



Handcuffs & High Heels

A Ruby Wisdom Mystery

J.M. Edwards

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CHAPTER 1

It was ten o'clock on a Tuesday night in early June. The moon was high, the lights were low and I was right in the middle of giving my favorite UPS guy a hot oil massage when the phone rang.

"Doesn't your office ever close?" Clint asked.

"You know the rules," I said. "People first. Then work. Then shopping."

"But I'm people," he moaned.

"I know you are," I said, drying my hands on a towel. "And I've been rubbing your shoulders for an hour. If my phone rings, it's almost certainly about work."

As the only private investigator in the upstate New York village of Wormwood, I frequently receive calls from clients at all hours of the day and night. When Clint stopped by at nine and announced that he'd pulled a muscle delivering Winnie Badger's new Elvis Presley garden sculpture, I'd offered to work out the knot. But I'd also reminded him, as I often do, that we might be interrupted by business.

Clint and I had been dating for a year—twelve months of happiness, adventure and bliss. He was thoughtful, kind and extraordinarily handsome. His lips were supple satin pillows, his face was a chiseled masterpiece and the curls of dark hair on his head looked like wisps of midnight sky. When he asked me out a few days after delivering my new office chair, I was a bit hesitant. He looked like the kind of guy who was normally interested in nothing more than a quick shag and a peck on the cheek. But during our first date on a drizzly Saturday evening, a four-hour conversation over pizza and two bottles of malbec, I realized that Clint was a keeper. And the dozen roses he brought by my office two days later convinced me that he was interested in something genuine and lasting. He was the best thing that had happened to me since I got my private investigator's license the previous year.

As I reached for the phone on the bedside table, Clint wrapped one hand around my wrist.

"Sure that can't wait until we're done?"

I gave him a look, the perfect blend of cool confidence and appreciation. Then I said: "You know what they say about all play and no work?"

He heaved a sigh, punched his lips into a woeful frown and headed for the shower. I grabbed the phone and clicked onto the call.

"Ruby Wisdom," I said. "How can I help?"

A woman was sobbing on the other end. I could barely understand what she was saying, and the smattering of words I did catch made no sense: dental floss, fur-trimmed handcuffs, George Clooney, pink panties and high school graduation.

"Hold on there," I said when she stopped to gulp in a breath. "You need to slow down so I can understand what you're telling me. Just take your time and speak clearly."

She mumbled a few more things before one final guzzle of oxygen. Then she said: "I believe that my husband's having an affair." There was a flurry of soggy sniffing on the other end of the line. "He's sleeping with his bookkeeper," she whispered. "In our bed." She paused again for more weeping. "At our house when I'm at work, and I think..." Her voice disappeared into another round of whimpering. I waited, knowing she would eventually get back to her point. I listened as she wept for a few moments before delivering the glum finale: "I think he's going to leave me so he can marry her."

I shook my head at the familiar refrain. It was one of the oldest tricks in the book. The pompous corporate executive beds a young, shapely ingénue and then dumps his faithful and beloved bride. I'd already worked three similar cases in my short career, confirming the infidelity with surveillance photographs, exhaustive research and covert snooping.

"What's your name, ma'am?"

"Violet Sullivan," she said. "My husband is—"

"Tripp Sullivan," I interrupted. "I'm familiar with his car dealership. And those wacky commercials."

Everyone in Wormwood knew Tripp Sullivan. He owned the Cadillac dealership on the corner of Main and Bourbon, a profitable enterprise that he inherited from his father when the elder Sullivan died in the arms of a coat check girl at Miss Maude's Cupcake Ranch. As anyone in town could also testify, Miss Maude's establishment had less to do with flour, baking soda and vanilla cream frosting than stripper poles and lap dances, although one of their specialties did involve sticks of butter and a large rubber spatula.

"Aren't those television ads ridiculous?" Violet asked. "I keep telling Tripp he needs a classier image, but he thinks riding donkeys is the way to go."

"Are you referring to the bookkeeper?" I asked mischievously. "Or the TV commercials?"

She giggled softly. "You've got a naughty sense of humor, Ruby. I think I like it."

"Just trying to lighten the mood," I said. "Now, here's what I propose we do."

I suggested that we meet at my office the next morning at nine. I told her to bring my usual fee plus a box of Little Debbie Swiss Rolls. We'd share the chocolate-covered treats while I reviewed my standard contract and Violet told me about her husband's duplicitous ways.

"My office is downtown above Smith's Pharmacy," I said. "Do you know the place?"

Violet snickered. "I've been there plenty of times filling Tripp's prescriptions," she said. "Sleeping tablets, antidepressants, blood pressure pills, Viagra." She made a loud *tsk, tsk* sound into the phone. "He's got more junk in his veins than Keith Richards during his heyday with the Stones."

"Well, you can park around back if you'd like. Or there are usually a few open spots at the curb in front."

"Don't you worry," Violet said. "I'll manage fine. I'm looking forward to meeting you, Ruby. Dita had so many nice things to say about you, so I just know you're going to help me resolve this manure pile one way or another."

When I finished the call, Clint was in the bathroom, slathering his caboose with some of my Beyond Beautiful Firming Serum. While I adore my love bucket's smooth, round posterior and admire the way it looks in his brown UPS shorts, there was no way I was going to let him ply it with two-hundred dollar face cream.

"Hey!" I grabbed the jar and put it back in the medicine cabinet. "That's not for your rear."

"It's not?"

"Did I stutter, pumpkin?" I handed him a bottle of cocoa butter deep conditioning lotion.

"Put this on your flipside instead."

"Thanks, Ruby," he said.

But before he could pump any cocoa butter balm into his hands, Clint suddenly cursed a blue streak. "Damn it all," he said. "I just remembered that I've still got a box of baby chicks in the truck. I need to deliver 'em right away."

I nodded and smiled. "I understand professional obligations," I said. "You've got a duty to serve and protect."

Clint tilted his head to one side. “Huh?” The corners of his mouth lifted to form a drowsy grin. “Did you just insult me or something?”

I shook my head, slapped his bottom and headed for the kitchen. When he left ten minutes later, shirt tails flapping in the breeze and a smudge of cocoa butter lotion in his hair, I decided to do some initial online research about Tripp and Violet Sullivan. Business had been slow lately, and I was grateful for the job. Although it didn’t sound like it would be difficult to crack, I was still looking forward to sitting down in the morning with my new client over a caramel macchiato, a Little Debbie Swiss Roll and another case of happily ever after lasting less than a lifetime.

CHAPTER 2

Violet Sullivan was tall and square, with long, chunky legs and the kind of face that looked perfect in a pitch-black room at midnight. She walked into my office a few minutes after nine the next morning with a box of Swiss Rolls, a large purple alligator handbag and an unlit cigarette dangling from her lower lip. Despite the eccentric appearance and questionable makeup choices—rarely does bright lime lipstick go with sapphire eye shadow—I was most distracted by the vintage John Deere cap that she was wearing with her bright teal Lilly Pulitzer tunic dress.

“Sorry about the hat,” she said, gesturing at her head. “My hair’s a disaster, and this was the first thing I could find.” She put the unlit smoke back in her purse. “I’m trying to quit,” she explained nervously. “My therapist told me to chew gum, but I find that incredibly unladylike.”

“The hat’s actually quite lovely,” I said, after she settled into one of the guest chairs across from my desk. “Very original and more than a little bold.”

“Well, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and just about died!”

I smiled and wondered if she was talking about before or after she slipped the battered bonnet over her mousy brown hair.

“So I grabbed this out of Tripp’s closet,” Violet continued, satisfying my curiosity. “But then I decided my appearance was the last thing I should be concerned about. I mean, he’s making love to another woman in our matrimonial bed, so everything else is pointless and inconsequential.”

I nodded. “And why do you think your husband is having an affair?”

“I found a pair of Victoria’s Secret pink panties under the covers,” she told me.

“Let me guess—not your size?”

She frowned. “They were so tiny that I thought they were a child’s sock.” She held her hands a few inches apart. “I mean, I couldn’t even get one leg in those little things, let alone my whole body.”

She grabbed a tissue from my desk. I finished my first Swiss Roll and sipped my coffee while she whimpered and dabbed at her eyes.

“And why do you think it’s the bookkeeper?” I asked when she’d calmed down.

“I recognized her perfume,” Violet whimpered. “It was all over our sheets. I’ve been to the dealership enough times to know that Clarissa wears Buxom Fantasy, that despicable crap they sell at Dealmart over on Dodge Street.” She heaved a sigh and reached for another tissue. “Our pre-nuptial agreement stipulates that I’m entitled to half of Tripp’s fortune if I catch him having an affair. I just know that’s what he’s doing with that floozy! She’s got big knockers and a teeny waist. Just the kind of girl Tripp used to fall for before he met me.”

Although Violet seemed convinced, I’d need to conduct my own investigation to confirm her suspicions, beginning with a few pointed questions.

“Is that a vintage Lilly Pulitzer?” I asked.

She grinned. “I’ve had this dress since I was twenty-two. My grandmother bought it during one of my summer visits to West Palm.”

“And how about those paisley knee-high socks you’re wearing?” I asked. “Where’d you find those?”

“Heels & Deals,” Violet answered, referring to the shoe store near the Wormwood Public Library. “They’ve got the best stuff in town.”

“Can’t argue with you on that point,” I said.

She blinked. “That sets you apart from most other people,” she said, sounding mournful and small. “During the past few days, it just seems like everybody wants to fight with me about something or other.”

I glanced up and she was drying her eyes again.

“You need a cocktail, Violet?” I nodded at the full bar near the photocopy machine. “I like to think of my office as more of a clubhouse for big, beautiful women than a desk and two chairs.”

She shook her head. “I already had a highball at home. That’ll keep me until dinner. I was so upset when I found the panties that I called in sick today. Decided to have a drink while I looked online for a local private investigator. I was about to throw in the towel when Dita Ingersoll told me about you.”

“How do you know Dita?” I asked, reflecting on the Ingersoll affair. It was a torrid case involving a blowup sex doll, three gallons of mayonnaise and a wayward husband named Earl with an unfortunate appetite for underage girls. After the divorce settlement, Dita was so pleased with my work that she gave me a hefty bonus and three loaves of her award-winning pistachio kumquat bread.

“Dita and I go way back,” Violet said. “We met in high school.”

“Were you classmates?”

She shook her head. “Strip poker party at the frat house.”

I gave her a wink. “Keeping it classy,” I said. “My kind of girls.”

A smile began to bloom on her lime-green lips, but then her mouth decided to call it quits. She ended up looking like a disappointed child on Christmas morning when the enormous gift-wrapped box under the tree holds a certificate for Etiquette 101 classes at Toddler University. My parents sent my brother and me to Toddler U when we were kids. The money was wasted on Ben, but I believe the things I learned from Chevelle Beauchamp and her faculty laid the foundation for the impeccable manners I employ each and every day.

You know what?” Violet said suddenly. “You’re not at all the way Dita described you.”

I shuddered at the thought of how someone like Dita—a svelte and stunning vision of cosmetic surgery, Pilates and malnourishment—would tell another person about my physical appearance.

“Oh, really?” I hoped my tone was the perfect balance between preoccupied and indifference. “What did she say?”

Violet shrugged. “Well, she got your hair right,” she said. “It’s kind of dark blonde with a few auburn highlights. And your skin tone is a lot like buttermilk that’s been watered down with a banana daiquiri.” She stopped to appraise my facial features. “And you’ve got a cute, tapered nose, delicious cheekbones, full lips and a sweet, little chin.” She leaned forward for a better look at my body, and I saw a blur of confusion cross her face. “But she said you were the size of a small farm animal, and I—” Her mouth fell open and her face went blank. “Oh, shoot! I didn’t mean to...” Her hands flapped a little in her lap, like the subtle motion would somehow reverse the hands of time and she could keep from making such an egregious gaffe.

It wasn’t the first time I’d heard someone describe me in less than flattering terms. I knew that the words many women take for granted—leggy, slim, toned and willowy—would never apply to me. And I was okay with that. I liked my curves, plentiful breasts and plus-size posterior.

“The most important thing is you’re cute as a button,” Violet said. “And you’ve got a really sweet smile.”

While I digested her appraisal of my appearance, Violet retrieved a Little Debbie from the box and gnawed on it hungrily. Then she slumped in her chair as I sipped my coffee and collected the remaining shreds of my dignity from the office floor. Before the awkward silence could swell into anything perilous, I decided to keep things moving with a rapid-fire series of questions to sketch in the background of the case.

“How long have you and Tripp been married?”

She groaned. “Too damn long.”

“More or less than a decade?”

“It seems like a hundred years.”

“Okay, so we’ll split the difference and call it a long time,” I said. “Any children?”

“Mutt and Jeff,” she said.

“Both boys?”

“Both dogs,” she answered. “They’re my everything at this point. If the bastard’s going to leave me for that home wrecker, at least I’ll have the two pups to keep me warm at night.”

I watched her face. There were shades of sorrow and rage, hints of confusion and abandonment. There was also a splotch of chocolate under one eye that made her look somewhat like a football linebacker getting ready for the big game.

“You’ve got a little something on your face, Violet.” I handed her another tissue. “Looks like maybe some Swiss Roll frosting.”

She took the tissue, wiped away the dark sugary spot and said: “I’m a woman scorned, Ruby. And I want to see that man pay.”

“Oh, he’ll pay,” I said. “But first we need to catch him *in flagrante delicto*.”

She frowned. “Is that the new Italian place down on Wabash?”

I smiled and shook my head. “No, *in flagrante delicto* is a legal term. It basically means we need to catch Tripp in the act with his lady friend.”

“Having sex?”

I nodded. There was no need to rub it in, so I returned to my standard investigative questions.

“Where do you work, Violet?”

“Tractor World,” she answered. “When I met Tripp, I was the featured dancer at Bubba Tuttle’s Big Kat Korral out on the frontage road.”

I knew the joint. It was a seedy, tumbledown former feed and grain warehouse that Bubba’s daddy had converted into a gentlemen’s club. If Violet had once been their top attraction, it was safe to say that she’d let herself go over the years.

“And what do you do at Tractor World?” I asked.

Violet shrugged. “Receptionist,” she said quietly. “Although I can also fix transmissions if Eddie’s too drunk to come in. My daddy said a girl should learn a trade in case love never bloomed in her garden.”

“Sounds beautiful, dear. And multi-tasking is always a good idea when you get to be our age.”

She narrowed her gaze. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-eight,” I said. “Aren’t we about the same?”

Her jaw tightened and her fingernails dug into the upholstered arms of the guest chair. “I’m forty-four,” she said through clenched teeth. “And the broad that my husband’s screwing is barely old enough to have a driver’s license.”

I knew for a fact that the bookkeeper at Tripp Sullivan's dealership was twenty-five. I also knew that she was my Clint's twin sister.

Life in Wormwood was simple and plain. We may have been a reasonable drive from the bright lights of the big city, but Wormwood would always be a small town filled with big fish. Connecting the dots was a breeze. Solving most cases didn't take too much heavy lifting, especially when they involved a woman whose husband was bedding my love bucket's doppelgänger.

"What're you going to do to help me?" Violet asked.

I decided to nibble on another Little Debbie Swiss Roll while I contemplated the answer. She watched me take a delicate bite. Then she watched me chew it slowly. And then she got up from the guest chair and began pacing.

"I'm gonna kill the little twerp," she said.

"Are you talking about your husband?" I asked. "Or the bookkeeper?"

She stopped near the filing cabinets. "Maybe I'll just put both of 'em out of their misery."

"How about you let me poke around a bit?" I suggested. "Double homicide tends to put a damper on things."

"But they deserve to die!" she sputtered. "Especially that cheating husband of mine!"

"Well, before you load the weaponry, why don't I do some investigating? I'll ask a few questions, do some surveillance work and pick up another box of Swiss Rolls. By the time I accomplish all of those things, I'll have a plan of action."

She nodded. "So you really think murder is a bad idea?"

"Always," I said. "Unless you're talking about killing time with a roll in the hay."

CHAPTER 3

It was nearly midnight when Clint turned over in bed and nuzzled my left cheek.

“Come up here and give me a kiss,” I said.

He grunted and groaned, heaving his gorgeous body until we were gazing into one another’s eyes with the blissful afterglow of our nimble lovemaking.

“You’re a tiger in the sack,” I said.

“Grrrrrrrrrr!” He raised one hand and pawed gingerly at my neck. “Tony the Tiger reporting for duty!”

I leaned over and gave him a kiss. “How’s your sister doing these days?”

He cringed. “We just made sweet, passionate love, Ruby. I don’t want to think about Clarissa right now.”

“I get that,” I said. “How much time do you need?”

He grinned and raised one eye. “Before I’m ready for another round of sweet, passionate love?”

I shook my head. “Before you can talk about your sister.”

“Well, darn it all. If you’re so interested in Clarissa, maybe you should ask *her* how she’s doing. I usually only see her when we have Sunday dinner with our parents.”

“Do you know if she’s dating anyone?”

He gave me a look. “Why? You thinkin’ about asking her out?”

I swatted his shoulder. “No, I’m working on a new case. I suspect your sister might be involved.”

“You suspect?” he asked. “Based on what?”

“The tearful accusations of a woman scorned,” I answered. “I can’t reveal names or any identifying characteristics, of course. My work has to be completely surreptitious and entirely furtive.”

“You talkin’ about the meeting you had today with Violet Sullivan?”

“Well, so much for being surreptitious,” I said, moving onto my side. “How’d you know about that?”

Clint rolled his eyes. “I’m the UPS guy, Ruby. I drive all over everywhere. I went by your office this afternoon and saw Violet’s Wednesday car parked out front.”

“Her Wednesday car?”

He smiled. “Yep, every Wednesday she drives the custom lime-green Cadillac Escalade. She’s got a different one for each day of the week. Tripp gives ‘em to all of his special lady friends.”

“He does?” I asked. “How do you know that?”

“Oh, c’mon,” Clint moaned. “I already told you. I’m the UPS guy. I drive all—”

“All over everywhere,” I said, pinching his arm. “So how’d you know it was Violet’s SUV?”

He smirked. “On account of the vanity license plates,” he said. “They’ve got her first name and the number three.” He wiggled his eyebrows in victory. “The three is for the day of the week, right? The black Escalade is for Monday. The pink one’s for Tuesday. And the—”

“I got it, Sherlock. The lime-green Escalade is for Wednesday.”

He laughed and pushed his face against my arm. “You’re cute when you get feisty,” he said.

“Oh, this isn’t feisty,” I said. “This is me wondering how you know so much about Violet Sullivan’s fleet of customized Caddies.”

“For cryin’ out loud, Ruby! I’m the UPS guy. I drive all over everywhere.” He paused for me to say something, but I held his gaze and waited patiently. “Besides, my sister told me about ‘em.”

“So now we can talk about Clarissa?” I asked.

“Why’re you so curious about my sister?” he said. “Is it because she works at the dealership?”

I told him what I’d heard about the pink panties and the Buxom Fantasy perfume.

He shrugged and rolled his eyes again. “It’s the most disgusting thing she’s ever done,” he groaned. “But she’s an adult, so it’s none of my business who she sleeps with.”

“Are you saying that it’s true?” I asked.

“Can you believe it?” Clint said. “What she sees in that old troll is beyond me. I mean, on one hand, I understand why she’d be into it. The guy’s filthy rich. He gave her a brand-new car. And he’s got a huge mansion with horse stables, a heated pool and his own soft serve machine. But there’s no amount of ice cream could make me sleep with somebody so old and wrinkled and nasty.”

“How long has it been going on?” I asked.

“A few weeks,” Clint answered. “It started one Friday night when Violet was in New York meeting with her publisher.”

“Do you mean the book rumor is also true?”

He nodded. “She’s turned her hard luck tale of woe into a big money deal with the people that publish the Harry Potter lady.”

I’d heard the rumor about Violet’s lucrative publishing contract the previous week from Toots Colson, the owner of Wormwood’s only nail salon. Toots had told me that Violet was writing a steamy memoir about her rags to riches life. The book promised to reveal intimate details about how Violet had clawed her way from an impoverished existence as a stripper and truck stop waitress to become the wife of a multimillionaire auto tycoon.

“I can’t believe Violet didn’t mention that when we met,” I said, wondering what else she’d left out of her teary blubbering in my office. “But, let’s keep the focus on your sister.”

“Let’s not,” Clint said. “And say that we did.”

I pinched his cheek. “C’mon, love bucket. I have a few more questions for you.”

“Do they involve making love or getting something to eat?”

I shook my head.

“Then I’m not interested.”

“Do you remember the time you were delivering those pornographic magazines to Casey Crook?”

“Hey!” Clint said. “You’re not supposed to talk about that! It’s confidential and private information. I could lose my job!”

I made a face. “And you got lost on that unmarked dirt road behind the old Patterson farm?”

“I already told you,” he sputtered. “I only knew they were dirty magazines because I recognized the return address.” His face went red and his forehead crinkled. “And I only knew the address on account of this one time that I placed an order for a copy of *Giant Jiggs* for my friend’s bachelor party.”

“I don’t care about that,” I said. “I’m trying to make a point.”

“Well, you’re taking the long way around to get there,” Clint said, giving me a sultry wink. “I’ve got other things I want to discuss.”

“Anyway, I seem to remember that you called me for help,” I said.

He shrugged. “So?”

“Well, now I need your help.”

“I don’t want to talk about my sister.” He stuck out his lower lip and muttered something under his breath. “She’s on my ‘do not call’ list at the moment.”

“Just a couple more questions, sweetheart.” I took his hand and gently kissed the tip of each finger. “You may know something that could be critically important to whether I succeed or fail with Violet’s case.”

He pouted for another minute or two. Then he sighed noisily, rolled onto his side and draped one arm across my midsection.

“What do you want to know?” he asked.

“Did your sister admit that she’s having an affair with Tripp Sullivan?”

“Might as well have. She’s posted pictures of them online. Facebook. Instagram. Naked Idiots on Rafts.”

“Whoa,” I said. “I haven’t heard about that last one. Is that a new website?”

“It should be,” Clint said, chuckling. “I just made it up on account of Clarissa’s shared pictures of her and Tripp naked in his swimming pool.”

I cringed at the thought of Tripp Sullivan exposing his twig and berries for the whole world to see. But I’m nothing if not professional, so I dismissed the horrible image and hit Clint with another question.

“Care to join me in the shower?”

He snickered. “Uh-huh.”

“Will you scrub my back with the loofah?”

“You betcha!” Clint said cheerily. “Anything else?”

“There is one more thing,” I said.

“Name it, babe. I’ll do anything for my sweet Ruby girl.”

“After we finish in the shower,” I said. “Will you please run out to the Dairy Twirl? They’re open until one o’clock, and hearing about Tripp Sullivan’s soft serve machine is making me hungry for a vanilla shake.”

CHAPTER 4

The next morning, fueled by a triple espresso and two blueberry scones, I headed for Sullivan Cadillac. A thin redhead greeted me when I knocked on Tripp's office door. She was wearing a filmy scrap of faded denim the size of a cocktail napkin and black patent leather stilettos. Her lips were crimson, her eyes were bloodshot and there was a dubious mark on her neck the size of Rhode Island. The white plastic tag pinned to her extra-large left breast read HEATHER CAIN.

"Mr. Sullivan is indisposed at the moment," she said.

"I'll wait," I told her, heading for the sofa near the windows.

"He won't like that," Heather told me. "He's in a foul mood." She paused, leaned closer and whispered. "On account of he's got diarrhea."

"On account of what?" I asked. "Food poisoning?"

She pushed out one hip and planted a hand on it. Then she sighed loudly and said: "On account of being out all night with his guests from Detroit. They started with tequila and quesadillas at that Mexican place in the mall. Then they did Jägermeister shots and ate Buffalo wings at some trucker bar. And then they went to the Waffle Hut this morning at six." She sighed again, shook her head and checked her lipstick in the mirror behind the desk. "All that liquor and grease, what do you expect, right?"

"Of course," I said, trying to read the phone number that was written on the back of her hand. "A guy Tripp's age should be more careful about what he puts in his—"

"What about my age?"

I looked at the door. Tripp Sullivan stood in the threshold, a can of ginger ale in one hand and *The Wall Street Journal* in the other. He looked pale and green and much older than his sixty-six years.

"Oh, Mr. Sullivan," the redhead gushed. "I was just telling..." She looked at me, realizing that she'd never asked for my name.

"Ruby Wisdom," I said, extending my arm toward Sullivan. "Would you have a moment for a couple of questions?"

He scowled at my hand. Then he looked at the redhead.

"Heather?"

She gave him a watery smile.

"Why don't you make yourself useful? Go get me some antacid tablets out of the first aid kit."

"Right away, Mr. Sullivan."

After she'd vanished into the hallway, Tripp dropped the newspaper on the coffee table and sat on the edge of his desk.

"How can I help you, young lady?"

I just about fell off of the sofa when I noticed that he was rubbing his crotch.

"I'm a private investigator, Mr. Sullivan. I'm working a new case. It's a rather delicate situation. I'm not sure how to dance around the elephant in the room, but my client seems to think your marriage may be in jeopardy."

He laughed. "What are you talking about?"

"I know it's a bit awkward for me to come here," I said. "Particularly with the subject matter. But I have it on good authority that my source is correct."

He scoffed, rearranged his man baggage with a muffled grunt and said: "Violet put you up to this?"

I gave him a vague shrug. "I'm here on behalf of a client," I said. "And I'd prefer to protect their identity."

"I know it's my wife got you to come here," Tripp sneered. "That lazy heifer is—"

I held up one hand. "Excuse me, sir?"

"What for?"

"Did you just call your wife a heifer?"

"Shoe fits," he said. "She's gained forty pounds since we got married."

I managed a smile. "Bigger can be better, you know."

"That's what the ladies tell me." He winked and touched the front of his pants. "If you know what I mean."

"You seem like a pretty frisky guy," I said.

He raised one eye. "As I said, that's what the ladies tell me."

I thought I was going to vomit. Between his offensive comments about Violet, his misogynistic attitude and the pungent taint of stale alcohol in the air, Tripp Sullivan was making me both uncomfortable and queasy.

"I'll tell you what, sunshine," he said. "I'm a busy man. I've got things to do. If you want to discuss any of my personal business, I suggest you contact my attorney."

"And who might that be?" I asked.

"Dewey Kincaid," Tripp answered. "His office is right upstairs from the donut shop there on Bishop Avenue. Unless you want to talk about you and me getting horizontal, this meeting is over."

I felt my stomach lurch. I'd heard the stories. And I'd seen his face on the television commercials and billboards. But meeting Tripp Sullivan and experiencing his piggish ways firsthand was even more revolting than I could've ever imagined. While he plopped down behind the desk and started clipping his fingernails, I shuffled out of the office and into the corridor.

"I hope you'll forgive Mr. Sullivan," Heather said, scurrying toward Tripp's office with a green plastic bottle and a glass of water. "He's having a real bad day."

I smiled. "More like a real bad life. That man is more of a jackass than anybody I've ever met."

"You haven't met my daddy," she said sweetly. "He's even worse."

"Are you kidding me?"

She shook her head.

"He and Mr. Sullivan were college fraternity brothers," Heather explained. "Two peas in a pod."

"More like two penises in a vise if there's any justice in the world," I said under my breath.

Before either of us could say another word, Sullivan barked from behind his desk.

"Heather!" he screeched. "Where are those damn antacid tablets?"

"Coming, sir," she called toward the door. Then she leaned closer and lowered her voice. "If you can wait outside, I want to tell you something."

I nodded and went toward the showroom. Over my shoulder, I heard Tripp grumbling about how long he'd been waiting. He threatened to deduct an hour of pay from Heather's check for the alleged offense.

"You're a snake, Tripp Sullivan," I muttered as I reached the door. "A snake and a pitiable excuse for a man."

Ten minutes later, while I chatted on the phone with Clint about plans for the evening, Heather appeared around the corner of the building. She whistled to get my attention and waved me over. I told Clint that I'd meet him at my place at seven after I stopped by my mother's house. Then I dropped my phone back into my purse and headed across the parking lot. When I came around the corner of the dealership, Heather was pressed against the building, glancing nervously over her shoulder.

"Why the subterfuge?" I asked.

She looked at me like I'd just insulted her outfit. "Why the *what*?"

"Subterfuge," I said, lowering my voice. "You asked me to meet you outside. You're hiding behind the building. And you're whispering like we're in church."

She glanced over her shoulder again, leaned back into the shadows and gestured with her head. I stepped around the corner and slid in beside her.

"What gives, Heather?"

"I need this job," she said. "I don't want anyone seeing us together."

"Okay, I kind of figured that out. But I don't understand why."

"Because of the death threats," she whispered. "They want to kill him."

"You mean Tripp Sullivan?"

She nodded and gulped. "I need the job," she said again in a breathless rush. "But I don't need it so much that I want to die."

"Why would your life be in danger?"

"Because the threats also mention me by name."

"I'm confused," I said. "I thought you just told me that Tripp Sullivan has been getting threatening letters."

"They're actually post cards," Heather told me. "And a couple of emails. They say that me and Tripp are going to pay with our lives because we're having an affair. But we're not! I'm engaged to Ty Caldwell. And Mr. Sullivan is, I don't know, like eighty or something. I'd never have an affair with someone old enough to be dead!"

I let her logic sink in for a moment. Then I smiled and asked my next question.

"Is that waterproof mascara?"

She nodded.

"It's holding up really well," I said. "Considering how upset you are."

"Well, I've got every right to be upset," she stammered. "Somebody wants me dead for no good reason."

I patted her arm and murmured a few words about taking a deep breath and counting to ten. She got to six and stopped. I wasn't sure if she was confused about what came next or my advice had helped her relax. While I was thinking about which option might be correct, Heather smiled. She seemed calm enough for my next inquiry.

"Do you know who sent the threats?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Not their name," she said. "But I think it's probably the person that wants us dead."

"Good guess," I said. "Lucky for you and Tripp, the alleged murderer hasn't made good on their threat yet."

"It's only a matter of time," Heather said anxiously. "I know for a fact that Mr. Sullivan is carrying on with at least two or three women besides his wife. The killer obviously has me confused with one of those other girls."

I considered what she'd just told me. Then I suggested we go back inside and talk to Tripp about the threats.

"Oh, my word!" Heather blurted. "He'll kill me if he finds out I told you someone's threatened to kill us!"

I couldn't help myself. I giggled. Then I apologized for it.

"Can you get me a copy of the post cards and emails?" I asked.

She made a face. "I suppose so," she answered. "But I'll have to do it secretly."

"Right," I said. "Subterfuge."

"There's that word again." She fluttered her eyelashes and frowned. "I still don't know why you keep saying it."

"Don't worry about that," I said. "Can you meet me in the morning at Rolls with Holes?"

"You mean the bagel place by the library?"

I nodded.

"I don't eat carbs," she said.

"Well, that's fine. It's just a place to meet. I'll buy you a cappuccino."

She smiled. "Seriously?"

"You bet, sister. If you'll bring the death threats, I'll buy the java."

Her smile bent into a frown. "Java?" she said. "I thought you were buying me a cappuccino."

I reached over and patted her arm again. "Don't you worry about it, okay? Just be careful and meet me in the morning. Does eight o'clock work for you?"

"Sure, that'll be fine. We open here at nine, so I can meet for a few minutes and then come on over to the dealership."

"That's perfect," I said. "Now, you better get back inside before Tripp sends the cavalry out to track you down."

Heather nodded briefly before she turned and tottered back toward the side entrance. She had trouble navigating the gravel in her heels, so she kept one hand on the cinderblock wall. When she reached the door, she gave me another smile and a frail wave.

"Oh, dear child," I said softly. "You're just a filet mignon walking right back into the lion's den."

CHAPTER 5

My mother was on the front steps of her house when I pulled into the driveway at five that afternoon. She was cradling a glass of red wine in one hand and a roll of duct tape in the other.

"Uncle Boom and Aunt Dot are here," she said. "You'll need a cocktail."

Besides their renowned contemporary art gallery in downtown Wormwood, Uncle Boom and Aunt Dot are known for their raucous and often alcohol-fueled disagreements. They've been married forty years, and the decades have given them ample time to perfect a particularly expressive form of bickering. The last time we all went to dinner, Aunt Dot threw a whole wheat roll at Uncle Boom that caused a server to spill a tray of food onto another table of diners. My mother pledged that night to seal their mouths if they ever caused another scene.

I pointed at the tape in her hand. "Which one is that for?"

She made a face. "They'll probably both go off before the night is through. They're in the kitchen arguing about where they had dinner on the last night of their honeymoon. I decided to get some work done while they squabble. I was packing some old dishes when I saw you pull in."

"Packing dishes?" I asked. "You and Jack thinking about moving again?"

She smiled. "No, but I told your stepfather that I was going to clean out the attic while he's on the fishing trip."

"Including his collection of old hiking boots?"

"Oh, those muddy relics are long gone," my mother said. "I got rid of all them when he went skiing last winter."

She turned and went inside. I followed her up the steps and into the house, coming through the door just in time to hear Uncle Boom screaming something about his iPhone.

"He's inebriated," Aunt Dot said when I walked into the kitchen.

"Lovely," I said. "And hello to you, too."

"What did she say?" Uncle Boom asked.

"It's lovely to see you both," I said, raising my voice and leaning closer to his ear.

He frowned and told me not to yell. "I'm d-e-a-f," he said. "Not d-e-a-d."

"Not y-e-t," Aunt Dot said. "But the way you're acting tonight, you may not see the sun come up tomorrow."

"Why the jolly mood?" I asked, pulling out a chair from the table. "I can't imagine that being tipsy would be enough to make you so cranky."

