gloves with her to where I was pulling another beet from the ground.

"Why don't you do the carrots. I think that's them over there." I pointed to where an area of green stems attached to orange veggies were peaking from the ground.

"I'm going to get my clothes dirty."

"You called me to help you garden. Gardens involve dirt."

"You don't have to be so snarky, Sophie."

I shook my head and went back to the task at hand. We worked in silence for a few minutes.

"Why do you think she couponed and gardened when she didn't have to? At least not to save money." Vivie asked.

"I don't know."

"Her life was kind of sad."

*Well yah, she was killed.* However, maybe Vivie meant something else. "What do you mean?"

"I didn't like her husband. And they didn't have any kids. Randy is a first-class douche, but at least I have my kids."

I nodded. "Marla did seem alone, except for us."

"Except she never really let us in, did she?" Vivie tossed a couple of carrots into the basket next to my beets.

"No."

"So, you think she was always like that or maybe her husband made her



that way.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. What really doesn’t make sense is why someone would kill her considering how much she kept to herself.”

“That *is* weird.”

I sat back on my haunches, already my back starting to get sore. “Do you think it wasn’t about her?”

“What?”

“Her being killed. Maybe it wasn’t because of her. Maybe it was something else.”

“Like what?”

I pulled another beet. “I don’t know.”

“Maybe she and Junior Junior saw something they weren’t supposed to.” Vivie offered. “Since they were both attacked.”

“Maybe, except someone shot at me and I don’t think I saw anything.”

“That probably wasn’t related,” Vivie said, yanking a carrot and tossing it in the basket.

“Why not?” I didn’t like the idea that someone wanted me dead outside of what was going on with Marla’s murder.

“Because both Marla and Junior Junior were attacked here. It has to do with something here.”

Vivie was on to something. I looked in the direction I was facing, to Ellie’s back yard. I knew a young family lived in the house on the other side of Marla’s. I couldn’t imagine what any of them would be doing something that would lead to killing Marla or attacking Junior Junior. I glanced around the area. There was nothing behind the house except the woods. Perhaps something nefarious was going on there.

“Maybe Ellie didn’t like her.”

I frowned at Vivie. “She hasn’t said anything like that.”

“She wouldn’t if she killed her, would she?”

“Why would Ellie want Marla’s dead?” The idea was ridiculous. Ellie was a lonely woman trying to care for her husband. Plus, I wasn’t sure she was capable physically. She wasn’t frail, but she was in her sixties. I doubt she could move fast enough to stab Marla or swing a shovel hard enough to knock out Junior Junior.

“I don’t know.” Vivie looked over at Ellie’s yard. “Maybe it was a land dispute. Marla’s garden is close to Ellie’s yard.”

I remembered that Ellie had expressed some concern over a when the time came for her to sell the house, but she hadn't been upset. "A survey and a fence would fix that. You don't have to murder."

Vivie shrugged and pulled another carrot.

"Why don't you like Ellie?" My father didn't have very kind words about her either.

"Aside from the fact that she's always in everyone's business even though she never gets out of the house, is her fake devotion to Al. Everyone knows they despised each other."

"Really?"

Vivie looked up at me. "You're from this town, how is it you don't know anything, Sophie?"

"Because I was gone ten years?" I answered in the same snarky tone.

Vivie shook her head. "Anyway, all that 'my poor Al' stuff is as fake as my blonde hair. She only keeps him alive because when he dies, all his money goes to charity or something and she won't get a cent. She probably has him artificially kept alive with hoses and tubes and such."

I frowned at her. "That's a horrible thing to say."

"Only if it's not true. I'm not the only one who thinks so."

I pulled the last beet from the row I was working on and moved to the next row. "Well, I still don't see her killing anyone."

We worked in silence for a time. The silence was nice.

"So, you and AJ Devlin. Is that serious?"

"Yes." I shored up my strength, waiting for whatever Vivie might say about AJ. If anyone had a prejudice against people from the Hollow, it was her.

"A word of advice, Sophie. Men aren't worth marrying. They're good for taking care of a woman's needs, like in the sack and heavy lifting. That's about it. I should know."

I wanted to say that AJ was nothing like Randy, except I figured it wouldn't sway her opinion. I also thought about telling her that Randy's character was crystal clear in high school. She had to have known what she was getting into with him. However, I didn't think that would matter either. Instead I said, "I'm sorry about Randy."

She shrugged. "I've known about him for a long time. But Tracy . . ."

I realized that Vivie's pain was less from Randy's betrayal than Tracy's, which made sense. Vivie knew he cheated. She had no idea her sister would

betray her.

"I'm sorry about that too."

Vivie looked up at me. "Do you think she's been doing him ever since high school?"

"God, Vivie. I don't know. I doubt it."

"Why doesn't she just get her own man? She may not be as pretty as me, but there are plenty of other men who'd have her."

"Jealous maybe?"

"Yes!" Vivie pointed a glove-tipped finger at me. "I bet that's it." She reached down and pulled out another carrot. "Ah . . . Sophie?"

"Hmm?" I looked up from my beets.

"Look at this?" Vivie held up a malformed, discolored carrot. Vivie leaned in to study it. "Is that a ring?"

I moved to where she was to examine the odd carrot. The carrot had definitely grown through a gold band. "Maybe Marla lost a ring while gardening."

"Then what's this?" Vivie poked at the white part of the carrot inside the ring. The carrot broke, and the ring with the white section fell to the dirt.

My stomach roiled. Without the carrot, the white part looked like a bone. A fingerbone. "Ah, Vivie. I think we should call Davis."

"Why?" She picked up the ring and the white bit fell out. She didn't care about that part, making me think she didn't realize that it was probably a bone. The bone of someone buried in Marla's garden.

