

Double Eagle
A Cliff Knowles Mystery

By Russell Atkinson

Chapter 1

I think it was the Double Eagle case that really brought home to me how smart Cliff was. I put in more hours than he did now, quite a bit more, but he was still the lead partner, the rainmaker, the one with his name on the door. And for good reason. I'd always admired Cliff for a number of reasons, but that morning he amazed me.

I should introduce myself. I'm Maeva Hanssen, Cliff's partner, the *very junior* partner, in the Knowles Detective Agency. I began as his secretary after I dropped out of Stanford Law School and learned the business from the ground up, but three years ago he made me partner. The firm is small, although we have grown some in those three years. Cliff's niece Ashley is helping out answering phones and doing some billing work, at least until she goes back to high school in the fall. We also have a part-time employee, Woody Braswell, who helps with some of the street work when needed. That's it.

I was at my desk when the call came in. Ashley took it. I overheard her end of the conversation and could tell she was a bit flummoxed so I walked over to her desk and pressed the speakerphone button so I could listen. The caller identified himself as Charles Johnson and said he would like to make an appointment with Mr. Knowles. Ashley didn't recognize the name and he didn't provide a company name so she asked him what he wanted to see Cliff for. He said he didn't want to give particulars over the phone but it was a personal matter. Sometimes we get people who want someone to follow a lover or collect a personal debt. Ashley told him that we don't do that kind of work. Almost all our work now is for law firms or corporations, although she didn't tell him that. He assured her that it was nothing like that. He said it was something quite strange and puzzling. He'd heard that Cliff was a modern-age Sherlock Holmes and that was what he needed. He added that he was prepared to pay quite handsomely. She made a tentative appointment for a week later, when Johnson said he'd be in the Bay Area, but she emphasized that she'd have to confirm it with Mr. Holmes, so he shouldn't make any irrevocable plans until he got a call back. I gave her a thumbs up. She got his number and hung up.

“Quite handsomely? He actually said that?” Cliff asked when he came in later that morning.

“He did. And he called you a modern-day Sherlock Holmes.” She giggled as though that prospect was unimaginably ridiculous.

Cliff snorted at her in mock indignation at her lack of respect. I could tell he was intrigued. Most of his time these days was spent dealing with the major clients hassling over billing rates, response time on the new hire background investigations, and the like. It was boring and not much fun, but it paid the bills. Who doesn’t like a good mystery? I was hoping he’d take the case, but he only told Ashley to give him the number and to write down everything she could remember about the call, even the man’s accent, tone of voice, background noises, and anything else. I told him I’d listened in and would send him my impressions, too. When we’d done that, there wasn’t much to go on. Older-sounding male, probably white, well-educated, American. Nothing in the background.

Cliff went to his computer and I was sure he was looking up the number, or trying to, but I’d already done that. It didn’t come up in Google or our subscription databases, which meant it was probably a prepaid phone – a “burner” phone as they say on TV. Area code 209, which covered a lot of the Central Valley of California. Cliff spent a half hour online and then told Ashley to call him back and confirm the appointment.

“Did you identify him?” I asked, my enthusiasm unhidden.

“No. Too many Charles Johnsons.”

“Me neither.”

That was it for the next week. We’d fallen into our normal routines, but I’d marked the date on my calendar so that I’d be sure to be around when he arrived. I’d asked if he wanted me to sit in on the interview, but he told me no, but to stick around “just in case.” It wasn’t what I’d wanted to hear. Cliff was in early and busy in his office when the door opened and Johnson walked in. He was average height, a bit portly, and in his seventies or possibly eighties. He wore slacks, leather shoes, and a short-sleeve polyester dress shirt with no tie or jacket. He introduced himself to Ashley noting that he had an appointment. She rose and walked to his office door and said, “Cliff, your appointment is here.”

Cliff scowled at her as she was supposed to refer to him as Mr. Knowles in front of clients, a mistake I suspected she made on purpose. At

least she hadn't called him Uncle Cliff as she sometimes did. The whole thing was something of a charade since Cliff could see everything in the main office through the window in his office. We've expanded some since the lawyers next door moved out, but it's still a small office. Cliff stood and walked to his office entrance.

"Mr. Johnson, please come in."