Uncle Boom scowled and grumbled.

"Allow me to interpret," Aunt Dot said. "We had a visitor at the gallery today, a man we met years ago in Manhattan when we opened our first space in Soho."

"And the putz is just as rude now as he was back then," Uncle Boom snarled. "He called me a lowlife huckster. Said the art we sell is counterfeit crap. Told me that the last great artist in the world was Al Capone."

"Who was the guy?" I asked.

"Some putz," my uncle said. "Convicted felon by the name of Lou Storto."

"Glass of wine, Ruby?" my mother asked.

"Hey!" Uncle Boom said. "I'm telling a story here."

My mother gave him a look. "And I'm asking my daughter if she wants some wine," she said, holding up the roll of duct tape. "You have a problem with that?"

"No problem," he said. "Carry on."

Aunt Dot shook her head. "The two of you," she said. "Just like an old married couple."

"He's your husband, Dorothy." My mother leaned down and kissed her brother's bald head. "The two of you *are* an old married couple," she said. "But you're a big old teddy bear, aren't you Boonski?"

"Don't call me that," he said. "Call me Boom or Robert."

She pinched his cheek. "Okay, Boonski. And you can call me her royal highness." She put the tape on the counter and turned to me. "So? Glass of wine?"

"Yes, please," I said.

"Okay then, Boom," my mother said. "Tell us about the visitor."

My uncle shrugged. "Nothing to tell really. The guy's a putz."

"More like the guy's a criminal," Aunt Dot said. "He tried to shake us down as part of an organized protection racket back in the old days."

"Like I said," Uncle Boom added. "A putz."

"We were young and naïve," Aunt Dot continued. "Figured we'd have to pay him to avoid trouble, so we borrowed the cash from our parents and friends."

"But then the putz went up the river the day before he was coming to get our money," Uncle Boom said. "Twenty years in prison for some other nonsense he pulled."

"We figured that we'd never see him again," Aunt Dot said. "But then here he comes today, waltzing into our gallery like some kind of—"

"Putz!" Uncle Boom said. "The guy's still a putz. When he recognized me, he started laughing and stomping his feet. Like it was the funniest coincidence in the whole damn world. And he still smells the same as he did back then."

"What was that?" I asked.

"The stench of the putz!" Uncle Boom said. "Twenty years ago, when he came to pressure us, he smelled like that mentholated goo you rub on your chest when you have a cold." He looked over at Aunt Dot. "What's that crap called, Dorothy?"

"VapoRub," she answered. "It's an unmistakable odor, and he smelled the very same way when he came to the gallery today."

"The putz!" Uncle Boom yelled. "Fouled the air with that mentholated stench and made me about sick to my stomach with the smug little smirk on his face."

"You want me to look into him?" I asked.

Uncle Boom swiveled his head in my direction. "What?" He cupped one hand to his ear. "Did you say something about a book?"

Aunt Dot reached over and rubbed his arm. "You old fool," she said. "Did you forget that Ruby's working now as an officer of the law?"

"Actually, I'm a private investigator," I said. "I changed careers about four years ago."

"He's just being difficult," my aunt said. "I've explained to him more than once that the reason you moved back home from the city was because the company where you were working got bought out by the communists."

"That's partially true," I said. "The brokerage firm that I joined after college merged with another company that's owned by a Russian billionaire. When my position was eliminated, I decided to try something completely different, and coming back to Wormwood made perfect business sense because there wasn't another PI in the area."

"But why a private detective?" Aunt Dot asked. "I've never quite understood why someone with an MBA would want to snoop around in the bushes or dig through a stranger's trash."

I smiled. Some people got it. Others didn't. I'd always loved solving puzzles and reading mysteries when I was a little girl. The skills I'd honed during college and a few torturous years on Wall Street were ideal for the life of a PI. Explaining that to my family, however, wasn't always an easy thing to do.

"I like being a detective," I said. "It suits me well."

Uncle Boom frowned. "How's that?" he shouted. "Did you say you're defective?"

"Not defective, you old stump," Aunt Dot screamed. "Detective! Like Sherlock Holmes."

"What's that about Rome?" Boom muttered.

"Oh, somebody bring me a valium and a martini," Aunt Dot groaned, shaking her head.

"Just pretend he's not here. That's how I've survived the last forty years of marriage."

My mother glanced at me and smiled. "Speaking of marriage," she said. "I ran into your husband this morning."

I gave her a look. "Please don't do that," I said. "You know that Hank and I are divorced. And that makes him my *ex*-husband."

"Why on earth you divorced the county sheriff is beyond me," my mother said. "He's got a good job, a steady paycheck and the ability to speed through town when you need to get somewhere fast."

"Yes," I said. "And Hank's also got a penchant for sleeping with women he meets in the line of duty."

"You talking about that hitchhiker?" Aunt Dot asked.

"Or maybe she's referring to the witness in that double homicide a couple of years ago," Uncle Boom added. "Although there was also the—"

I held up one hand to stop the litany of my ex-husband's record as a womanizer. "Well, Uncle Boom," I said. "It's nice to see your memory and hearing working flawlessly."

"What's that?" he said, putting his hand by his ear again. "You say something about someone lawless in the clearing?"

I sipped my wine and smiled. Then I said: "So should I look into the guy that came to the gallery?"

"Lou Storto?" Aunt Dot asked.

"Yes," I said. "If he was bad news in the old days, there's a chance he might be bad news now."

Uncle Boom waved one hand in the air. "No need," he said. "I got the skinny on him. Seems he met some tramp that lives in Wormwood. They've been bumpin' uglies for a few—"

"Robert, we've talked about that!" Aunt Dot said. Her face was candy apple red and her dentures were clattering like castanets. "You need to refrain from saying naughty things in mixed company."

Boom laughed. "Mixed company?" He looked around the kitchen. "We're all family here, Dot."

"Not for long," she said. "I got the name of a good divorce attorney from Muriel Spratt. I'm not afraid to make that call."

"Oh, c'mon," Uncle Boom said. "You've been making that same threat for forty years." He got up, shuffled around the table and kissed my aunt on the mouth. "You know I love you, right?"

"Well, you've got a funny way of showing it," Aunt Dot muttered.

The room went quiet for a few minutes. I sipped my wine. Aunt Dot twisted a dishtowel into a bowline knot. Uncle Boom plopped into his chair and crunched his way through a handful of

crackers. And my mother went back to wrapping a set of old everyday dishes in newspaper before stowing them in a large cardboard box. When she finished the last plate, she turned and came back to the table.

“More wine, Ruby?”

I shook my head. “I’ve got work to do when I get home,” I said. “Need to keep my mind clear.”

Uncle Boom popped another cracker into his mouth. “What kind of private detecting work you have to do at home?” he asked. “Can’t find your vibrator?”

Aunt Dot slapped the back of his head. “Robert!” she hissed. “Don’t test my resolve! I will call that attorney!”

“Want me to dial the number?” my uncle asked.

“I’m going in the living room,” Aunt Dot said, getting up from the table. “Someone please let me know when it’s time to leave for dinner.”

“You guys going out?” I asked.

My mother nodded. “Bella Napoli,” she said. “Care to join us?”

“No, thanks,” I said. “I’ve got work to do. And Clint’s bringing Chinese when he comes over later.”

My mother smiled. “So things are getting serious with Clint?”

“Is he as much of a tool as your ex?” Uncle Boom asked.

“Robert!” Aunt Dot screamed from the living room. “I can hear every word! Mind your manners!”

Uncle Boom shrugged and reached for more crackers.

“So what are you working on these days, Ruby?” he asked, spraying the table with crumbs. “A matter of life and death?”

I gave him a smile. “Isn’t everything?”

“Sometimes yes,” he said. “And sometimes no. My sources tell me you were seen huddling in the alley beside the Cadillac dealership earlier today with a stripper.”

“Robert!” Aunt Dot yelled again.

He rolled his eyes. “Until death do us part,” he said. “Can you believe I made such a long-term promise to that woman?”

“Can you believe she made it to you?” I asked.

“So anyway,” Boom said. “What about the stripper?”

“She’s not a stripper,” I said. “She just likes skimpy outfits, tons of makeup and looking sexy.”

“Sounds like a stripper to me,” my uncle said.

I finished my wine and put the glass in the sink. Then I turned back to the table. “You know something, Uncle Boom?”

“What’s that, Ruby?”

“You can be a real horse’s ass sometimes. You’re judging Heather based on what she wears. I don’t think that’s a very nice thing to do.”

“If the stiletto fits,” Uncle Boom said.

Aunt Dot reappeared in the kitchen doorway.

“Don’t mind him,” she said. “He’s a d-o-r-k.”

CHAPTER 6

That night, after we ate dinner and did the dishes, Clint and I were sitting on the back deck at my place, drinking wine and staring at the stars in the darkness overhead. The sky was a gorgeous shade of blue-black, like an infinite canopy of crushed velvet dusted with tiny dots of silver and gold.

“Where did you come from?” I asked after a few minutes.

He screwed up his face, looking confused and tired. “You mean earlier? Before I got here?”

I smiled. “No, it was a rhetorical question.”

“Is that some kind of legal maneuver you learned from testifying in court?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, I’m not very smart about that stuff. I’m pretty much just a basic guy. Simple words, simple mind, simple pleasures.”

“There’s nothing simple about your mind,” I said. “Or the way you generously bring pleasure to others.” I lowered my voice. “Especially my bits and bobs.”

“You talking about your bodacious fun bags and lower level lady parts?”

“Indeed,” I said. “As well as my simple mind and my fluttering heart.”

He smiled. “So you like the way I tend to your physical needs?”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed.

Clint frowned. “What’d I say now?”

“Nothing,” I said, squeezing his hand. “You’re just so damn cute.”

“So cute you have to laugh at me?”

“It wasn’t you,” I said. “I was laughing because that was something my father used to say to my mother. Late at night. When my brother and I were supposed to be asleep.”

“During their private time?”

“Well, if you call doing the dishes private time, then sure. Most nights, they’d send us to bed, have a glass of wine on the veranda and then clean up the kitchen together. It was kind of darling, really. The way my mother and father stood together at the sink, one washing and the other drying.”

“That’s nice,” Clint said. “It’s really sweet and old-fashioned.”

“Exactly. People today have housekeepers or dishwashers.”

“Or they eat out all the time so nobody has to do the dishes.”

There was another scrap of silence. We drank, kissed, drank some more.

“So what did you mean before?” Clint asked.

“About what?”

“The thing you asked—about where I came from.”

I reached out and brushed his cheek. “Don’t worry about it, biscuit.”

“I’m not worried,” he said. “I’m just curious about what you meant.”

“Oh, well...” A gust of wind came up, swallowing my voice.

“Seriously, babe.” Clint squeezed my hand. “Why’d you ask that question?”

I turned and met his gaze. “I’m just really grateful that we met. The world can be a pretty wicked place, you know? Lots of bruised hearts, battered hopes, dreams that get the life kicked out of them before they have a chance to take wing.”

“You quotin’ some Broadway show tune?” He smiled. “Or is all of that a Ruby Eloise original?”

“They’re my words,” I said. “As well as my hopes and dreams.”

He thought for a minute. Then he said: “I love ‘em. But I love you a whole lot more.”

I leaned in for a kiss. Which went on and on and on. When our lips were within a millimeter of going numb, I pulled back. Clint still had his eyes closed and a blissful smile slowly appeared beneath his adorable button nose. It was one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen while fully dressed.

“I just can’t believe that this is happening, you know?”

He opened one eye. “What—us having wine and looking up at the stars?”

“Yeah, but more than that—all of it actually,” I said. “Like meeting you and the chemistry and the sex and now...”

“The us of it all?”

I started to say something, but realized there was no need. Clint had summed it up perfectly with five little words.

CHAPTER 7

Rolls with Holes was quiet when I arrived for my meeting with Heather Cain. It was my favorite bagel shop in Wormwood. Actually, it was the only place in town to buy fresh bagels. A few months earlier, during a blinding snowstorm, a semi loaded with adult diapers had missed the sharp left turn where First Street intersects with Bird Pond Road. The ensuing crash soiled thousands of pristine undergarments and obliterated the Quonset hut that had been home to Shimmel & Sons Bagels for three generations.

As I settled into a booth, I glanced around the shop. An elderly man I didn't recognize sat at a table near the windows, gnawing on a poppy seed bagel and reading the newspaper. A woman named Pinkie Crabb stood at the counter, jabbing one bony finger against the glass to indicate exactly which selections she found acceptable.

"Not that defect!" she said when Eunice reached for a plump blueberry bagel. "The one right beside it!"

Eunice gave me a sly smile, plucked Pinkie's selection from the tray and dropped it in a white paper bag. After they completed the transaction and Miss Crabb stomped out the door, clutching her bagels and glaring angrily at the old man near the windows, Eunice came over and sat across from me in the booth.

"I wish that woman would learn to be less angry," she said.

"You mean Pinkie?"

"Yes," Eunice said. "She's been coming in every week since we opened five years ago, and never once has she seemed cheerful or sociable."

"She was born mean," I said. "Plus, with that last name..."

I left the rest of the thought unspoken, and Eunice giggled.

"But enough about that old grump," I said. "How are you and Little Tex doing?"

Little Tex was Eunice's husband. They opened the bagel shop after moving to Wormwood from his namesake state to help her mother care for her grandparents.

"We're fine," she said. "He's in Dallas this week packing up his mother's house. She's moving to a retirement community now that Big Tex is gone."

"Oh, golly," I said. "Did he pass away?"

Eunice shrugged. "He left Marvene for someone else," she said glumly. "After forty-five years of marriage."

"Another woman?"

She shook her head. "A hog."

I winced. "Your husband's father left his wife for a pig?"

Eunice giggled. "Not a pig, silly. A Harley-Davidson motorcycle. Big Tex went to the auto show one day, got a wild hair up his keister and traded a brand-new pickup for a used motorcycle with a sidecar. He told Marvene that they were going on the open road to find new adventures. She told him to stick it where the sun don't shine. Next thing we knew, they'd split, he'd headed west on the interstate and Marvene was moving to a double-wide at Golden Paradise Trailer Park."

I was about to ask Eunice how Little Tex was feeling about his parents splitting up when the door opened and Heather came in from the sidewalk. She was wearing a white macramé tube top, black vinyl mini skirt and a pair of red patent leather thigh-high boots. Enormous bejeweled

sunglasses covered the top half of her face and a tiny red patent leather purse dangled from her shoulder at the end of a gold chain strap.

“Who’s the hooker?” Eunice whispered.

“That’s no hooker,” I said quietly. “That’s the woman I’m here to meet. She works at Tripp Sullivan’s dealership.”

Eunice gasped. “That’s Brenda Cain’s little girl?” she whispered.

I gave her a quick nod as she got up from the booth and greeted Heather warmly.

“How’s your mother doing?” Eunice asked.

“She’s fine,” Heather said. “She and my father are going to Vegas next week, so she’s busy raiding my closet for age-inappropriate outfits.”

Eunice smiled. “Well, that sounds par for the course,” she said. “What can I get for you two?”

“I’ll have a toasted whole wheat bagel with veggie cream cheese,” I told her.

Heather sank into the booth. “Just a cappuccino, please.” Her voice was faint and her hands were trembling as she removed the sunglasses.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “You look like someone who just saw a ghost.”

She opened her purse and removed a mound of crumpled paper.

“Here are the death threats,” she said softly. “Including the one that I found taped to my front door when I got home from work last night.”

She began to sniffle and her eyes became moist with tears. I leaned forward, took one of her hands and squeezed tightly.

“Hey, now,” I said. “Let’s take a deep breath and count to six. Everything’s going to be okay.”

“If I live through this,” Heather whimpered. “I’m too young to die, Ruby. I just started dating Ty. And I just spent half my savings on a lifetime supply of press-on nails.”

Eunice approached the booth gingerly. She quickly assessed the delicate situation, delivering the bagel and cappuccino without a word. I gave her a quick glance before tightening my grip on the poor girl’s quivering hand.

“Maybe you should talk to Sheriff Martin,” I suggested.

“Isn’t he your ex-husband?”

I nodded. “He and I were married briefly a million years ago,” I said. “But that’s not important.”

“Is it true he left you for a younger woman?”

Besides being surprised by her indecorous question, I wasn’t in the mood to discuss my personal life. Did it matter that Hank and I had been childhood sweethearts? Did it matter that I’d pledged my lifelong devotion on the playground at Wormwood Middle School? Was it relevant that we were married a week after high school graduation? And did it matter that I caught him in our laundry room one Saturday afternoon a few months later with his pants around his ankles and Shelby Dubois cantilevered over the edge of the washing machine while it was on the spin cycle?

“Yes, that’s true,” I said after a moment or two of quiet reflection. “Hank and his infant bride will soon begin their second explosive decade of wedded bliss. But I’m not here to talk about my sordid past, Heather. I want to discuss Tripp Sullivan and these death threats.”

She looked at the collection of creased notes, sighed softly and retrieved one folded post card from the pile.

"This one has a picture of Niagara Falls on the front." She opened the card and flattened it on the faded red Formica tabletop. "And on the back it says, 'Tripp Sullivan and his sex bunny may be drowning in a river of fornication, but they're both going to drown in a sea of blood very soon.'"

She gulped in a breath. I reached over, took the post card and held it between my thumb and forefinger.

"We really should preserve these for the sheriff," I suggested, reaching into my purse for a plastic evidence bag. Heather watched as I slid the Niagara Falls post card and all the other notes into the clear bag and sealed the opening. "One of them may reveal fingerprints that Hank and his team can use to identify the perp."

Heather frowned. "The *what*?"

"The perp," I answered. "It's short for perpetrator. It means the person behind the threats."

"I can tell you who it is," Heather said confidently.

I blinked and asked her to go ahead.

"It's got to be one of the women that Tripp's diddling," she said.

I liked her use of the word *diddling*. It reminded me of my Uncle Boom. Whenever he got mad at my Aunt Dot, he'd curse a blue streak and finish it with a robust: "And you can go diddle yourself, Dorothy Katherine Gallagher!"

I was smiling at the thought of Uncle Boom when I realized that Heather was tapping my hand with her finger.

"Did you me hear?" she said.

I shook my head. "No, I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"I asked if you want me to tell you who Tripp's diddling."

"My goodness," I said. "If you've got the names, I've got the short-term memory space."

She frowned. "I don't know what that means."

"Skip it," I said. "I'm ready when you are."

"Okay," she said. "I know about two of them, but I suspect there's a third."

"So you believe Tripp has three girlfriends on the side?"

"The side of what?" Heather asked.

"Skip that, too. Just tell me the names that you know about."

"Well, there's Clarissa Williams," Heather said. "She's the bookkeeper at the dealership."

"Yes, I've already heard about her," I said. "Who else?"

"One of the coat check girls from Miss Maude's Cupcake Ranch." Heather bit her bottom lip as if she was deep in thought. "Um, I think her name is Fiona. Or maybe Leona. Something like that. I've heard Tripp talking to her on the phone, cooing and burbling like a newborn baby."

An unfortunate image of Tripp Sullivan wearing a powder blue bib and holding a rattle suddenly flashed through my mind. I shook it away and smiled at Heather.

"Okay, so Clarissa Williams," I said. "And someone named either Fiona or Leona from the Cupcake Ranch."

Heather nodded. "That's right," she said. "And there's a third one, but I don't know her name."

"Do you know anything about her?"

She bit her lip again, closed her eyes and hummed softly. A few minutes passed. I kept my eyes on her face while she hummed and rocked contentedly. When she suddenly stopped and her eyes opened, I was ready for the newest nugget of information.

"Hello Kitty!" Heather said.

I smiled. "Excuse me?"

"The third one has a tattoo on the inside of her left ankle," she said. "It's that Hello Kitty thing. You know the one? The cartoon cat that usually has a bow or a flower in her hair."

"You mean fur?" I asked.

Heather winced. "What?"

"Cats don't have hair," I said. "They have fur."

"But this isn't a real cat. It's a cartoon character."

"Of course, it is," I said. "Do you remember anything else about the third woman?"

Heather shook her head. "No, but I'm sure she has a Hello Kitty tattoo on her left ankle. I heard Tripp telling one of the guys in the dealership about it."

"Such a gentleman," I said. "Kissing and then telling."

Heather took a deep breath and looked down at the collection of menacing letters inside the plastic bag.

"So you believe me, right?"

"About the threats?"

She nodded.

"I most definitely do," I said. "And I'm going to turn these over to the sheriff so his forensics team can process them for prints and DNA."

"Oh, holy crackers!" Heather suddenly squealed. "You sound just like the detectives on TV!"

She touched the plastic bag of crumpled post cards and printed emails. Then she glanced at her watch and squealed again.

"Oh, holy crackers!" She jumped up from the booth. "I'm going to be late if I don't leave this very minute!"

"Okay," I called as she rushed toward the door. "Did you want to take your—"

The old man near the windows scowled first at Heather and then at me.

"—cappuccino?"

But she was already on the sidewalk, skittering toward her battered brown sedan.

"You should tell your daughter to wear more clothes," the old man hissed. "She looks like a hooker!"

CHAPTER 8

Hank was in the conference room at the sheriff's department drinking a cup of coffee when I came through the door. The table was covered with neat stacks of manila folders and mug shots. He glanced up and smiled the same endearing grin that first attracted me when we met in middle school. It had been six years since the divorce, but I still felt a faint tug on my heart whenever I saw his face.

"Hey there, gorgeous!" It was the greeting he'd used since we were teenagers. "What's shaking besides your va-va-voom?"

"Zip it, Hank." I put my purse on the table and sat across from him. "And please don't use the phrase 'va-va-voom' again, okay?"

Despite multiple cases of marital duplicity, an enormous collection of bobblehead hula girls in his office and the lamentable habit of chewing massive wads of bubblegum, Hank Martin was still a lovable guy. Our marriage may have collapsed after less than one year, but it seemed our friendship was strong enough to last a lifetime. When I'd told him that I was interested in getting my PI license, he'd been supportive and helpful. He introduced me to Hiram Short, a well-known sleuth with a large agency in Albany, who hired me as an associate four years ago so I could accrue the required experience working for an established investigator before I applied for my license.

"What's new?" he asked. "Still dating that FedEx guy?"

I gave him a look. "Clint's with UPS," I said. "But you know that already, don't you?"

He shrugged. "Just bustin' your chops, darling."

"Don't call me that, Hank."

"What should I call you?"

"How about Miss Wisdom?"

"How about no?"

I frowned. "How about we get back to the reason I'm here?"

"I'm all ears," he said.

"Plus a healthy portion of hot air and bull crap," I added, smiling.

"So you came here this morning to insult me?"

I shook my head. "I wanted to ask you a few questions."

"Innocent until proven guilty," he said, holding up both hands.

"Speaking of hot air and bull crap."

"Ah, c'mon," Hank said, lowering his fleshy mitts. "You still mad about the past?"

I took a deep breath and counted to ten. Then I did it again. Then I said: "Are you asking if I'm angry that you slept with half a dozen home wreckers after we got married?" I raised one eye. He squirmed uncomfortably in his chair. "What do you think?"

"I think that I was a wretched husband." He looked down at a stack of folders on the table. "I didn't deserve someone like you, Ruby. I was too young to appreciate what we—"

"Blah blah blah," I said, interrupting the refrain that I'd heard a million times since our divorce. "That's all water under the bridge, okay? I know you have regrets. I know you feel somewhat bad about what happened. But I also know that we're both adults and we've moved on since then."

He glanced at me. "Then why do you mention it so often?"

I ignored the question. "What do you know about Tripp Sullivan?" I said. "Have you heard anything fishy around town recently?"

He laughed. "The only thing you hear about that doofus is fishy. He drinks too much. He treats women like doormats. And he cheats on his wife."

"Golly," I said. "Doesn't that sound familiar?"

Hank shook his head. "Ah, Ruby. I said that I'm sorry. Why do we have to—"

"Just jerking your chain, Hank."

"As always," he said.

"What about death threats?" I asked.

His eyes went wide. "You thinking about having me killed?"

"Not you," I said. "Tripp Sullivan. Have you heard anything about someone threatening his life?"

Hank smiled. "Over the years, I'm sure there have been plenty of people who'd like to see Tripp six feet under. Husbands who find out he's sleeping with their wives. Women who discover they're not the only daisy on his chain. And all the employees who endure his drunken rants and disrespectful ways."

I nodded. "Anything lately?"

He shook his head. "Not that I've heard. But it seems you may know something I don't."

"It's unsubstantiated," I said. "Just something that someone told me."

"Heather Cain?"

"Jeez, Hank. Do you have someone following me again?"

"No, of course not. Cletus drove past the bagel place earlier. He saw you and Heather Cain hunkered down like you were deep in conversation."

"Maybe she was giving me fashion tips," I said.

Hank blurted out another laugh. "You've got to be kidding!"

"I don't like your deputies keeping tabs on me," I said.

"Cletus wasn't keeping tabs on you. He saw your car. Then he looked in the window. Then he saw you. He was on patrol, Ruby. Not stalking my ex-wife and reporting her whereabouts."

"Then why'd he tell you about seeing me with Heather?"

"So you admit that you were with her?"

"Hank," I said firmly. "Don't push your luck."

"What kind of fashion tips?" he said, wiggling his eyebrows. "You thinking about wearing halter tops and Daisy Dukes the next time you have to testify in court?"

I grabbed my bag and got up from the table.

"Ah, c'mon," Hank whined. "Don't be that way."

"I didn't come here for your schoolboy bullshit," I said. "I wanted to get your advice."

"Then sit back down. I promise to be good."

"Not one more peep about Daisy Dukes and halter tops," I said firmly.

"Only if you bring 'em up," Hank said as I settled into the chair again. "Now what's going on? You working on something that involves Tripp Sullivan?"

"I've been engaged by a client to help resolve a private matter," I said.

Hank leaned forward in his chair. "Who is it?" he asked. "Somebody from Tripp's ever-expanding harem?"

"I'm not naming names," I said. "I'd like to keep my client's identity confidential."

"Oh, sure," Hank said. "You're working on behalf of Violet, right?"

I clenched my teeth. Then I took a deep breath. And then I counted to ten.

“You counting to ten?” Hank asked. “I remember when you did that when we were—”

“Thin ice,” I said. “Don’t skate back into the past, Hank.”

He nodded meekly. “Oh, right. I’m sorry, Ruby. It’s just that whenever I see you, I think about what could’ve been and what we could’ve had.”

“I’d say you had whatever and whomever you wanted during our agonizingly brief marriage,” I said. “Now, can we *please* stay on the subject?”

“You got it, sweetheart,” Hank said sheepishly. “What’s the question?”

“It’s kind of a hypothetical situation,” I said. “What if I had a friend who was a private investigator? And what if they were working a case and someone mentioned that their life is being threatened? Would you recommend the PI alert the local authorities?”

“Ruby,” Hank said. “I *am* the local authorities. Of course, I think you should tell me if someone associated with the Violet Sullivan case is receiving death threats.”

“I’m not talking about me,” I said. “I’m talking a friend. Someone who needs to remain anonymous for the time being.”

He rolled his eyes. “Okay, sure,” he said. “I think your *friend* should tell the local authorities. Especially if she saw proof of the threats this morning at the bagel shop.”

“What was Cletus doing?” I asked. “Using high-powered binoculars to spy on me and Heather?”

“No, of course not. You know our budget’s smaller than one of Heather’s miniskirts. We can’t afford high-powered anything.”

“Then how’d you know that she showed me the death threats this morning?”

Hank leaned back in his chair and grinned smugly.

“I didn’t,” he said. “Until you confirmed it just now.”

CHAPTER 9

I was the only customer when I walked into Forward Fashion a little before six. I was still thinking about Hank's ruse earlier in the day, tricking me into confirming that Tripp Sullivan and Heather Cain had received death threats. After leaving the office, I decided to stop at my favorite boutique. Clint and I were going out for Italian when he finished his route, and I decided a new outfit would lift my spirits.

"How are you, Ruby?" Myra Morgan called from behind the counter. "You're lookin' pretty sexy there, little mama!"

Myra complimented everyone that walked through the door of her shop. Even though some days I felt like a two-ton walrus wearing a sheen of perspiration and slobber, her cheerful tone and gracious smile always made me feel better.

"What's new?" I asked, making a beeline for a rack of plus-size little black dresses near the changing rooms. "I need something special for tonight."

"Big date?"

I smiled.

"With Clint?"

"Who else?"

"God, I'm so jealous I could spit," Myra said. "He's the man of my dreams. Does he have a brother?"

"Just a twin sister," I said.

"Ah, the little vixen that Tripp's banging."

I stopped scrutinizing the collection of black frocks. "Does everyone in town know?"

Myra shook her head. "Nobody at First and Plymouth has heard the news."

"You mean the residents of Mount Emblem Cemetery?"

She giggled. "Sorry, Ruby. That was in poor taste."

I waved my hand. "Actually, it was pretty good," I said. "But it'd make Clint want to crawl under a rock."

"Why? He's not the one having an affair with a lecherous drunk."

"No, but he still feels protective about Clarissa," I said. "And that can be a fulltime job, considering that she's prone to making bad choices when it comes to men."

"And outfits," Myra added. "I saw her last night at the Quik Mart filling the tank on a big ol' Escalade." She rolled her eyes and raised her skirt until it was barely covering her lady parts. "When she dropped something at the register and bent down to pick it up, I swear to God that Walter Dupree wet himself. He was standing behind Clarissa and I was behind him. That girl's holding a one-way ticket to the dark side, Ruby. Can't her brother do anything?"

I shrugged. "He's tried," I said. "So have their parents. But Clarissa just keeps pushing the envelope."

"That was about the size of her skirt," Myra said. "A little white leather envelope that had ALL DELIVERIES IN REAR printed on the front."

I winced at the comment, but didn't say anything. Myra smiled and went back to the paperwork on the counter. As I sifted through the black dresses, I thought about Violet and Tripp and Heather and the whole sordid affair. Not to mention the other women that Tripp was diddling. It was a regular tangle of lies and deception, the kind of situation that rarely led to a

happy ending for anyone but divorce attorneys and rumormongers. After a few minutes of comparison shopping, I pulled two dresses from the rack.

"I'm going to try these on," I told Myra.

"Be my guest, hon."

I slipped into one of the changing rooms, shimmied out of my blouse and khakis and wrestled the first dress over my head. I glanced in the mirror. I looked like a Little Debbie Swiss Roll, my white knobby knees below, the expanse of dark velvet in the middle and my pasty shoulders at the top.

"How you doin' in there?" Myra called from the other side of the door.

"I'm fine," I answered. "The first one isn't quite right, so let me see how the second one fits."

"Okay, hon. That's the one that Dita bought for her big top secret rendezvous."

I slipped the first dress onto its hanger and reached for the second option.

"Oh, really? Who's the lucky fellow?"

Myra chuckled. "More like who's the next victim. That Dita's been burning through gentleman callers since her divorce from Earl was finalized."

"She's making up for lost time," I said, unzipping the second dress. "Nothing wrong with that."

"Single women of a certain age are entitled to date whomever they choose," Myra said. "I just wish Dita would pick less putrid targets for her feminine charms."

The second dress slid over my shoulders and settled against my body. I glanced in the mirror and smiled. It was perfect, a sleeveless black sheath made from brocade fabric with pleats in the front and a keyhole opening in back.

"Did you say 'putrid'?" I asked Myra.

"Yes, I did," she said. "Earl was no angel, but the men Dita's been seeing make him look like a wholesome cherub with an unblemished track record."

"Well, who's she been dating?"

Another muffled laugh came through the dressing room door. "You mean who's she been shagging in the back of her Escalade?"

I stopped and looked in the mirror. For a brief moment, I imagined the look on Clint's face when he saw me in my new dress at the restaurant later. He'd beam proudly, pull out a chair and invite me to join him at the table. He was the perfect gentleman in every way, and I still had to pinch myself sometimes when I thought about him choosing me from all of the eligible single women in Wormwood.

"Did you?" Myra said, knocking on the door.

"Sorry," I said, removing the dress. "What was that?"

"I asked if you heard about the video footage of Dita online in her skimpiest pair of panties and a pushup bra. It was obviously a private recording of some sort, but it got leaked onto a website that features sexy older women."

I smiled. "No, I don't believe I've heard about that until just now. But if you'll give me a minute, I'd love to hear the juicy details."

"You bet, hon," Myra said. "I'll be up front when you're done."

I put the dress back on the hanger, got back into my clothes and came out of the changing room. After returning the first selection to the rack, I headed for the front of the store. As promised, Myra was back at the counter, a ballpoint pen tucked behind one ear and her reading glasses at the end of her nose.

"I can't make heads or tails out of this sales report," she mumbled. "I hired a new accountant, and he uses some kind of futuristic mumbo-jumbo software to forecast projected sales figures and the ratio of the overhead and some other junk that doesn't make any sense to me at all."

I put the dress on the counter and reached for my purse.

"I'll take this one," I said. "It's perfect for my date with Clint."

"Oh, now," Myra said. "You don't have to rub it in, Ruby. I already told you that I'm so jealous I could spit."

I shrugged. "Clint's a good one," I said. "And there's a good one out there for you, too. It just takes faith and patience and—"

"And a pair of plastic knockers from some Park Avenue surgeon," Myra sniped.

"Beg your pardon?"

"I'm just peeved about Dita," Myra said. "She spent a big chunk of her divorce settlement on a boob job and that thing where they suck the fat out of you with a big vacuum."

"Liposuction," I said.

"Whatever," Myra huffed. "I just think she should know better. Single women of a certain age shouldn't try and act like prepubescent tarts."

"Weren't you and Dita born the same year?"

Myra nodded. "A few months apart," she said. "What's that got to do with anything?"