"I think that's a bone."

"A bone." Vivie looked up at me horrified. "Whose?"

"I don't know. It might explain why Marla was killed."

"She buried someone in her garden?" Vivie dropped the ring and scooted away.

That made the most sense. It also explained why Junior Junior was attacked. It didn't explain why I was shot at, but not wanting to take any chances, I looked around to see if anyone was coming after us.

"If she killed someone and buried him, who killed her?" Vivie asked.

"I don't know." However, she did have a point. "Give me a glove."

"What?"

"Give me a glove. Maybe the ring has an inscription and we can see who it is."

“Why do you need a glove?”

“Prints, Vivie.” I wasn’t an expert in crime scene forensics, but I knew enough to keep my fingerprints off potential evidence.

“Oh.” She pulled a glove off and handed it to me. I put it on and picked up the ring. Dirt coated the gold band. I wiped as best I could and found the inscription. It was faded and difficult to read. “My devotion . . . always . . .” I think that’s what it said.

“It looked like a man’s wedding ring.” Vivie stood beside me, leaning over to inspect the ring.

I adjusted the band, trying to get the right light on it. “There is a date. It looks like . . . 78 or 79?”

“That’s a long time ago.” Vivie looked at Marla’s house. “Maybe it was her dad? He could have been married forty years ago.”

“The family here before her wasn’t that old either. Unless it was a grandparent or something.”

Vivie thought. “Wouldn’t we have noticed if someone disappeared from Jefferson Grove?”

She had a point. “Since these are bones, he’s probably been here awhile.” I don’t know why I thought that. I don’t know the first thing about the rate of body decay. “Who haven’t we seen in a while?”

“Nobody is missing, Sophie. Maybe it was someone visiting Marla or the family that used to live here. They had kids. Who’d commit murder with kids around?”

“Any parent would if they thought the kids were in danger.”

She nodded. “You’re right. Except why not call the sheriff’s office in that case?”

I shook my head. We were just tossing out scenarios with no real clues. I read the inscription again. Devotion . . . always. The word hit on a memory, and like a network, hit on other memories. “Oh God . . .”

“What?”

“Maybe he’s not missing.” I jerked my gaze to Vivie.

“Huh.”

“Maybe no one thinks he’s missing because they think he’s sick.”

Vivie’s brows furrowed. “Why would that matter?”

“You said it yourself, Vivie. He’s worth more alive than dead.”

“This guy is dead.” She nodded toward the ring.

“Maybe no one knows he’s dead. Maybe everyone thinks he’s sick. Being cared for by his devoted wife. The wife who was upset the other day when Debbie was poking around here. And who could have attacked Junior Junior.”

“Ellie?” Vivie didn’t seem convinced even though just a few minutes before she’d been accusing Ellie of murder.

I nodded. Of course, that didn’t explain why I was shot at. Maybe it was unrelated. Either way, we had to call to Sergeant Scowl. I reached into my jeans pocket for my phone.

“There’s no need for that, Sophie.” I flinched. Vivie grabbed my forearm. In sync, we turned toward the voice.

“I have some cold tea and cookies. Why don’t you come visit me?” The gun in Ellie Tappen’s hand suggested the invitation wasn’t something we could refuse.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

“I think we found who killed Marla and attacked Junior Junior.”  
“Why would she kill Marla?”

I looked at Vivie. “Probably because she found Al in her garden.”

“No,” Ellie shook her head. “She didn’t. Eventually she would have, just like you two did.”

Vivie shook her head. “Why did you bury him in the Marla’s garden. That’s not very smart.”

“Vivie,” I hissed under my breath. To Ellie I turned and asked. “What are you going to do?”

“There was no garden here when I buried him.” Ellie turned her attention to me. “To answer your question, Sophie, unfortunately I have to kill you both.”

I was afraid of that.

“No, you don’t.” Vivie took a step back. “Everyone knows Al deserved it. We won’t tell, will we Sophie?”

I didn’t think this would work, but I shook my head. “No, I won’t tell.”

Ellie sighed. Her demeanor was calm, like this was a normal afternoon. “I tried to keep this from happening. I always liked you, Sophie, even though your father took all our money. He’s why I had to get rid of Al.”

“I’m sorry.” How strange that this was the second time I’d run into someone wanting to kill because of what my dad had done. Conning people out of their money was bad, but it wasn’t his fault that Ellie killed Al.

“You can’t just kill us, old lady.”

I closed my eyes willing Vivie to not annoy Ellie.

“People will hear the gun, and how will you bury us? You’re too old to dig a hole much less a grave.”

“Stop antagonizing the person with the gun,” I snapped at Vivie.

Ellie didn’t appear annoyed. She was cool as one of Marla’s cucumbers. “We’ll go have some tea, wait for it to get dark, and then go for a drive.”

“People will notice we’re gone.” I looked around, hoping to see someone else in the neighborhood.

Ellie waved the gun motioning us to start walking. “By then it will be too late.”

“I have to be home for my kids,” Vivie’s tone turned from annoyed to worried.

“I’ll make sure they’re fine.”

“Don’t go near my kids.” Vivie lunged. I grabbed her just as Ellie lifted the gun.

“Stop Vivie.” I pulled her back next to me.

“She’s threatening my kids.”

“I would never hurt children.” Ellie’s expression suggested she was horrified to be accused of such a thing.

“I can’t just let her kill me,” Vivie said.

“We don’t have a choice at this time.” I tugged on Vivie to walk with me toward Ellie’s.

“There’s two of us and one of her. And she’s old.”

“I might be old, but I’m not deaf. I can hear you.”

“Neither of us is faster than a bullet, Vivie.” I tried to give her a look that said we had to bide our time and wait for a moment to get out this mess.