Johnson walked slowly to the plush chair kept for clients. Cliff took his own spot behind his desk rather than the other client chair. I walked up to the open door and gave Cliff a hopeful look. He waved me to come in. I broke into a Cheshire Cat grin, but toned it down to a Flipper the Dolphin smile by the time I sat next to Johnson.

"This is my partner, Maeva Hanssen."

"Pleased to meet you. Thank you for agreeing to see me."

"My pleasure, Mr. Johnson. How can I be of service?"

I got a better look at Johnson now that I was three feet away. He had a thick shock of graying hair over the ears and neck, but it was thinning on top where some nasty-looking sun spots spread and merged like a Rorschach test. The back of his hands suffered from the same condition. He kept reading glasses in his shirt pocket, but didn't wear any now unless he had contacts in. I couldn't tell. Despite his deep tan, he had a fair complexion and light blue eyes. He'd probably been blond as a boy, but the hairs that weren't white were now a dull muddy gray that a charitable person might call salt-and-pepper. He wore no wedding ring or other jewelry.

"Mr. Knowles, I've heard good things about you. I asked someone I trust to recommend a top notch detective and he gave me your name. He said you were a modern-day Sherlock Holmes."

"That's what my secretary said. I'm flattered, of course, but really that's an exaggeration, I'm sure."

"Oh, I'm not given to blandishments, Mr. Knowles. Those were his words."

"And to whom do I owe that compliment? You're not from around here and I don't know anyone in Sutter Creek."

I don't know whose jaw dropped farther, mine or Johnson's.

"My lord. How did you know that? I never told your secretary where I lived. You really are Sherlock Holmes."

"Pfft. Don't be silly, Mr. McNabb. If I were Holmes I would tell you all about yourself, but all I know is that you're from Sutter Creek, you own a

vineyard, you were classically educated, you recently bought a Pixel 3 smart phone, your first smart phone, and you like ragtime music. I really have no idea why you're here."

Cliff kept a straight face, but I couldn't. I clapped a hand over my mouth to prevent some unprofessional verbiage from leaking out. Johnson, or McNabb I guess it is now, put his hand to his chest and gaped speechlessly. For a moment I thought he was going to yell "This is the big one, Elizabeth!" like Redd Foxx on Sanford and Son. I'm too young to ever have seen that when it was live, but my dad loved that show and used to imitate him whenever my mom wouldn't go along with one of his more outrageous plans. I saw a few reruns when I was little. Instead, McNabb burst into uproarious laughter.

"I see I got good advice about coming to you. You must tell me how you did that. This is a brand-new phone with a new number that I've never given to anyone or used with any sort of account, online or otherwise. I use only my home phone for those."

"Quite simple, really. The white stripe on your left wrist shows where you used to wear a wrist watch while the rest of your tanned skin shows evidence of a life in the sun. We were once the target of a serial killer so I had a security camera mounted in our hallway. I watched from my desk as you approached our door. I was expecting you since you had an appointment. You looked at your empty wrist, shook your head at your foolishness, then pulled out your phone to see the time to make sure you weren't late. It took you three tries to turn it around and unlock it, so you are obviously new to the technology. Your phone case says Pixel 3 on it."

"Ah, I see. That explains the phone. But my name, the vineyard, Sutter Creek, the ragtime, the education. How in the world ...?"

"Your manner of speech is quite ... quaint, shall we say, and erudite. Blandishments and handsomely are not words one hears every day. Clearly you are an intelligent man with a classical education. As for the rest, let's chalk that up to professional secrets. Now how can I help you?"

"First, I must apologize for using a false name. I see now that was foolish, but I really think someone must be spying on me. There are strange ... doings going on at my home, Mr. Knowles. If I were a superstitious man I'd think ghosts were haunting me. But more to the point so far as you're concerned, someone is stealing my fortune. I need it to stop."

“How exactly is this theft taking place? Embezzlement? I’m not an accountant.”

“No, no. The books balance perfectly. The business is fine. Someone’s stealing gold coins from my home. You see, my great-grandfather was a gold miner, one of the lucky ones. He sold his gold to the San Francisco Mint, the Granite Lady, back in the 1870’s. They would buy the raw gold, paying the miners with gold coins, keeping a percent. He didn’t believe in banks, and he kept those coins in his home. The house and the coins were passed down to my grandfather, then to my father, and then to me. We’ve all been only children so there are no other family members in the know. There’s a safe in the house where the coins are kept. No one knows the combination but me. No one even knows of the existence of these coins so far as I am aware. But I’ve discovered that some of the coins are missing. You can understand the reason for all the secrecy.”