I looked at Myra's outfit. She was wearing sheer pink leggings, a black leather miniskirt and a blouse that was unbuttoned so low it threatened to give any interested parties an unobstructed view of her Brazilian wax. I love Myra, but she has a tendency to throw stones from the front porch of her glass house.

"Nothing at all," I said. "I just think everyone should be entitled to do their thing."

Myra snorted. "Well, Dita's been doing her thing and the things of so many men that she probably has a scoreboard mounted on the wall above her bed."

"She's an adult," I said, trying to redirect the conversation. "She's allowed to—"

Myra's face went pink. "Well, that *adult* as you call her has been acting like a petulant child! She knew that I was interested in Oliver Friedman, but she went right ahead and wiggled her new tits in his face at the Quik Mart one afternoon and the next thing you know she's in here bragging about the size of his Johnson."

I did my best not to smile. Myra's face had gone from pale pink to fire engine red. She was balling her fingers into tight fists and her nostrils were flaring with fury.

"What's so goddamn funny, Ruby?"

"Nothing at all," I said again. "I just hate to see you getting so upset, Myra."

"Well, you'd be upset, too!" She reached for the can of Diet Coke on the counter and took a healthy swig. "I mean, Oliver had already invited me to come out to see his pigs, you know. On the farm. And I was looking forward to it. But then that train wreck with fake hooters came along and stole my future husband right out from under me!"

I waited while she took another sip of soda. Then I said: "Maybe that just means Oliver Friedman isn't the one."

She slammed the can down on the counter. "Well, of course not!" she shrieked. "He's been trapped in the black widow's web now. There's no way I would touch that man with a ten foot pole!"

I resisted the urge to ask if that was the size of Oliver's Johnson, but Myra saw the look on my face.

“And don’t say anything at all about his penis being as big as a baby’s arm!” she bleated. “I’ve already heard all the details from that venomous tramp!”

I shook my head. “I wasn’t going to mention anything of the sort. I was just going to ask if you could ring up my dress so I can get home to take a shower.”

She muttered under her breath. “God, I’m sorry, Ruby. I’m just a mess these days.”

I reached over and patted her hand. “It’s okay,” I said. “You’re just going through a rough patch at the moment. The sun’ll come out tomorrow.”

She looked up and glared at me. “Are you trying to make me feel worse?”

“Well, no…” I stammered. “I just wanted to—”

“Then please don’t quote that damn Orphan Annie musical in my presence,” she said. “That was the show Dita and Oliver saw when they went to Chicago last month.”

“Oh, Myra.” I reached for her hand again, but she yanked it off the counter. “I’m so sorry, sugar. I had no idea.”

She frowned. “I know,” she said. “And I’m sorry that I’m being so emotional. I just saw the video of Dita last night and…” Her eyes filled with tears and tumbled down her cheeks. “I’m a huge wreck today, Ruby.” She leaned over and pulled a box of tissues from beneath the counter. “I am so embarrassed that I can’t control my emotions,” she said, blotting her eyes. “Why don’t you take that dress as a gift from me to you?”

I gave her a look. “No way, Myra. I’ll take a goodbye hug, but I’m paying cold, hard cash for the dress. You don’t need to give me a gift because you feel embarrassed about being emotional. That just means you’re still alive and kicking.”

She heaved a sigh, folded my new dress and wrapped it in pink tissue paper. Then she put it in a shopping bag and swiped my credit card.

“I hope you have a wonderful time tonight with Clint,” she said. “I’m going home to watch that video again. There’s one thing Dita does with a cantaloupe that I’ve never seen before. I’m thinking about adding it to my arsenal of erotic talents.”

I laughed as she handed me the receipt. Then I said: “That’s a great idea, sugar. My Aunt Dot always says that ripe melons will charm any red-blooded men in the boudoir!”

“So maybe there’s still hope for me?”

I went around the counter and gave her a hug. “Of course,” I said. “Just remember that your thoughts, words and deeds are much more important than the size of your melons.”

She managed a faint shrug. “I wish Dita felt that way,” she said quietly. “Because her deeds are bound to give her nothing but trouble if she’s not careful.”

CHAPTER 10

Bella Napoli was crowded when I arrived at seven. I saw Clint sitting at a table near the bar with a glass of wine and a small, gift-wrapped box. I made my way through the restaurant, saying hello to a few friends and former clients as I passed their tables. Since it was Wormwood's most upscale eatery, the joint was packed every night. When I reached Clint, he stood and pulled out a chair for me.

"Hi, doll," he said, planting a big kiss on my cheek. "How was your day?"

"Lunacy and kooks," I said. "But I knew you'd be waiting at the end of the road, so nothing got me down."

He smiled, sat down beside me and pushed the box across the table. "I got you something that I bet you'll like," he said. "Just to show you how special you are to me."

"How'd you get a jumbo bag of peanut M&Ms inside such a tiny box?"

"Crushed 'em," he said, smiling. "In the food processor."

I reached over and took his hand. It was big and warm and trustworthy as he squeezed my fingers.

"Just kidding," he said. "It's not candy. It's something else."

I gave him a kiss and loosened the bow. It fell away and the paper slid off easily to reveal a plain white box. I shook it gently.

"Flat screen television for the bedroom?" I asked.

He made a face. "Just open it already."

And I did.

"A key?"

"To my place," Clint said. "I want you to know that you're welcome to stay over whenever you'd like. I feel kind of bad that we always end up at your house."

I wanted to jump up and wave my arms. I wanted to climb on the table and scream at the top of my lungs. I wanted everyone in the restaurant to know that, for the first time in my life, a man had given me the key to his heart. Well, his apartment. Either way, it was a huge milestone. For us. For me. For the entire universe.

Ruby Wisdom, curvy, swervy and nervy, had a boyfriend.

I felt like I was sixteen again.

Sixteen and silly.

And lightheaded.

Racing around Wormwood High School like a runaway freight train to let the entire world know that Clint Williams had asked me to the prom.

"So?"

I blinked away the memory at the sound of Clint's voice. I looked over and he was grinning at me, waiting for a response.

I considered saying something simple. *Thank you! That's sweet! How wonderful!*

Instead, I leaned closer, lowered my voice and said: "This is the sweetest thing that—"

Clint held one finger up and pressed it against my mouth. Then he said: "I love you, Ruby Eloise Wisdom. I really and truly and madly love you!"

My heart stopped. My lungs collapsed. And my brain imploded with a few small puffs of smoke. It felt like I was floating on a cloud of whipped cream. With multicolored sprinkles. And a cherry on top.

When things kicked back in and I could breathe again, I realized Clint was gazing at me with his gorgeous blue eyes and a smile that was more genuine than any I'd ever seen before in my entire life.

"Ditto," I said. "I love everything about you, Clint Bodeen Williams."

And right there, in the crowded Italian restaurant, surrounded by loud conversation and clinking glasses and riotous laughter, I felt like I was home. Like my heart had found a safe haven from the storm. Like the future would be far different than the past. Like anything was possible.

CHAPTER 11

"You feel like something sweet?" Clint asked as we left Bella Napoli.

I grabbed his hand, pulled him closer and nuzzled into his ear. "Is that a euphemism?" I whispered in my most seductive tone. "Are you asking if I want to go home and make love?"

He frowned. "No, I was asking if you want to go over to Scoops for an ice cream cone."

"Oh," I said, feeling silly. "Yeah, that sounds nice."

Clint squeezed my fingers. "Perfect," he said. "Then we'll go back to your place for a euphemism."

I laughed. And it felt good. We were having a perfect evening: dinner, wine, candlelight, conversation. There was nothing better than strolling through downtown Wormwood after a romantic dinner with the man I love. And nothing in the world that could spoil the night.

Except running into Dita Ingersoll.

"Well, look at that!" she squealed when she came around the corner a block from the ice cream parlor. She was accompanied by a tall, thin man with greasy hair and clawlike hands. "It's Ruby Wisdom and her much younger delivery boy!"

Clint groaned. "Is it too late to pretend we don't see them?" he whispered.

"Yep," I said. "Let's keep it short."

He smiled. "Like I'm going to engage her in a long conversation about her new boobs."

I looked at Dita more closely. The outcropping on her chest looked like a pair of chunky torpedoes, all perky and upright and instantly recognizable as a breathtaking combination of modern science and aerodynamic invention.

"Hi, Dita," I said, giving her a little wave.

"Hello, young lovers," she said. "What brings you out on a beautiful night like this?"

"Dinner," Clint said, staring at her breasts.

I gave his hand an especially meaningful squeeze and he looked at the sidewalk.

"We were at Bella Napoli," I said. "How about you two? Out for dinner?"

Dita shook her head. "No, just a little stroll," she said. "Ruby and Clint, this is Marcus Swenson."

"Lovely to meet you," I said, feeling grateful that he didn't try to shake my hand with his colorless claw. "How long have you and Dita been dating?"

"Oh, we're not dating," she said, giving me a sharp look. "Marcus is a business associate of my boyfriend Lou."

The tall guy with greasy hair scowled. "We should be on our way," he said. "Mr. Storto ain't happy when his dame is late."

I bit my lip to keep from smiling. The guy sounded like a goon from an old gangster movie.

"Sure thing," I said. "Nice to see you, Dita."

"And good to meet you, Marcus," Clint said as they walked down the street. "Have a nice evening."

As soon as we were far enough away for safe conversation, I turned to Clint.

"Did you see that bulge?" I asked.

He made a face like he'd just smelled something bad. "In his pants?"

"No, silly. On his hip under the blazer. He's packin' heat."

"You mean a gun?"

"Indeed, I do," I said. "Dita's escort is armed and possibly dangerous."

Clint shrugged. "Maybe the guy's got a permit to carry."

"Maybe he does," I said. "And maybe he doesn't. But there was something odd about him."

"You mean his creepy hands?" asked Clint.

"So you noticed them, too?"

He nodded. "Absolutely," he said. "They were like little bird hands with little pointy bird fingers."

"And a little pointy bird gun under his little pointy bird jacket."

"Huh?" Clint shook his head. "What's a little bird gun?" he asked. "And that looked like a regular tweed blazer to me."

"Don't worry about it," I said, tugging his hand to get him moving again. "Let's go buy our ice cream so we can get home for that euphemism you were talking about earlier."

As we headed down the block toward Scoops, I started thinking about my last serious relationship. Marc was a writer from New York, a handsome guy who came to Wormwood when his grandmother passed away and he inherited her farm. We met at a fundraiser for my friend Lola's political campaign. Marc smiled at me while she was giving her speech. I smiled back. An hour later, we were parked on the edge of the auditorium stage, sipping red wine from plastic tumblers and sharing the stories of our lives. It was inexplicable; like a comet burning brightly across a pitch-black sky. Something that would only happen once, something that you never expected to see in the first place.

All my life, with the exception of Hank, men overlooked me for my thinner friends when it came to serious romances. There was the occasional flirtatious encounter with guys who seemed like possibilities until I discovered they were married. When Marc asked me out to dinner, I thought it was to talk about Lola's politics. But when he kissed me at the end of the evening, I knew it was something more.

We were inseparable from that moment on. Two years of romance and travel and mind-blowing sex. And then, one night after we made love, he told me that he was done with his book about Wormwood and was going back to New York. He asked me to join him. And I almost accepted the invitation. But then I realized that I could never live surrounded by concrete and glass and steel. I needed rolling pastures and towering trees and gentle streams. I needed Wormwood. And, as the only private investigator in the county, Wormwood needed me.

Marc packed his BMW, kissed me on the cheek and drove off into the sunset the next week. I heard later that he married a plus-size model named Kara.

It made me proud. And not at all jealous.

In the end, Marc had Kara. I had Clint. And all was right with the world.

CHAPTER 12

"I'm going to kill him!" Violet shrieked into the phone when she called at midnight.

"What is it?" I asked as Clint rolled out of bed and sashayed to the bathroom. His rump looked like two flawless melons under his pajama bottoms, sweet and tempting and luscious.

"It's my damn husband!" Violet yelled. "He's canceled my credit cards, changed the locks on the house and drained my bank accounts."

"Where are you now?"

"In a room at the Motel 6," she said. "The night manager's an old friend. He said I could stay here until you get this sorted out for me."

"I think it may be time to get your attorney involved," I suggested.

"That's what Brandon told me when I got here earlier," she said. "But when we hacked into the nanny cam feed from our house and saw what we saw, he thought maybe I could leverage the video into a pretty juicy divorce settlement. And he suggested that a private investigator may be more helpful in doing that than a lawyer."

I was half asleep and wasn't sure what I'd just heard. So I asked her to repeat it.

"Brandon's some kind of technology wizard," Violet explained. "We got to talking and I told him about the nanny cams. Tripp had them installed all over the house when we went on safari a couple of years ago. We were going to be away for such an extended time that he wanted to be able to get online from Africa and make sure none of the staff was having parties in our house while we were gone."

"Okay, so the nanny cams are still online?"

"Yes, they're on a secure website that Tripp had his computer guy set up. I didn't know the password, but Brandon figured it out in less than ten minutes. By the way, the password is 'soft serve.' Anyhow, when we gained access to the nanny cam site, the first thing I saw was that bastard Tripp banging that floozy bookkeeper on our new Carrera marble kitchen counters. And the bitch was wearing my handcuffs and high heels!"

Clint came back from the bathroom, crawled into bed and put one hand on my stomach.

"Everything okay?" he whispered.

I covered the phone. "It's Violet Sullivan," I said. "I can't tell if she's more upset that she's got proof of her husband's infidelity or because he was having sex with your sister on the new marble counters."

Clint muttered something, turned onto his side and pulled a pillow over his head.

"Ruby?" Violet chirped. "You still there?"

"Yes, I'm here. And I think we should meet at my office first thing in the morning."

"Okay, should I bring the video?" she asked. "Brandon copied it onto a DVD."

"You bet," I said. "Bring the video and maybe another box of Little Debbie's."

CHAPTER 13

Violet barreled through my office door at nine o'clock the next morning. She looked rumpled and confused, like someone that's just awoken from a horrible nightmare. A short, bald guy wearing black glasses and a faded New York Mets jersey was right behind her.

"This is Brandon," she said, waving one hand in his direction. "He had to drive me this morning because I'm upset and jittery."

The little guy smiled. "It's been a long night," he said. "I didn't want Violet to endure any more unnecessary pain. After what that jerk's put her through these past few weeks."

I gave him a nod, thinking: *Further proof that chivalry is alive and well in Wormwood.*

"You want me to fire up the laptop?" Brandon patted the messenger bag hanging from his shoulder. "Take a look at the jerk and his hooker?"

"Sure," I said. "Although I don't really believe Clarissa is technically working as a prostitute."

"The hell she's not!" Violet screeched. "He gave her a car. He gave her my handcuffs. And he gave her my favorite pair of Louboutins."

Brandon looked at me. "Them there are shoes," he said. "Real expensive ones. From Bergdorf's in the city."

"Thank you, Brandon," I said, glancing down at my gold leather lady flats. They were *my* favorite pair of Louboutins, a little gift that Marc sent when he returned to New York. "That's very helpful. Now, why don't we take a quick peek at the evidence? If it shows Tripp and Clarissa in a compromising position, I think you'll be in good shape, Violet."

"Compromising position?" she said. "They did that one and every other position you can think of! I mean, my Lord! You should see what she had him do with the stainless steel tongs and a can of Crisco!"

I felt my heart shudder. It was way too early in the morning to see a mature, slightly overweight man doing anything with hydrogenated shortening. I took a bite of my first Swiss Roll of the day and waited for Brandon to get the video ready to roll. When he'd logged into the nanny cam site, Violet gasped, covered her mouth and turned away.

"I've seen enough to last a lifetime," she said quietly. "It breaks my heart to think that our wedding vows expired on account of some stick figure with big boobs and a shaved hoo-hah."

I leaned closer to the laptop. Then I blinked. And then I looked at the screen again. It was divided into four quadrants, each one representing the video footage from one of the nanny cams in the Sullivan house. In the first one, Tripp Sullivan, wearing a pair of backless black leather chaps, was being spanked by Clarissa with the aforementioned tongs. His saggy butt looked horrific on the grainy black-and-white video.

"See?" Violet asked. "That's him!" She jabbed one finger at the screen. "And that's her!"

"Looks like you're right," I said, nearly upchucking when I glanced at the image in the upper right corner. "And it also looks like your husband's soft serve machine doesn't need a cup or cone to dispense its frozen yummys."

Violet gasped. "I know! Can you imagine how cold that would be in your hoo-hah?"

"I cannot," I said. "Nor do I ever want to find out."

Brandon sifted through his messenger bag, coming out with a DVD marked **TRIPP & HIS WHORE/DEFINITIVE PROOF**.

"Here you go," he said, handing me the disk. "I made plenty of copies."

“That’s great, Brandon. You’re right on top of things. This will be very helpful when we meet with Tripp to negotiate a settlement.”

“Meet with him?” Violet asked.

“I think we should,” I told her. “If we talk to your husband and show him what you found on the nanny cam site, I think he may be willing to fast-track the divorce. You’ll be set for life, Violet. And he’ll be sent packing.”

“I like the sound of that,” Violet said. “Can we do it now? Get it over with?”

“I’m sorry, but my schedule is jammed today,” I said. “How about we meet at the dealership tomorrow morning at ten? Can you both be there?”

Brandon nodded. Violet smiled. I took a bite of my Little Debbie Swiss Roll, savoring it while they chattered on about Tripp’s wanton ways and Clarissa’s disparagement of the Sullivan’s kitchen utensils. After I finished my snack and their conversation ended, I thanked them again for their diligent efforts to help with the case.

“This is excellent substantiation of your claim,” I said, tapping the DVD with one finger. “I imagine Tripp will throw in the towel when he finds out that you’ve got this.”

“He better,” Violet said, heading for the door. “Or else I’m gonna shoot off his cojones with my granddaddy’s pump-action Remington!”

CHAPTER 14

I was sitting at my desk, gazing out the window and thinking about the Tripp Sullivan videos when a voice boomed into my office from the hallway.

“Hey there, gorgeous!”

It was Hank. He stood in the doorway holding a small white box wrapped in a bright blue ribbon. My keen detective skills identified it instantly as the signature packaging from my favorite bakery.

“Hungry?”

“Are those frosted sugar cookies from Blue Moon?” I asked.

He smiled. “Want one?”

“I’ll have part of one,” I said, waving him into the room. “Come in and sit down.”

He slid into a guest chair, put the package on my desk and removed the ribbon.

“What brings you by?” I asked, carefully lifting a platter-sized cookie from the box.

“I was in the neighborhood,” he said. “Thought you deserved to take a little break from all the heavy lifting you’re doing on the Sullivan case.”

I gave him a look. “Wormwood’s a very small place,” I said. “No matter where you go, you’re always in the neighborhood.”

“True enough.” He grabbed one of the cookies and took a bite. Crumbs tumbled onto his uniform like a shower of tiny snowflakes. “How’s Violet doing?”

“She’s fine.”

He took a second bite, chewed it happily and then wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

“And how are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m fine.” I gave him a napkin from my desk drawer. “What do you want, Hank?”

“I wanted to talk to you about Tripp and Violet.”

“What about them?”

He furrowed his brow. “I stopped by the dealership earlier and talked to Tripp about the death threats.”

“Why’d you do that?” I asked, feeling my heart rate increase. “I told you about the letters in confidence.”

“It’s my duty as sheriff,” he said. “If I learn that someone in the community is receiving threatening letters, I want to check up on ‘em. See if the rumors are true.”

I spread another napkin on the desk and put down my cookie. Then I took a sip of caramel macchiato. Then I glared at Hank until he blinked.

“What makes you think they’re rumors?” I asked.

He squinted, leaning forward in his chair. “What makes you think they’re not?”

“I’ve seen the threats,” I said. “I know they’re real.”

“So you’re withholding evidence, Ruby?”

“Doesn’t a crime have to occur before something is labeled as evidence?”

He shook his head. “I’m not here to argue about the law.”

“That’s good,” I said. “Because you’d probably lose the debate.”

“I don’t think I like your tone.”

I gave him a smile. “And I don’t think I care.”

His brawny hand went back into the Blue Moon box and retrieved a second cookie. He ate it in three massive bites. I turned away from the carnage and waited until sufficient time had passed. Then I glanced back at him.

"Your manners are atrocious," I said. "Doesn't your wife say anything when you eat like that at home?"

His face went blank and he looked down at the floor. "We split up," he said sadly.

"Oh, golly," I said. "I'm so sorry, Hank."

"It's for the best. She and I never really saw eye-to-eye on things."

We sat without talking for a while, the shared sorrow and heartbreak of our own failed marriage twining through the silence. Finally, Hank cleared his throat and asked if he could take a look at the death threats.

"I don't have them here," I said.

"Where are they?"

"Elsewhere."

"Like where, Ruby?"

"Like in another place, Hank."

We stared at one another as he drummed his fingers on the desk.

"Please stop doing that," I said.

He frowned. "Doing what?"

"Making that annoying sound." I glanced down at his hand. "It's another one of your more undesirable traits."

"That's what Shelby told me the day she asked for a divorce," he said slowly. "I'm annoying and I work too much and my not being able to have kids makes me less than a real man."

His voice quivered a bit as he spoke the last few words. I sat and waited for him to continue, but he just kept staring at his fingers resting motionlessly on the edge of my desk.

"I'm sorry, Hank," I said after it seemed the brief silence could become an uncomfortable void. "What can I do to help?"

He shrugged. "Show me the death threats?"

"Trust me," I said. "They're the real deal. I did some snooping and the handwriting doesn't match Violet, Tripp or Heather Cain."

"I'd still like to send them to the crime lab," he said.

I promised to drop them off at his office later.

"Thanks," he said. "And, now that you mention Heather, what's she got to do with this anyway?"

"She works for Tripp," I said. "Down at the dealership."

"Well, she certainly has my sympathy," Hank said. "Working for that assclown is probably a bigger nightmare than anyone can imagine."

I nodded. "That'd be my guess, too. From what I observed during my visit to Tripp's office, he's a complete tool."

"I'm not going to argue that point," Hank said. "But being a tool doesn't mean he's impervious to death threats."

"Whoa!" I said. "Look who's using the big words all of a sudden." I smiled. "Impervious."

"What's wrong with that?" His face scrambled into a confused grimace. "Did I use the wrong word or something?"

I shook my head. “No, you were right. Impervious, immune, unaffected. They’re all good. And they all describe Tripp’s reaction to the threats. Based on what my source told me, Tripp is—”

“Meaning Heather Cain, right?”

I glared at him. “Based on my source’s comments, Tripp has laughed off the letters and emails. He wants to seem cool as a cucumber, like it’s all some kind of game.” I sipped my macchiato. “A game to show his harem that he’s got the biggest cojones in Wormwood.”

Hank chuckled. “Did you just say *cojones*?”

“I did.”

“And you know what that means, right?”

“I do.”

“And you said it with a straight face,” he said. “That’s pretty damn impressive, Ruby.”

“Thank you, Hank.”

“So can I see the threats later?” he asked.

I held his gaze for a minute or two. Then I said: “Maybe.”

“I’m just trying to do my job, gorgeous.”

“Ditto,” I said. “I learned about the threats from a source during my—”

“Meaning Heather Cain,” he said again.

“For crying out loud, Hank. Can you please just give it a rest? What’s it matter to you? I made you aware of the allegations as soon as I learned about them. And then, despite the implied confidentiality, you went and—”

“Implied by whom?”

I glowered at him. Then I sipped my macchiato. And then I pinched off a piece of frosted sugar cookie and took my time nibbling it while Hank fidgeted in the chair.

“What did Tripp say?” I asked when I finished the sweet lump of perfection.

“About what?”

“Hank,” I said. “If you want games, I suggest you head on out to Miss Maude’s Cupcake Ranch. One of the girls out there will be more than happy to play hide and seek with various parts of their anatomy while you watch from the shadows.”

He clenched his jaw and narrowed his eyes. “Tripp said he hadn’t received any death threats,” Hank growled. “And I felt he was being truthful.”

I smiled. “That bag of misfortune hasn’t been truthful since the day he was born.”

“Wow!” Hank slapped his thigh. “That’s pretty harsh, Ruby.”

“It’s the truth,” I said. “The man cheats at business, cheats when he’s playing poker, cheats on his wife and probably cheats on his taxes.”

“But he’s got nice teeth,” Hank said. “And a wicked golf swing.”

“Well, then, forgive my errant ways,” I said. “I didn’t realize those two things trumped all the shit the doofus pulls.”

“Tripp’s human,” Hank said. “We all mess up now and again.”

I raised my chin and smiled at the goofball on the other side of my desk. “Right,” I said. “But lots of us learn from our mistakes. Tripp Sullivan wears them like a badge of honor. As if he’s campaigning for biggest asshole in the universe and every blunder he makes puts him closer to victory.”

Hank brushed a few stray crumbs from his shirt. Then he groaned and got up from the chair.

“I can see this isn’t getting us anywhere,” he said.

“Just like our marriage,” I said, regretting the comment as soon as the words left my mouth.

Hank grimaced. "Thanks, gorgeous. After the way things are going, I needed another kick in the pants."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"It's okay." He turned for the door. "I forgive you." He glanced back over his shoulder. "Again."

"What're you up to later?" I asked.

"Why?"

"Just wondering," I said. "Maybe you could come over and join Clint and me for dinner. I'm stopping at the store on the way home to buy ingredients for a frittata and salad."

He shook his head. "I wouldn't want to ruin a perfectly good evening for you two love birds." His voice was flat and sad and empty. "Not a chance," he said. "I'll probably go over to my sister's and listen to her whine about how awful it is that her husband bought her a Jaguar instead of a Mercedes."

"Golly," I said as he stepped into the hallway. "She's got it even rougher than any of the rest of us."

"That she does," Hank said. "I don't know how she manages to get through the day with only one nanny and one housekeeper." He smiled and it looked genuine. "Take it easy out there, Ruby. I'll talk to you later."

CHAPTER 15

My brother stood in the produce section at Food Festival, gaping at me like I'd just confessed to being an alien overlord instead of his baby sister.

"Who gave you a *what*?"

"Clint," I told him. "The guy I've been seeing. He gave me a key to his apartment."

"Isn't he the UPS guy?"

I nodded.

"And he's got that twin sister?"

Another nod.

"Well, hell," he muttered. "Aren't they what—sixteen or something?"

I punched his arm. "They're twenty-four."

"Jeez, Ruby. I didn't know you were robbing the cradle again?"

"What do you mean again?"

"Wasn't that Max guy from New York about half your age?"

I hate my brother sometimes. He can be such a condescending, small-minded stain.

"His name was Marc," I said. "And he was four years younger than me."

"Well, whatever," Ben said. "I never was good at math."

"Or anything else," I said. "You're a useless piece of excrement. I don't know why I'm even still standing here talking to you."

"Because I'm your big brother," he said, puffing out his chest. "And because you love me."

"Don't count on it," I said. "Especially if you're going to say disparaging things about the man who holds my heart in his hands."

"Oh, shit. Now you sound like mother."

"Is that so wrong? She loved daddy very much."

"Too much," Ben said, frowning like he'd stepped in something brown and squishy. "When that lump of shit ran off with the preacher's wife, mama still believed that daddy was a good man."

We stood in silence for a minute or two, each of us momentarily lost in our memories.

"So this thing is real?" Ben asked finally. "The thing with Clint?"

I smiled. "It is," I said. "I'd love for you to meet him sometime soon."

He shrugged. "You serious? I already see him once or twice a week as it is. My office is on his route."

"Well, I'd like to have you meet him *properly*," I explained. "Over dinner. Or maybe we can get together for drinks."

"Sounds good to me," Ben said. "Give me a call. Let's get it on the calendar."

"Okay, I'll check with Clint and let you know." I glanced at my watch. "I've gotta run, sugar. I'm meeting a client this morning and I can't be late."

"Something juicy?" Ben asked, wiggling his eyebrows. "You're always up to your nose in one scandal or another."

"What can I tell you? It's the fast-paced, exciting life of a private investigator."

"Or a nosy busybody," Ben said. "Either one applies, so call it however you'd like."

I smacked the back of his head. "That's for calling me nosy," I said, smiling. "And for being such a massive pain in my ass."

We promised to talk soon and find time so Ben and his wife, the lovely and eternally patient Rita, could get to know Clint. As my brother walked away toward the frozen food aisle, I couldn't help but grin and giggle. Life was good. The Violet Sullivan case seemed to be falling into place. Someone loved me. Someone wanted to be with me. And it wasn't a rescue dog, a carrot cake muffin or one of my willful elderly relatives.

CHAPTER 16

“What’s a frittata?” Clint asked as I broke eggs into a bright blue mixing bowl.

“It’s an Italian dish,” I explained, dropping the last shell into the trash. “Think of it as an omelet or a quiche that doesn’t have a crust.”

He watched as I whisked the eggs. Then he said: “You been watching the cooking shows again?”

“Perhaps,” I said. “My culinary skills are a bit rusty, so I wanted to get some pointers on how to please my love bucket at meal time.”

His mouth formed a mischievous smile. “How about breakfast, lunch and dinner in bed?” he asked. “You’re the main course and I’m dessert.”

I smiled. “How about you chop that onion while I shred the cheddar?”

He pulled a knife from the wood block on the counter and went to work on the small onion that I’d already peeled. As he sliced and diced, he asked me about Violet Sullivan.

“I saw her driving through town today,” he said. “Looking really sad and depressed.”

“There’s good reason for that,” I said. “The poor thing is married to a nightmare.”

“Tripp has quite a reputation,” Clint said. “But my sister says he can be a real sweet guy.”

“Maybe when he’s asleep.” I poured the egg mixture into a round black baking dish. “I’m actually pretty intrigued by his jumbled psychological state. I mean, I wonder what happened during his childhood to make him such a complete jerk as an adult.”

“You think something bad happened when he was a kid?”

I shrugged. “That’s often the case. People who act like beasts later in life generally suffered some type of trauma when they were young.”

“I could ask Clarissa to look into it,” Clint suggested.

“Heavens no!” I blurted. “Don’t tell your sister anything that you and I have talked about.”

“Are we violating some code of conduct?”

I reached over and swatted his caboose. “Not yet,” I said. “But let’s wait until after dinner and see what kind of conduct we can violate together.”

“I like it when you get sassy,” he said, finishing with the onion. “What happens next?”

“With the frittata?”

He wiggled his eyebrows. “Or we can skip right to after dinner delights.”

I reached over and pinched his cheek. “There’s plenty of time for that,” I said. “How about you sauté the onion while I find a nice ripe tomato?”

“You got it,” he answered. “I think this could be a good—”

My work phone chirped. Clint glanced at it and then back at me. He rolled his eyes and went right on with the onions.

“I know,” he muttered quietly. “People first. Then work. Then shopping.”

I gently smacked his rear again before answering the phone.

“Ruby Wisdom,” I said. “How can—”

“For the love of Pete!” Violet screamed. “What the hell am I going to do about Tripp?”

I smiled at Clint, walked out the door and sat in a chair on the deck.

“What’s going on, Violet?”

“He burned all of my Lilly Pulitzer dresses!”

“Tripp did?”

“Yes, Tripp did!” she screamed. “Who else would be so cruel? My grandmother bought those for me when I’d visit her in Florida. And the lowlife cretin put ‘em all in the barbecue, soaked ‘em with lighter fluid and lit a match.”

I held the phone away from my ear while she shouted for a few minutes. When she paused to refuel her lungs, I said: “I’m very sorry that Tripp destroyed your dresses, Violet. But this is all gist for the mill.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“When you go before the judge in divorce court,” I explained. “Your attorney can present Tripp’s behavior as—”

“My grandmother bought those for me!” Violet interrupted. “She’s dead now, Ruby. Dead and buried and there’s no do-overs.”

Another few minutes passed while she screeched about Tripp and her grandmother and the ruined dresses.

“We’re meeting at the dealership in the morning,” I said when she paused again. “We’ll discuss this with Tripp after we show him the videotapes.”

“I don’t think I can face him,” Violet said.

“You can skip it if you’d like,” I told her. “I can go in and talk with him by myself.”

“No, that’s okay. I want to see the look on the little jerk’s face when he finds out I know what he’s been doing when I’m at work.”

“Sure you’re up for it?” I asked. “He could get nasty.”

“Lord almighty!” she said with a throaty laugh. “If you want to see nasty, wait until I get my hands on that little rat! I’ll strangle him! I’ll rip his head off! I’ll make him watch *Project Runway*!”

CHAPTER 17

Tripp Sullivan stomped into his office like an ill-tempered adolescent. He glared at Violet, ignored Brandon and sneered at me before sitting in his desk chair.

“What the hell do you want, Ruby?” he shouted. “I am bewildered that you’ve come back in here to annoy me again. As if once wasn’t enough.”

It was ten in the morning and Wormwood’s leading auto tycoon was glaring at me with beady bloodshot eyes and screaming at the top of his lungs. I took a breath and squared my shoulders. “New evidence has been uncovered,” I said in a clear and authoritative tone. “It shows you *in flagrante delicto* with a young woman who is not your beautiful bride.”

Tripp laughed. “You hear that?” he asked Violet. “This clown just called you ‘beautiful’.”

“Shoe fits,” Violet said with a frosty grin.

Tripp glared at his wife. Then he said: “Who’s the freak in the Dolly Parton T-shirt?”

I hadn’t noticed Brandon’s attire before that point, so I took a quick look. Violet’s friend was wearing a crewneck shirt with a vivid cartoon figure that looked somewhat like the famous country singer.

“My name is Brandon Sheffield,” Brandon said. “And I am *not* a freak!”