“Listen to her, Vivie. She’s the smart one.”

Vivie glared at Ellie.

“Come on. Let’s have tea.”

We went to Ellie’s house, on the way, I scanned for ways we might save ourselves. Nothing appeared. Inside Ellie’s kitchen, she had Vivie serve the tea and we sat at the table.

“Isn’t this nice?” Ellie smiled at us like she had before. It was creepy that she could act like this was a simple afternoon tea and not her plotting two murders.

“Not so much,” Vivie murmured.

“At least you know your kids will have your sister to care for them when you’re gone.”

“Now you’re just being mean, Ellie,” I said.

She sighed. “I guess you’re right.”

“So, what’s going to happen?” Neither Vivie nor I touched our tea. Instead we sat, ramrod straight in our chairs.

“Like I said, when it’s dark, we’ll leave and go someplace private and quiet up one of the canyons.”

“Why didn’t you put Al in a canyon and then none of this would be happening,” Vivie said.

“I would have if he hadn’t made me kill him in a fit of anger. No, I had to think fast then. It wasn’t easy. It was a while ago . . . about two years, I guess. I wasn’t young then either.”

“Two years? You’ve had people thinking you’ve been caring for him for two years?” I couldn’t believe she’d duped the entire town for that long.

She nodded, the smirk on her face suggesting she was pleased with herself. “No one ever questioned me. The only downside was I had to stay home all the time to keep up the ruse. At least I had visitors. I’ve really enjoyed your visits, Sophie.”

“How will you get us out of here?” I asked, hoping there’d be an opportunity to free ourselves.

“Easy, we’ll take your friend Mrs. Naylor’s car.”

Vivie and I looked at each other.

“How do you have her car?”

“She leaves the key in the hallway to the garage. We’ll go over, you’ll get in the trunk and we’ll drive out.” She smiled, pleased with her plan.

“Won’t the gate notice you driving her car?” I asked.

“The gate isn’t manned at night.”

Oh yah.

“The security will have a record of her car, but no one will see us.”

I stared at Ellie realizing that she could have taken Marla’s car up to the Booty Burgo and shot at me. “Are you the shooter from the other night?”

Ellie nodded. “I just wanted to scare you. Like I said, I like you Sophie. The problem is you’re too smart and I couldn’t have you nosing around.”

“So, you took Marla’s car and drove up to the Booty Burgo?”

“Yes.”

I looked to Vivie again. “Aren’t there cameras at the gate?”

“It was dark,” Ellie explained. “And the next day, the sheriff was back at the Naylor’s questioning her husband. I suspect they thought it was him, which turned out well for me, don’t you think?”

“That’s why they don’t want him to leave town,” I said.

“All you had to do was mind your own business. What were you doing out



in the garden?” Ellie asked.

“Tending to it.”

“Well, that’s unfortunate. Would you like some cookies?” Ellie rose from her chair and went to the counter to get a plate of cookies.

“Sophie, what do we do?” Vivie hissed under her breath.

I shrugged, unsure of what we could do. “Wait for a better time,” I whispered back. My phone buzzed in my pocket. I quickly reached to my back pocket to hit the button to mute it.

Ellie turned toward us. “What was that?”

“What was what?” I asked.

“That noise.”

“Probably Vivie’s stomach. She doesn’t eat enough. Why don’t you have a cookie?”

Vivie looked at me like I’d grown a third eye. Then she shrugged. “Sure, why not. I’m dying anyway. Doubt a few sugar calories will kill me at this point.” While Vivie took a cookie, I stealthily slid my phone from my pocket. Keeping it under the table, I tried to be nonchalant as I poked at the apps. My fingers shook, and I kept hitting the wrong option. I started to text Sergeant Scowl, but then decided to call. I turned the volume down hoping it softened what came out of the phone, while he’d be able to hear what went in.

“Ellie, I don’t understand how my dad taking your money led you to kill Al. Why not just say his death was an accident? Why all this?” If I was lucky, Sergeant Scowl would hear all this.

Ellie shook her head. “Maybe you’re not as smart as I think you are.” She leaned against the counter; the gun still pointed at us. “Your dad took our money, so all we had was that family trust of Al’s.”

“It’s not smart to kill the Golden Goose,” Vivie said.

“That was an accident. And because the money would go to the church at Al’s death, I couldn’t have him be dead.”

“So, you made him sick.”

Ellie nodded. “Worked like a charm until Mrs. Naylor moved in and decided to plant a garden.”

“You should have buried him in your own yard.” Vivie shook her head. “Maybe you’re not as smart as you think you are.”

I closed my eyes, wondering if Vivie just bought her death.

“I tried. The ground was softer on her side of the line. Plus, it was practically in the woods. Why she had to keep adding to her garden . . .”

I glanced down at my phone, wondering if Sergeant Scowl had gotten any of this and if he was on his way. Then again, I wasn't sure we'd said anything to indicate danger we were in.

“Now, what shall we do to bide our time until it's dark?”

I stared at Ellie. She was talking like we were waiting for night fall to go trick or treating, not for her to kill us.

“I know, let's go to the basement. You'll be comfortable there. And you can watch tv until it's time to go.”

Vivie looked at me. “She's gone batty.”

I shook my head telling her to be quiet.

“Come on you two, down to the basement.”

I discreetly slid my phone back into my pocket as I stood. I glanced down the long hallway toward Ellie's front door. If we could knock her down, we might be able to make it.

“The door to the basement is there.” Ellie pointed with the gun. Vivie and I started walking but Ellie kept enough distance that I didn't think I'd able to knock her by surprise. Single file, Vivie and I through the door and down the basement stairs.