“How much money are we talking about?”

“That’s difficult to say, since the coins are literally mint condition from the 1800’s. They’re worth much more than the face value of the coins but their value as collector’s items would diminish if the number of them were to become known. That’s why I don’t sell them. I don’t need the money and they’re appreciating very handsomely ...”

He paused briefly when he realized he’d used that word again, suddenly self-aware of his pretentious manner of speaking. Then he continued.

“Well, to answer your question, I would say the coins at retail value, the whole lot of them, would probably bring in around twelve million dollars if sold over time to collectors. If I were to sell them all in bulk it would have to be to a dealer at a substantial discount, but even melted down as bullion at today’s gold prices, at least nine million. When I did an inventory recently I discovered that three coins are missing. They were 1874-S twenty dollar Liberties, also called double eagles. Retail value would be about \$1700 each, probably more considering their perfect condition.”

“As disturbing as that may be, that’s not such a large loss. My fee would be much more than that. Perhaps it’s best just to file a claim with your insurance company or absorb the loss.”

“I realize that, but it’s more than just that. As I said before, there have been some strange phenomena going on.”

“Such as?”

“One morning I came down and noticed a piece of furniture had been moved slightly. I’m sure I would have noticed if it had been out of place when I went to bed. I have to walk right by it to go upstairs to bed. Then just the other day, I was sure I heard someone moving around downstairs. I went down, but no one was there. That was what convinced me I needed a detective. Besides, if someone has stolen three coins, and we don’t determine who and how, they could do it again.”

“You’re sure about the furniture?”

“Quite sure. My housekeeper is meticulous and would have straightened it, too.”

“Who else has access to your house? You’ve mentioned a housekeeper. Do you have other family? Visitors? Staff?”

“No other servants or staff except a gardener once a week, but he never comes inside the house. My housekeeper doesn’t live with me but she has a key. She comes in three times a week and does some cleaning and cooking, but she goes home in the evenings. My only child is a daughter. She and her husband come to visit three or four times a year. She has a key. They have a youngster, my grandson. The coins, my entire estate in fact, will one day be theirs. She knows I have a safe, but she doesn’t know about the coins. I’ve told her I just use it for papers like my will and such because it’s fireproof and it’s been there since before I inherited the house. My dad had it installed back in the 1950’s. She’s never shown any curiosity about it. She doesn’t know the combination.”

“Where do they live?”

“Not far from here. Palo Alto. In fact, I’ll be meeting her for lunch later today.

“What do she and her husband do for a living?”

“She’s a stay-at-home mom. She has a teaching credential and taught in elementary schools for many years, but retired from that in her thirties when she and her husband had a child. Her husband is in software. Surely you don’t suspect them? As I said, my daughter will inherit everything one day and I know her husband makes good money. Plus I give them generous gifts every year. They have no reason to steal from me.”

“How often do you inventory the coins?”

“Rarely. I have no reason to. I don’t use them for anything. I just discovered the theft two weeks ago when I did it for the first time in years. Prior to that the last time I did one was when my daughter got married. That

was eight years ago. I took two coins out and had them mounted together as a wedding gift. Lady Liberty showing on one coin, representing my daughter, the eagle on the other for my son-in-law. Her name is Libby and her husband's last name is Hawke. The wordplay was too enticing to pass up. I did a full written inventory then and left it in the safe. It's still there."

"So she knows about the coins."

"No, no. I didn't tell her where I got them. I'm sure she assumed I bought them from a collector. I've never told her about the coins. She does know that the family money came from my great-grandfather's gold mine."

"What prompted you to do this latest inventory?"

"These strange things I mentioned to you. First it was the table being moved. Then I thought I heard someone downstairs one night and after calling down, with no answer, I went down to see. I didn't find anything but I felt a cold draft even though everything was closed up. It made me wonder if someone was getting in at night, so I decided to check the coins. I did the inventory the next day."

"Could you have miscounted, either this time or the previous time? Maybe no coins are missing."

"That is quite impossible, Mr. Knowles. Most of the coins are in sealed rolls. There was only one stack of loose coins at the previous inventory. That stack had five coins then. I took the two for the wedding present and left a neat stack of three. This latest time all the rolls are still there but the three loose coins are missing. It's difficult to miscount the number zero."