“Everyone’s entitled to their own opinion,” Tripp said coldly. “But if I say you’re a freak, then you’re a freak, Brenda.”

“It’s Brandon!” he said again.

Tripp laughed again. “Whatever you say, sweetheart,” he said, blowing a kiss at Brandon. “You may have fooled these two heifers into thinking you’re a real man, but I can hear the lack of testosterone in your voice.” He paused and chuckled for a moment before adding: “Now then, Ruby. What’s this about new evidence?”

I smoothed a wrinkle from the cuff of my blouse, trying to appear unruffled. “We have a videotape of you having sex with another woman in the home you share with your wife,” I said. “It’s conclusive proof that you’ve violated the pre-nuptial agreement that was signed by both Violet and yourself.”

The room was quiet for a moment. I heard the loudspeaker in the showroom and power tools in the service garage. Then I heard a high-pitched giggling that sounded like it was coming from a young girl or a newborn calf. Instead, it was Tripp Sullivan, holding one hand in front of his mouth while his eyes went wide.

“You’ve got videotape of *what*?” he gushed.

“You heard the woman,” Violet said. “We’ve got videos of you having your way with a slew of sluts.”

Tripp ignored his wife. He took a bite of his Egg McMuffin and scowled. “Are you deranged?” He sprinkled the *Wormwood Gazette* on his desk with spittle and bits of Egg McMuffin. “Did you really access my personal nanny cam site?”

I nodded solemnly. “We did indeed,” I said, patting the laptop on his desk. “Want to have a look?”

Violet stood quietly near the door of her husband’s office. Her fingers pulled nervously at the hem of one sleeve. I’m not sure why she thought a bright pink *Vagina Monologues* hoodie complemented her blue floral slacks, but I imagined that wardrobe had been the last thing on her mind as she scurried around the Motel 6 getting ready to confront her philandering groom with irrefutable proof of his indiscretions.

“No, I don’t want to have a look!” Tripp shouted. “I want you to get the hell out of my office!” His face was red and his hands were shaking. “Heather!”

The scrawny redhead suddenly appeared in the doorway.

“Yes, Mr. Sullivan?”

“Get these two cows and this moron out of my office.” He pointed at Violet, Brandon and me before uttering a string of curse words. “And do it fast!”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” Heather said quietly.

Tripp glared at her. “Why the fuck not?”

“Well, sir,” the willowy thing murmured, “first of all, they’re not cows and he’s not a moron. They’re human beings. They have feelings. And, second of all, I need to remind you that the laws of our county, state and federal governments strictly prohibit an employer from sexually harassing an employee.”

Sullivan looked like he’d just been kicked in the soft parts by a brute wearing steel-toed boots.

“What the hell are you saying?”

“I’ve hired an attorney,” Heather said. “And we’ll be filing our civil law suit in the morning at the county courthouse.”

She gave me a quick smile, whispered something in Violet’s ear and swiveled out of sight.

“That little bitch,” Tripp said under his breath. “I’m gonna fire her. She can’t talk to me like that.”

“She just did,” Violet said.

“What was that?” Tripp demanded, waving one bony fist at his wife. “What’d you say?”

Violet smiled. Then she raised both hands. And then she waved a matching set of middle fingers at Tripp.

“Well, then,” I said, deciding it was time to intervene. “Seems to me that we have a couple of choices here, Tripp. We can all gather around the laptop and have a gander at you performing indecent and unattractive sexual acts with several women in various parts of your home.” He gulped and frowned, but kept quiet. “Or, Violet, Brandon and I can leave you alone with your thoughts. She’s on her way to the attorney’s office after this. He plans to draw up a divorce complaint on her behalf in light of your infidelity, both matrimonial and fiscal.”

Sullivan’s head started to wobble and he waved the knot of skeletal fingers at me. “The hell he will! I’ll file my own complaint! Against Violet. Against you. Against that damn Heather that just mouthed off!” He seethed silently for a moment or two, his lips turning white and his eyes narrowing to form dark slits above an angry scowl. “All you women are alike!” he said finally. “Nothing but a herd of greedy, ignorant, selfish cows.”

Violet started to say something, but changed her mind and hurried from the room.

“There now,” Tripp said. “Look what you’ve done.”

“No, Mr. Sullivan,” I told him. “That’s your doing. If you’d treated your wife with respect and compassion instead of taking her for granted, perhaps things would be turning out a bit differently.”

He glared at me, pursing his lips and muttering to himself. As I picked up the laptop and dropped it into my bag, he came out from behind the desk.

“Is that all you’ve got to say?” he demanded.

“No, there’s actually one more thing,” I said evenly.

“Oh, yeah? What the hell is that?”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Yeah?” he grumbled. “For being such a bitch?”

“No,” I said. “After watching the video footage from the nanny cams, I wanted to tell you that I’m sorry God gave you a gherkin for a penis instead of something with a little more heft and girth.”

The look of fury that flashed on his face was priceless. He was stunned and livid and immobilized all at once.

“Have a nice day,” I said, turning to leave. “And give my regards to your harem!”

CHAPTER 18

That afternoon, while I was getting a manicure at Nails, Nails, Nails, my phone rang. I asked Toots if she would give me a minute. She said she'd give me two.

"Ruby Wisdom," I said, answering the call. "How can I help?"

"Tripp won't do it!" Violet screeched.

"Won't do what?"

"Give me a fair settlement," she said. "He laughed and hung up when my attorney called him."

"Then maybe your attorney should call Tripp's lawyer," I suggested. "I think that's how it's usually done once the motions are filed."

"I'm gonna shoot off his motion if he doesn't hand over my fair share," Violet said. "I've given that man the best years of my life! I supported him when he went to rehab. I kept on supporting him when the first rehab didn't work and he went a second time. I'm the glue that's been holding that rat bastard together all these years."

When she stopped, I whispered to Toots that I needed to stretch my two-minute recess into a slightly longer gap of indeterminate length.

"Then I'll go outside and stretch my legs," she said quietly. "Don't you worry, okay? You're my last customer of the day. Take your time. I know you're probably juggling some kind of prickly—"

"Are you listening to anything I'm saying?"

It was Violet, screeching again. Toots made a face and headed for the door. I pressed the phone back to my ear and told Violet to carry on.

"I'm sorry, Ruby," she said. "I'm a little on edge at the moment."

"No apology necessary. You're dealing with an injustice that no woman should ever face. You've been a rock for Tripp all these years, and now he's lifting his leg and urinating all over you."

"I'm not sure that I'm comfortable with that imagery," Violet said.

"Sorry, sweetheart. Let's just skip that part and move on to what else Tripp told you."

"That was about it really. He laughed at my attorney and told him to tell me that I should be grateful for whatever crumbs he throws my way."

"Are you serious?"

"As a heart attack," Violet said. "The man knows no shame."

I tapped one finger against my chin. Then I told Violet that I had an idea.

"What're you thinking about?" she asked.

"A surprise for your husband," I told her.

She squeaked a little into the phone. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"I don't know," I said. "What are you thinking?"

"Put all the nanny cam footage on that YouTube," Violet said. "Let the world see what a cheating snake Tripp Sullivan really is."

I smiled. She was far more devious than me. And I liked it. But my brand of mischief was generally a bit less public. I was thinking about a more modest form of trickery, something that could probably avoid any of the myriad law suits that might result from Violet's idea.

"I don't think that'd be a good move at the moment," I said.

"Then what?"

“There’s someone I want to talk to next,” I told her. “I’ll stop by his office later today and see if my little idea might actually be feasible.”

“What’s your idea?” she asked.

“I need to talk to someone first,” I said. “Why don’t you meet me at Bella Napoli for lunch tomorrow at noon. If things don’t work out, we may have no choice but to diffuse Tripp’s bombastic bullshit with the YouTube idea. We can discuss our next move over lunch.”

Violet squeaked again. “I love the sound of it,” she said. “I knew you’d be able to help me, Ruby. I just knew it!”

CHAPTER 19

Dewey Kincaid's law firm was located on Bishop Avenue above King Tut's Donut Hut, a second-career culinary adventure opened the previous year by a retired Egyptologist and his third wife. I adored Benny. He gave me free crullers and coffee whenever I stopped by, although his bride, a stick figure mail order Ukrainian named Svetlana, always glared at me through her kohl-rimmed Eastern European eyes.

"Nothing for me today," I told Benny when he scurried out onto the sidewalk. "I'm going up to see Mr. Kincaid."

"Oh, big legal doings?" he asked.

"Always," I said. "But they're very hush-hush."

"Is it the Sullivan couple?" Benny said.

"No," I lied. "Why would you think that?"

"Because the air shaft in our kitchen is connected to Dewey's office," Benny winked and stepped closer. "Is it true that you've got video?"

I smiled and returned the wink. "I can neither confirm nor deny," I said. "As I've already mentioned, it's hush-hush."

"No problem," Benny said, turning back toward the donut shop. "I can just go in the kitchen and get back to work." He winked again. "That should tell me everything I need to know."

I wagged one finger at him and went for the stairs. Dewey was standing behind his desk when I came through the door. It had been a while since our paths had crossed. Between the elastic waistband on his plaid trousers and the dusting of powdered sugar on his chin, it looked like Dewey had been spending plenty of time at King Tut's. He plopped in the desk chair and sank his choppers into a coconut-covered confection as I crossed the room.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in," he said, spewing small crumbs on his desk. "How are you, Ruby?"

"Flawless," I said, giving him a little smile. "How are you?"

"Couldn't be better. I've got a full roster of clients, a new titanium knee and my wife just bought us tickets for a Caribbean cruise." He leaned back and his chair groaned under the load. "What brings you to see me on this fine day?"

"Tripp Sullivan," I said.

He held out a box from King Tut's, but I declined and sat in the only available chair in his office. The others were piled high with manila folders, legal journals and travel brochures for cruise ships and various island getaways.

"I imagined you'd drop by at some point," Dewey said.

"Have you heard about the nanny cam videos?"

He shrugged. "Those things are easy to doctor. Any moron can manipulate the footage with one of those hotshot software editing packages. What else have you got?"

"I don't need anything else," I said. "Once Violet's attorney gets a look, the poo is going to hit the proverbial fan."

"I love the way you talk," Dewey said. "So refined and expressive."

"Thank you," I said, ignoring the snub. "Would you like a peek at the evidence?"

He popped a chunk of donut between his thin, pale lips. "Not really, no. If I want to see a piece of crap, I'll look in the toilet after I take a dump."

Without missing a beat, I smiled and said: "I love the way you talk, Dewey. So refined and expressive."

He grumbled something I couldn't catch. Then he told me to go ahead and show him the nanny cam video. Ten minutes later, as I was leaving his office, he tried again to offer me a donut.

"I'm fine," I said. "Which is something your client is not going to be as soon as we deliver the footage to Violet's lawyer. If you want to get ahead of this thing, I suggest you call Tripp and talk some sense into him."

"I'll do my best," Dewey said. "And I'll also try to talk him into never again putting on a pair of backless chaps. He looked awful in those ridiculous things."

CHAPTER 20

Violet Sullivan smiled at the waiter, glanced down at the Bella Napoli menu and then over at me.

“What do you recommend?” she asked.

“Everything is good here,” I answered. “I usually get the grilled salmon or lasagna, depending on whether I feel in the mood for something healthy or need some comfort.”

“I’m not much of a seafood fan,” she said. “And pasta isn’t very figure friendly.”

She glanced across the table. “I mean, you can get away with it, right?” She fluttered her eyelashes. “With your big bones and all?”

“Exactly,” I said.

A young guy wearing black pants, a crisp white shirt and a stained tan apron crept toward us.

“Ready to order?” he said softly.

“What was that, dear?” Violet asked.

The little guy grimaced and swallowed hard. “Are you ready to order?” He repeated the question at such a loud volume that I imagined the people across the street turned their heads. “I’m ready if you’re ready!”

“I’ll have the salmon,” I said. “With sautéed spinach and brown rice.”

I felt impossibly virtuous. Of course, I also felt bloated from the peanut M&Ms I’d gobbled earlier at my desk. And that was nobody’s business but my own. Some people are stress eaters, but I tended to inhale junk food and candy in larger quantities to celebrate good news. My therapist told me it was common and nothing to be overly concerned about. I’d told him that I would follow his advice all the way to the closest Dairy Twirl.

The waiter smiled at Violet. “What would you like, ma’am?”

“I can’t decide,” she answered.

“Well, our lunch special looks pretty amazing,” the little guy said. He was an adorable geek, short and scrawny with big green eyes and a clanging voice. “It’s pasta with meat sauce. Comes with a small house salad.”

Violet glanced up and smiled. “I’ll have that, but no onion in the salad, please.”

The anxious gnome nodded and wandered off toward the kitchen. He was new at Bella Napoli. One of the bartenders told me he had worked most recently at Hardware Depot, but they fired him for clobbering an elderly woman with a roll of carpet on his third day. No wonder he was so jittery. I made a mental note to leave a big tip, hoping it would help in some small way to calm his nerves.

“My attorney called this morning,” Violet said, plucking a piece of garlic bread from the basket. “He told me that Tripp had agreed to all of my demands.”

“No kidding!”

“Isn’t that amazing?” she said. “And I owe it all to you, Ruby.”

I shook my head. “I didn’t really do anything, Violet. You remembered the nanny cams. Brandon hacked the website. That’s the most critical piece of the puzzle.”

“But you gave me confidence,” she said. “I truly don’t think I could’ve stood up to Tripp without knowing you were behind me.”

“Well, that’s very kind of you, but I really feel like I should return the check you gave me.”

She frowned. “No way! You earned that money fair and square. Like I said, without your moral support, I’d probably be cowering in the room at the Motel 6, chewing my nails and crying like a baby.”

The waiter approached the table with a panicky look on his face and a small salad in his hand. He put the bowl in front of Violet and asked if we needed anything else.

“No, but you do,” I said. “Take a deep breath, okay? You’re doing great. I waited tables when I was in school. I know how you feel. Everything will be okay if you cut yourself some slack.”

He managed a weak smile. “Thank you, ma’am.”

“Oh, call me Ruby. I come here pretty often, so we’ll be seeing a lot of one another.”

When he left the table, Violet reached over and touched my arm. “You’re such a sweetheart,” she said.

“I don’t think Tripp would agree with that sentiment.”

“Well, screw Tripp Sullivan,” she hissed. “And the donkey he rode in on.”

CHAPTER 21

When my phone rang later that afternoon and I saw that it was Dewey Kincaid, I hoped he was calling to tell me that Tripp Sullivan was ready to admit defeat. Instead, he told me that Tripp was dead. I gasped and asked him to tell me more.

“A nail file,” Dewey said. “Right through his corroded artery.”

“His *what* artery?” I asked.

“Corroded,” Dewey said dismissively. “The big one on the left side of his neck.”

I shook my head and wondered how Dewey had managed to pass the bar. “That’s the *carotid* artery,” I said slowly. “It supplies the head and neck with oxygenated blood.” I plucked a mint from the tin box on my desk and popped it in my mouth. “Now, is this the part where you tell me that your announcement is some kind of practical joke?”

“Nope,” Dewey said. “Tripp Sullivan is d-e-a-d.”

A brief image of Uncle Boom flashed through my mind. I shook it away, sat up in my chair and said, “No s-h-i-t.”

“It’s a horrible thing, Ruby. I mean, Tripp may have been a son of a beeswax, but no man deserves to be murdered in such an emasculating way. The poor sucker was completely naked except for fur-trimmed handcuffs and leopard print high heels. He’d been stuck like a pig with a damn nail file that had the initials V-B-S engraved on one side.”

“Handcuffs and high heels?” I asked.

“Pink fur and leopard print,” Dewey said. “Like some kind of sideshow freak.”

“Or someone that likes to experiment in the boudoir,” I suggested.

Dewey grumbled incomprehensibly.

“What was that?” I said.

“Tripp Sullivan brought this on himself,” Dewey answered. “The guy lived on the edge. He treated people like crap. It was only a matter of time before somebody snapped and let him have it.”

I made a few notes on my iPad while Dewey muttered about Tripp’s selfishness and arrogance. When he paused to catch his breath, I asked my next question.

“You said the nail file had the initials V-B-S etched in the blade?”

“Yep,” Dewey said. “And it don’t take Alfred Einstein to figure out that’s Violet Bernice Sullivan.”

“Do you mean *Albert* Einstein?”

“Yeah, that’s the guy,” Dewey said. “But you know what I’m talking about here, Ruby.”

I closed my eyes and leaned back in my chair. “Who found him?”

“Alfred Einstein?”

“No, Dewey. Who found Tripp’s body?”

“His housekeeper,” Dewey said. “Esmeralda Whatshername. The little Mexican woman that cleans and does the laundry.”

I took a long, slow breath, counted to ten and reached for another mint.

“Her name is Esmeralda Murillo,” I said. “She’s from Colombia. And she does a lot more than clean Tripp’s house.”

“Like what?” Dewey sounded unconvinced. “She wears a uniform, so I figured that was her primary function.”

“Esmeralda has worked for Tripp and Violet since they got married,” I said. “She keeps that place running like a fine Swiss watch, juggling the Sullivan’s social calendar and their travel itineraries and the—”

“I don’t need to know all that crap,” Dewey said. “I’ve got a shitload of work to do now that Tripp’s gone. I was just giving you a courtesy call to let you know. Seeing as how you’ve been collaborating with the widow on her bogus divorce claim.”

“There’s nothing bogus about Violet’s claim,” I said. “Tripp was cheating on her with multiple women.”

Dewey chuckled. “Then the poor fool will be missed by many,” he said. “Have a good day, Ruby. I’ve got to—”

“Where was Tripp found?” I asked. “At home? The dealership?”

“None of the above,” Dewey said. “He drew his last breath at the Capri Motel. Esmeralda thought he’d checked into the dump to get away from the stress of his everyday life. When he didn’t return home as planned, she drove over and asked the manager to unlock his room.”

“No kidding,” I said. “Tripp Sullivan stooped that low?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“A multimillionaire with his own palatial home goes to a low rent joint like the Capri?”

“Don’t play dumb, Ruby. Everybody knows that’s the place to go if you’re banging somebody other than your wife or husband.”

I reached for my iPad again and went online to search for the Capri’s phone number.

“So Esmeralda and the manager went into the room together?”

“Yes,” Dewey said. “Tripp was on the bed doing the backstroke in a pool of blood.”

“Any chance you have the manager’s name?”

Dewey sighed noisily into the phone. “You’re the detective,” he said. “Why don’t you do some snooping?”

After the line went dead, I called Hank.

“Hey there, gorgeous,” he said. “You heard the news?”

“Is it true?”

“Yes, it is!” Hank said brightly. “But don’t tell anybody. Steak Stampede’s offering a two-for-one tonight on—”

“Don’t toy with me, Hank. You know that I’m calling about Tripp Sullivan.”

“Yeah, the poor guy. It’s quite a shock, isn’t it?”

“Are you there now?”

“That depends on where you’re talking about.”

“The Capri Motel.”

“No comment,” Hank said. “I can’t talk about an ongoing—”

“Zip it, Hank. I know Tripp was killed there. Dewey Kincaid just called with the news.”

“That moron,” Hank hissed. “I don’t know when he’s going to use the three brain cells that God gave him.”

“Three?” I smiled. “You’re being pretty generous there, compadre.”

“What did you say?”

“I said that you’re being pretty generous.”

“Not that,” Hank said. “What came after that part?”

I had to think for a second. Then I said: “Compadre?”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought I heard.” His voice was softer. “You haven’t called me compadre for years, Ruby.”

“Slip of the tongue,” I said. “What can you tell me about Tripp?”

“He’s dead,” Hank said.

“Anything else?”

“I can neither confirm nor deny any details at this time,” he said, lapsing into drone robot mode. “Please respect the confidentiality of the victim and his immediate family.”

“I’m working for his immediate family,” I said.

Hank groaned. “And your client is parked here at the motel. I’m surprised she hasn’t already called to tell you that.”

My phone buzzed and vibrated. I glanced at the screen.

“From your mouth to Violet’s ears,” I said. “That’s her on the other line.”

Hank wished me luck and said he’d talk to me later. I clicked onto the incoming call and heard Violet cursing a blue streak.

“Violet?”

She roared and ranted, using a few colorful phrases that I’d never heard.

“VIOLET!” I yelled.

“Oh, sorry!” she said, dropping the volume to a soft howl. “Did you hear about Tripp?”

“Yes, I’m so sorry for your loss,” I said.

“He was naked!” Violet said. “In a filthy room at the Capri! Wearing my fur-trimmed handcuffs, a pair of high heels and a cheap blue nylon wig!”

I asked her to repeat the last part. When she did, I made a quick note and listened as she wailed on the other end.

“Do you want me to come over there?” I asked when she paused to blow her nose.

“That would be nice. If it’s not too much bother.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes,” I said. “Why don’t you stay in your car, okay?”

I got up from the desk, grabbed my purse and headed outside.

“I hated the man for cheating,” Violet said as I climbed behind the wheel. “But I never in a million years wanted to see him dead.”

“I know that,” I told her, pulling into traffic. “Life is unpredictable, Violet.”

“At the moment,” she said, “life is more like a bag of horse manure.”

“You have every right to say that, hon. But just remember—”

And the call dropped. I tried dialing her again, but it went straight to voicemail. When I pulled into the motel parking lot a few minutes later, I saw a bright yellow Escalade with Violet’s personalized plates. The door was open, the speakers were blaring a Maria Callas aria and Violet was nowhere to be seen.

I headed toward the knot of people outside Room 15. I recognized a couple of Hank’s deputies and a reporter from the local newspaper.

“She’s gone,” Hank said when he noticed me in the crowd.

“Any idea where she went?” I asked.

He pointed across the street. “Cocktail time,” he said.

I thanked Hank for the information, got back in my car and drove over to Morton’s Tap Room. I spotted Violet at the bar as soon as I walked through the door. She was drinking from an upturned vodka bottle. Morton Squab, the barkeep and namesake for Wormwood’s most popular watering hole, was watching her with a look of admiration and horror.

“Hey, let’s save some for the other drinkers,” I said, grabbing the bottle from Violet’s quivering hand.

“Let them get their own damn vodka!” she hissed. “I’m the widow of a cross-dressing philanderer!” She wiped her mouth with a stack of cocktail napkins. “Not only was he cheating on me, but he changed his will last night and I’m not getting squat!”

Morton asked if I wanted anything to drink.

“Is strychnine an option?” I said.

He blinked. “But that’s poison, Ruby.”

“I know,” I said. “Bad joke. Sorry about that, Mort.”

“Don’t you worry about me,” he said. “You’ve got a live one on your hands.”

I grabbed Violet by the elbow and guided her to a booth in the back of the bar.

“What am I going to do?” she asked once we were situated. “This is one massive cluster, Ruby.”

“That it is,” I said. “But the important thing is you take care of yourself, okay? Getting drunk isn’t going to help anyone.”

“It’ll help Morton,” she said. “It’s how he makes his living.”

“Right, of course.” I glanced at the bar. Mort was polishing shot glasses and talking quietly to another patron. “I’m sure Mr. Squab will be just fine. Why don’t we get you home and into bed?”

“I can’t go there!” she said. “It’s tainted with the lust of my dead husband and his tramps.”

“How about back to the Motel 6 then?”

She nodded. “Maybe after I have one more little nip?”

“Not today, Violet. I think you’ve had plenty for one afternoon.”

“Maybe so,” she said, sounding faraway and lost. “I just couldn’t believe it when Esmeralda called to tell me about Tripp.”

“When was that?”

Violet shrugged. “An hour ago maybe. I was at the diner over on Cherry, talking to Brandon about whether or not hacking the nanny cams was the right thing to do.”

“Are you having second thoughts about that?”

She nodded. “Pretty much. I started to feel that maybe if I hadn’t been so demanding...” Her eyes filled with tears and she reached for the napkin dispenser. “If I had been less persistent about him cleaning up his act,” she said, sniffing sadly, “then maybe Tripp and me could’ve worked out our differences.” She pulled a few more napkins free and dabbed at her nose. “And if we could’ve ironed out the problems, then maybe he’d still be alive.”

I didn’t know what to say next, so I reached over and took her hand. She smiled, dried her eyes again and asked if I was driving.

“I’m a little wobbly on my feet at the moment,” she said. “And I think I’m a little over the limit to operate a motor vehicle.”

CHAPTER 22

After I tucked Violet into bed at the Motel 6, I called Hank and asked if we could talk about Tripp's murder.

"I can neither confirm nor deny any details at this time," he said, sounding once again like an automaton. "Please respect the confidentiality of the victim and his immediate family." There was a brief pause and he cleared his throat. "How's the immediate family doing anyway?"

"She's smashed," I told him. "But I got her back into bed at the motel."

"That's good," Hank said. "Let her sleep it off for a few hours."

"Did you talk to her?"

"Briefly," he answered. "But she was already pretty far gone. Smelled like a distillery. I was just glad that you came to her rescue."

"I feel for her, Hank. She's done nothing wrong."

"Did I say she was a suspect?" he grumbled.

"I wasn't referring to Tripp's murder," I said. "I just mean Violet's done nothing to deserve such a horrible ending to her marriage, you know? She was an exotic dancer who met a millionaire and fell in love. How could she have known that he would one day break her heart?"

"And then prance around a sketchy motel room wearing handcuffs and high heels?"

"Along with a blue nylon wig," I said.

The line went quiet. Then Hank said: "How'd you know about the wig?"

"Violet mentioned it."

"We didn't tell anyone about that, Ruby."

"Well, maybe Esmeralda or the Capri manager told her."

"Possibly," Hank said. "By the time Violet arrived, the Sullivan's housekeeper and the motel manager were in the patrol cars being interviewed by our detectives."

"I'm sure there's a practical explanation for how Violet knew about the wig. She's been through enough, don't you think?"

Hank chuckled. "Haven't we all?"

"So what's your theory?"

"About Tripp?"

"Don't be obtuse, Hank. You know that's what I meant."

"Hard to say at this point. The list of suspects could be a long and winding road."

"Lots of broken hearts and angry husbands," I said. "Not to mention the people he's fired from the dealership over the years."

"Or the other members of his family," Hank added. "Tripp stopped talking to his brother and sister years ago. There was a dispute about their father's will and it ended in an ugly court case."

"I remember that," I said. "But I thought Tate and Tina were compensated financially at the time."

Hank whistled into the phone. "Damn right they were," he said. "My sources tell me they still receive a percentage of the profits from the car business."

"So why would either of them want to kill their brother?"

"Who knows? Maybe some more crap happened between the siblings. Maybe another argument about the father's estate. Sometimes it takes years for those things to be resolved. I remember a story that Blaze told me once. He opened his tattoo place with money he got from a

life insurance policy that his grandmother had. But it wasn't discovered until ten years after she died."

"No kidding," I said. "I always wondered how someone like Blaze could get a bank loan."

"Yeah, he's eccentric as hell," Hank said. "But he's a damn fine tattoo artist and a pretty smart businessman. Did you know he also does financial planning for people in the back of the tattoo shop?"

"Blaze Cohen?"

"The one and only," Hank said. "He used to work on Wall Street. Has an MBA and a license to work as a certified public accountant. The guy's a brain all tarted up with ink and black leather and biker boots."

"Okay, so back to Tripp," I said. "Since I'm already working for Violet, I'll let you know if I uncover anything that might be related to his killing."

Hank sighed. Then he wheezed. And then he sighed again.

"Ruby, my darling compadre," he said. "I would like to respectfully request that you avoid crossing that line, okay?"

"What line is that, my darling ex-husband?"

"I know that Violet hired you to snoop around into Tripp's extramarital pile of shit," Hank said. "But I'd really prefer that you keep out of the official police investigation."

I took a breath and counted to ten. "Have you had your hearing checked lately?"

"What was that?" He giggled, a rather disconcerting sound to hear when you consider that Hank's a tall, rugged, brawny bundle of masculinity. "I'm just kidding, Ruby. What's your point?"

"My point is I just told you that I'd let you know right away if I come across anything that might help your search for the killer."

"Or killers," Hank said. "It's entirely possible that more than one person was responsible for Tripp's death."

"That's true. Maybe a band of spurned women got together and lured the old fool to the Capri."

"Don't joke about the situation, Ruby. A good man lost his life today."

"You're right," I said. "And I'm sorry. I shouldn't make light of such tragic circumstances."

"It was more than tragic," Hank said, giggling again. "The guy looked completely ridiculous in that wig and those high heels. I mean, blue was never a good color for Tripp, and he—"

"Hank?"

"Yes, compadre?"

"Go wash your mouth out with soap," I said. "You just told me not to joke about Tripp's death, and then you turn right around and do the same thing."

"Holy crap," he mumbled. "I guess I did."

I listened while he apologized for the awkward comments about the murder victim. "It was unprofessional," he added. "And I'm sorry you had to hear it."

"Pull back on the regret wagon," I said. "I know you've got a lot on your plate right now."

"Yep, the last homicide we had was two years ago," Hank told me. "And the one before that was a good decade or more."

"Anything I can do to help?" I asked.

"Prayers and whiskey," Hank said, repeating the familiar refrain he used whenever I posed the question.

"For me?" I said, smiling. "Or for you?"

“Yes and yes,” he answered. “Now, I should get back to it.”

“Same for me,” I said. “Good luck with the investigation.”

“Yeah,” Hank said. “Although it’s going to be more like a squirrel rodeo the way things have been going lately.”

CHAPTER 23

The parking lot at the Capri Motel was still buzzing with uniformed officers, crime scene investigators and onlookers when I pulled in later that day.

“Hey, Ruby,” called Lana Krenshaw, one of Hank’s deputies.

I gave her a little wave. “How’s it going?”

She shrugged. “Slow and steady. The room’s a cesspool of prints and bodily fluids and random weirdness. We’re taking our time and doing everything by the book.”

“As always,” I said.

“You looking for Hank?”

I shook my head. “I’m here to talk with Burl.”

“The poor guy,” Lana said. “I’ve never seen someone turn so pale.”

“Is he in the office?”

She shook her head and pointed across the street. “Cocktail time,” she said.

In a fleeting flash of *déjà vu*, I thanked her for the information, got back in my car and drove over to Morton’s Tap Room. Burl Hannity was at the bar, sipping milk through a straw and talking to Morton.

“Hey there, Burl.”

He glanced up and smiled. “Hi, Ruby.”

“How you doing?”

“As well as you’d expect.” He went back to work on the glass of milk. Then he said: “It’s not everyday that I find a dead guy wearing a blue wig and ladies’ shoes in one of the rooms.”

I planted my caboose on the next barstool and asked Morton for a club soda with lime.

“Nothing stronger?” he asked, smiling.

“I’m on the job,” I said, tapping my right temple. “Need to keep a clear head.”

Morton nodded and went to get my drink. I asked Burl if he was up to telling me about finding Tripp.

He sighed. “I already told Hank and the detectives.”

“Of course,” I said. “And I want you to know that you’re under no obligation to talk to me if it’s too much of a strain. But I was hired by Violet Sullivan to handle another matter, and now I want to see if it relates to Tripp’s murder.”

He finished the milk and pushed the empty glass across the bar. “Hit me again, Squab.”

“You got it,” Morton said, delivering my club soda.

“What do you think?” I asked Burl.

He looked at me through his sad brown eyes. “About what?”

“Talking to me,” I said.

“Looks like I’m already doing that,” he said as the whisper of a smile flickered on his face. “Besides, I’ve got nowhere else to go. After a day like this, the last place I want to be is home alone.”

I waited while Morton brought a fresh glass of milk and a paper-wrapped straw to Burl. While he sampled the new batch, I sipped my club soda. After that, we sat in silence for a few minutes.

“How you doing?” I asked finally.

Burl glanced over. “No change since the last time you asked me that about ten minutes ago,” he said. “Now, what do you want to know about earlier?”

"Was the room paid for by Tripp or someone else?" I asked.

"Tripp's credit card," Burl said. "Although Esmeralda was the one who came by to make the reservation."

"That makes sense," I said. "She's the linchpin in that household."

"The what?"

"Linchpin," I repeated. "Same thing as the glue that holds everything together."

He nodded. "Right you are. She's a good woman. I didn't think she'd ever stop sobbing after we found what we found."

He closed his eyes and rubbed his face. I took another sip of my drink and waited.

"It was terrible," he said a few minutes later. "Poor Tripp. What a way to go."

"Murdered?"

"Naked," Burl said. "With his family jewels right there for the whole world to see and that stupid wig covering his face."

"So the wig wasn't actually on his head?"

"Yeah," Burl said. "It was on his head covering his face."

"Okay, so the wig was on his face," I said. "Did you or Esmeralda remove it to identify Tripp?"

"What for?"

"Well, if his face was—"

"Did you know that Tripp had a tattoo on his ankle?"

I shook my head.

"Of that Japanese cat," Burl said. "The one that all the little kids like."

"Do you mean the Hello Kitty character?"

"Whatever the hell it's called," he said sharply. "The damn fool had it tattooed on his skin. Like some kind of biker. Or an old guy having a midlife crisis."

Burl sipped his milk and muttered. Morton came over and asked if we were doing okay.

"Thanks, Mort," I said. "I think we're fine for now."

When Burl seemed to have regained his composure, I floated my next question.

"Was there anything else unusual about the room?"

He turned to me and frowned. "Other than the naked dead guy on a bloody bed?"

I nodded. "If this is too much for you, we can—"

"No, it's okay." He took a breath. "I'm sorry, Ruby. It's just been a day from hell is all. Know what I mean?"

"Of course," I said. "And the last thing I want to do is make it any worse for you."

"That's nice," he said. "I guess maybe I'm just tense is all."

"Understandably so. You had quite a shock earlier."