The basement was finished in what must have been Al's mancave. There was a large flat screen TV mounted on the wall, and recliners parked in front of it.

“You two stand right there. Don't try any funny stuff.” Ellie kept an eye on us as she went to another section of basement that had a large tool chest. Ellie opened it and pulled out duct tape.

“Give me your phones.”

Inwardly I screamed. I reached in my pocket and hit the button on the side to make the phone go to sleep. The one good thing was that I used a password, so she wouldn't be able to see my call to Sergeant Scowl. If he called back, that might be a problem.

I handed her my phone, and Vivie took hers from her back pocket. She tossed it at Ellie.

Ellie set the phones aside. The she tore four long pieces of duct tape. She handed me a strip of the tape. “You first, Sophie. Put this on Vivie's wrists.”

“No,” Vivie shook her head.

“Hands behind you, now.”

I took the tape and gave Vivie an apologetic look.

“You’re crazy, you know that,” Vivie spat at Ellie.

“Maybe.”

Vivie stalled by glaring at Ellie, until she finally acquiesced putting her hands behind her back. I wrapped tape around her wrists.

“Make it tight Sophie. Tighter.”

I grimaced and did a tighter loop. I folded a corner on the end hoping we’d have a chance to use it to undo the tape later.

“Sit down, Vivie. Sophie tape her ankles.” Ellie extended a second strip of tape to me.

I looked at Ellie. “You don’t need to do this.”

“Yes, I do.” Ellie’s soft demeanor snapped. She waved the gun. “Stop dallying and just do what I say.”

I took the tape, and turning to Vivie, who sank down on to the chair, I taped her ankles, trying not to make them too tight.

“Now here, tie her to the chair.” Ellie tossed me rope from the toolkit.

“It’s a bit overkill don’t you think?” Vivie extended her legs. “I can’t go anywhere like this.”

Ellie ignored her. “Sophie.”

“How?” I couldn’t tie her hands or feet.

“Around the chair and her shoulders.”

I had to agree with Vivie, that this was overkill. On the other hand, she hadn’t gotten away with murdering Al by cutting corners.

“Sorry Viv.” I wrapped the rope around her.

“Now, turn around with your hands behind you, Sophie.”

Reluctantly, I turned around. I looked over my shoulder, wondering if she’d put the gun down and I could try to overtake her. No chance. She held the gun in one hand, while laying the tape over my wrists, and wrapping them with the other.

“Now, sit in the other chair.”

I took a moment to assess our surroundings again in the hopes of finding an escape. I came up with zip. In the end, we were no match for a gun. So, I sat.

She put the rope across my chest. Holding the gun in one hand, and with the end of the rope on the other, she walked around the chair to wrap it

around me. She did the same with the other end and then tied them behind the chair.

She narrowed her eyes at me, and then, she put the gun down, I suppose deciding I couldn't do anything. She grabbed the last piece of duct tape and wrapped my ankles.

Our chances of survival were quickly fading.

"People will come looking for us." Vivie argued.

"They won't find you here. Y'all keep quiet or I'll tape your mouths too." She wagged the gun at us. Then, like Jekyll and Hyde, her menacing face turned softer. "Now, what do you want to watch on television?"

"I don't want to watch TV, you old bag," Vivie spat.

I rolled my eyes. Ellie might just kill Vivie right there.

"Whatever is on is fine," I said.

Vivie gave me a look like I was nuts too. I figured if we had any chance to escape, we'd have better odds at success if the TV drowned out our hatching a plan.

Ellie turned on the television to a soap opera. "Now, I'm going upstairs to prepare for tonight. Enjoy this time while you can ladies." Ellie gave us one last look and then took the stairs up to the main floor.

"You're as crazy as her, Sophie. Since when do you watch soaps?" Vivie sat in her chair looking like a petulant child.

"I didn't want her to hear us, and we need to come up with a plan. I just can't think of any ideas to get out of this. If we're lucky, Sergeant Davis is on his way."

Vivie's face lit up. "You called 9-1-1, brilliant."

I blanched. I hadn't called 9-1-1, I'd dialed Sergeant Scowl. 9-1-1 would have been better since someone would have picked up. I had no idea if Sergeant Scowl answered the phone or if I left a message. Maybe it didn't go through at all.

"So, we need to sit here and wait?" She shook her head. "I don't like those odds. What if Sergeant Davis can't get in the house?"

"If he got my call, wouldn't he have probable cause or whatever?" I didn't know the first thing about the law, which is probably why AJ was right and I should keep my nose out of other people's business.

"What if he doesn't, Sophie? What do we do then?"

"I think we need to wait." I pulled at my restraints on the off chance I

could free myself. All I did was make my wrists burn.

"You want to let her put us in a car and dump our bodies in the woods?"

"No. I think we have a better chance getting away from her when we're not in the house. No one is going to think to look for us here. We should wait until she takes us to Marla's car. Someone is more likely to see us."

Vivie sank back in her chair. "How long do we need to stay here?"

"She said until dark." I sagged in my chair, surrendering to the fact that at this moment, there was nothing we could do.

"That's hours." Vivie's voice was a whine, but I didn't begrudge her. I felt the same way.

Since the basement had no windows, our only way to know how much time was passing was by the number of shows that came on. As one soap, and then an afternoon talk show came on, it was clear to me that the call to Sergeant Scowl hadn't gone through.

The local news was on when the door upstairs opened.

"She's coming," Vivie hissed.

"You two having fun?" Ellie said when she reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Oh yeah, it's a real blast. Dane left Sara for Joyce, except Nancy just revealed she's having Dane's baby." Vivie glared at Ellie as she recapped the days' soap opera plot lines.