Cliff mulled this information over for a long minute before replying. "All right, Mr. McNabb, I'll take the case. You understand I cannot guarantee a satisfactory solution. I will need to visit your home as an overnight guest for a few days."

I cleared my throat, catching Cliff's eye.

"My partner and I, that is. Can you accommodate us?"

"Oh yes. The house is quite large. I have spare rooms and I can have the housekeeper stock up on groceries. When would you like to come?"

"As soon as I can, but I need to do some research first and move some things on my calendar. I'll be contacting you."

Cliff presented McNabb with our contract to sign, took his retainer, and McNabb was on his way, all smiles. I followed them both to the door and

shook his hand as he left. As soon as he was gone I tailed Cliff like a puppy dog back into his office.

“OK, Cliff, you gotta tell me how you did that. I searched every social media, every data source for that phone number and that name and never got anything. And don’t say ‘elementary, my dear.’”

Cliff smiled that smile, the one the gracious winner uses on the vanquished foe while relishing the victory with a secret evil smile inside. “I didn’t have any luck on that specific number, not all ten digits anyway. But I knew that in large area codes like 209, the prefixes are usually assigned to specific communities. His number had a 267 prefix. I started looking up bed and breakfast inns in the various cities and towns until I found a bunch of them in Sutter Creek with the 267 prefix.”

“Why B and B’s?”

“Because they’re big enough to have websites with phone numbers, but smaller than hotels and often owned by a single proprietor. They’re more likely to have single regular residential phone numbers. The hotels often have toll-free numbers or are part of chains with commercial numbers located elsewhere. Stores and businesses often have commercial prefixes. Anyway, so once I knew the town, I started researching Sutter Creek. Fortunately it’s quite small. It used to be a gold mining town, but that ended long ago. Its only two industries now are wineries and tourism. There are six wineries there, so if the mysterious caller could afford to pay me ‘handsomely’ I figured he might be the owner of one of those. With some Google searches I eventually found a website promoting the town’s wine industry. It had pictures provided by all the wineries. Most of them showed the tasting room or pictures of grapes in the field, but three of them had pictures of the founders or owners. The names of those owners were listed. Charles McNabb was one of them. I had that website up on my screen when he walked in. I didn’t know for sure it was him until I saw him arrive, but I recognized him immediately. It could have been one of the other two, or none of them, but the other guy in the photo was short, dark, younger, and Italian and the third was a woman.”

“What about the ragtime?”

“Sutter Creek hosts an annual ragtime festival.”

“That doesn’t mean he’s a fan.”

“True, but he was on the host committee three years ago according to another web search, although that also didn’t mean he really liked the music. He was the only man on the committee that year. Additionally, Charles

Johnson is the name of one of the best-known ragtime composers. I didn't think he chose that name out of the blue."

"Best known? I've never heard of him."

"How many ragtime composers have you heard of?"

"Uh ... Scott Joplin?" I realized my failing to recognize the name didn't mean much. It wasn't exactly my area of expertise.

"You got one. Very good. That probably beats ninety-eight percent of the American public. Joplin, Joseph Lamb, and James Scott are probably the only three that are considered generally well-known to the public, but Johnson wrote a number of successful rags and is considered on a par with those others by experts."

"I didn't know you were into ragtime music."

"I'm not. But the website promoting the festival listed some of the scheduled rags and their composers. One of those was Charles Johnson. From there it was Wikipedia."

"So what do you think is going on with the coins and the spooky furniture?"

"I have no idea, but a long weekend in the mountains will be a nice break. Rainy season just ended and fire season hasn't started. It will still be cool enough to do some hiking."

"And geocaching?"

"You know me too well. I've never cached in Amador County."

Chapter 2

Ten days later we found ourselves cruising up Highway 88 into the Sierra foothills. Cliff had to stop and pick up some geocaches along the way. I even helped him search for a couple of them. We arrived at McNabb's house on Friday afternoon in order to fit the cover story we'd concocted. Cliff was going to portray McNabb's cousin come to visit and I'd be Cliff's daughter. That way, if someone was watching the house, it shouldn't be obvious we were detectives. Cliff told me these sorts of things are almost always inside jobs, but that we should start with a physical security inspection.