"I know!" he said, suddenly animated. "I've never seen anybody all trussed up with fur-trimmed handcuffs before. And the fact that it was such a prominent guy. And he was naked. And wearing women's shoes." Burl shook his head and rubbed his face again. "I mean, tell you the truth, I feel like I just stepped into an episode of *Law & Order*."

"I can see how it might seem that way," I said.

"Although it'd be more accurate to call it *Law & Odor*," Burl said. "On account of the room stank to high heaven."

I sat up on the barstool and leaned closer. "Go on," I said. "What did it smell like?"

"VapoRub," Burl told me. "That mentholated ointment my mother used to slop on me whenever I had a bad cold."

“And the room smelled like it?”

He nodded. “Yeah, and it was like we’d walked into the VapoRub factory or something. The smell just hung in the air, real pungent and strong.”

“Could it have been someone that works at the motel?” I asked. “Maybe somebody from the housekeeping staff?”

Burl smiled. “You’re looking at the housekeeping staff,” he said.

“Oh, really? I thought you’d hired that Miranda...” I tried to remember the last name. “Was it Miranda Welch?”

“She quit,” Burl said. “Ran off to Albany with some musician that stayed here a couple weeks ago when his band played out at the Big Kat Korral.”

I nodded. “Okay, so the room smelled like mentholated ointment. And Tripp was naked.”

“Yeah,” Burl said. “The family jewels just right there.”

“For all the world to see,” I said.

“Until Esmeralda got one of the wash cloths from the bathroom and covered up Tripp’s Johnson.”

“Oh, really?”

“She was talking a whole bunch of Mexican words,” Burl said. “Which I don’t speak. So I have no idea what she was saying.”

“Esmeralda is actually from Colombia,” I said. “And the native language is Spanish.”

“Okay, sure. It all sounds the same to me.”

I waited while he finished his second glass of milk.

“Were Tripp’s clothes on hangers?” I asked.

“Hell, no. They were willy-nilly all over the room. Like he’d been in a big hurry to strip naked.”

“And did you happen to notice who he was in the room with?”

Burl sighed. “I already told Hank and the detectives,” he said. “It was a woman wearing the blue wig.”

“So you saw her enter the room?”

He nodded. “Even though she hoofed it in from the car real quick,” he said. “Like she didn’t want anybody to see her going in the room.”

“On account of the motel’s reputation?”

Burl narrowed his eyes. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Skip it,” I said. “So the woman in the blue wig hurried—”

“I know what you’re getting at,” he interrupted. “I know how people talk about the Capri. But it’s a viable business establishment that provides a meaningful service to the community.”

I smiled. “A place for philanderers to shag their love buckets?”

Burl nodded. “Basically,” he said. “And I do not judge, okay? It’s none of my business what goes on behind closed doors.”

“Until it ends in murder,” I said.

He blinked. “Well, sure. Then it *is* my business. Which is why I unlocked the door after Esmeralda came to the office earlier. She was flapping her hands and going on in Mexican about Tripp.”

“Spanish,” I said.

“Sure, okay.” He shrugged. “Sorry, it’s a habit. She was talking in Spanish about Tripp.”

“Any idea what she was saying?”

“No, on account of I don’t speak Spanish,” Burl said. “But she made it very clear that she was concerned about his welfare and safety.”

“And so you opened the door to his room?”

Burl nodded. His eyes closed and he took a deep breath.

“It was horrible,” he said. “I never want to see anything that bad again.”

I reached over and put my hand on his shoulder. “I think that’s enough for today, Burl. I really appreciate you talking to me.”

He looked over and smiled. “Got nowhere else to be,” he said. “How about you and me go to the Steak Stampede for a bite to eat?”

“Two-for-one special?”

He smiled. “Yeah, what do you think?”

“You bet,” I said. “And it’ll be my treat.”

CHAPTER 24

Clint was on the back deck drinking a glass of wine when I got home from Steak Stampede. He patted his lap and reached for my hand.

"Come on up here, little lady," he said. "Tell Santa what you want for Christmas."

"A hot bath," I said, sitting gingerly on his knees. "And a strong cocktail."

"Bad day?"

"Long day," I said. "Tripp Sullivan was murdered this afternoon at the Capri."

Clint's mouth fell open like an unhinged trap door. After a moment, I closed it with one finger.

"You hadn't heard?" I asked.

"No, I was out on my route all day," he said, looking bewildered. "And my sister never called..." He squinted, deep in thought. "I should see if she's okay."

"Want my phone?"

He shook his head. "It might be better to wait until she calls me," he said. "Maybe she doesn't even know yet. I mean, I hadn't heard a thing all day. They must've kept the news quiet."

"Not really," I told him. "The reporters were there from Channel Ten and the Fox station along with a couple of radio crews."

"Okay, so I was oblivious I guess," Clint said. "What happened to Tripp? Are you sure it was murder?"

"There's no doubt," I said. "He was stabbed."

"Jesus," Clint hissed. "With one of his hunting knives?"

"No," I answered. "With a nail file."

He grinned. "Are you pulling my leg?"

"Not at all. Someone stabbed him in the neck with a nail file that may have belonged to his wife."

"Jesus," he said again.

"It gets worse," I said. "He was also naked."

Clint winced. "Don't tell me that you had to look at that."

"I never went in the room. Hank had it sealed up pretty tightly by the time I got to the motel."

"Then how do you know Tripp wasn't wearing any clothes?"

"Various sources," I said. "And it's been confirmed."

Clint nodded. "Well, it sounds pretty sleazy. I mean, the Capri. And naked."

"Wearing handcuffs and leopard high heels," I said. "With a blue nylon wig covering his face."

Clint frowned. "Now you're pulling my leg."

"Nope," I said. "All of that has been confirmed by authorities as well."

"Hank?"

"Various sources," I said again. "But mainly Hank."

"How's he doing?"

"I think he's okay, why?"

"Just wondering," Clint said. "I heard about him and Shelby getting separated."

"Yeah, the poor lout. His track record with women isn't very impressive."

We sat quietly for a few minutes. I draped one arm around Clint's neck and gave him a long, lingering kiss.

"Okay, little lady," he said finally. "Santa's lap needs a break for a few minutes."

I pushed up and away. "Want me to fix us a drink?"

"Let Santa do that," he said. "You go and climb into your bath. I've already lit the candles and the water should be the perfect temperature about now. I filled the tub right after you called from Burl's place."

I leaned in for another kiss. "You're a peach, Clint Bodeen."

"And you're the apple of my eye, Ruby Eloise."

We stood on the deck for a few minutes, arms looped around waists, my head on his brawny chest.

"Okay, scoot," he said. "I'll meet you in there."

A few minutes later, as I soaked in the lilac bubble bath and the votives flickered on the edge of the tub, I thought about the unforeseen developments of the day. Tripp Sullivan was dead. Violet was now a widow instead of a spurned wife. And the scene of the crime smelled of VapoRub and sordid trysts.

I had new leads to follow in my quest to help Violet sort out the aftermath of her husband's murder. After Burl mentioned the Hello Kitty tattoo on Tripp's ankle, I recalled Myra Morgan telling me that Dita Ingersoll had the same caricature on her leg. Besides the possibly matching tattoos, I also needed to investigate the blue wig, the fur-trimmed handcuffs and the leopard print high heels. Since the alleged murder weapon had Violet's initials on the blade, I'd ask her about that little coincidence. I could check with Blaze Cohen to see if Tripp and Dita had possibly visited his tattoo parlor for matching ink. And there was a chance that Myra might know something about the shoes. As for the blue wig and handcuffs, I'd just have to do what I did best: ask questions, dig for evidence and snoop around in Wormwood's adult novelty shop to see if they sold anything matching the evidence found at the Capri.

"Here's your favorite beverage of choice for stressful days," Clint said, appearing in the bathroom door. He held a root beer float in his left hand and a bottle of Wild Turkey in his right. "Along with something stronger in case you want to kick it up a notch or two."

"I'll take the root beer now," I said. "And see how I feel about the Wild Turkey in a second."

I sipped the float as Clint sat on the edge of the tub. Then I splashed his boxer shorts with sudsy water and motioned for him to climb in.

"You're feeling better already?" he asked.

"A little," I said. "And I imagine your arms around me will help a whole lot."

He smiled, stood up and started to get out of his underwear. But then my phone rang. I'd left it on the counter by the sink just in case.

"Oh, for crying out loud," Clint moaned.

"No kidding," I said. "Would you see who it is?"

He looked at the caller ID.

"It's Violet," he said.

I handed him the root beer float and he passed me the phone. I clicked on and heard Violet snapping a wad of gum.

"Ruby Wisdom," I said. "How can I help?"

"It's me," Violet said. "There's been a burglary."

"At the Motel 6?"

She grumbled something. Then she said: "At home."

"You left the motel?"

"Yes," she said. "I decided that I need to take the bull by the horns. What happened to Tripp is a sign, Ruby. I've got to seize the day. Carpe diem, right?"

"I think it's 'carpe diem,' but I get the point."

"I knew you would," she said. "I tried talking to Dita about it, but she was all weepy and emotional about my Tripp getting cut down in cold blood."

"Are you home alone, Violet?" I asked.

"No, Esmeralda is here. And my parents drove up from Cleveland as soon as they heard the news."

"Well, that's a good thing. I'd hate to think of you in that big house all alone on a night like this."

"Thank you, Ruby. I think they're going to stay for a few days. And Esmeralda said she'd be happy to sleep in the guest bedroom instead of going home to her place until I'm feeling less shaky."

"Even better," I said. "Now, tell me about the burglary. Are you sure someone broke in?"

"Well, I know they stole a bunch of my personal things. Isn't that a burglary?"

"Maybe," I said, not wanting to get into the semantics of specific criminal acts. "Did you call the sheriff's dispatcher? They can send someone out to look into it for you."

"That's not necessary," Violet said. "I mean, they took my personal things, not anything of real value."

"Your personal things?"

"Yes, can you believe it?" she asked. "My bedroom slippers and my hairbrush and the nail file that I got last year from Tripp for our anniversary. He gave me a full set of manicure tools with my initials engraved on them. And they came in this cute little tortoise shell box."

"Did they take the whole kit?" I asked.

"No," Violet told me. "Just the nail file. Isn't that the strangest thing?"

"It's very strange," I said. "I think you might want to call the sheriff, Violet. Considering everything else that's happened today, it might be a good idea to have an official report about the theft of your personal property."

"I don't think that's really necessary," she said. "It's just a bunch of trivial trinkets. Toots does my nails anyway, you know. I go for my weekly manicure on Friday mornings. I'm sorry the nail file is gone, but the rest of the manicure set is here so it's fine. I'll cherish it just the same as a keepsake of my marriage to Tripp." She whimpered a little and said something under her breath that I couldn't make out. "The lying, cheating, despicable son of a tick."

We talked for a few more minutes about the items that were missing. Then I suggested that we meet in the morning to discuss the theft and Tripp's demise.

"I want to help you during these difficult days," I said. "Whatever I can do, okay?"

She sniffled a little. Then she blew her nose into the phone. And then she said: "Catch the wonton criminal that killed my Tripp, Ruby. That's the only thing I really care about right now."

CHAPTER 25

Esmeralda opened the door at the Sullivan residence the next morning with a grim expression on her face and a black ribbon tied around her right arm. She was a short, round woman with long black hair that she wore in a tight bun at the base of her neck. As always, she was dressed in a starched powder blue uniform and white shoes.

“To mourn Mr. Tripp,” she said, tapping the strip of dark fabric with one finger. “He was always good to Esmeralda, so I grieve over his death in the way my mother taught me.”

She stepped to one side and gestured for me to come across the threshold.

“Miss Violet is still in bed,” she said, closing the massive carved wooden door.

“Not feeling well?” I asked.

Esmeralda smiled. “Would you after six vodka tonics and a handful of sedatives?”

“Oh, golly,” I said. “Maybe I should come back later then.”

The housekeeper shook her head. “Miss Violet was very firm with me last night,” she said. “I have strict instructions to escort you to her room so the two of you can powwow.”

“Powwow?”

The smile widened. “Miss Violet has been watching a lot of old movies about cowboys and Indians,” Esmeralda explained. “She started calling me Pocahontas after the third cocktail.”

“Oh, golly,” I said again. “Maybe I should have one before we get started.”

“Okay,” she said. “What would you like? Mimosa?”

“No, I was just kidding. It’s a little early in the day, and I’m on the clock. Maybe just a cup of coffee?”

“With cream?”

“That would be perfect,” I said. “Now, which way to Violet’s bedroom?”

I followed Esmeralda across the foyer, up a sweeping staircase, down a long corridor and through a set of double doors into a shadowy room that smelled of fried chicken and Shalimar. I recognized the fragrance immediately because it was my mother’s signature perfume.

“Shalimar,” I said softly.

“Yes,” Esmeralda said. “Miss Violet mistook the bottle for a pint of gin. I knocked it from her hands before she could take a sip.” She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “It could’ve made her very sick, and the last thing this family needs is more tragedy.”

We walked toward the bed. A large mound was in the middle, covered by blankets and a floor-length fur coat.

Esmeralda reached over and plucked the coat from the pile. “Miss Violet wears her chinchilla when she is sad,” she explained.

“What?” a voice called from beneath the mountain of fleece and wool. “Someone say my name?”

“Violet?” I said softly. “It’s Ruby Wisdom.”

The blankets suddenly flew up and away from the bed and Violet appeared. She was wearing a pink lace bra, polka dot pajama bottoms and a smear of red lipstick.

“For heaven’s sake!” she bellowed. “Why are you both lurking around my bed?”

Esmeralda cleared her throat delicately and stepped closer. Then she said: “Time for your powwow, Miss Violet.”

“It’s morning already?”

“Yes,” the housekeeper said. “It’s nearly ten o’clock.”

“Are you kidding?” Violet said, crawling out from under the remaining bedding. “I probably look like death warmed over!”

I winced at the unfortunate reference, but kept smiling and helped her from the bed. She tottered across the room and plopped onto an overstuffed sofa by the fireplace.

“Dear Esmeralda,” she said once she was comfortable. “Could you please bring me a little highball?”

“How about a glass of mineral water and two aspirins?” the housekeeper asked.

Violet thought for a minute, fluffed her hair and nodded. “Even better,” she said. “Mommy has a little headache now that you mention it.”

After Esmeralda left, Violet pressed back into the sofa and groaned loudly. “Ruby, my life is a nightmare!” she said. “A living, goddamn nightmare!”

“We’ll get it straightened out,” I said, lowering myself into a club chair. “The most important thing for you to do is take care of yourself, Violet. Get plenty of rest. Eat a healthy diet. Maybe cut back on the cocktails.”

She glared at me. “I know what I’m doing, Ruby. I’m drowning my sorrow in gin and vodka.”

I waited. She leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

“Tripp is gone,” she said finally. “I’m alone.” A tear appeared in her left eye and slowly tumbled down her cheek. “It’s just me and ten million dollars.”

I waited some more. She sat up, opened her eyes and brushed the tear from her face.

“I found out last night that the bullshit about Tripp’s will was a lie,” she said.

“What about his will?”

“There was a note at the Capri,” she went on. “It was left on the dresser along with his wallet, a box of antacid tablets and his wedding ring. “Somebody was trying to make it look like a suicide, Ruby. Can you believe that?”

I couldn’t, but I decided to keep that to myself since she was on a roll.

“The note said that Tripp was leaving his entire estate to Dita Ingersoll,” Violet said. “That nasty tramp! And to think she’d been to my house for book club last week!”

“Book club?”

Violet smiled. “Same thing as cocktails,” she said. “Four of us girls get together for drinks once a month. We’ve been doing it for years. I think that may have been when my things were stolen.”

“Why do you think that’s when the theft occurred?”

She extended one finger and jabbed it repeatedly against her forehead. “Because I’ve been using my noggin,” she said. “I retraced my steps back through the past few days. Besides me and Tripp and Esmeralda, nobody else has been in the house since last Tuesday night.”

I wondered about Tripp’s extramarital excursions, but decided to keep that to myself as well. There was no sense introducing logic to the equation and Violet seemed to be on to a reasonable theory.

“It was the usual group,” Violet said. “Cora Trout, Maude Sinclair, Dita Ingersoll and me.”

Esmeralda returned with a glass of water and a cup of coffee on a silver tray.

“Here are your drinks,” she said, delicately placing the tray on the tufted ottoman in front of the sofa. “Would there be anything else I can do for you now, Miss Violet?”

“No, thank you so much,” Violet said. “You’re being such a doll.”

The housekeeper gave me a quick smile and then slipped out of the room. Violet lifted the glass of water and sipped it for a few minutes. She looked lost and adrift, with a sad frown on her face and a glaze over her eyes.

"How are you feeling, dear?" I asked finally.

She returned the glass to the tray. "Like poop," she said. "Like a big old pile of poop."

"That's understandable, Violet. You've been through quite a lot in the past few days."

"You're telling me." She sighed noisily and leaned back against the cushions again. "I learn that my husband's been cheating on me with a series of tramps. He kicks me out of the house and cuts off my money. And then he gets himself killed at the seediest motel in town." She huffed and waved her hands in the air. "That's not what I signed up for, Ruby. I did not become Mrs. Tripp Wolcott Sullivan to be thrown out like hog slop and left on the side of the road."

Since she was on a roll again, I sipped my coffee and listened intently.

"That piece of poop Dita Ingersoll's fingerprints are all over this mess," she continued. "The stolen nail file. The fake suicide note. The stench of VapoRub in the motel room."

I put my cup down and turned in my chair to face her.

"What was that?"

She scowled. "What was *what*?"

"You suspect Dita in the theft of the nail file?"

Violet nodded. "She's the only one that went tinkle when the girls were here for cocktails," she said. "And she even used the upstairs bathroom." She pointed across the room toward the open door. "It's right out there and down the hall to the left. So she had ready access to my personal belongings last week. That must be when she stole my nail file and slippers and whatnot." She heaved a sigh and shook her head. "You know what else, Ruby?"

"I haven't a clue," I said.

"Dita was gone so long that I sent Cora up to make sure she hadn't drowned in the toilet."

"That's interesting," I said, making a mental note. "What other items went missing that day?"

Violet shook her head. "I'd rather not say."

"Because you're not sure?"

"Because I'm a lady!" she said loudly. "And a lady doesn't need to tell anyone about the personal battery-operated appliance that she keeps in her bedside drawer." She paused and raised one eye. "If you catch my drift."

"Most definitely," I said. "So you believe that Dita came into your bedroom last Tuesday while everyone else was downstairs?"

Violet nodded.

"And you believe that she removed your monogrammed nail file, a pair of bedroom slippers and the..." I lowered my voice. "...the personal battery-operated appliance from the bedside table?"

"That's what I just said, Ruby. Why are you repeating all of this?"

"Just to clarify," I told her. "You originally hired me to investigate Tripp's extramarital dalliances, but now I'd like to help you find a way forward through the mire of his murder."

"The *what* of his murder?"

"The mire," I said again. "The muck. The mess. The sludge."

"Oh, sure." She reached for her glass of water again. "That tramp Dita brought plenty of sludge and muck into my life."

"Do you suspect that she and Tripp were—"

“Doing the horizontal mambo?” she said.

“Yes, that’s what I meant.”

Violet swirled the ice cubes around in her empty glass. Her eyes followed the translucent chunks as they circled the bottom of the tumbler.

“I didn’t think Tripp was fooling around with Dita until last night,” she said after a moment. “But I started to do the math, Ruby. I realized that my things were probably stolen last week when Dita was up here. And I realized that she’s been asking me too many questions about Tripp lately. She’s been working like a busy beaver to try and get me to divulge personal and private details about our marriage and so forth. But she drinks a bit, you know? She was always pretty tipsy when she’d pry and poke her nose into our business.”

“But we saw Clarissa on the nanny cam videotapes,” I said.

Violet glanced up. “And your point is?”

“We don’t have any proof that Dita was involved with Tripp.”

“Wake up and smell the trickery, Ruby!” She suddenly slammed the glass down on the silver tray. A few cubes of ice flew out of the tumbler and onto the floor. “That bitch was trying to get my Tripp’s fortune! I mean, the fake suicide note! The claim that he’d left his entire estate to Dita Ingersoll! I mean, isn’t that proof?”

“It’s all circumstantial,” I said.

She slanted her head to one side. “It’s all *what*?”

“Circumstantial,” I said. “It’s incidental information that suggests something is factual, but doesn’t actually prove that it’s true.”

“Can you just say it in plain English?” she asked.

“It’s like I told you the other day. You may suspect Dita was sleeping with your husband, but we’d need to catch them *in flagrante delicto* to prove that they were.”

She thought for a minute, smoothing wrinkles from her pajama bottoms and brushing loose strands of hair from her eyes. Then she looked up, crossed her arms and smiled.

“Did you watch *all* the videos?”

I shook my head. “Not yet,” I told her. “There are hundreds of hours of footage.”

“Well, I’ll bet you ten million dollars that Dita’s skinny ass is going to show up on those tapes.”

“Perhaps,” I said. “And I’ll go back to reviewing the video evidence as soon as I can. In the meantime, what can I do to help you, Violet?”

She made a little sound in her throat and shook her head. “I don’t know, Ruby,” she said. “Maybe run downstairs and fix me a little highball?”

CHAPTER 26

Aunt Dot and Uncle Boom were at the bar in Bella Napoli when Clint and I walked into the restaurant at seven that evening.

“Uh-oh,” he whispered. “It looks like they’re arguing.”

I glanced over and saw Aunt Dot tugging viciously on one of Uncle Boom’s earlobes.

“If they’re still alive and kicking,” I said, “there’s a ninety percent chance they’ll be arguing. It’s how they demonstrate their love for one another.”

Clint groaned. “Promise that you and I will never do that, okay?”

“You got it, mister.” I grabbed his hand and squeezed tightly. “The only way we’ll demonstrate our love is with love.”

“I like the way you think, Ruby Eloise.”

I gave him a quick kiss. “And I like the way you do *everything*, Clint Bodeen.”

We made our way across the room to the table where my mother sat alone with a glass of white wine on ice.

“What’s happening with Fric and Frac?” I asked. “Why are they at the bar and not here at the table with you?”

“I told them to go over there and resolve their differences before you two arrived,” she said.

“What were they arguing about?” Clint asked, pulling out my chair.

My mother smirked. “Who knows? Probably something like whether or not oxygen is real. Or if the moon is made from cheese. Those two truly believe that bickering is a form of affection.”

“I’m glad you and Jack don’t behave that way,” I said.

My mother smiled. “Amen to that. Your stepfather’s a good man, dear. Even if he can’t tell time.”

“So he’s late again?”

She nodded. “He’s still in the city. I reminded him this morning about dinner tonight. And he promised to leave his meeting a little early so he’d be back to meet us at the restaurant.”

“Isn’t he joining us at all?”

She shrugged. “Maybe he’ll get here for dessert. But it’s fine. We three can have a lovely evening while Yin and Yang squabble.”

A waiter appeared on my left. He asked for our drink orders and told us about the specials.

“And we have a spicy seafood pasta dish,” he said, wrapping up the roster. “It’s called The Devil’s Shrimp.”

Without missing a beat, my mother pointed at my aunt and uncle as they meandered toward us. “That’s okay,” she said. “We have the devil’s next of kin joining us tonight. I don’t think we need any more fiery ingredients.”

Clint jabbed me under the table. “This should be entertaining,” he whispered.

“Or infuriating,” I replied. “It’s usually one or the other.”

“Look at what the cat dragged in,” Uncle Boom said when they reached the table. “Our darling Ruby and the poor sap that became entangled into her web of love and romance.”

Clint’s jaw tightened. “Hello, Mr. Holder,” he said politely. “How are you two doing tonight?”

Aunt Dot leaned down and kissed Clint on the cheek. “This bozo thinks *Seinfeld* was a reality show.”

“Don’t start up with me again, Dorothy!” Uncle Boom yelled. “I’m right. You’re wrong. Get used to it.”

After they were seated and the waiter brought my glass of pinot noir and a beer for Clint, Aunt Dot tapped me on the wrist.

“Tell your uncle that he’s wrong,” she said.

“About what?”

“That thing he just said.”

“About *Seinfeld*?” I asked.

Aunt Dot rolled her eyes. “Yes,” she answered. “He insists it was a reality show. But anyone with half a brain knows for a fact that it was a sitcom.”

“You’re right,” I said. “It was a sitcom.”

“For the love of Pete!” Uncle Boom shouted. “It was a reality show!” He punched Clint’s shoulder. “Isn’t that right, Clark?”

“His name is Clint,” I said.

“No, it’s not,” Uncle Boom sputtered, looking more confused than usual. “His name is Jerry.” He smiled. “Jerry Seinfeld. And it was a reality show. Like those horrible housewife things that your aunt watches all the time.”

Clint leaned closer to Uncle Boom. “She means that *my* name is Clint,” he said. “Not the character on the sitcom or the comedian who played him.”

Uncle Boom sneered at Clint. Then at me. And then at Aunt Dot.

“So what’s this?” he asked. “You three amigos ganging up on a poor old senior citizen?”

“Zip it, Robert,” my mother said. “If you don’t have anything nice to say, please just sit there and look pretty.”

“A full house, is it?” Uncle Boom said. “All four of you wise guys are going to make my life miserable tonight?”

“Just returning the favor,” Aunt Dot said, reaching for a piece of garlic bread. “Why don’t we all talk about something a little more interesting than why Robert believes a sitcom was a reality show?”

Uncle Boom started to say something, but my mother wagged one finger at him. “Not a peep,” she said.

“Maybe Ruby could tell us about her day,” Aunt Dot suggested. “What’s new in the exciting world of private investigating?”

“Tripp Sullivan was found dead at the Capri Motel,” I said, taking a piece of bread from the basket. “So I’m working with his widow now to help ease her through the situation.”

“What was that?” Uncle Boom asked.

“Tripp Sullivan,” Aunt Dot told him. “He was murdered in a room at that fleabag motel. Wearing nothing but handcuffs and high heels.”

I nearly choked on my bite of garlic bread. “Where did you hear that?” I asked. “Those details weren’t released to the media.”

Aunt Dot clucked her tongue. “It’s all over town, Ruby. I heard it from Peaches Wellington when I stopped in at the drug store to refill your uncle’s prescription for his little blue pills.”

Everyone at the table looked at Uncle Boom. He scowled, cupped one hand to his ear and asked what the hell was so funny.

“Nothing,” my mother said. “I’m not surprised that you take Viagra.”

He leaned closer. “What was that about Niagara?”

“We were talking about the falls,” my mother said. “They’re lovely this time of year.”

Uncle Boom shook his head. "They look the same every damn day," he said. "Why would this time of year be any different?"

My mother glared at him. "Thank you for that, Robert."

"You're welcome," he barked. "Now, where the hell is that waiter? I need another drink."

"You need another lobotomy," Aunt Dot said. "But I suppose that's too much to hope for."

We sat quietly for a few minutes. The waiter returned. Uncle Boom ordered a Manhattan and Aunt Dot told the man to make it a Shirley Temple. I tried to engage my mother in a conversation about her efforts to clean the attic, but she dismissed the question with a shrug.

"What's Hank say about Tripp's murder?" Aunt Dot asked finally.

"I'm not sure what you mean," I answered.

Aunt Dot sipped her drink. "Does he have any suspects?" she said. "Besides all the tramps that scalawag was bopping?"

My mother grunted. "Is this appropriate dinner conversation?"

"What should we talk about?" Aunt Dot said. "*Seinfeld*?"

"What's that?" Uncle Boom asked.

"Don't start," my mother told him. "Just keep minding your own business."

"My own *what*?" he blurted.

"Oh, somebody get me a one-way ticket to the moon," Aunt Dot muttered. "Just pretend he's a bale of hay. That's how I've survived the last forty years of marriage."

CHAPTER 27

In the morning, after a vanilla latté and chocolate chip bagel at Rolls with Holes, I headed for Sullivan Cadillac to check on Heather Cain. I had called her the previous afternoon, but it went straight to voicemail. I'd dialed the dealership immediately after that, but the woman who answered said Heather was in no condition to talk.

The showroom floor was hushed and still when I pushed through the glass door. Two salespeople were huddled in a cubicle, their heads close together and their brows furrowed with bewilderment. I imagined everyone was trying to figure out who would assume leadership of the business now that Tripp was gone.

"Can I help you?" asked the perky blonde behind the reception desk.

"Good morning," I said. "I'm looking for Heather Cain."

She smiled. "Join the club. Nobody's seen her since yesterday afternoon."

"Did she call in sick?"

"No." The blonde shook her head. "She called in scared."

"Pardon me?"

"After we got the news about Mr. Sullivan yesterday, Heather told everyone about the death threats. She's terrified that the killer will do the same thing to her."

"Did she leave town?"

"I'm not at liberty to say," the blonde answered.

"Do you know where she is?"

"No comment."

"Look," I said. "My name is Ruby Wisdom. I'm a private investigator, and I—"

"I know who you are," the woman said. "But that doesn't change anything. Heather's life is in jeopardy. I'm not going to tell *anyone* where she's hiding."

"Okay, so that means you do know where she is."

"Like I said," the woman told me. "No comment."

"Can you get a message to her for me?"

The woman sighed. "I'm not at liberty to say."

"Do you realize how ridiculous this is?" I asked.

"No comment," she said.

I took a breath, counted to ten and pulled one of my business cards from my pocket. "If you change your mind," I said, sliding the card across the desk, "please tell Heather that I'm concerned about her and want to help."

The woman picked up the card and dropped it in a drawer. "Will there be anything else?"

"No, thanks," I said, smiling. "You've been a huge help."

I turned, went back outside and headed for my car. As I reached for the door, I heard someone whistle. I glanced over my shoulder and Heather Cain appeared around the corner of the building. She whistled again and waved me over.

"What are you doing out here?" I asked when I slipped around the side of the dealership. She was pressed against the wall, looking pale and trembling slightly. "The woman inside just told me that you weren't at work today."

"She didn't lie," Heather said. "I'm not working, but I figured this was a good place to hide what with all the mechanics and other people around." A horn blared from the parking lot and

she squealed loudly. "Damn it all! I'm so jittery, Ruby. I've never been this scared in all my life."

"I can understand that," I said. "But I don't really think you have anything to worry about."

Her eyes bulged and her head quivered. "Tripp's dead!" she whispered. "That means the killer is watching my every move!"

"Maybe you should talk to Sheriff Martin," I suggested.

"About what?"

"Your safety concerns," I said.

She nodded. "I heard about him and Shelby. That's such sad news, isn't it? Breaking up on account of he's shooting blanks."

Now my eyes bulged. "I don't see how Hank's fertility issues are at all related to the death threats you received, Heather. You need to focus here."

"Sure thing," she said. "I'm sorry. I didn't sleep a wink last night, between the news about Tripp and the greasy pizza and being terrified that the murderer is coming for me next."

"Nobody's coming for you," I said. "The whole thing centers on Tripp Sullivan's duplicitous ways."

"His *what* ways?"

"The fact that he was cheating on his wife."

"Oh," she said. "So you think Violet did it?"

I shook my head. "I don't, but I imagine she'll be on the list of suspects until Hank and his team can confirm her alibi."

"Oh, my God!" Heather gasped. "Do you think I'm gonna need an alibi?"

"Did you kill him?"

"Heavens no!" she said. "He was my boss. I maybe didn't like the guy very much, but I'd never jab him in the neck with his wife's nail file."

"Where'd you hear about the nail file?"

She shrugged. "It's all over town, Ruby. Everybody knows Tripp was buck naked when he met his maker."

"Not completely," I said under my breath.

"You mean the handcuffs and high heels?" asked Heather.

"I suppose that's all over town, too?"

She smiled. "Peaches Wellington heard it on her police scanner. She told a few people and they told everyone else."

"Good old Peaches," I said. "Always one step ahead of the law."

Heather frowned. "You think *she* did it?"

I laughed. "No, I don't think Peaches killed Tripp," I said. "She's ninety years old. She uses a motorized scooter to get around town. And she's the oldest living Girl Scout in the tri-state region."

A look of relief swept over Heather's face. She leaned back against the cinderblock wall and sighed. "I'm just so tired, Ruby. Worrying that somebody's going to kill you is exhausting."

"Maybe you and your boyfriend should get away for a few days," I suggested. "Is that something you and he could do?"

She smiled and giggled. "That's the same thing Ty said we should do."

"What can I say?" I asked. "Great minds think alike."

"I guess so," Heather said.

She looked down at the gravel. "But what about Tripp?" she said quietly. "What if they don't catch the killer?"

"They will," I said confidently. "Hank Martin's a dedicated law enforcement professional and his team is rock solid. They'll follow every lead until they identify and detain the person or persons responsible for what happened to Tripp yesterday at the Capri."

"Make sure you tell Hank to look into Atlantic City," Heather said, yawning and stretching her arms. "In the mess and confusion yesterday, I forgot to tell the deputy that interviewed me last night."

"What was that?"

One hand went to her cheek and she patted it lightly. "I feel like I'm gonna fall asleep standing up," she said.

"Well then, you and Ty should get on the road soon. Maybe have him do the driving."

"I will," she said, yawning. "He only has me drive if he's had too many beers down at the Tap Room."

"Smart man," I said.

"The smartest. And the cutest." She blushed and looked at the ground again. "And he's all mine!"

"You're lucky. I know how good it feels to be loved myself. It's the best feeling in the world."

She nodded.

"But before you go," I said. "What was that about Atlantic City?"