"Well, it's time to go." Ellie undid my rope and then Vivie's, leaving our wrists and legs duct taped. "We're going upstairs and then out my back door. We'll go through Mrs. Naylor's side door to get to her garage."

This was good. It was evening when people were coming home from work. We could call out to someone in the neighborhood. Ellie wouldn't shoot us if someone would be able to see her, would she?

"I'll need to duct tape your mouth."

And just like that, my hopes dropped. Who'd have thought such a nice elderly lady would have it in her to plot out a murder so meticulously?

Ellie put duct tape on our mouths, cut the tape around our ankles, and led us upstairs. For a moment, I considered falling backwards, which would knock both Vivie and Ellie down the stairs. I decided that chances were good we'd all be seriously hurt.

It was early evening, with a little light in the sky, but as I looked around for anyone stirring in the neighborhood, my hopes dimmed. The court was

empty. No one was coming home from work or out walking their dog.

We arrived at Marla's side door with no chance of getting help. We went through the door and Ellie grabbed a set of keys hanging in the hall. Then she ushered us through another door into the garage where Marla's black sedan was parked.

Ellie opened the trunk of the car. She pushed me in first, and then Vivie. Because I didn't have use of my hands, I fell in, bumping my head, and bruising my shoulder. Vivie made a noise that suggested she would be sore too. The trunk looked big from the outside, however, even though I was a small person, we were squished tight.

"Not much longer now girls." Then with a smile, Ellie closed the trunk.

Immediately, Vivie started trashing and making grunting sounds, her elbows jabbing me. I ignored it for now as I pressed my cheek to the floor of the trunk and turned my head, hoping the duct tape would stick to the carpet and peel enough to uncover my mouth. The first time, it pulled a little bit, though not enough. The second time, I removed enough of the tape to talk.

"Calm down, Vivie."

My words only made her thrash and balk more.

"Hold on."

Both Vivie and I were facing the back of the car. It took some effort because of the cramped confines, but finally I rolled onto my back, and then again to my other side facing the interior of the trunk and my back to her, putting my hands next to hers.

"I'm going to try to get the tape off your wrists. You need stay quiet and calm, Vivie."

Vivie continued to make grunting noises.

The door of the car opened, and it shook slightly suggesting Ellie was getting in. Then the door closed.

"She'll hear us," I whispered.

That seemed to have worked, as Vivie quieted down. My fingers searched for Vivie's hands, finally finding them. I felt for the folded end of the duct tape and pulled, trying to unwind it from Vivie's hands. She yanked a hand free.

I couldn't see, but she let out a gasp that let me know she'd pulled off the tape on her mouth.

“Help me get loose too,” I whispered to her.

There was movement behind me, and soon my hands were free. The car started, and jerked as if Ellie was putting it gear.

“What do we do now?” Vivie’s voice was more panicked than before.

“There must be an emergency latch that can pop the trunk.” I rolled to face her.

“Right. I remember showing that to my kids.” She turned to her other side and scooted to the end of the trunk.

I put my hand on her shoulder. “Not yet though.”

“Why not?” Vivie didn’t hide her annoyance.

“Wait until we’re in town, where there are people. She still has that gun and there is no one here to help us.”

Vivie was silent for a moment. “What if she doesn’t go into town? She said she’s taking us to a wooded area. She can do that without going to town.”

She was right. “How about the gate? When does the gate person leave?”

“I don’t know. There could be people driving in if it’s after work. I don’t know what time it is, do you?”

I didn’t wear a watch because I usually had my phone. “I don’t know. I guess we have to risk it.” I imagined the gate in my mind. “There is a building and trees. We might be able to hide before she could get out of the car to shoot us.”

“Wouldn’t she just come after us?”

“Maybe, but people have to be coming and going. It would be risky for her to stalk and shoot us there.” It would work in the movies, although, this was real life. Even so, I liked my odds better getting out of the car at the gate than letting Ellie take us to the dark, uninhabited woods.

“How will we know we’re at the gate?” Vivie asked.

“She’ll have to stop to wait for it to lift,” I said.

“She has to stop at stop signs too. How will we know it’s the gate?” Vivie’s voice pitched upward with each sentence she uttered. I hoped she could stay calm enough to pop the trunk when we had a chance.

“How many stop signs are there between here and gate?”

Vivie began to walk us through the route to the gate. “I think it’s three.”

“Pull the latch at the fourth stop then.”

The drive took forever. The engine hummed, and it was the only sound, besides my racing heart. I didn’t hear cars outside. If we got this wrong, Ellie

might be able to kill us while we were in the trunk and no one would know about it.

"I don't want to die, Sophie."

"Me neither." I squeezed her arm in an attempt to comfort. It was fruitless though.

"Do you think Randy ever loved me?"

I wanted to tell her to focus on the task at hand, but a part of me understood. I couldn't help but think about my life, my regrets, and what I'd be missing if this didn't go our way. I wished I had another chance to see AJ, his brilliant blue eyes and cocky grin. I'd like to tell him one more time that I loved him and thank him for making me feel special and loved.

"Yes. I think he does."

"How do you know?"

I didn't for sure. I latched on to signs that he might care. "He was really upset when you were in jail and when you kicked him out."

"Then why does he cheat?"

"Maybe the same reason you do. You two don't appreciate each other enough."

She was quiet for a moment. "If we live through this, do you think it will be too late for us?"

"Vivie, I don't think it's too late for anything. But you'll both need to change." And we'll both have to survive Ellie.

"Tracy is nicer than me."

That was true at one time, although lately I didn't think so. "She's been pretty mean to me lately. Right now, I think you're the nice sister."

"That's nice of you to say, even though you're just saying it because we're about to die."

"It's true right now. If we live, it could change again."

She sniffed. I wasn't sure if it was from crying or laughing. "Do you think Randy loves her?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. At least not romantically. They said it was over."