The house was in a late Victorian style, embellished with architectural bric-a-brac you seldom see any more: hand-carved wooden balustrades and corbels, twin turrets topped by elaborate finials, bay windows, and all kinds of exterior foofaraw I don't know the technical terms for. It had once been

painted bright, contrasting colors, but those were faded so badly now that it assumed an almost gray appearance. Located two blocks from “downtown” Sutter Creek, its three stories loomed over the surrounding modest structures. It had clearly once been the grand showpiece of the area but was looking dated and out-of-place among the cheap one-story clapboard houses that had sprung up all around. The house was set back from the street on a large lot and was somewhat shielded from view by three magnificent elm trees. Directly across the street were two houses, one of which had a large motor home parked in the driveway.

Cliff had decided to take the company van. We didn’t do much surveillance these days, but any real detective agency needs a vehicle like this from time to time. We had a couple of signs we could attach to the sides with magnets to look like workmen or vendors of various sorts, but we left those back at the office. It was leased, and he turned it in for a brand new one every six months so we didn’t have to display a license plate. We were just cousin Cliff and his daughter May. Cliff said Maeva was too distinctive so I should go by May while here at least with anyone besides Charles.

The driveway ended in a loop that curved around in front of a high portico so that people could alight from their car and step right under it, never getting wet in the rain. To the side was a wide area for guest parking. We parked there and lifted our bags from the car. McNabb must have heard us arrive, or been alerted by his housekeeper, since he came out to greet us warmly as we climbed up the steps to the front door. As we had agreed, he hailed us by “Cliff” and “May.” I called him “Uncle Charles” although technically he’d be my first cousin once removed, I suppose. I gave him a hug. His housekeeper, a stout woman in her forties with a German hausfrau look to her, took it all in from the front porch.

The house had a hallway running down its length from front to back. All the rooms on the right were wider than those on the left, so the hall wasn’t actually down the center. On the right were the living room, dining room, kitchen, and a room that doubled as a laundry area and mud room, with a door into the back yard. On the left was a room that might once have been a sitting room or sewing room, with its good light from two sides, but now served as a map room. McNabb was apparently a fan of maps. Several framed ones on the wall showed very old maps from the earliest European mapmakers with their comical renditions of the world and on one wall was a rack of large wooden dowels on which large maps hung overlapping like I’ve seen in libraries. The

next room was the coat closet, then a storage closet, a small utility room housing the furnace, then the guest bathroom, and finally an office in the back corner. A stairway led up from where the living room and dining rooms met the hall.

He showed us to our rooms on the second floor. As we passed through the house, it was clear that many of the rooms had been modernized inside. The kitchen looked up-to-date and so did most of the ground floor. My room, however, looked like it hadn't been touched since it was built back in the 1800s. The rickety bed had a new mattress and fresh linens on it, but was so small I barely fit and I'm only average height. The housekeeper had cleaned it, but it could have been a museum display depicting yesteryear. At least it did have its own bathroom, but that consisted of a standing rust-stained washbasin, an ancient chain-pull toilet, and a tiny clawfoot tub that looked like it belonged on *Salvage Dawgs*. I hoped Cliff got something bigger. McNabb apologized that my room wasn't "up to snuff" as he put it, but explained that he'd only inherited the house after his daughter had gone off to college. The master bedroom and one of the larger bedrooms were nicely remodeled, so he hadn't seen the need to remodel the other ones once they were empty-nesters. I soon learned that Cliff had been given the remodeled guest room, the same one his daughter and her husband used when they came to visit. My room was the grandson's, I surmised.

"If you already had a comfortable home, why didn't you just stay there when your father passed?" Cliff asked.

"Well, our house wasn't all that comfortable. My father was never that generous. He was old school. He thought every man should earn his way in the world. I learned the winemaking business growing up, but I was just a regular salaried employee at the vineyard until dad was on his last legs and he finally made me president. That's the main family business, growing grapes. As a kid I spent a lot of time doing field work during the summer when I was on break from boarding school. Despite my 'classical education' as you called it, I'm really just a farmer. My wife and I lived farther down in the valley when I first got married. It's hotter there. This is a nicer location and a nicer house despite its age, and then there's the problem with the safe."

"The problem?"

"Yes, well, if I'd sold this house, I'd have to do something with it. I could have sold the gold, but that would have posed all kinds of problems – tax, security, logistical. The safe weighs over six hundred pounds and the

coins over five hundred. And I'd get only a fraction of their true value if I sold them all at once or even a big portion of them."