"I heard Mr. Sullivan say something about Atlantic City yesterday before he left the office," Heather said. "And I'm pretty sure he was talking to the woman with the Hello Kitty tattoo."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because Mr. Sullivan said something like 'I'm gonna say hello to your kitty while the sun comes up over the Atlantic.' And then he laughed and said some very nasty things. And then he asked if she'd bought a new bikini for their trip."

"What did she say?"

Heather rolled her eyes. "At that point, he was talking so dirty that I got up from my desk and went to the bathroom." She narrowed her eyes. "I mean, it's creepy enough as it is to think of him being naked, but I didn't want him to talk about rubbing his you-know-what on her Hello Kitty tattoo." She opened her mouth and put in a finger. "That's enough to make a person gag," she added. "Know what I mean?"

"I definitely know what you mean," I said as she yawned again. "And I agree completely."

CHAPTER 28

I left the Cadillac dealership and headed toward home, thinking it would be a good idea to sit on the back deck with a glass of something cool and consider what I knew so far about the situation. As with most things in the life of Tripp Sullivan, his death was a jumble of puzzlement, allusion and inexplicable elements. Hank's team was working the official investigation, but I wanted to do everything possible to lend a hand and save Violet from any additional strife.

As I turned onto Davidson Boulevard and drove past Wormwood City Park, I caught a glimpse of a teenage girl wearing a bright yellow bikini and a pair of translucent pink jelly sandals. She was walking hand-in-hand with a boy dressed in basketball shorts and flip-flops. They both had beach towels around their necks and they were carrying a picnic basket between them.

"Ah, young love," I said to myself. "How amazing to be—" I stopped and replayed my conversation with Heather Cain. "Holy crackers!" I slammed on the brakes, did a quick turn and steered my car in the direction of Forward Fashion.

"Well, if it isn't Ruby Eloise!" Myra Morgan chirped from behind the counter when I walked into the store a few minutes later. "You're lookin' pretty hot there, little mama!"

"Hey, beautiful," I said. "How's tricks?"

She pantomimed juggling. "Keeping the balls in the air," she said. "And the wolf from the door."

"That's a good place to start," I said. "Mind if I ask you a few questions about something I'm working on?"

"Fire away," Myra said. "I'm always up for helping our town's most esteemed PI."

I put my purse on the counter and pulled out my iPad.

"Have you sold any bikinis lately?"

"In the store?" Myra asked. "Or on the website?"

"Probably in the store," I said. "I got a lead today about someone buying a bikini. If it was a local woman, I figure they probably came in to see you."

She wiggled her mouth from side to side and tapped her pencil on the glass counter. Then she smiled and said: "Are you just trying to find out who's wearing what so you don't clash at a pool party?"

I shook my head. "It's related to the Tripp Sullivan case."

"But he wasn't wearing a bikini when they found him," Myra said. "He was completely bare except for—" She stopped when she noticed my frown. "Okay, so that wasn't what you meant?"

"Nope," I said. "I'm looking for any women that have been in to buy a bikini in the past week or so."

"Biological women?"

I made a face. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"Well, there's one really sweet transvestite that shops here every now and then," Myra explained. "He came in and bought a polka dot number that looked really hot when he modeled it for me." She swept the hair from her forehead and smiled. "I don't understand men wearing women's clothes. But it's not my place to judge others, especially when their behavior doesn't harm anyone else."

"Okay, I see your point," I said. "Have any *biological* women bought bikinis recently?"

Myra smiled. "Well, it's summertime, Ruby. You know they have! But you'll need to give me a sec to check my weekly inventory sheet, okay?"

While she went into the back office, I wandered around the store inspecting a few items. There was a filmy peach negligee that made me think of Clint. A bulky wool cardigan that made me glad it was summer. And a sleek beige pencil skirt that made me think of my thighs. On a table near the back, I found a slinky red-and-blue striped number that would be perfect to wear while lounging on a Saturday morning at home.

"You'd look stunning in that!" Myra said, coming through the beaded curtain that separated the store from the office and storage room. She had a manila folder in her hands. "I'll give you an extra twenty percent off if you take it today."

"Hmmmmmm," I said. "That's tempting, but I probably shouldn't. I'm saving my pennies for a trip to Hawaii."

"Oh, my God!" she shrieked. "Do you mean a honeymoon?" She tucked the folder under one arm and began clapping. "When did he propose?"

I smiled and shrugged. "It's wishful thinking," I told her. "He gave me a key to his place the other night. I figure the proposal is right around the corner."

"Oh, honey," Myra gushed. "I so hope you're right. Of all the women in town, you deserve a happily ever after most of all."

"Thanks, Myra. I appreciate that vote of confidence and your kind words."

She handed me the folder. "This is a list of all the bikinis that I've sold since May. I feel a little funny sharing this information, but you're kind of like a real detective."

"I am a real detective," I said. "The main difference is the name on my paycheck."

"Oh, of course." She smiled and nodded. "Because Hank's people get paid by the city, and you get paid by your clients."

"Exactly right," I said, opening the folder. I glanced at the sheet of six customers. At the top, printed neatly in blue ink, were two familiar names: Cora Trout and Dita Ingersoll.

Myra shuffled over to the counter. "You can take that with if you want," she said. "I made a copy just for you."

"Thanks, I will. This is helpful, Myra. I appreciate your willingness to lend a hand."

"What are friends for?" she said, giving me a wink. "Did you make up your mind about the striped number on the sale table?"

I shook my head. "I'd love to buy it, but I really want to be more disciplined about finances."

"How's business been?" she asked.

"Fair," I answered. "I'd just wrapped up my last case when Violet called and asked me to follow Tripp. She suspected he was cheating on her."

Myra blurted out a laugh. "Suspected?"

"Well, you know how it goes," I said. "Our gut tells us something's wrong, but our heart isn't in much of a hurry to find the proof."

"Oh, come on! The proof was walking all over town, day and night. Tripp's reputation was as sleazy as they get."

"I'm not disagreeing with you," I said. "But I like Violet. She's got a heart of gold."

"And now she'll be able to afford to have a gold anything her heart desires," Myra said. "Peaches said she heard Tripp's fortune was in the neighborhood of ten million bucks."

I nodded. "That's the rumor I heard, too. But I'm not concerned about that. I want to help Hank and his people find Tripp's killer."

She thought about what I'd said. Then she pointed at the manila folder. "You think the murderer might be on that list?"

"There's a chance," I said. "But who knows? Between the tip about the bikini and the wacky evidence recovered at the Capri, the clues do suggest a woman did it."

"Well, I really shouldn't say anything," Myra said, leaning closer and lowering her voice. "But Dita Ingersoll used Tripp's American Express card to buy her bikini."

"Is that right?"

Myra nodded. "He called ahead of time to say it would be okay," she said. "But you didn't hear that from me."

"Mum's the word." I flashed a smile. "And thanks for telling me."

"Just like Cora Trout," Myra said. "She used the same credit card to buy a blue wig across the street." She pointed through the window at Custom Creations, the costume shop owned by a retired soap opera actor named Barton Lane. "But you didn't hear *that* from me either."

Although he was over sixty, Barton's devotion to Botox, cosmetic surgery and strenuous exercise kept him looking like a man twenty years younger. I'd heard that he and Myra were having a torrid after hours affair in the storage loft at his shop, but I wasn't about to pry.

"Since you've mentioned it," I said, "how do you know that little tidbit of information?"

Myra blushed. "Pillow talk," she said with a wink.

"Excuse me?"

"I know that Cora bought that wig because Barton told me," Myra explained. "The other night, while we were in bed, he told me that Cora pranced into his shop and bought a blue wig, some pink fur-trimmed handcuffs and a pair of leopard print heels."

My heart skidded to a stop.

"What's wrong?" Myra said. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

I swallowed and told her I was fine.

"Then why do you look so weird?"

"I'm just distracted by the whole thing with Tripp," I said.

"I get that. He was a complete jerk, but nobody deserves to die that way."

"Nobody," I said.

We shared a moment of silence in respect for the jerk. Then Myra said: "Is it true his toe nails were painted fuchsia?"

I laughed. "Not that I know of," I said. "Maybe you should check with Peaches."

CHAPTER 29

My phone rang as soon as I left Myra's shop. I glanced at the caller ID. It was my brother. I considered letting it go to voicemail, but decided to talk to him instead. Maybe it would be a brief diversion from the murder investigation. Maybe Ben would effusively offer his admiration and support when I told him that I was working to identify the killer. Instead, I instantly regretted the decision to take the call.

"Where the hell have you been?" he snarled when I answered.

"Excuse me?"

"What? You going deaf like Uncle Boom?"

"No, I'm not going deaf," I said. "But I don't appreciate the way you started the conversation."

"Why? You getting all finicky about etiquette shit like Mom?"

I clenched my teeth, closed my eyes and leaned against my car. "Ben?" I said calmly. "Is there a point to this or did you just call to harass me?"

"This isn't harassment," he said. "This is me being concerned for my baby sister."

"Ah, how sweet," I purred. "Now, what the hell do you want?"

He chuckled. "You're mad."

"No, I'm not. But I don't have time to waste."

"I know," he said. "You're hot on the trail of the Blue Wig Babe."

I asked him to repeat the last part.

"The Blue Wig Babe," he said. "That's what the radio station is calling Tripp's killer."

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah," he said. "Peaches Wellington was on there being interviewed. I think she may have coined the phrase."

"Brilliant. Not only is she a nosy old lady, but now she's the media darling of Wormwood?"

"Something like that," Ben said.

Neither of us said anything for a few seconds. I heard an Aerosmith song in the background on Ben's end of the line. Then I heard the toilet flush.

"Were you going to the bathroom just now?"

"No way," he said. "I'd never talk on the phone and take a dump. That's disgusting."

"Then why did I just hear the toilet flush?"

"Oh, damn," he said. "Could you really hear that?"

"Yes."

"Oh, crap. I'm sorry, Ruby. I went earlier, but forgot to flush. I was walking by the bathroom just now while we were talking, and I—"

"Ben?"

"Yep."

"Bottom line," I said. "Why did you call me?"

"Oh, right." He laughed again. "It's about Uncle Boom."

"Didn't we already discuss him?"

"Some assclown keeps going to the gallery," Ben continued. "He's a gangster or a convicted felon or whatever."

"Lou Storto," I said.

"What?"

“Lou Storto. That’s the guy that was bothering Uncle Boom and Aunt Dot the other day.”

“Okay, sure,” Ben said. “Boom didn’t mention any names. But he was pretty upset when I saw him at the Tap Room earlier.”

“He was at the Tap Room earlier?”

“Jeez,” Ben said. “Is there an echo on here or what?”

“Just get to the point, Ben.”

“So the guy has been to the gallery three different times,” my brother said. “Just flipping Uncle Boom shit, you know? Telling him how lame the art is and asking personal questions about the business. Stuff like that.”

“And you want me to...” I let the question fade into the static on the line.

“Hello?”

“I’m still here.”

“Well, how the hell am I supposed to know that?” Ben asked. “You started to say something and then you just stopped talking. I thought maybe the call dropped or something.”

“What do you want me to do about Lou Storto?” I asked, doing my best to sound calm and unhurried.

“I don’t know,” Ben said. “Maybe kneecap him.”

I didn’t laugh. And I didn’t say a word. I just waited, pressing my teeth together and breathing deeply.

“Ah, c’mon, Ruby. You gotta admit that’s funny, right?”

“Wrong. There’s nothing amusing about somebody getting shot in the knee.”

“I didn’t mean literally,” my brother said. “Just ruffle his feathers a bit. Let him know that that sort of mob intimidation bullshit doesn’t fly in Wormwood.”

“Did Uncle Boom ask you to call me?”

“Heck, no. I’m taking the initiative to reach out because you’re connected.”

“To?”

“Hank,” said Ben. “You’ve got a hotline to the sheriff’s office, twenty-four hours a day and seven—”

I punched the END button my phone. I couldn’t take any more of my brother’s lame nonsense. I made a mental note to check in with Uncle Boom and Aunt Dot as soon as I got home that night. In the meantime, I had at least one more stop to make in downtown Wormwood.

CHAPTER 30

Inked was the only tattoo parlor in town. It was owned by Blaze Cohen, a refugee from Brooklyn who had moved to Wormwood a few months earlier. Inked was situated in a warren of small rooms on the third floor of a Victorian mansion a few blocks from the town square. I'd met Blaze one afternoon when Uncle Boom, after a trifecta of double martinis at the Tap Room, barged through the door of Blaze's business and demanded that he immediately tattoo WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU LOOKING AT? on his buttocks. Luckily, Boom fell asleep in the waiting area while Blaze finished the work he was doing and Aunt Dot called me to pick up my mother's wayward brother.

When I came through the door, the chime sounded and Blaze suddenly appeared from behind a black velvet curtain. He grinned and put his hands on his hips.

"Well, if it isn't Ruby Wisdom," he said warmly. "Is your uncle missing again?"

"Not today," I told him. "I think Aunt Dot's got him duct taped to the recliner."

Blaze laughed and motioned for me to follow him into the back. I slipped through the fabric divider into a long, narrow room with more black velvet drapes covering the walls. An old Grateful Dead track was playing at low volume from a quartet of massive speakers mounted near the ceiling in the corners of the room.

"Welcome to my inner sanctum," Blaze said, pointing at a battered black leather Chesterfield sofa. "Have a seat and make yourself at home." He waited until I was arranged on the creased leather cushions. "Can I get you a cup of tea or bottle of mineral water?"

"I'm fine, thanks. I don't want to interrupt your day any longer than necessary."

"What's up?" he asked. "What brings you to my part of the universe this afternoon?"

"I'm working a new case," I said. "There's a chance you might be able to help me if you don't mind a few questions."

"Probably just depends on what you ask," he said. "I'm not going to divulge my trade secrets or tell you where I keep my collection of Stephen Sondheim autographs."

I smiled. "Is that a joke?"

"Which part?"

"About Sondheim," I said. "You mean to tell me that a guy like you is into Broadway show tunes?"

The question wasn't all that unusual. Blaze stood a few inches north of six feet and he weighed around three hundred pounds. His long brown hair was sculpted into a braid that he wore tied with strips of black leather. He drove a Harley, lived in an Airstream trailer and had such intricate sleeve tattoos that it looked like he was dressed in a black sweater when he wore sleeveless T-shirts.

"A guy like me is into all kinds of stuff," Blaze said slowly. "Sondheim. Krav Maga. White water rafting. Beer pong. Ballroom dancing." He stopped and raised one eye. "Want me to continue?"

"I got it," I said. "And I'm sorry if my comment seemed impolite."

"You're good, Ruby. I get a kick out of shocking people with Sondheim."

"What's Krav Maga?"

"A form of martial arts," Blaze said. "There's a class tonight at eight if you want to come check it out."

"Sounds tempting," I told him. "But there's a blackberry cobbler at home with my name on it. Lifting the spoon from the bowl to my mouth is probably as much exercise as I'll be up for later."

He nodded and sat on the wooden bench that faced the sofa. "So you have questions about something?"

"I do."

"What can I help you with?"

"This might sound strange," I said. "But have you done any Hello Kitty tattoos lately?"

The laugh that came from his mouth was loud and burly. "Are you serious?"

I nodded.

"Sorry for laughing," he said. "That's just the last thing I expected you to ask me."

"Well?" I smiled. "Have you?"

"Three," he said. "Bing. Bang. Boom. First, a woman comes in and asks for one on her ankle. I didn't really think much of it, you know? In my line of work, you hear just about anything and everything you can imagine."

"Do you remember her name?"

He shook his head. "No, but I can check."

"If you don't mind," I said. "And the other two—were they women?"

He got up from the bench and walked across the room to a tall black filing cabinet. Another of his throaty laughs filled the space and he said: "One was a hot brunette named Cora." He opened the top drawer and began sifting through the contents. "I'll never forget because she also had me ink her first name on the back of her neck."

"That's Cora Trout," I said. "And the third?"

Blaze tugged a large white envelope from the drawer.

"The third Hello Kitty went to goofball Tripp Whatshisname. The Cadillac guy. The one that rides a donkey on his TV commercials."

"And all three had the same Hello Kitty tattoo put on their ankles?"

"Yep."

"And who paid for the ink?"

"Well, the Trippster took care of his and the Trout woman," Blaze said, sitting on the bench again. "They came in together one evening and used his American Express card."

I watched as he pulled a sheaf of papers from the envelope. He flipped through a few pages, ran his index finger down a neatly printed list and stopped as he got to the bottom of the sheet.

"Here we go," he said. "Dita Ingersoll."

"Kaboom!" I said.

"Yeah?"

"Sorry. I'm just following some leads and working a hunch."

"That's cool," Blaze said. "Anything else I can help you with?"

"Did Tripp also pay for Dita's tattoo?"

"No," Blaze said. "Her boyfriend paid for it."

"But I think Tripp Sullivan *was* her boyfriend."

Blaze shook his head. "It wasn't that wrinkled prune. It was..." He frowned and rubbed his chin. "I know Dita said the guy's name a bunch of times, but I can't remember it. And that was a cash sale, so I wouldn't have anything printed like I would if they'd paid with credit." He whispered a couple of names under his breath. "Yeah, I'm sorry. Nothing's coming up from the

memory bank. I remember she kept saying his name the whole time, like a little kid singing and playing.”

“And it definitely wasn’t Tripp Sullivan, right?”

“Yeah, I’m positive about that,” Blaze said. “The guy who came in with Dita was short and dumpy, like a sack of potatoes.” He rubbed his chin again, deep in thought. “Oh, here we go! Maybe this’ll help you. The guy reeked something fierce.”

“You mean like body odor?”

Blaze shook his head. “No, it wasn’t that,” he said. “The little stubby guy with Dita smelled like he’d just taken a bath in VapoRub.”

“Kaboom!” I said again.

CHAPTER 31

A small crowd was gathered on the sidewalk outside the Dot Boom Gallery at the corner of Jefferson and Third. They were dressed mostly in black with the occasional splash of dark gray. I counted five berets and three foreign accents as I waded through the throng toward the front door.

“What the hell?” Uncle Boom said when he saw me. “You finally decided to come to one of our openings?”

I smiled. “Looks that way.”

“What was that?” he yelled.

“It’s a beautiful day,” I said when he inched closer. “And it looks like you have a good turnout.”

He muttered a few garbled words and shuffled off toward the improvised bar in the corner of the room. A young woman dressed in black pants and a starched white shirt approached with a tray.

“Care for a glass of wine?” she asked.

“How about a bucket and a straw?” I said.

She maintained her blank expression and waited while I plucked one of the plastic tumblers from the tray. Without another word or as much as a raised brow, she spun around and disappeared into the swarm of art lovers. As I gazed at the paintings on the walls—enormous abstract canvases that looked like someone had spilled milk on a black carpet—I felt a hand on my back. When I turned around, Aunt Dot was beaming at me like a wrinkled angel.

“Hello, sweetheart,” she said. “You’ve made your uncle’s night.”

“I did?”

“Just by showing up,” my aunt said. “He’s tickled pink.”

“That’s nice. I’m sorry about my track record.”

“Your what?”

“You know—for missing all of your other openings.”

“Oh, pishposh,” she said. “You young people have very busy lives these days. I’m just glad to see you here tonight.”

“Did my mother come?”

“Been and gone,” Aunt Dot said. “Like the wind.” She rolled her eyes. “Like breaking wind. The poor thing never could stand being in a crowded room with people she’s never met.”

I nodded and sipped my wine.

“Okay, I should get back to it,” Aunt Dot said. “I’m working on Peaches Wellington. It’s time to go in for the kill.”

“Excuse me?”

“She’s thinking about buying one of the paintings in the other room,” my aunt explained. “It’s a lovely piece by an artist from Rochester. Peaches said she wanted to think about it for a few minutes.” She glanced at her watch. “That was an hour ago, and I want to see if I can close the deal before she gets too drunk.”

“You’re letting a ninety-year-old woman drink to excess?”

Aunt Dot shook her head. “She was half in the bag when she blew through the door on her scooter. Somebody told me she was celebrating her upcoming appearance on CNN.”

“On what?”

“CNN,” Dot said. “Haven’t you heard? She’s been booked for a talk show this weekend or something.”

“Is it related to Tripp’s murder?”

Aunt Dot giggled. “Heavens no,” she said. “It’s got something to do with a martial arts thing she’s doing with that tattoo guy.”

I smiled. The world was small and getting smaller with each passing day.

“What are you grinning about?” my aunt asked.

“Nothing,” I said. “But before you go talk to Peaches, is everything okay with you and Boom?”

She shrugged. “Who knows?” she said. “After forty years of marriage, we don’t make love as often as—”

I held up one hand. “Whoa now! That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what?” Aunt Dot said. “You asked if everything was okay.”

“Ben called me earlier and said that Lou Storto has been coming by on a regular basis,” I said. “Is he becoming a nuisance?”

“Your brother’s exaggerating,” Dot said. “Lou’s been in two or three times. He plops his fat butt on the chair and jawbones with your uncle. Tells him what we’re doing wrong with the gallery.” She waved at Peaches Wellington, who was slowly making her way through the crowd on her motorized scooter. “Okay, wish me luck. I’m going to see if I can get some moolah.”

I gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Good luck, sweetie.”

“I’m going to need it,” my aunt said, glancing at Peaches. “Look how glazed her eyes are. It just means she’s in a fighting mood. I know she’s going to wave her AARP card around and try to get me to knock off a couple hundred bucks.”

We both stepped to one side as Peaches swerved in our direction. When the scooter stopped, I noticed a silver flask tucked in the small wire basket attached to the handlebars.

“Would you look at that?” Peaches said. “Ruby Eloise Wisdom! How the hell are you, darling?”

I told her I was fine. Then I asked how she was.

“Top of the world,” she said. “I’m living life and loving it!”

“How’s your husband?”

She extended one finger and dragged it slowly across her neck. “That bum better stop playing online poker,” she said. “Or else it’s curtains for him.”

Aunt Dot reached over and patted Peaches on the arm. “You shouldn’t say things like that, dear. Not with what happened to Tripp Sullivan yesterday.”

“Well, my man isn’t looking over our back fence,” Peaches said. “He knows the grass is plenty green right there at home.” She winked and wiggled her eyebrows. “If you know what I mean.”

I didn’t want to think about what she meant, but it was too late.

“Our sex life is as frisky as it was the day we met,” Peaches said. “We maybe can’t do all the positions in the Kama Sutra anymore, but the truth is you don’t need all that crap. Missionary is just fine for us, thank you very much.”

Aunt Dot and I exchanged a nervous glance. Then she suggested I go check on Uncle Boom.

When I looked across the gallery, he was talking with an art lover wearing a black beret.

“He looks fine,” I said.

Aunt Dot delicately pressed one elbow into my ribs. "You never know," she said, leaning closer. "He may go rogue at any moment." She lowered her voice. "I need Peaches alone to close the sale, okay?"

"Oh, of course," I said. "I'll wander over there and see what Boom's up to." I smiled at Peaches as she unscrewed the cap on her flask. "Have a nice evening, Mrs. Wellington."

"You do the same, dear," she said. "And please give my regards to your husband."

I took a step back. "You do know that Hank and I are divorced, right?"

Peaches nodded. "I do, dear," she said. "But hope springs eternal. Maybe now that he and Shelby are breaking up on account of he's shooting blanks, the two of you can patch things up."

I managed a smile. "That's sweet, Mrs. Wellington. But I actually have a new boyfriend."

"Oh, I know all about Clint," Peaches said. "I keep my police scanner going around the clock. I heard your husband talking about your boyfriend with the dispatcher." She sipped from the flask and offered it to me. "Little nightcap, dear?"

"No, thanks." I raised my plastic tumbler of wine. "I'm all set."

After a brief conversation with Uncle Boom, I made my exit through the backdoor of the gallery. A couple was huddled together on the bottom step, holding hands and kissing in the moonlight.

"Sorry to bother you," I said. "But can I get through?"

"Oh, sure," the guy said, standing so I could slip by them.

As I walked down the steps and headed toward the far end of the alley, I caught the faint scent of VapoRub on the air. I looked over my shoulder, but I was alone. As I turned toward Jefferson Street, I saw a glowing orange dot in the shadows beside the Dumpster followed by a cloud of smoke swirling upward.

"Who's there?" I asked, reaching for the gun in my purse.

"Little Bo Peep," said a deep voice.

"Come out where I can see you," I said slowly.

A short, heavy man with greasy black hair appeared in the slice of moonlight. He slipped something into his coat pocket and held up one hand to inspect his fingernails.

"Are you Lou Storto?" I asked.

"Maybe," he said nonchalantly. "Who wants to know?"

"My name is Ruby Wisdom," I told him. "My aunt and uncle own the gallery over there."

"Tell me something I don't already know."

I stepped closer. "I've heard that you've been bothering them."

He laughed, a throaty, watery sound. Then he said: "You heard wrong, doll."

"Don't call me doll," I said.

"What should I call you?"

"Miss Wisdom will do."

He laughed again. Then he spit on the ground. "Think you're a big shot?"

I held his gaze, but didn't say anything.

"I know who you are," he said. "I know what you do for a living. And I know that you used to bone the sheriff."

"That's lovely," I said. "Clearly, your manners are impeccable."

Another soggy laugh filled the alley. "My manners got nothing to do with this," he said. "It's a free country we got right here. If I want to go in your uncle's gallery and take in the art, I'm allowed to do that." He spit again. "Whenever I want."

I inched my way toward him, one small step after the next.

"Look," I said. "Mr. Storto?"

"That's me," he said.

"Wormwood's a nice, quiet place. We don't take kindly to thugs and bullies."

"Then what about you?" he asked. "Aren't you trying to bully me right now?"

I shook my head. "I'm not bullying you," I said. "I'm communicating with you."

He smiled. One of his teeth was capped with gold and it glinted in the moonlight.

"You're right about it being a free country," I said. "But I'm not interested in hearing about you causing any more trouble for my aunt and uncle. Whatever happened in the past is ancient history." I paused, letting my words wind their way through the circuitous mush of his brain.

"And it needs to stay in the past, okay?"

"Listen, doll," he said. "Your tough gal act is pretty sweet. But I'm not doing anything wrong here. I'm having a smoke before I go inside and look at the art."

"Think again, sir."

His forehead creased as he tried to figure out what I meant. "What's that?"

"You should really be moving along, Lou. It's time to call it a night."

"More like time to call you a cab," he said, smiling again. "Maybe you just had one too many, doll. The booze is giving you artificial courage."

"Nope," I said. "My courage is giving me courage. Now, do us both a favor. Take one tiny step forward, make a left turn and find your way out of the alley. Then walk to whatever car you're driving, get behind the wheel and go back to the city."

"I'm not living in the city any more," he said. "I'm staying local at the moment."

I thought for a second, imagining that he was referring to Dita Ingersoll.

"That's fine," I said. "Then head home to wherever you're staying while you visit the area. And please remember what I said about my aunt and uncle, okay?"

He glowered at me in the gloomy shadows before spitting on the ground again. He warned me to keep my distance. "Everybody makes mistakes," he said. "I'm just trying to save you from a fatal one." Then he grunted, cursed and walked away.

I stayed where I was until he disappeared around the corner. Then I pulled out my phone, dialed Hank and told him to do a little digging into Lou Storto's background.

"Lou who?" Hank asked.

I repeated the name and spelled it slowly. "Got it?"

"Yep," he said. "But what's this all about, Ruby?"

"I don't know yet," I told him. "But something tells me Mr. Storto's up to no good."

CHAPTER 32

Since Clint was babysitting his niece and nephew, I had the night to myself. I fixed a salad and poured a glass of malbec before slipping into a XXXL Banksy T-shirt and my favorite pair of sweat pants. I flipped through every recording on the DVR until I found an old Sherlock Holmes movie with Basil Rathbone as the dazzling sleuth. Then I climbed into bed with my salad and wine. And then the phone rang.

"Seriously?" I muttered, glancing at the name on the screen: VIOLET S.

"Is this a bad time?" she asked.

"No such thing, Violet. What's happening?"

"Everything," she said. "And nothing."

"What do you mean, sister?"

She sniffled and blew her nose. I put my salad on the bedside table and sipped my wine. Then I gingerly guided her through a few deep breathing exercises.

"Okay," she announced a moment later. "I'm better now. I think I can talk without completely breaking down."

"Are you alone in the house?" I asked.

"Esmeralda is here. And my parents. But they just make me feel worse, so I'm thinking about asking them to go back to Cleveland after the funeral."

In the swirl of chaos and confusion following Tripp's murder, I hadn't thought much about the customary arrangements that follow death. Meeting with the funeral director. Selecting a casket. Planning the memorial service. Taking care of the burial arrangements. As I listened to Violet describe the most recent skirmish with her mother and father, I felt my eyes fill with tears. The poor dear was doing her best under the worst of circumstances to honor the memory of a man she loved despite his unfaithfulness.

"...because mother thinks that would be acceptable since she feels Tripp didn't deserve someone like me," she was saying when I returned from my daydream. "But I think everyone should have a proper farewell after they pass away, Ruby. It's the right thing to do." She waited for a response, but I was busy dabbing at my eyes with my T-shirt. "Are you still there?"

"Yes, yes," I said in a hushed, squelchy voice. "I'm right here."

"Oh, my word," Violet said. "Are you crying?"

"A little bit," I said.

"Because of Tripp?"

"I think it's because of you," I told her. "You're really being incredibly brave in light of everything that's happened."

"Oh, not at all," she said. "My doctor gave me some new pills this afternoon. I think they're kicking in right about now."

"Well, pills or no pills, I'm very proud of you, Violet."

She sighed. "That's sweet, Ruby. I really have grown to like you quite a bit in the past couple of days. I do hope we can keep in touch after all of this mess is settled."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," I said. "I like you, too."

Someone called her name in the background. Violet covered the mouthpiece, but I could hear every word as she tried to get her mother to respect her privacy while she was on the phone.

"No, I do not think I'm being unreasonable," Violet said at one point. "I think you're being a complete ogre. I'm not five anymore, mother. I'm a grown woman."

Her mother said something about respecting one's elders. Violet suggested she respect this and then I heard her mother shriek.

"Did you just flip me the bird, young lady?"

"Yes, I believe that I did," Violet said. "Now, before I come completely unglued, would you please let me finish my call with Ruby? I'll be right down to eat in a second."

There was another angry squawk from her mother before Violet came back on the line.

"Jeez, I'm so sorry," she said. "That witch has no idea what I'm going through. She thinks because she watched *Terms of Endearment* a million times it gives her some sort of insight into losing a loved one."

"It's a difficult journey," I said. "No matter what the circumstances might be."

"Well, I suppose so. I'm just trying to keep myself upright and moving forward, you know?"

"And you're doing an amazing job. If you need anything at all, just let me know."

"I will," Violet said. "I was kind of wondering if you've heard anything from Hank about the investigation."

"I haven't talked to him for a few hours," I said. "But I know that he and everyone on his team will leave no stone unturned."

"Thank you, Ruby."

"You're welcome," I said. "And, even though Hank and his people are conducting the official investigation, I want you to know that I'm also doing some checking of my own."

"I know. Don't you remember telling me that already?"

"Of course. I just wanted to say it again."

She asked if I'd uncovered anything that might identify the killer. "I just know it's Dita," she said. "That little stunt to go tinkle upstairs last week."

I listened as she ranted about the book club and Dita Ingersoll and the theft of her personal items. When she stopped to catch her breath, I suggested that she might want to go downstairs for dinner with her parents.

"You're probably right," she said. "They've both got about a dozen screws loose. The less I antagonize 'em, the better off I'll be."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Amen to that, Violet," I told her. "Take good care of yourself. Call if you need anything."

CHAPTER 33

The next morning dawned bright and clear. A gentle breeze carried the scent of fresh-cut grass and jasmine through the air as I drove across town to the Capri. I wanted to ask Burl, the motel manager, a few questions about Tripp Sullivan's final hours. I knew it would require a delicate approach. Hank had told me that Burl was deeply rattled by the murder. "It's the first time they'll have to replace carpet in one of the rooms," he'd explained. "That's been a badge of honor for Burl since he took over his daddy's business a few years ago."

At the last minute, I decided to stop at King Tut's for a dozen donuts. Maybe a little fried dough and sugary icing would bring a smile to Burl's face. I parked my car at the curb in front of the donut shop and headed for the door. As usual, Benny met me on the sidewalk.

"Good morning, sunshine," he said.

"How are you, Benny?"

"Perplexed," he said, quickly glancing over both shoulders.

"About what?" I asked.

"The Sullivan case," he said. "I happened to overhear Dewey Kincaid talking about the murder."

"Oh, right," I said. "Through the air vent that connects your kitchen with his office."

Benny smiled. "Quite possibly," he said. "How I heard what I heard is irrelevant." He looked around again. "It's *what* I heard that has me baffled."

I waited for him to keep going, but he simply nodded his head and kept his eyes on mine.

"Okay," I said finally. "What did you hear?"

"I heard that Peaches Wellington is getting her own talk show on CNN," Benny said. "It's because of the role she played in the Tripp Sullivan investigation. At least, I think that's what I heard." He frowned and shook his head. "But I definitely heard that Dewey's negotiating the terms of her deal."

I laughed softly and shook my head. "She's being *interviewed* by CNN," I explained. "Not joining their team."

"You sure about that?"

I nodded.

"Gospel truth?" he said.

"Cross my heart and hope to..." I stopped from finishing the adage. "How do the donuts look this morning, Benny?"

He grinned and reached for the door. "Flawless as always. Come on inside and we'll get you fixed right up."

As he carefully arranged twelve gooey nuggets in a white box, Benny explained that he thought he'd heard Dewey Kincaid discussing financial arrangements with someone on the phone about Peaches Wellington. He said it sounded like the legal beagle in the office above the donut shop had mentioned something about Peaches moving to Atlanta to work for CNN. Then he admitted that it might have been something else entirely.