"If I die, I will haunt the both of them." That sounded like the Vivie I knew.

"They'd deserve it."

The car rolled to a near stop, and then lurched forward. "I guess that's stop sign number one," I said. "Can you find the safety latch?" It was pitch black



in the trunk, but the safety release glowed.

"I see it. Do you think this will work?"

"I think it's our best chance. By the time she realizes what's going on, we should be able to take cover. And if someone is at the gate, I don't see her taking a chance coming after us."

"Why not? She knows we'll tell on her. She'd have nothing to lose and everything to gain to kill us."

Vivie was right. And that meant we were putting the gate attendant in harm's way, if one was there.

"I don't know what else to try. I don't want to be alone with her in the dark woods."

Vivie shivered. "Me neither."

"Does the security person at the gate have a gun?" I'd grown up in this neighborhood but never noticed if the gate security carried any sort of weapon. Or that one of my neighbors buried her husband in the back yard.

"I don't know. Maybe."

The car slowed and rolled through the next stop sign.

"I never realized how long it takes to get out of the gate." Vivie's voice quivered.

"Maybe she's a slow driver."

We slowed for the third time, and my heart rate ratcheted up. One more stop should be the gate, if we calculated correctly.

Vivie's hand gripped my arm. "This is going to sound crazy. If this doesn't go right, will you tell Randy I'm sorry?"

"If it doesn't go right, I'm not sure I'll be able to."

The car slowed, and the squeak of the gate echoed in my ears.

"Now, Vivie!"

She yanked the latch and the trunk popped open. Vivie scrambled to sit up. She'd put one foot over the edge of the trunk when the car lurched forward. The jerk of the car accelerating forced her to tumble out, while it slid me into the spot she'd just been thrown from. I put my hand on the edge of the trunk, hoping I could follow her out. The hood slammed down, crushing my fingers. I cried out and yanked my hand to my chest. I lay on the floor of the trunk, listening to the squeal of the tires as Ellie shot out of the gate, and watching as the trunk hood bobbed above me.

She took a hard right turn that had my head banging on the side of the

trunk. The car fishtailed side to side. I stretched out in a spread eagle, trying to brace my hands and feet against the sides of the trunk to stop from sliding around. I knew she wanted to kill me, but in that moment, I thought she might kill us both. The car felt and sounded like it was going way too fast for the country road heading into the mountain woods.

The trunk hood continued to bob up and down with the motion of the car. I was afraid to look out. She could hit a pothole or swerve and I'd be tossed onto the pavement. I didn't think I'd survive that.

Instead, I held on, hoping somehow, I'd survive the ride and get away. The right side of the car jerked and dipped with such force, I was lifted off the floor and hit the roof of the trunk.

This was it. For a split second I saw the reflectors on the road and thought I was about to be roadkill, literally. I dropped down hard, and the trunk slammed shut, latching and locking me in again.

What was she doing? The question was answered when the car slammed into something. The sound of the crunching and gnashing seemed to last forever. My body flew in slow motion forward deeper in the trunk, slamming me against the inside wall. Sharp pain pierced my back and head, and then everything went dark and quiet.

I might have been knocked out, but finally my senses came back. At first, I didn't hear anything. Then there was a mixture of a crunch like walking on gravel and swoosh like something was moving in tall grass.

Instinct had me cowering deep inside the trunk, although there was nowhere to hide. I should make a run for it. If I moved fast enough, maybe I could get out and run before Ellie could react. Surely, she'd be disoriented from the crash.

"This woman is out, but breathing." A man's voice drifted into the trunk. It sounded like he was at the driver's side of the car. Did that mean Ellie was unconscious?

"Sophie?" The latch clicked, the trunk lid opened, and a face peered in.

I was never so happy to see Sergeant Scowl in my life. Well, okay, there was one other time when he saved my life then too. As annoying as he was, he always showed up just in time.

"You okay?" He reached a hand to me.

I sat up, but the world spun. "I think so . . . I don't know."

"Stay there—"

“No. Please, I want out.” I didn’t want to spend one more second in the trunk.

His gaze assessed me, and apparently, he didn’t think I was in any state to climb out. He reached in, scooped me into his arms, and carried me toward the sheriff’s SUV sitting on the side of the road with lights blazing.

“Call for the ambulance for both of them,” he said to the deputy attending to Ellie.

“She killed Al.” I rested my head on his shoulder. It reminded me of when I was a little girl and my father would carry me to bed. I didn’t tell Sergeant Scowl that as he probably wouldn’t want to be compared to my father.

“You can tell me all about it in a minute.”

I lifted my head. “You got my call?”

“I did. Sort of.” He set me on my feet, keeping one arm around me as he lowered the back gate of the SUV. Then he lifted me to sit on the ledge. “It was on my voice mail, Unfortunately, it was too muffled to understand.”

“We were gardening.”

He frowned. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

I thought that was an odd question. Did he think the finger we found was mine? “We found Al’s finger.”

He put his hands on his hips, his brows pulled together in a single line. “Where?”

I huffed out a breath. This was hard enough; I didn’t need Sergeant Scowl to be so dense. “In the garden. We were tending Marla’s garden.” Then I remembered Vivie. “How is Vivie?”

“She’s fine. A little banged up, but okay.”

“Good.”

“I’m going to let you take it easy right now. After you’re checked out at the hospital, I’m going to want to know how you got into all this.”

I nodded. “Yes. I know.”

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Vivie and I were in the same triage room at the hospital. She had scratches and a sprained wrist. I was a little worse for wear. I had a broken hand, and the bump on my head required an overnight stay in the hospital. I freaked out about that a little bit because I wasn't sure how Aunt Rose would take the news. The nurse assured me she'd contact my aunt.