"Can we take a look at that safe now?"

"I'd rather wait until Bernice has gone. I've never opened it while she's been in the house, although I have no reason to distrust her. So far as she knows, it's a relic I never use."

"Bernice is the housekeeper, I take it?"

"Yes. Sorry, I should have introduced you."

"How long has she worked for you?"

"Going on seven years now. I hired her after our previous woman became too old. My wife insisted on doing the cooking for the family but now Bernice does most of it, although I can put together a meal."

"Bernice never worked for your parents? Or helped your wife with the cleaning?"

"Good point. I see where you're going with that. My wife knew about the gold, of course, but also knew not to tell anyone about it. She did have regular housekeeping help, but it was an older woman who moved into an assisted living facility shortly after my wife passed away. I doubt she's alive now. I hired Bernice myself but I never asked if she'd worked for my parents. She's the wife of one of the winery employees and might have known them. It's possible, I suppose. My wife had a brother, but he's deceased, so there are no relatives there who would know about the safe."

We'd been standing in the hallway of the second floor outside Cliff's room. Suddenly I noticed Bernice standing at the top of the stairs watching us. Cliff and Charles had their backs to her, unaware of her presence.

"There's Bernice now," I interrupted, hoping she hadn't overheard us talking about her. "You should introduce us."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I just wanted to ask if you wanted me to set the table with the good china."

Charles motioned for her to come over. "Bernice, I want you to meet my cousin Cliff and his daughter May."

"Hello," she said shyly.

"Pleased to meet you," Cliff and I said almost simultaneously.

She nodded and smiled but did not extend a hand. She was holding a dinner plate with both hands, presumably the good china she was asking about.

"Yes, please use the good stuff. We don't have guests very often."

Bernice was middle-aged and, as I said, stout. I'd call her non-descript, but that wouldn't make me a very good detective. She really didn't stand out. She was a white woman with pale skin, red knuckles, and bifocals. Her bottle blonde hair looked like a do-it-yourself job. Cliff later referred to her as a suicide blonde – dyed by her own hand. She went back downstairs.

Cliff waited for her to get out of earshot and then told McNabb that he wanted to look over the rest of the house. McNabb walked us over to the only other room on the floor, which was now a small sitting room or possibly reading room on the other side of the stairs. It appeared to be a converted bedroom. It had good light in the afternoon he said, so he would sometimes read there. A small couch, a recliner chair, and a side table were the only furniture. It also housed a good-sized flat screen television mounted on the wall.

There was a third floor, so Cliff asked what was up there. McNabb told us he almost never went up there any more as it was getting more difficult to make the climb. He said he probably wouldn't be able to keep his bedroom on the second floor much longer. I could foresee the map room becoming a bedroom one of these days. Despite this disclaimer, he led us up the stairs without any apparent difficulty. That floor was smaller, holding only two rooms. The windowless one on the left was used more or less as an attic, holding all that miscellany that one accumulates over the years. Cardboard boxes of varying sizes covered one wall stacked two or three high, labeled in felt pen with various dates. There was an old ironing board, some camping gear, rickety folding chairs, a 1940's style vacuum cleaner, and much more. You could see where Bernice vacuumed in the area close to the door, but she obviously didn't dust in that room. Spider webs and dust blanketed everything. I started sneezing and backed out of the room.

The other room was a converted bedroom now used as a playroom. There were Lego blocks, simple board games, toy cars and trucks. The room had French doors that opened out onto a small balcony. An expensive-looking telescope was set up on a platform in the turret that rose from one corner. Since the grandson was only four years old, I pegged McNabb as premature in his aspirations, but what do I know? Maybe the kid is a budding cosmologist.

Cliff inspected the French doors and the large window on the other wall. Both had electronic detectors mounted on them.

"These set off an alarm if the window or doors are opened?" Cliff asked.

“If the security system is set, yes. Not during the day. I set it every night before I go to bed and if Bernice is not coming in, when I leave the house for any length of time. You can check the logs if you want. It’s all on my computer. There haven’t been any intrusions here or elsewhere around the house. These gadgets send a signal to the wi-fi. All the windows and exterior doors have them. Cameras around the outside, too. It’s a top-notch system.”

“Who installed these?”

“HSS. Home Security Systems. They’re in Sacramento. There’s a smaller company in Jackson, Mother Lode Alarm, that I got a bid from, but I didn’t want anyone local being familiar with my security setup and they were more expensive.”