"The air vent isn't the most reliable form of covert surveillance equipment," he said, handing me the donuts. "But I don't have to tell you that, right?"

"That's correct, Benny." I gave him a smile and headed for my car. "You have a good day, okay?"

He waved and I went outside. On the drive to the Capri, I listened to a performance of Rachmaninoff's *Vocalise* featuring a hunky cellist named Luka Šulić. There was nothing like an early morning drive through Wormwood accompanied by the smell of fresh donuts and a calming piece of classical music to start the day.

A few minutes later, when I walked into the front office at the Capri Motel, Burl was behind the counter staring at his laptop.

"Hey, Ruby." His voice was limp and frail instead of the robust, booming foghorn I'd known since we met in high school. "What's going on?"

"You tell me," I said, putting the donuts on the counter. "I brought you a little something."

He glanced at the box and smiled.

"You doing okay?" I asked.

"No idea," he said. "I've never been part of a murder investigation before." He closed his laptop and reached for the donuts. "All the questions, you know? Everybody picking apart everything I've done in the past few days. Like I'm some kind of suspect or something."

"I bet they're just trying to identify the actual perp," I said.

"The *what*?"

"Perp," I said again.

"Oh, like perpetrator." Burl smiled. "I thought you called me a twerp."

I shook my head and put my purse beside the box of donuts. Then I asked Burl if he felt up to a few more questions.

"Are you kidding?" he said.

"No, but if you don't feel like it, just say so."

"I don't feel like it." He bit into a chocolate-covered cake donut. "Mainly because I'm so tired of hearing my own voice," he said, showering the counter with crumbs. "Do you know what I mean?"

I nodded. "Of course, Burl. If you don't feel like discussing what happened the other day, we can talk about blue wigs and fur-trimmed handcuffs instead."

He laughed, nearly choking on his donut. "You're trying to trick me, aren't you?"

"Me?" I pressed one hand against my chest. "Have you ever known me to trick anybody, Burl?"

"All the time," he said. "Like that day we were in English class and you got Parker Briggs to read the Shakespeare stuff even though Miss Dennis wanted you to do it."

"I didn't feel well that day," I said, remembering the long ago afternoon at Wormwood High. "And I knew that Parker was a big showoff."

"You mean he's a big drama queen," Burl said, taking another bite of donut. "He's on Broadway now, you know."

"Seriously?"

Burl nodded. "Sent me an email about the show he's in. Some kind of musical about a dysfunctional family that fights all the time like cats and dogs until a space ship comes down and takes them away."

I cackled and Burl joined in. It felt good to laugh. It also felt good to hear about Parker Briggs, my high school crush and the first gay boyfriend I had during my teenage years. I hadn't seen him in ages, but I always pined for what never could have been. My heart broke the night Parker told me he'd rather be making out with the quarterback instead of the curvy girl working the concession stand at our high school stadium. But then I realized how good it felt to have a

friend trust me with such a delicate truth. I promised Parker I wouldn't tell anyone that he was gay. He'd kissed me on the cheek and pledged undying devotion.

"Okay," Burl said. "What did you want to ask me?"

"But I thought you—"

"Don't make me mad, Ruby. What do you want to know?"

"What can you tell me about the afternoon Tripp was murdered?" I said. "I mean, do you remember anything unusual or strange?"

He smiled. "Everything about Tripp Sullivan was unusual and strange," he said. "The way he bullied people. The way he used money as a weapon. The whole being naked while wearing ladies' shoes on the wrong feet."

I blinked. "What was that?"

"Which?" Burl said. "About the money?"

"No, the shoes. Did you just say that they were on the wrong feet when Tripp's body was found?"

Burl nodded. "Yes, the left shoe was on the right foot and the right one was on the left."

"Did Hank or one of the detectives see that?"

"Well, of course," Burl said. "Everybody noticed it."

"Because it was so unusual and strange," I said to myself.

"That's what I already told you," Burl said. "There was nothing normal about Tripp Sullivan. My daddy used to tell me that the Sullivan family wealth ruined him."

"Too much too soon?"

"I suppose," Burl said, brushing a few crumbs from his shirt. "If his father hadn't died at Miss Maude's strip club, Tripp Sullivan would probably be alive today."

"Quite possibly," I said. "So the shoes were on the wrong feet. Anything else?"

"He wasn't wearing anything else," Burl said. "Except for the handcuffs." He made a face. "It was the most heinous thing I've ever seen in my life, you know? A grown man, drenched in his own blood and sprawled out on the bed in his birthday suit." He trembled slightly and folded his arms across his chest. "Jeez, gives me the heebie-jeebies just thinking about it."

"You and anyone else who was in the room," I said.

Burl sighed. "That'd be my guess. Between the blood and the handcuffs and the high heel shoes, it was a pretty unsettling sight. The housekeeper and I just stood there for what seemed an eternity, you know? Speechless and frozen. She started whimpering and saying Tripp's name over and over. I think that's what finally got me to snap out of it. I called 911 and told Esmeralda that we should probably go outside and wait for the patrol car."

"And did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Did you and Esmeralda go outside?"

Burl reached for another donut. "I suppose we did," he said. "Esmeralda wandered over to the dresser when she saw the suicide note."

"Did she touch anything?"

Burl shook his head.

"Did *you* touch anything?"

He glowered at me. "Do I look like an idiot?" he said sharply. "I've seen enough cop shows to know that you're not supposed to do that. For one thing, it can contaminate the crime scene. For another, you could accidentally leave a fingerprint that lands you in hot water."

“I imagine your prints are all over the motel,” I said. “So that’s probably not a concern for you.”

“Well, sure,” Burl agreed. “I’m the manager. I go in and out of every room at least once each day. I keep an eagle eye on this place, Ruby. Nothing happens here that I don’t see.”

“Except for the time Dita’s husband brought that set of twins to his room,” I said.

Burl grunted. “I’m entitled to use the restroom now and then.”

“Sure thing,” I said. “And it wasn’t your fault that the girls had fake IDs that said they were thirty.”

“Did you see ‘em?” Burl asked. “All that makeup and the wigs. They looked older than thirty when they staggered out the next morning.”

I smiled and nodded. “Of course,” I said. “But let’s get back to the other day. When you and Esmeralda were in the room with Tripp’s body, did you notice anything else that was odd?”

He thought for a minute. Then he chomped into another donut.

“Any personal effects in the room?” I said. “Was music playing? Did you see any—”

“The room smelled like that stuff you use when you’ve got a chest cold,” Burl said, scratching his chin. “I can’t think of the name. Do you know what it’s called?”

“VapoRub,” I said, feeling my stomach twist slightly. “And if you’ll excuse me for a second, I need to step outside and make a call.”

CHAPTER 34

Hank had me repeat the information three times before he finally understood what I was telling him.

“You’re talking about that mentholated ointment?” he said finally.

“Thank God!” I gushed. “I was beginning to think you’d had your brain disconnected.”

“Well, excuse me, Ruby. It’s still relatively early, okay? I worked until two this morning, so I’m a little slow on the uptake.”

“But you’re with me now, right?”

“Yep.”

“And you got the rest of what I said?”

“Something about a guy called Lou having his shoes on backwards or something?”

“No, Hank. Those are two different pieces of information.”

“Can you go over them one more time then?” He yawned and made an unfortunate noise with part of his anatomy below the waist. “Did you just...” I didn’t even want to say it. “Was that what I think it was?”

“I’m gassy,” he said sheepishly. “Taco Loco at midnight.”

“That’s enough discussion about your flatulence.”

“My *what*?”

“Okay, moving on,” I said, avoiding further discussion of his gastrointestinal symphony. “Here’s the deal, Hank. There’s a guy called Lou Storto, some kind of old school mobster type from the city. He spent a big chunk of change in prison in the recent past. Now he’s here in Wormwood, pestering my aunt and uncle as well as spending time with a local woman.”

“Do you know who it is?”

“I suspect it’s Cora Trout,” I said.

“You suspect?”

“One plus one equals two.”

“Now and then,” Hank said. “Sometimes it equals things that you shouldn’t poke your nose into.”

“But this is connected to my client’s husband’s death. And I have new information.”

“Right,” he said. “Something about VapoRub and a pair of shoes. So far, that seems pretty sketchy. Can you help me out here, Ruby?”

“You bet,” I said. “This guy Lou Storto? He’s been bugging Uncle Boom and Aunt Dot at their art gallery.”

“Are you saying he’s an artist?”

“No, he’s a mobster. Well, he *was* a mobster. I think he’s probably just a putz now, trying to bully people and throw his weight around.”

“He’s a fat guy?”

“Oh, come on, Hank! Would you please just keep your trap shut so I can tell you the rest of what I learned from Burl?”

He didn’t say anything, but I could still hear him breathing.

And passing gas.

“Hank,” I said quietly.

He was silent.

“Let me repeat that,” I said. “Hank?”

"What?" he snapped. "You told me to keep quiet."

"From both ends," I said. "I can still hear you farting."

"I'm sorry, okay? Taco Loco gives me gas."

"Apparently," I said. "I'm just glad I'm not there to have my nostrils assaulted."

He laughed. Then he told me to tell him what I'd learned from Burl.

"The shoes were on the wrong feet," I said. "The leopard print high heels?"

"Yeah," Hank said. "That's right. I already know that."

"Well, you didn't tell me. That's a clue, Hank."

"How?"

"Because a woman would've never made that mistake," I said. "At least, nine out of ten women. There's always a chance that somebody might've been in such a hurry after they jabbed the nail file in Tripp's neck that they wouldn't realize they'd mixed up the shoes."

"Uh-huh," Hank said. "Sounds pretty flimsy to me."

"It's not! It's a really important clue, Hank. Trust me on this."

"I've heard that from you before, Ruby."

"When?"

"The time you told me the bed in your parents' guest room could support the two of us while we were..." He paused, muttered and then added. "...you know, while we were doing it."

"Oh, *that* time! Yeah, I was wrong. But it was funny, wasn't it?"

"Not when your mother came rushing into the room to see what was wrong and saw my butt."

"But it's a cute butt," I said.

"I don't think your mother thought it was cute. The way she was shrieking and pointing and turning white."

"That's because she saw what's on the opposite side from your caboose," I said. "That made her shriek and point."

"Oh, sure," Hank said. "That makes sense now that you mention it."

"Okay, and I think that's enough about your penis," I said. "Can we get back to the case?"

"Yep," he said, chuckling. "What was the deal about the mentholated stuff?"

"The VapoRub."

"Sure, okay. What's that got to do with anything?"

"Lou Storto," I said.

"And there's that name again. Would you mind telling me why you keep mentioning your uncle's buddy?"

"Well, first of all, he's not Uncle Boom's buddy," I said. "More like an adversary from the ancient past."

Hank huffed and sighed. "Is that it?"

"No, that's not it," I said. "I really think that Lou Storto killed Tripp Sullivan."

"On account of what?" Hank asked.

"Women's intuition. Along with a few pieces of compelling evidence."

"The smell of cold ointment and some shoes being on the wrong feet?"

"And the fact that Cora was seen with Lou Storto," I said. "And Cora's fingerprints were on the suicide note. And Cora had the opportunity to steal the nail file from Violet's bedroom. And Cora has been jealous of Dita Ingersoll since they both entered the Little Miss Wormwood Pageant when we were all in grade school."

"That's pretty damn riveting, Ruby," Hank said. "But I don't see—"

“Hank!” I said. “Wake up and smell the coffee! Cora’s jealous of Dita. Dita and Tripp are having an affair. Dita and Tripp get matching Hello Kitty tattoos! Lou Storto takes Cora to Blaze so she can get the very same tattoo! The suicide note had Cora’s fingerprints on it. The shoes were on the wrong feet. And the room at the Capri smelled like VapoRub!” I stopped to catch my breath. Hank waited. After a moment, I said: “Do you get it now?”

“Yes, Ruby,” he said. “I get it. You’ve had way too much coffee to drink. You’re talking a mile a minute, but you’re not making any sense.”

I closed my eyes and leaned against the side of the motel. “I am making *perfect* sense, Hank. If you take a moment to consider everything that I just said, you’ll see that I’m right about this.”

CHAPTER 35

"You might be right," Hank said two hours later as we sat in his office.

"About Lou Storto?"

He shrugged. "That women's intuition thing may not be such bullshit after all."

I smiled, pressing my teeth together to keep from saying anything unfortunate.

"Anyway, I did some checking on Storto," Hank continued. "He's a real piece of work."

"What've you got?"

He shuffled a stack of papers and put them aside. "It's on my desk somewhere," he grumbled. "Tucker was in here earlier using my office."

"He was?"

"Guy's got some crap going on with his girlfriend," Hank said.

"And what—you let him come in here so he could talk in private?"

Hank glanced up. "Yeah?"

I waited, the hint of a smile rising on my lips.

"You got a problem with that?"

I shook my head. "Not at all," I said. "I'm just surprised to see that your heart still works."

He chuckled. "You're a regular funny guy, compadre."

"Too bad you didn't realize that when we were married."

"Oh, I realized it alright," Hank said. "But I was too much of a jackhole to appreciate you."

Someone knocked on the door and it opened.

"Oh, sorry," Lana Krenshaw said. "I didn't realize you were in a meeting."

Hank rolled his eyes. "I'm not," he said. "I'm right in the middle of getting a lecture from my ex-wife about what a jerk I was when we were together."

Lana tossed me a smile. "Well, I'd hate to interrupt that," she said. "Especially since Ruby's right."

"Hey!" Hank groaned. "I don't need the two of you doubling up on me, okay?" He rubbed his hands together and narrowed his gaze. "Unless it involves a game of naked Twister. Then I'm all in."

"In your dreams," Lana said. "And, by the way, I believe that would qualify as sexual harassment if I wanted to be a stickler for details."

Hank's naughty grin vanished. "Oh, shit. I'm sorry about that." He leaned back in his chair. "I've had a bunch of really long days in a row," he said. "Can we write that one off to lack of sleep?"

"How about lack of sensitivity?" I suggested. "Or lack of tact?"

"Or both," Lana said. "But we can overlook it, Hank. Just this once."

"I'm not so sure I'm willing to do that," I said, giving him a cold glare. "I believe in speaking truth to power."

He frowned. "What the hell does that even mean?"

"Look, we could go round and round with this," Lana said. "But I've got a ton of work waiting on my desk. I actually came in to let you know that we got a match for the other set of prints on that suicide note at the Capri."

Hank's eyes brightened. "And?"

"Vito Stein," Lana said. "He's in the system."

"Are you pulling my leg?" Hank asked.

Lana frowned. "Heavens no," she said. "There's no telling where that thing's been."

"Well, damn it all," Hank said. "The two of you *are* ganging up on me."

He stood up from the chair and leaned over the desk, muttering to himself and sifting through the folders, note pads and envelopes.

"I've got to get this place sorted out," he said. "And I've got to tell Tucker to leave my crap alone when he's in here talking to his girlfriend."

"You let Tucker use your office?" Lana asked in disbelief.

Hank stopped moving papers. "So?"

"I'm just surprised," Lana said. "I mean, you're turning into a regular softie in your old age, Hank."

"Oh, shoot!" I said, suddenly realizing what she meant. "I missed your birthday, didn't I?"

"It's okay," Hank said. "Thirty-five isn't a big deal."

"It is when you're the youngest sheriff in the history of the county," Lana said. "People are always going to comment on your age in that case."

"Well, I think we've had just about enough commenting on—" He suddenly pulled a sheet of paper from beneath a stack of carryout menus. "Here it is!"

"Storto's history?" I asked, leaning forward.

"No, my birthday wish list," Hank said, plopping back in his chair. "Of course, it's his file, Ruby. What the hell did you think I was looking for?"

Lana turned and headed toward the door.

"Don't you want to hear this?" Hank asked.

She waved one hand and shook her head. "Saw it already," she said. "Considering that I was the one who brought it to you." She paused, spun around and smiled. "Old man!"

"Ah, c'mon," Hank said. "Get outta here!"

After she left, he glanced at the sheet of paper. "The guy's spent more time in state institutions than on the street. He was in a juvenile detention center in New Jersey at twelve. Then he was in jail for a couple years after that. And from there, following a brief period as a law-abiding citizen, he landed in the state penitentiary about twenty years ago."

"Right," I said. "Uncle Boom and Aunt Dot told me about that. They said Storto was part of a protection racket or something, back when they were opening their first gallery in the city."

Hank smiled. "Maybe part of his *own* racket. I doubt if Storto was ever actually connected to any organized crime families."

"Really?"

"Yeah, the guy's file makes him look like a wannabe," Hank explained. "His real name is Vito Bernard Stein."

"So he's not—"

Hank smiled. "His father was Jewish and his mother was Italian. Thus the blended name. From what I read in his sleeve, Vito changed his name to Lou Storto after he got out of juvie."

"And his real name is Vito Bernard Stein?"

Hank frowned. "Am I gonna have to repeat everything for you, Ruby?"

"But don't you get it?" I asked.

"Get what?"

"The initials," I said.

"What initials?" Hank made a face. "You mean from the nail file that killed Tripp? But those were V-B..."

I smiled.

“Bingo!” Hank said. “A clue!”

“No kidding, Sherlock.” I smiled. “It’s a good thing that I’m on the case, don’t you think?”

“You bet,” Hank said. “It gives us a reason to spend some quality time together.”

“Want to extend that with a visit to Smith’s Pharmacy?” I asked. “I know it may not be essential, but I want to ask if anyone’s been in lately to buy VapoRub.”

“On account of it’s summer and that’s usually sold in the winter?”

“Bingo!” I said.

Hank smirked. “Don’t make fun of me, Ruby. It hurts my feelings.”

“Ah, I’m sorry, compadre.”

His frown flickered briefly before changing into a grin. “Tell you what,” he said. “I’ve got another matter to attend to. Why don’t you check on that pharmacy lead and keep me posted?”

“You bet,” I said. “I’ll give you a call later.”

On the drive to Smith’s Pharmacy, I called Violet and asked her to look again for her missing nail file.

“Why?” she asked. “Do you have a break in the case?”

“Possibly,” I told her. “Can you do me a favor and check? Maybe your monogrammed file simply got misplaced.”

She laughed. “Anything’s possible in this big old house. I mean, Esmeralda does a fabulous job of riding herd, but there’s always a chance something might end up where it doesn’t belong.”

A cavalcade of images flew through my mind. The cheating husband who ends up with another woman. The leopard print shoes that end up on the wrong feet. The lowlife thug who ends up in Wormwood.

“Oh, my God!” Violet shrieked. “You’ll never guess what I found!”

I held the phone away from my ear. “The nail file?”

“No,” Violet said happily. “My vibrator! It was in the kitchen with all the other handheld appliances.”

I smiled. “Well, that sounds about right.”

“Yes, it does. But I have no idea how it made its way from my bedside table to the…” The line went quiet. “Well, can you believe this?” she said. “I never in a million years would’ve thought to look here.”

I waited.

She muttered and the sound of clanging pots and pans filled my ear.

“Violet?” I said finally.

“Oh, crap!” she gushed. “I’m so sorry, Ruby. I put the phone down and completely forgot we were talking.”

“What else did you find?”

“Well, a whole truckload of things,” she said. “Including my monogrammed nail file, my fur-trimmed handcuffs and that pair of leopard print high heels I thought were missing.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” she said. “All those things are right here in the bread box. Isn’t that odd?”

“Definitely. But a lot of things have been odd lately.”

“And wait!” she said. “There’s a note!”

I heard the rustle of paper and her breathing as it increased.

“Violet?”

“Oh, my word, Ruby,” she said softly. “It’s from Tripp.”

“What does it say?”

“He was planning a naked scavenger hunt.”

I blinked. And tried to think of something to say. But decided a simple question would be best.

“Can you repeat that, Violet?”

“Oh, Ruby,” she whispered. “It would’ve been just like the old days.”

“A naked scavenger hunt?”

“Uh-huh. When we first met, you know? I was working at the Big Kat Korral and Tripp was a bachelor. We’d come over here to his house after I got off at the club. He would’ve hidden all kinds of things around the house, just silly trinkets and keepsakes and the odd pair of handcuffs.”

“Of course,” I said. “Always popular on a scavenger hunt.”

She giggled. “Well, they were for us, you know? And I would try and guess where he’d put things,” she continued. “We’d go around the house and I would take a peek in cabinets and closets and under furniture. Whenever I was right, Tripp would take off a piece of clothing. And when I got it wrong, I would slip out of something I was wearing.”

“So the things you thought Dita took were actually—”

“Yes!” Violet said. “Tripp was going to have me come back home and we’d make it like the old days.” She sniffled softly and choked back tears. “It’s all here in the note, Ruby.” She paused and whimpered lightly. “I guess Tripp wrote it the other day before he went to the Capri. He confesses all of his sins and says he’s going to meet with his lady friends, that’s what he calls them here in the note. He was going to tell them that he’d made a terrible mistake and was in love with his...” She stopped, sniffled briefly and then wailed so loudly I had to lower the phone again. “...with his beautiful wife,” Violet whispered finally. “Oh, Ruby. My Tripp had seen the error of his ways.”

“That’s lovely,” I said. “I’m so glad you found that note, Violet.”

“Me, too.”

“Maybe you should keep all those things together, okay? I imagine Hank or Lana Krenshaw will want to come out and talk to you about them.”

“Oh, my word,” she said. “Do I have to tell them about the naked scavenger hunt?”

“It’s okay, hon. They’ve heard anything and everything you can imagine in their line of work.”

“I suppose that’s true,” she said. “But, you know what, Ruby?”

“What’s that, Violet?”

“We still don’t know who killed Tripp.”

“We’re working on it,” I told her. “And we’ll find the person responsible for your husband’s death.”

After chatting with Violet for a few more minutes, we agreed to talk again later in the day. When we finished our conversation, I dialed Hank’s office.

“What’ve you got?” he asked.

“Two things,” I said, pulling into a parking spot in front of Smith’s Pharmacy.

“I’m all ears,” said Hank.

“Violet found her monogrammed nail file,” I told him. “And have you ever been on a naked scavenger hunt?”

CHAPTER 36

Since my office was upstairs from the pharmacy, I was a familiar face to all of the employees and the owner, Gabriel Smith. A slim, hard-faced woman of seventy, Gabby was known in Wormwood for her love of polka and toothpicks. If she didn't have a willowy splinter of wood in her mouth, it meant she was sleeping or eating.

"Morning, Miss Wisdom," Gabby said when she saw me coming toward the counter in the back of the store.

"Hi, gorgeous!" I said. "How are you?"

"The flesh is weak," she muttered, offering the customary refrain. "Only the soul is immortal."

I smiled and thanked her for the reminder. Then I asked if she'd sold any VapoRub lately.

"You got a warrant?" she asked.

"Do I need one?"

The toothpick in her mouth quivered. "Unless there was a coup overnight that I haven't heard about," she said firmly, "this is still a free country. A woman's got a right to defend her honor and protect her privacy."

"I'm not trying to invade your privacy, Gabby. I'm working on a case. I just thought maybe you wouldn't mind answering a question or two."

"Well, I do," she said, shifting the toothpick from one side of her mouth to the other. "I was at Woodstock, you know. I marched on Washington. I survived Kent State."

I nodded. "I know you did," I said, wondering how many thousands of times she'd told me the same things since I opened my office one floor above. "And I think that's an amazing personal journey."

Before Gabby could respond, a voice came over my shoulder.

"Heya, Ruby!"

I turned to see Gabby's grandson walking down the shampoo and hair conditioner aisle. Carter Smith was sixteen, tall and impossibly attractive. He was carrying a large cardboard box, which made his bulky biceps even more impressive.

"Hi, Carter." I gave him a little wave. "How are you?"

"Doing good," he said. "Is my grandmother giving you a hard time?"

"I'm protecting my privacy," Gabby rasped. "This is still a free country."

"Of course, it is," Carter said. "Should I run in back and get your musket?"

Gabby glared at him. Then she turned and shuffled away into the shelves of pharmaceutical supplies that stood behind the counter.

"Bad hangover," Carter said.

"Her or you?" I asked.

"My grandmother. She went out to the Big Kat Korral last night with her boyfriend."

"Her boyfriend?"

Carter snickered. "Yeah, he's half her age and twice her height," he said. "They make a pretty freakish couple." He put the box on the counter. "But she's happy and he treats her well, so I figure they can't do too much damage."

"What were they doing at the Big Kat?" I asked.

"Amateur strip night," Carter said.

"Please don't tell me that your grandmother got up and took off her clothes."

He shook his head. "The boyfriend's making a documentary about small town strip clubs. My grandmother went to lend support." He walked around behind the counter and opened the box. "What were you asking about, Ruby?"

"I just had a couple simple questions about a case I'm working on," I told him. "But your grandmother wasn't in the mood to talk."

Carter smiled. "She never is when she's been out all night." He pulled a large white bottle from inside the box and read the label. "So what did you want to know?"

I glanced toward Gabby. She was rearranging the inventory on one of the shelves.

"You sure she wouldn't mind?" I said.

He shook his head. "She's just in a mood. If you came by tomorrow and asked the same thing, she'd tell you whatever you wanted to know. She talks about you all the time."

"She does?"

"Yeah," he said. "I guess when she was younger, maybe around my age or so, she thought about becoming a detective."

"She never told me that."

He nodded. "I'm not surprised, but it's true. I don't think she likes to think about what could've been. I mean, she loved my grandfather and everything, but I think she had dreams that went unfulfilled because they got married and had so many kids."

I looked at Gabby again. She'd put her earbuds in and the faint, tinny sound of "Beer Barrel Polka" filtered into the air as she tapped her toes and continued working.

"So?" Carter said.

I moved my eyes from his grandmother to his smooth, youthful face. Then I said: "Yeah?"

"You said you have questions."

"Oh, right," I sputtered. "Just a couple."

He nodded.

"Have you sold any VapoRub lately?" I asked.

He laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"VapoRub," he said. "It's the middle of summer and we normally only sell it in the winter, right? When people get colds and the flu?"

"Sure, but..."

"But some guy came in a couple of weeks ago," Carter continued. "He was with a woman that lives in town. Kind of snobby with those fat lips you get from injecting stuff. She treats my grandmother like shit." He winced. "Oh, sorry," he said. "I mean, she treats her like crap."

"Shit is perfectly okay with me," I said. "Was it Cora Trout?"

He shrugged. "Don't know her name. But she's a bitch."

"Sounds like Cora," I said. "Was the guy short and dumpy?"

"Basically," Carter said. "When he stood here at the counter, you couldn't see anything below his chin."

I smiled at the image and asked Carter to tell me the rest.

"I don't really know much else," he said. "Except, of course, that the guy placed a special order for three cases of that VapoRub stuff."

"Did it seem like he had a cold?"

"No, he didn't. And I thought it was weird that he was buying so much of that crap. But I heard him telling that fish lady—"

"Cora Trout?"

“Yeah, her. I heard him say that he wore that stuff instead of cologne because it reminded him of his childhood.”

Carter started laughing then, loudly enough to attract Gabby’s attention. She pulled out the earbuds and glowered at us angrily.

“What the heck are you two crowing about?” she asked. “And why are you shouting?”

“We’re not shouting,” Carter said. “We were having a conversation.”

“About what?” Gabby asked.

“How much I love you,” Carter said.

His expression was so sincere that Gabby bought it. She shrugged and a faint smile flowered on her lips. It made her look ten years younger and much less irritated.

“Anything else you want to know?” Carter asked after his grandmother went back to tapping her toes and rearranging the white plastic bottles.

“I think that’ll do it for today,” I told him. “You’ve been a big help. Thanks for connecting two more of the dots.”

He frowned. “That VapoRub guy is involved in what you’re working on?”

“He is,” I said. “If you see him before I do, give him a wide berth. He’s a nasty bit of business.”

“Looked like a putz,” Carter said.

I laughed and smiled. Then I headed outside to go upstairs to my office. I was still smiling an hour later, thinking about Carter and Uncle Boom and the short, dumpy ex-con with the unconventional VapoRub routine.

CHAPTER 37

The dishes were washed, the leftovers were stowed in the freezer and an old Nina Simone song was streaming through the speakers in the living room. It was nearly eleven o'clock. I'd spent the rest of the afternoon and most of the evening writing case notes to organize the information I'd gathered about Tripp Sullivan's murder.

"You haven't told me about your day yet," Clint said. "How was it?"

We were curled up on the sofa, arms and legs intertwined and two glasses of wine at the ready.

"My day was gruesome," I said. "How was yours?"

He thought for a second. Then he said: "Real good, actually. I was ahead of schedule nearly the whole way. And I met the new family that moved into the Greendale's old place on Post Road."

"No kidding. How were they?"

"Nice. Just regular people. They had a package from somewhere out west."

"Like Ohio?"

He smiled. "No, like San Something."

"Diego?"

He shook his head.

"Francisco?"

"Jeez, Ruby! Would you please stop doing the geography thing? I was just making conversation, not looking for a pop quiz."

"Touchy, touchy."

"Well, I just don't think it matters," Clint said. "They're nice people. They got a package. It came from somewhere out west. End of story. Not everything that happens in life is a big, bad mystery."

I nodded and kept quiet. I could tell something was on his mind. After ten minutes of being patient, I decided to move the ball down the field.

"You okay?" I asked.

He grunted.

"Can you translate that into English for me?"

He groaned.

"That, too?"

"Oh, c'mon, Ruby. If a guy doesn't wanna sit around and talk about things, you shouldn't force him to engage in some kind of deleterious conversation."

I turned to face him. "A *what* conversation?"

"Deleterious," he said again. "It's the same as harmful or injurious."

"I know. And I'm really pleased to find out that you know that, too!"

"I'm not a complete idiot," he said, sounding wounded. "I know me some words so I can talk pretty."

I laughed. "I guess so. What other words do you know, big boy?"

"Concupiscent," he said. "It means I want to jump your bones."

I smiled. "What else?"

He leaned closer and kissed my cheek.

"Saxicolous," he murmured.

“Love that one,” I said. “Is it something sexy?”

“It means somebody who lives under a rock.”

“So not sexy. What else have you got, über-stud?”

“Okay, and here’s my last one,” he said. “Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.”

“Very impressive!” I gave him a kiss on the tip of his nose. “I love your brain even more than your body.”

We sat and sipped our wine and kissed again. I was starting to yawn, so I drained my glass and put it on the coffee table.

“About ready for bed?” I asked.

Clint wiggled his eyebrows. “I was born ready,” he said in a smoky tone. “And I’m feeling pretty concupiscent.” He nuzzled my neck. “How about you?”

“Woof!” I said. “And grrrrrrr!”

“Let’s get to it then.”

He finished his wine as I stretched and yawned some more. Then he carried the glasses into the kitchen.

“Big day tomorrow?” I asked as we tottered down the hall toward the bedroom.

“Same day, different deliveries,” he said. “How about you?”

“I’m going to see Cora Trout,” I told him. “Ask her a few questions about Tripp Sullivan.”

“You going alone?” he asked.

I nodded and switched on the light. There was a single red rose on my pillow along with a box of Little Debbie Cloud Cakes.

“Oh, you sweet, sweet man.” I grabbed the rose and put it between my teeth for a moment. “You are too good to be true.”

Clint grinned. “You can say that again.”

“You are too—”

“Okay, yeah whatever,” he said, flopping into bed. He patted the mattress. “Come on in, the water’s fine.”

I crawled in beside him and put my head on his chest. I could hear his heart beating, a steady and reliable rhythm that made me feel safe and sheltered.

“So then,” Clint said. “About tomorrow?”

“What about it?”

“Think it’s okay to go to Cora’s by yourself?”

“I’m a big girl,” I said.

“I know.” He reached over and cupped my loveliness. “In all the right ways.”

“No, silly. I mean that I can take care of myself.”

He made a sound in his throat. “Just be careful, babe.”

“Of Cora?” I smiled and laughed. “She wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“Maybe not,” he said. “But it sounds like her friend might not be so peaceful.”

CHAPTER 38

Cora Trout was in her bathrobe and a pair of shiny red stilettos when she answered the door the next morning at ten. Her hair was tangled, her lipstick was smudged and she smelled like a bottle of cheap whiskey.

"What the hell do you want?" she snapped.

"I'd like to talk to you about something," I said.

"Make an appointment like normal people. I may run a business out of my home, but that doesn't mean you can just show up whenever you please."

"This isn't about interior decorating," I said.

"Then what the hell is it about?"

"Murder," I told her. "The murder of Tripp Sullivan."

Cora frowned. "And you think I did it?"

I shook my head. "I just want to talk to you, Cora."

She heaved a sigh and shifted her weight from one foot to the other. In the process, her bathrobe fell open to reveal a bright pink lace bra.

"How pretty," I said. "Victoria's Secret?"

She stuck out her tongue. "It's *my* damn secret, Ruby. Now, you need to leave!" She crumpled her mouth into a dangerously unattractive frown. "And I mean it. Right! This! Minute!"

"What's going on, Cora?" I asked. "You don't seem like yourself."

"Well, I am myself!" she snapped. "And I want you off my property. I'll have you know that my father-in-law is the—"

"Are you referring to Judge Trout, your *former* father-in-law?" I asked.

Cora glowered at me like a bull seeing a red cape in the ring. Her nostrils flared. Her eyes narrowed. And she stamped one of her slinky stilettos on the floor a few times.

"Who do you think you are, Ruby? Some kind of crusader? Some kind of know-it-all saint?"

I told her that I was a private investigator working on behalf of the widow of a murder victim. I told her that I was cooperating with the local sheriff's office to track down the individual who had killed the aforementioned victim. And then I told her that she had a tiny bit of something green in her front teeth.