"Let her know I'm not in dire straits, okay?"

The nurse patted my non-injured hand. "Okay."

While I waited to be admitted, Sergeant Scowl came in. I let Vivie take the lead, being glad for once that I wasn't the center of Sergeant Davis' attention. After she shared her side of the ordeal, I told mine. It wasn't that much different. The only variance was she escaped at the front gate and was able to get help from a man driving into the gate coming home from work.

It turns out, Sergeant Scowl had been on the way to Monticello Heights when he came across Vivie at the gate. As he explained his story to us, he had that look on his face that he usually had when talking to me that said, *how much longer am I going to have to deal with you?*

Apparently, my call had gone to his voicemail, but he couldn't decipher the message. All afternoon he'd been looking for us, and he'd even stopped by Marla's, and then questioned Ellie. It wasn't until he'd gotten a call from Tracy, who'd heard from Randy that Vivie hadn't been home to meet the kids after school, that Sergeant Scowl began to get worried about us.

"At least Randy and Tracy knew you were missing and hadn't run off," I said to Vivie.

"Even they know I'd never leave my kids."

"How did you figure out about Ellie?" I asked him.

"If both you and Mrs. Danner were missing, that meant you were poking your noses into Mrs. Naylor's murder, so I was heading back to her house. We arrived at the entrance to Monticello Heights and saw Mrs. Danner and a good Samaritan, who explained that you were in the trunk of a sedan

heading up into the hollow. When we knew Mrs. Danner was getting help, me and Deputy Scott pursued the car driven by Mrs. Tappen.”

“Thank goodness you were there.”

I couldn’t have agreed with Vivie more.

When Sergeant Scowl was done, Vivie and I were left to ourselves.

“I bet I look a mess.” Vivie’s comment was very Vivie-esque; shallow, and yet perfect. It was proof that we survived and would be okay.

“You’ve looked better.” I grinned at her.

“Yeah, well, I still look better than you.” She was smiling, letting me know her remark was teasing, even though it was probably true.

“That’s a given.” I ran my fingers through my thick, curly hair.

“Oh God, Vivie.” Randy came barreling into the triage area. “Are you okay? What happened?”

Before she could speak, he’d grabbed her and pulled her into his arms. I never thought I’d feel warm and fuzzy where Vivie and Randy were concerned, but as I saw the genuine fear in his expression and love in his eyes, I did an inward “aw.” I loved fairy tales and happy endings, and it looked like Vivie and Randy were going to have theirs. At least for the time being.

“She tried to kill me.”

Randy took her face in his hands. “I’m sorry Vivie. About everything. The other women, especially Tracy. I was stupid and jealous and . . . you have to forgive me.”

Vivie studied him. “What do you think Sophie? Should I?”

I thought back to what she said when we were stuffed in the trunk of the car careening to our deaths.

Randy jerked his head to me. “You saved her, didn’t you?”

“No. We saved each other.”

“If you want your job back, it’s yours. Name your price.”

That lifted my spirits, so it was a shock to me when I said, “Thank you, but no.”

“What about me?” Vivie pouted, apparently not liking the attention Randy was giving me.

“You’re everything. The kids and I need you.”

“Do you love me?” She had that coy nearly snarky expression. I think it was just a cover. I think she really wanted to know.

“Yes. I’ve always loved you. Ever since high school.” He took a deep breath. “Do you love me?”

She sighed. “I can’t seem to help myself.”

He gave her lopsided grin. “Is that a yes?”

“Yes.” She smiled.

“Let’s get you home. We can show each other how much we love each other.”

I rolled my eyes. Randy was never far from thinking about intimate play. But if Vivie was game, who was I to judge? Me, if AJ walked in, I’d probably have to tell him I had a headache, because I did.

“We’re ready to take you to a room, Ms. Parker?”

I was disappointed that I had to stay, but I understood that it was better to be safe than sorry where head injuries were concerned.

“Do you need someone to tell your aunt?” Randy asked me.

I shook my head. “The nurse said she would. My car is at your house and I don’t know how I’ll get home tomorrow.”

“Won’t AJ come get you?” Vivie slipped off the exam table and into the crook of Randy’s arm.

“He’s out of town.”

“I can get your car here tomorrow,” Randy said.

“No driving tomorrow,” the nurse said.

I cut her a look. “Why not?”

“You’ll be feeling the effects of the accident and be on medication. You need someone to give you a ride.”

“We’ll take you home tomorrow, Sophie, and I’ll arrange to get you your car to you.”

I stared at Randy and wondered how long the niceness would last. For both of them. Not wanting to count them out, I nodded. “Thank you.”

I was settled into my room when Aunt Rose came barreling through the door with Carl Jackson, looking prim and distinguished, behind her.

“I would have been here sooner, Sophie, if this big lug behind me hadn’t driven slower than a snail in molasses.” She cut him a searing glare.

I couldn’t believe she’d ask him to drive her. My heart went all mushy that she’d call her nemesis to drive her here to check on me. “I’m glad you made it. You didn’t need to come. I’m going to be fine.” I looked to Carl. “Thank you, Mr. Jackson, for driving her.”

“Pah, he owed me.” Rose leaned closer to study me. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Well, you’re not dead. That’s what Betty said. She called and said, ‘Rose, Sophie died in the trunk of Ellie Tappen’s car.’ Of course, I didn’t believe her. Why would you be in Ellie Tappen’s trunk?”

I took Aunt Rose’s hand. “I’ll tell you all about it when I get home.”

“You get your rest, Sophie.” Aunt Rose patted my hand.

“Do you need a ride tomorrow?” Carl asked me.

“We’ll have to stay the night if you want him to drive you,” Rose said. “It will take him all night to drive home.”

Carl simply smiled at her. I began to wonder if maybe their banter was a form of foreplay . . . well not foreplay, but related to an attraction, not a dislike of each other.

“I have a ride tomorrow, thank you.”

Aunt Rose gave my hand a squeeze. “After you tell me about Ellie Tappen’s trunk, you can tell me why you’re unemployed.”

True to their word, the next day Vivie drove me home while Randy brought the Brown Bomber to my house. The nurse was right in that I wasn’t up for driving, or even being upright. Turns out getting tossed around in a trunk like clothes in a dryer is more painful the second day.

Aunt Rose took care of me, only fussing a little bit about how I was always getting into trouble. Because I’d been hurt, she didn’t seem that upset about my not having a job. She even commended me for turning down Randy’s offer.

“Even so, you have to get a job soon, Sophie. I don’t run a charity house.”

Fortunately, the next morning I got a call from the library. Not only was I reinstated, but also, they’d offered me a 30 hour per week job running the children’s section and doing programing. I’d have kicked up my heels if I wasn’t afraid I’d fall and hurt myself more.

I also got a call from Marla’s attorney who confirmed Sergeant Scowl’s information that I was getting some money. Fifteen thousand to be exact. However, it would be awhile before it came because her estranged husband was contesting the will.

I didn't tell AJ about my ordeal because I didn't want him to worry while he was working. He and Bull were gone two more days and arrived together to visit me. Actually, Bull stopped by to see Aunt Rose, bringing her a box of Buckeye Candy and asking if she could make the peanut butter fudge and chocolate confection. At that point they disappeared into the kitchen.

AJ and I went outside to the porch. I sat on the love seat and moved for him to join me. He chose to remain standing. He leaned against the rail and crossed his arms. It was then that I realized the friendliness earlier was a farce, because he glared at me.

"AJ?"

"Were you going to tell me?"

"Tell you?" Had he heard about my ordeal? Then I realized I had bruises, a cast on my hand, and I walked a little hunched over like an old man. "About my accident? Yes."

"When?"

"When I saw you next. Now."

He studied me, and I was worried I'd messed up, although I wasn't sure how. "Why didn't you call me?"

"Because you were working. I didn't want to interrupt."

He turned his head to the side as if he was gathering his thoughts or maybe just trying to get his anger in control. When he brought his attention back to me, he said, "Did you hear the part when I said I love you."

I smiled. I blamed it on the drugs I was on that I felt warm from his comment when he was clearly mad at me. "Yes."

My smile must have disarmed him, because with a shake of his head, he came to sit next to me. "Sophie, what do you think this is between us?"

"Love?" I wasn't sure what he was asking and was afraid to get the answer wrong.

"This isn't just dating or hooking up for me."

I smiled again. "I'm glad."

"Are you? Because if we're in a relationship we need to communicate. If you're in the hospital, I need to know. Right then. You didn't call. Is this because you're afraid to need anyone? Are you going to push people away and end up like your Aunt Rose?"

I took offense to that. "Aunt Rose is just fine and happy where she is."

"And she's alone."



"She's not alone. She has me."

He nodded. "So, you do want to keep me away."

"What? No." Why was love so confusing? "I didn't call because you were working. I was respecting that you need to focus on your job. You were out of town anyway. There was nothing you could do. And I wasn't seriously hurt—"

"You were nearly killed."

"I wasn't."

He turned away, and again, I had that feeling like I was going to lose him. The memory of his discussion with Becca came back to me.

*"Is it serious?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Marriage serious?"*

*"Maybe. Probably."*

I also remembered him thinking I wasn't as committed to our relationship as he was. Is that where this new round of anger came from? It was time for me to come clean.

"AJ."

He turned back to me and I cupped his face with my non-injured hand.

"I love you too. And I don't see this as just dating. I want to see where this goes." I took a deep breath. "All the way if that's where it leads. My not calling wasn't because I didn't think you should know or didn't want you to help me. It was because you were several states away working and I knew I'd see you in a day or two. If that was the wrong choice, just tell me and the next time someone tries to kill me, I'll call you first thing."

He laughed and dropped his forehead against mine. It hurt like heck, but I didn't flinch because I liked it when he was close to me.

"No more almost getting killed Sophie. I don't think I can survive it."

"In that case, there's no problem, right?"

He lifted his head. His bright blue eyes shining. "Right."

"You know, for someone who's all upset because you love me so much, you don't have a good way showing it."

He quirked a brow.

"You haven't even kissed me hello."

He gave me a lopsided grin. "You're right. I'm not a very good boyfriend."

"You can make it up to me."

I expected him to kiss me. Instead he pulled me into his lap.

“Aunt Rose doesn’t like hanky panky.” I ran my fingers through AJ’s auburn hair.

“Aunt Rose is busy right now.” He didn’t let me respond as his lips captured mine. Warmth spread through me. Not just because of AJ’s scorching kiss, but also because all was right with the world. In that moment, sitting on Aunt Rose’s porch, I was safe, I had friends, I had a job I really loved, and I had a man who loved me. If that wasn’t a fairy tale come true, I didn’t know what was.



Jenna Harte loves to write about crime and passion. She is the author of *Death of a Debtor*, the first book of her Sophie Parker Coupon Mystery series featuring a fairy tale loving, coupon clipping sleuth. She also writes the Valentine Mysteries, the first of which, *Deadly Valentine*, reached the quarter-finals in Amazon's Breakthrough Novel Award in 2013. When she's not telling stories, she works by day as a freelance writer, blogger and online entrepreneur. In her free time, she loves coffee, chocolate, books, and YouTube. She is an empty-nester living in central Virginia with her husband.