"I do?" she gasped. "My goodness! Why didn't he tell me that earlier?"

She spun around, clomped to the mirror on the wall and conducted a quick examination of her porcelain veneers.

"Oh, would you look at that?" she said. "A piece of spinach." She removed the offending scrap of leafy vegetable with the manicured nail of her right pinky. "I'm so embarrassed. I should've ordered the salmon like Lou did."

I saw the opening and went for it. "Are you talking about Lou Storto?"

Cora spun around, came toward me and jabbed one finger in my direction.

"Get out of here!" she said, sounding even more anxious. "I have nothing to say to you, Ruby."

"I just have a couple of questions, Cora. I wanted to talk to you about what happened to Tripp Sullivan the other day at the Capri."

Her face went slack, like a gelatin mold left too long in the sun. Her blistering frown faded and the light went out of her eyes.

“Such a terrible tragedy,” she said quietly. “I cannot imagine how poor Violet is going to carry on.”

“In time, I imagine she’ll be just fine,” I said. “Since she’ll have ten million dollars to call her own.”

I noticed a barely perceptible tightening in Cora’s jaw as the vein in her neck began to quiver.

“Oh, isn’t that nice?” she said. “Ten million dollars? And it’s all hers?”

I nodded. “She’s the sole heir. Even though the note that was left in the room at the Capri—the note that had *your* fingerprints all over it—stated erroneously that Tripp wanted to change his will and leave everything to Dita Ingersoll.”

Cora’s lower lip trembled. “Did you say my fingerprints?”

“The forensics team processed the evidence in conjunction with the state’s CSI lab. And there was a full set of your prints on the paper.”

“Well, they obviously made a mistake,” Cora said, fluttering her fake eyelashes. “I’ve never been arrested in my entire life.”

“That’s true,” I said. “But you did apply for a liquor license back when you were in college in Syracuse.”

Cora gulped. “I did?”

“Yep,” I said. “You worked as a bartender at a place called The Rowdy Rooster. Isn’t that right?”

“I guess so.” She sounded bewildered. “But what does that have to do with Tripp’s murder?”

“Pretty much everything.” I gave Cora a look that blended compassion and sorrow. “Your prints were on the sheet of paper in Tripp’s room because you wrote the note and left it on the dresser.”

“I did not,” Cora said.

“Well, your prints were confirmed,” I said.

She stared at me, motionless and quiet.

“And you bought the blue wig that was found covering Tripp’s face the other day at Barton Lane’s costume shop. I talked to him earlier. He confirmed that you purchased a neon blue wig with the credit card that Tripp gave you after the two of you started having an affair.”

“Well, that’s a load of pig shit,” Cora snapped. “I wasn’t having an affair with Tripp.”

I took a breath. “Were you aware that Tripp and Violet’s house had nanny cams installed in every room, Cora?”

She made a face. “Nanny cams?”

“Yes. Nanny cams, the little secret surveillance video cameras that you can disguise as a stuffed animal or a potted plant.”

“But why would they have those?” she asked. “They didn’t have any children, so they never had a nanny.”

“Well, lots of people have hidden surveillance cameras,” I explained. “Whether or not they have children in the home.”

“But I don’t—”

A floorboard creaked somewhere in the house. Cora’s eyes flashed a look of panic.

“You need to leave,” she said quietly.

Another creak echoed through the vast space.

“And I mean right this second.”

“Cora?” I reached for her hand, but she pulled her arm away. “Are you okay?”

She shook her head. "He'll be really mad if you—"

"Baby?" a man's voice came toward us from the hallway. "Where'd you go, sugar pop?"

Cora began to tremble. "Please, Ruby. Just go, okay? This is none of your business."

When I glanced down at her left arm, I noticed a deep purple bruise around the wrist. She saw me studying the blotch and quickly covered it with her other hand.

"I slipped in the tub," she said. "A silly accident."

"Honey bunch?" the man said. "Come back to bed, sweet peaches." He laughed, a deep, throaty sound that turned my stomach. "Come back to bed...or else, you stupid, skinny bitch."

Cora gulped. "It's okay, Ruby," she said quietly. "I can handle him. But you need to leave, okay?"

"I'm not going anywhere," I said. "I don't like the sound of—"

And Lou Storto shambled around the corner from the hallway. He was dressed in red boxer shorts, a white T-shirt and black dress socks. There was a smug grin on his face and a black pistol in his hand.

"Well, hello there," he said, flashing a smile at me. "What was that you were going on about, chunky?"

CHAPTER 39

"Hello, Vito," I said.

He wheezed and his beady eyes bulged in his head. "What the hell did you call me?"

"Vito." I smiled at Cora. "It's his real name. Vito Bernard Stein." I paused. "But we can pretend it's Lou if that makes you feel better."

His mouth was partially open and the expression on his face was confusion cleaved by fury. Cora's head was ratcheting back and forth between Lou and me, like someone at a tennis match who wants to keep their eye on the ball. Except the only thing moving was her head as Lou tried to find enough words in his brain to make a complete sentence.

"But how did you..." He began. "How did you..."

"Figure out your real name?"

He nodded silently.

"So it's true?" asked Cora.

"Stay out of this," Lou told her.

"Yes, Cora," I said gently. "It might be best if you—"

"The hell I will!" she screamed suddenly. "One of you two better tell me what's going on here."

I waited for a moment to see if Lou would volunteer, but he simply stared at me in bewilderment.

"Okay, so I'll kick it off," I said, turning to Cora. "That was Lou's nail file the police found in Tripp Sullivan's neck," I said. "Not Violet's." I let the news sink in before going on. "In a strange twist of fate," I continued, "Lou and Violet have the same initials. I mean, if you use Lou's real name, which is Vito Bernard Stein."

Lou snorted. "You big ol' cow," he snarled. "I don't wanna hear another word."

"Is it true?" Cora asked, genuinely surprised by the news. "Did you kill Tripp?"

The roly-poly wannabe gangster drew back his hand. "Same goes for you, Cora. Keep quiet or I'll hit you again." He glared at her silently, the hand hanging in midair like an incomplete thought. "I don't want either of you to say another word. I gotta keep a clear head so I can think about my next move."

"He's been here since it happened," Cora said through chattering teeth. "And he's been acting really strange."

Lou sneered at her and lowered his hand. "You better shut your trap, Cora."

She paused briefly, her eyes fluttering again between my face and Lou's gaping maw. Then she said: "I went to meet Tripp at the motel. We were going to have one final rendezvous, you know? It was going to be our final roll in the hay because he was planning to reconcile with Violet. That's why I bought the wig. Tripped wanted me to wear it along with my usual leopard print heels. And we generally used the fur-trimmed handcuffs for a little naughty fun." She stopped and smiled. I imagined she'd detoured into a wayward memory from the recent past. "But when I got there," she went on, "he'd changed his mind. So we just sat and talked, kind of like two old friends. Tripp had brought a bottle of some fancy vodka, so we did a couple of shots and laughed about all of our antics." She looked at the floor. "But then Lou showed up and came into the room, yelling and threatening to hurt Tripp. After a few minutes, I couldn't take it, so I ran out of there and came back home."

"This is all pretty damn touching," Lou said. "But I don't think I want to hear any of your other tender memories of the late, great loser you were banging."

"So it's true, isn't it, Lou?" I said.

His eyes swung around and met mine. "Didn't I tell you to shut up?"

"You did," I said. "But I'm not very good at following directions."

He waved the pistol. "How are you when it comes to dying?"

"You're not going to shoot me, Lou."

Before I knew what happened, he raised the gun and squeezed the trigger. Cora screamed and I winced as a blue vase on the far side of the room shattered.

"You're next, kitten," he said, spinning the gun around his index finger. "I'm not going to warn you again."

"Okay, that's fine," I said. "But you need to remember that it's only going to get worse for you, Lou. The sooner you throw in the towel, the easier this whole thing's going to be for your attorney. The sheriff knows you killed Tripp. They pulled one of your thumb prints from the nail file you're always using to freshen up your manicure."

He sneered and inched closer. "Shut up, heifer!"

"Don't call me that," I said. "Don't call me heifer or chunky or tubby." I narrowed my eyes. "I don't like bullies, Lou. And I definitely don't like you."

He pointed the gun in my general direction. "I'll call you whatever I want, chunky!"

"Sure thing," I said. "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words—"

The gun went off again, taking out a gold-framed mirror above the fireplace.

"I meant to do that," Lou said. "Next time it's your bullet, tubby."

"Oh, Lou," Cora cried. "Please just let us go. Won't you do that for me?"

He scowled at her and spun the pistol on his finger again. "Things weren't supposed to go like this. Okay, Cora? We were supposed to be getting hitched today, not having some kind of showdown with this tub o' lard."

I drifted across the entry hall toward the living room.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" Lou asked.

"I've got to sit down," I said. "My shoes are killing me."

"Well, you could've gotten a bullet for your trouble," he said. "Don't make any sudden moves."

"It wasn't sudden." I smiled and shrugged. "I walked over here very slowly and deliberately."

"Whatever," Lou said. "Just get in there and sit yourself down."

I nodded for Cora to follow me into the next room. Once we were situated on the sofa, Lou sat on the arm of a club chair near the fireplace.

"Why are you doing this, Lou?" asked Cora.

"I need time to think," he answered. "I've got to figure out what to do next. If you hadn't ever told me you'd been sleeping with that Cadillac guy, none of this would've ever happened."

"How about turning yourself in?" I suggested. "That makes the most sense at this point."

He growled at me. "Not gonna happen," he hissed. "I'm not doing that. I've got to figure out how I'm going to get out of this disgusting place and back home to the city."

While Lou rubbed his face and mumbled to himself, the doorbell rang.

"Who the hell is that?" he said, turning to Cora.

"How should I know?" she asked.

"You expecting anybody?"

She shook her head.

“Well, this is not a very happy day,” Lou said. “And it’s about to get a lot less happy.”

The bell chimed again.

“Somebody’s really itching for trouble,” he said. “They need to learn to be more—”

And the bell sounded a third time.

“—more patient!” Lou hissed, moving toward the door. “If you’re not expecting anybody, then why is someone leaning on the bell?”

He pressed his face against the door, squinting into the peephole.

“It’s the damn UPS guy,” Lou said.

Cora gave me a quick glance. I nodded.

“You expecting a delivery, Cora?”

I winked at her. She looked at Lou.

“Maybe just that special gift I was buying for you,” Cora said.

Lou’s expression brightened momentarily before his scowl returned. “Well, you’ve got horrible timing,” he said. “Let me get rid of this guy and we’ll carry on with our friendly little fireside chat.” He brandished the gun and scowled. “And no funny stuff, okay? I’d hate to shoot either of you and make a mess of the carpet.”

He gave me one last lingering glare before returning to the front door. I saw him lower the pistol and hold it behind his back. Then I watched as he opened the door. And then I smiled as Clint came over the threshold like a cannonball and tackled Lou Storto.

“What’s happening?” Cora screamed.

As Clint and Lou tumbled across the floor, I heard sirens in the distance. The gun in Lou’s hand skittered across the carpet and disappeared beneath a chair.

While I headed for where Clint and Lou were grappling in the foyer, I caught a glimpse of Cora from the corner of one eye. She rushed across the living room, knelt beside the chair and reached for Lou’s pistol. I quickly opened my purse, grabbed my handgun and aimed it at Cora.

“Don’t even think about it,” I said as her hand moved closer to the small black weapon under the chair.

Cora glared at me. “I don’t have to do what you say, Ruby!”

“I’m afraid that you do,” I told her.

“Because why?” she hissed.

“Because I have a gun,” I said. “And you don’t.”

Her fingers hovered above the pistol on the floor.

“Don’t, Cora,” I said in a flat, even tone.

She looked at me, narrowed her eyes and said: “You’re just a fat cow, Ruby.”

“But at least I’m not a murderer,” I said.

“Well, neither am I!” Cora shouted. “He did it! It was all his idea!”

Clint had Lou subdued and the wannabe gangster was sputtering a string of curse words longer than the Amazon.

“This guy smells like that stuff,” Clint groaned.

“VapoRub,” I said.

Clint nodded. “Yeah, that’s it.”

“That guy’s also up to his triple chin in conspiracy to commit murder,” I said. “As well as assault with a deadly weapon, kidnapping and a dozen counts of pure stupidity.”

“Can they charge him with that?” Clint asked, shifting his weight so that Lou would stop squirming.

"If they can't, they should," I said, watching as Hank and three deputies streamed through the front door.

"Isn't this a most unusual set of characters?" asked Hank, surveying the scene. He smiled at Clint, pointed one finger at Lou and then turned to me. "I suppose you can fill in the blanks for me about all of this, Ruby?"

"She just went crazy!" Cora screamed. "Started making up a bunch of lies. Then she started shooting her gun."

I waited until she'd finished, then I told Hank the truth.

"Well, screw you, Ruby Wisdom!" Cora snapped. "Why don't you go take a hike?" Then she looked at Hank. "Aren't you the damn sheriff?"

He nodded.

"Then why are you letting this piece of trash get involved in police business?"

"Miss Wisdom is a licensed private investigator," Hank said slowly. "She's been involved in the case since the beginning because Mrs. Sullivan engaged her services on an unrelated matter that got real related shortly after your boyfriend here jabbed Tripp in the neck with his nail file."

Cora looked like she'd swallowed some spoiled fish soup.

"You're both crazy!" she shrieked. "And I do not have to put up with this gobbledygook you're spilling all over my new kilim rug!"

I looked down at the floor. A beautiful kilim was indeed beneath my feet.

"I'm afraid that you do," Hank said. "But I think this would be a good time to tell you something, Cora."

"And what the hell is that, Hank?"

"Cora Trout, I'm placing you under arrest for the murder of Tripp Sullivan," Hank said, reaching for his handcuffs. "You have the right to remain silent, although anything you say or do can be used against you in a court of—"

"I want my lawyer!" Cora screamed.

"—law," Hank continued. "You have the right to consult an attorney before speaking to the police and to have an attorney present during—"

Cora struggled as Hank fastened the left handcuff. "Are you even listening to me?" she demanded. "I just told you to that I want to talk to Dewey Kincaid!"

"—questioning now or in the future," said Hank, placing the matching cuff on Cora's right wrist. "If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be—"

"Well, of course I can afford to pay for Dewey," she snapped. "I get a discount on account of the sexual services I performed for his—"

I grabbed her arm. "Cora, sweetheart," I said. "You really should zip it, okay? None of this is very ladylike and it certainly isn't going to help your case any."

"—appointed for you before any questioning," Hank went on. "If you decide to answer any questions now, without an attorney present, you will still have the right to stop answering at any time until you talk to an attorney."

"For the millionth time!" Cora yelled. "I want to call Dewey!"

CHAPTER 40

Hank stood on the sidewalk in front of Cora's house, tapping his pen on the notebook in his meaty paw.

"You trying to be some kind of hero, Ruby?"

I shook my head. "I was trying to ask a few questions," I told him. "I had no idea that Lou Storto would be here."

"Uh-huh," he said suspiciously. "You expect me to believe that?"

"Yes."

"Sure you're not trying to pull the wool over my legs?"

I waited until he realized what he'd said.

"I mean, pull the wool over my eyes," Hank sputtered. "Ah, jeez. You can still turn me into a tongue-tied fool sometimes. With your feminine charm and your beauty and all that."

"Are you taking Cora in?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Have you heard from Dewey Kincaid?" I asked.

Hank rolled his eyes. "A dozen times or so." He checked his watch. "In the last twenty minutes. But I'm letting his calls bounce to voicemail until we get this scene wrapped up."

I felt a hand on my back and turned to see Clint's gorgeous smile.

"Hi," he said. "How're you doing?"

I reached up and pinched his cheek. "I'm fine. How are *you* feeling after that body slam?"

He shrugged. "Piece of cake," he said. "Although I can't wait to take a shower. That guy smelled like crap."

"VapoRub," I said.

"Yeah, that stuff," Clint said. "Reminds me of when I was a kid."

I nodded. "Yep. We all remember the smell."

"What's the deal with him anyway?" asked Clint.

"Can you be more specific?" I said.

"Why the smelly ointment?"

I explained that Lou Storto wore VapoRub instead of cologne because it reminded him of his childhood.

"That's weird," Clint said.

"Everything about that guy is weird," said Hank. "The VapoRub. The obsession with his youth. The weekly beauty treatments. Carrying a nail file in his pocket so he could smooth his manicure. He claims it's because life behind bars was so rough and tumble."

"Not to mention you can't actually own a nail file in prison," I said.

"And that's what he used to stab Tripp Sullivan?" asked Clint.

"Yeah," Hank said. "It was a classic crime of passion."

Clint blinked a few times. Then he said: "You mean Tripp and that little fat guy were..."

"No, biscuit," I said. "They weren't lovers. But Lou and Cora were fooling around. And when Lou learned about her affair with Tripp, the poor little fool couldn't handle the competition."

"So he just flipped out?"

Hank nodded. "That's one way of putting it. Lou followed Cora to the motel and waited in the parking lot. After an hour or so, he knocked on the door, charged inside and confronted Tripp. Cora tried to explain, but Lou pushed her outside and locked the door."

"How'd you hear all of that?" I asked.

"Cora," Hank said. "She told Lana when they were talking inside after we got here. I imagine we'll hear the rest of the story once we get Lou and Cora down to the station."

"Well, they sound perfect for one another," Clint said.

I gave him a look. He shrugged. Then I said: "How'd you happen to know what was going on in here?"

Clint grinned. "You mean how did I save the day?"

"Don't push your luck, mister."

"How many times do I have to tell you, Ruby? I'm the UPS guy. I drive all over. When I was passing Cora's house, I saw your car. So I got curious. I parked at the end of the driveway, crept around back and happened to see the little fat guy walking down the hall with a gun in his hand."

"And you just decided to go all action hero on him?" I asked. "Why didn't you call 911?"

"He did," Hank said. "How else would we have arrived just a minute or two later?"

I leaned over and kissed Clint. "My hero," I said.

He rolled his eyes. "How'd Cora meet that creep anyway?"

Hank shrugged. "Prison," he said.

"When did Cora do hard time?"

I poked Clint's shoulder. "Stop joking," I said. "She was a volunteer with the prison's literacy program."

"Teaching cons to read?"

"Something along those lines," Hank said. "From what we've learned, they met innocently enough. But after a few one-on-one tutoring sessions, Cora fell hard for Lou's romantic charms."

"His what?" I asked.

"I'm just telling you what the warden told me," said Hank. "I called there yesterday when we figured out that Lou's the one who sent the death threats to—"

My phone bleated from my pocket.

"Sorry," I said, glancing at the name on the screen. "I should take this."

Clint smiled as I slipped away and walked down the driveway toward the street.

"Mother?" I said quietly.

"Hello, dear," she said. "Did I call at a bad time?"

"Not at all. We're in the middle of a game of mahjongg."

"How lovely," she said. "I'd love to play sometime."

"I was being facetious," I told her. "I'm at an active crime scene with Hank and Clint."

"Oh, is your new boyfriend a police officer now?"

"It's a long story."

"Go ahead," my mother said brightly. "I've got plenty of time. Your stepfather's gone out to the store to buy more paper plates for the picnic this weekend." A vision of my family circled around a table in the woods suddenly popped into my mind. "I hope you and Clint still plan on joining us," she added. "Your Aunt Dot is making her world famous tuna noodle cupcakes!"

My stomach lurched.

"Well, I hope that we can come," I said. "It'll just depend on this investigation. And a couple of other things."

“What are you working on again?” she asked. “Is it something fun?”

“Tripp Sullivan’s murder.”

The line went still for a moment. Then she said: “That’s not very much fun, dear.”

“Especially for Tripp.”

“Oh, Ruby!” Her voice was shrill and loud. “Mind your manners, missy! That was a terrible thing to say.”

“Terrible, but true.”

She giggled softly. “Well, I just wanted to check in, sweetheart. I should let you get back to work.”

I promised to call later, slipped my phone back into my pocket and headed for where Clint and Hank stood near the front door.

“...on how the evidence stacks up,” Hank was telling Clint. “But I should really get back inside for now.” He noticed me approaching. “And you, Ruby, should let Lana take your statement before you leave.”

“Of course,” I said. “My interest is being cooperative in any way.”

Hank grinned. “For a change,” he said.

“Oh, boy,” Clint said, turning to Hank. “Is it okay if I leave now, Sheriff Martin?”

“Sure thing,” Hank said. “And, by the way, thanks again, Clint.”

“For what?” Clint shrugged. “I just happened to be passing by.”

“True,” Hank said. “But you also just happened to save our Ruby here from a rogue garden gnome who smells like medicinal ointment.”

CHAPTER 41

The next morning, after Clint left for work and I took a long bubble bath, I dialed Heather Cain's number and waited. But instead of her delicate, sweet chirp on the other end, a gruff male voice answered.

"Yeah?" he said abruptly.

"Good morning," I announced. "I'm looking for Heather."

"Who is this?"

"Ruby Wisdom," I said.

"Who the hell is that?"

"That's me," I said. "Did I dial the wrong number?"

"What number did you dial?" he asked, sounding even angrier than before.

"Listen," I said. "My name's Ruby. Like I already told you. And I know Heather. From Wormwood. I've talked to her—"

"How'd you get this number?" the guy asked. "Are you the killer? Are you the—"

And he was suddenly gone, replaced by the familiar honeyed tones of Heather's voice.

"Ruby?"

"Hey there," I said. "Ty's a very capable bodyguard."

She giggled. "He's just trying to keep me safe."

"And that's a very good thing," I said. "But you two can come back home."

"Did you catch the bad guy?"

"Well, let's just say the sheriff and his team have someone in custody," I told her. "And he is a bad guy."

"Are you sure he's the one?"

"Yes," I said. "He confessed to killing Tripp Sullivan."

"But why?" she asked. "Why on earth would someone want to do such a horrible thing?"

"Love," I said.

"Oh, my God!" Heather squealed. "Tripp was in love with another guy?"

Before she could start an entirely unnecessary rumor, I explained the situation. I told her about Cora and Tripp and Lou Storto. Then I filled in a few salient points about Storto's background, Cora's volunteer work at the penitentiary and the pen pal friendship that blossomed into a mad and torrid affair.

"But it still doesn't make any sense," Heather said.

"Love makes people do strange things sometimes," I said, thinking about Hank and Clint, Aunt Dot and Uncle Boom and my parents.

"I suppose so, but I sure hope it doesn't make me kill anyone."

I laughed. "Well, I hope so, too."

"Yeah," she said. "There's no chance of that happening. Me and Ty are too happy to kill each other."

"Where are you guys?"

"I can't tell you that," Heather said.

"Oh, it's okay now," I said. "With Lou Storto behind bars, I think you can come on home right away."

She didn't say anything for a few seconds. Then I heard voices in the background. And then Heather told me she could reveal their location if I promised not to tell a living soul.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll just whisper it when I drive by the graveyard.”

“Oh, my God!” she gasped. “Not even them! You have to promise not to tell anybody!”

I promised. Then I waited.

“We’re at The Eternal Happiness Wedding Chapel,” she whispered. “In Las Vegas!”

I nearly dropped my Little Debbie Cloud Cake. “Well, that’s fantastic, Heather! You and Ty decided to get married while you were hiding from the killer?”

“We did!” she gushed. “Isn’t that insane!”

“I think it’s amazing! And I wish you all the luck and happiness in the world!”

“Oh, thank you, Ruby,” she said. “I thought we could just do the ninety-nine dollar special, but Ty insisted we go for the three-hundred dollar deluxe package. It includes a DVD of the candle-lit ceremony, a hand-tied rose bouquet, a fresh carnation that we pinned on Ty’s NASCAR T-shirt, twenty-five extra pictures and a bunch of other stuff.”

I pictured the two of them in Las Vegas, holding hands and grinning from ear to ear. They were young and in love. And they had the DVD to prove it.

“Well, I’m just tickled pink,” I said. “What did your parents say?”

“Oh, my parents?”

I waited for her to continue, but there was only silence and the muted echo of The Shirelles singing “Going to the Chapel of Love” in the background.

“Heather?”

“Uh-huh.”

“You didn’t tell your parents yet?”

“No,” she said. “That’s why I made you promise not to say anything.”

“Well, I’ll honor my pledge,” I said. “But don’t you think they should know?”

“In due time,” she said. “With Ty dropping out of the community college and me losing my job, I don’t want to give them anything more to worry about.”

“Why did you lose your job?”

“Well, don’t you think I will?” she asked. “With Mr. Sullivan dead and all, I just figured the place would close down and I’d be out of work.”

I told her that Violet planned to take over as head honcho at the Cadillac dealership. Then I told her everything would be fine once the dust settled.

“I hope so,” she said.

“Well, I *know* so,” I told her. “That’s how these things go, Heather. Life is either feast or famine, up or down, sunshine or rain.”

She laughed. “You sound like Ty.”

“Then he sounds like a good man.”

“He is,” Heather said. “I’m lucky.”

“Amen to that,” I told her. “Now go on and enjoy your honeymoon. I’ll check in on you at work sometime soon.”

CHAPTER 42

Violet was sitting at the bar in Bella Napoli a few minutes after one that afternoon. She was wearing a sleek black dress, a pair of bright red high heels and a tasteful string of pearls. As I made my way across the restaurant, she jumped off the barstool and started waving one hand in the air.

"Hi, Ruby!" she called. "It's so nice to see you!"

We hugged and she gave me a kiss on the cheek. Then she frowned and snatched a cocktail napkin from the bar.

"Oooh, I'm so sorry, sweetheart." She took my chin in one hand and wiped my face with the napkin. "I left telltale evidence and DNA on your skin."

I smiled at the CSI reference. "You've been watching more cop shows?"

She leaned closer. "You're partially correct," she said in a low voice. "I've been watching one particular cop." She tilted her head to one side and grinned. "Watching him sleep. Watching him shower. Watching him watch me." The grin exploded into a wide, vibrant smile. "I know it's too soon to rush into anything, but I think he's a keeper!"

My head had barely stopped spinning from the unexpected news when she grabbed my hand and pulled me toward a table near the back of the restaurant.

"Let's order lunch," she said. "I'm famished!"

"So who's the lucky copper?" I asked. "Somebody from Wormwood?"

She shook her head. "No, he's a detective in the city," she said. "We met at a little cocktail thing that my publisher threw for me a few weeks ago. It was right about the time that Tripp was cheating on me with half the town. So I figured, when in Rome, you know?"

"Uh-huh," I said.

"Besides," Violet continued, "Tripp and I had no business being together anymore. He wasn't in love with me. And I deserved better."

The waiter we'd met during our previous lunch at Bella Napoli came up to the table.

"Well, hello again, ladies," he said cheerfully. "Can I start you off with a glass of wine or a cocktail?"

"Or both!" Violet said. "Ruby, what'll it be?"

I smiled at the young guy and ordered a glass of orange juice.

"Orange juice!" Violet said. "Nothing stronger?"

"I'm on the clock," I said. "There are a million things to do this afternoon. As much as I'd love to have a drink, I need to keep my mind clear and crisp."

"Not me!" Violet said, grabbing the waiter's arm. "Bring me a vodka rocks, handsome! And make it a double!"

While the waiter went to the bar, I gave Violet a recap of the Lou Storto arrest. I told her only the basics: who he was, where he came from, how he met Cora Trout, and what he'd said about being a jealous guy. I didn't feel it was necessary or advisable to divulge anything more than the nitty-gritty.

"That's it in a nutshell," I said. "When Lou Storto followed Cora to the Capri and found her with Tripp, he flew into a covetous rage."

Violet frowned. "A *what* rage?"

"Covetous," I explained. "Because he was jealous of Cora spending time with Tripp."

"Oh, jealous I understand," she said. "That other word I don't know."

“Well, it doesn’t really matter. Storto confessed and he’s behind bars now.”

“And so this Lou Storto character killed Tripp with a nail file all because of Cora Trout?”

“Well, because he was jealous,” I said.

“Because of Cora.”

“Yes, because he wanted her all to himself.”

“And if he’d waited a few more hours, Tripp would’ve called it off with Cora and the putz could’ve had his wish.”

I nodded.

“What’s going to happen to Cora?”

“It’ll just depend on how she does with the detectives.”

“And your husband?”

“Hank’s my ex,” I said. “And he’s the most reasonable man I know.”

“Didn’t he cheat on you?”

I smiled politely. “Water under the bridge,” I said, not wanting to discuss the ruins of my marriage for the umpteenth time. “We all make mistakes.”

“Sometimes more than one,” Violet said.

A few minutes later, after our second round of drinks was delivered and we’d ordered lunch, Violet reached into her purple alligator handbag and came out with a small gift-wrapped box.

“This is for you,” she said. “A little something extra to thank you for everything you’ve done.”

“Golly,” I said. “You shouldn’t have.”

She smiled. “Well, I know that Dita baked you some of her famous pistachio kumquat bread, but I’m a disaster in the kitchen. There was one time, not too long after we got married, Tripp wanted me to make him a steak dinner. Well, I went to the butcher and bought the two nicest filets they had. Then I went to Britt’s Market and got potatoes and broccoli and some French bread. And when I got back home and started cooking, I proceeded to set fire to the cabinets, cut my finger so deep it needed twenty stitches and the dogs pulled the raw meat off the counter and ate it on the white mohair sofa in the den.”

I noticed the package was covered in pink gift wrap decorated with a girl sitting in a martini glass.

“Sorry about the paper,” Violet said. “That was from my sister’s bachelorette party a few years back. It was the only thing I could find at home this morning.”

I told her she didn’t need to apologize for the paper. “And you certainly didn’t need to buy me anything special,” I said, loosening the ribbon. “I’m just glad that I was able to help you with your situation.”

She turned away and nodded. The shadow of a frown came and went on her face. Then she said: “I miss Tripp a little bit more every day, you know.”

“I can’t imagine what you’re going through, Violet.” I reached over and squeezed her hand. “And I want you to know that you can call me anytime you need someone to talk to, okay?”

“Okay.” She watched as I slowly removed the bachelorette paper. “Are you gonna open that damn thing this week?” she said, winking. “Or should I check back in a few days to see how it’s coming?”

“Sorry,” I said, tearing off the gift wrap. “Let’s see what we’ve got here.”

I crumpled the paper into a ball and set it on the table. Then I lifted the box lid, folded back the white tissue paper and nearly choked when I saw what Violet was giving me.

“Your John Deere cap!” I said, doing my best to sound overjoyed. “What a wonderful surprise!”

She beamed with pride. “I remember how you commented on it when we first met. I figured it was the least I could do to let you know how deeply you’ve touched my heart.”

I kept smiling and pulled the cap from the box.

“Try it on,” Violet said.

“Oh, I’m sure it’ll be fine,” I told her.

“Please,” she said, sounding small and faraway. “Won’t you do it for me?”

So I did it for her. And everyone else in the restaurant. As I put the John Deere cap on my head and Violet reached for her phone to snap a picture, she accidentally bumped a woman carrying a tray loaded with bowls of tiramisu.

“Oh, holy crap!” Violet shrieked as two tables of diners were coated with coffee-soaked ladyfingers and mascarpone cheese. “I did *not* mean for that to happen!”

CHAPTER 43

My hand was trembling as I stood in the hallway outside Clint's apartment. I'd been there for what seemed an eternity when a woman stepped off the elevator with a bag of groceries and a toddler.

"That usually works better when you put the key in the lock," she said.

I glanced down at my hand. Then I looked into her kind eyes.

"Yeah," I said. "It's just that—"

"You're Ruby, right?" she asked.

I was momentarily confused, wondering how she knew my name. But she cleared up the mystery for me before I could say anything.

"Clint told us all about you," she said. "He and my husband are fishing buddies. We moved in last March, and Clint was really helpful when our Emma got sick." She nodded at the little girl, clutching her mother's hand and working on a chocolate chip cookie. "He's a saint, that one."

"That he is," I said, finally finding my voice again. "A saint and a sinner." I winked and she giggled. "And he's all mine."

"Well, you're a lucky woman, that's for sure. You should've seen the expression on his face when he told us all about you."

"Yeah?"

"I've only seen that look once before," she said. "The night I met my husband."

"Oh, that's sweet. Thank you. Clint means the world to me."

She smiled. Then she turned and guided the little girl down the hallway.

"Take good care of him," she called over her shoulder. "And take good care of yourself, too."

After they disappeared around a corner, I put the key in the lock, opened the door and stepped inside.

"Hey!" Clint said. "You're here!"

He came out of the kitchen, wearing a striped apron over a white T-shirt and his brown UPS shorts. He had a wooden spoon in one hand and *Joy of Cooking* in the other.

"Yep," I said. "I'm here."

"I'm making dinner for you." He put the spoon and cookbook on the counter. "But we may have to order a pizza if it turns into a disaster."

I walked over and gave him a kiss. He leaned into it, pressing one hand on my waist.

"Damn, you taste good," he said. "That a new lip gloss or something?"

I shook my head. "Jelly donut. Whenever a case ends, I always treat myself to something sweet."

He laughed. "Well, heck," he said. "I've got something sweet right here." He pointed at his lips.

"Yes, you do, big boy!" I said as we kissed again. "And don't I know it!"

THANK YOU!

Thank you for purchasing and reading **HANDCUFFS & HIGH HEELS**. I'm really grateful that so many readers are embracing Ruby and telling their friends about her. If you enjoyed the book and have the time, I would appreciate a review on [Amazon](#).

Let me know what you think—the good, the bad and all the rest. Your comments and thoughts about Ruby are essential because without readers the equation is incomplete.

I'm working on the next book in the series, and will share it with you soon.

In the meantime, thank you again for reading the first Ruby Wisdom mystery!

J.M.