“Did you tell them about the safe? Or did they see it?”

“No. Both companies had to come inside to make bids or to install the devices on the windows and doors, but I was with them the whole time in the office. HSS also came into my office to install the software and demonstrate how to use it, but I had the covering on it so that it looked like an incidental table. You’ll see when we go down there.”

“How long ago did you have this put in?”

“Almost three years now. It’s really been splendid. When people ring the bell I can see them on my computer screen and even talk to them. I can avoid solicitors and such.”

“Is it connected to the police?”

“It alerts the HSS central office of a breach via the Internet. They call the local police emergency number, which for me is the Sutter Creek Police Department. It also rings a very loud alarm in the house. As I mentioned before, there’s never been a breach, at least not that the alarm log has ever shown. The police have never said anything about an alarm being reported there. I also arranged for them to call the sheriff’s office in Jackson. I contributed heavily to the sheriff’s election campaigns, so I’m sure he’d let me know of anything like that if I were not around. He’s a family friend. His father worked for my father.”

Cliff murmured acknowledgment but said nothing. He walked out onto the balcony and peered over the railing. The balcony extended over the front porch. The balcony was the roof of the portico. A tall enough ladder would reach from the front walk to the balcony, but it was up on the third story level.

We went back to the second floor and Cliff asked to see the master bedroom. McNabb seemed nonplussed, like he was prissy about his privacy, but he led us in. It was twice the size of mine with an adjacent bathroom/walk-in closet suite. The bath had been modernized with a built-in Jacuzzi. The bedroom also had a small fireplace that was obviously original to the house.

“Do you use the fireplace?” Cliff asked.

“Not this one. The office is directly below and shares the chimney with this one. Occasionally I use that one, and there’s a bigger fireplace in the living room with its own chimney. I use that on special occasions like Christmas morning when the family is here. Those downstairs are both plumbed for gas now. This one isn’t.”

Cliff went over to the fireplace and looked up the chimney. He reached up and moved something. Two metallic clangs signaled the opening and closing of the damper, accompanied by the squeak of a rusty hinge. A few rusty specks floated down. I could tell from his grunt that it took some effort to move. “You keep this damper closed then?”

“Yes. It hasn’t been opened in years. The house has central heating and air conditioning now. It would just vent heat or cold outside if it were left open.”

Cliff brushed some reddish rust specks off his hands. He continued into the bathroom and closet area. There was a skylight in the bathroom, a modern addition. “Does that open?”

“No. It’s fixed.”

Cliff checked all the windows and they had the same security sensors as the other rooms. “I saw two turrets when we arrived, but there was only the one upstairs in the playroom.”

“Oh, that. The other one is over the storage room, but there’s no access. The ceiling blocks it. It’s purely cosmetic to provide balance and symmetry.”

Cliff seemed satisfied and asked to go downstairs. We descended to the ground floor and McNabb led us to the living room. In the hallway at the base of the stairs was a small table and combination umbrella stand and hat rack. Charles tapped the stand and gave us a significant look, apparently indicating this was the mysterious moving furniture he’d told us about.

The room was large by modern-day standards, but it was certainly comfortable feeling. The fireplace was massive and took up most of the side

wall. The front wall overlooked the front yard. The large picture window there was framed by stained glass on both sides and above. Cliff inspected the windows carefully but only after checking to make sure Bernice wasn't watching them. The ones in this room didn't open, but there was a wooden panel under the picture window that could be opened. It was hinged on the bottom and when pulled out exposed a screened airway to the outside. The panel hung open a few inches and was secured by small chains on either end to prevent it falling flat onto the floor – or someone's foot. Cliff checked the heavy-duty screen and determined that it was built into the foundation and not movable. McNabb explained that the panel was another feature that wasn't used anymore since the installation of central air. Heavy drapes hung on both sides, but were drawn open now.

The sunken floor was polished hardwood. The room was about eight or ten inches lower than the adjacent hallway, so we'd stepped down to enter. There was no wall between the hall and living room but the step had the effect of separating them. One large Persian rug covered all but the edges of the room, about one foot from every wall. Based on the size and shape, I guessed it was custom made to the dimensions of the room. The walls featured sconces that must have held candles or oil lamps originally, but now were purely decorative. Modern LED lighting was built into the high ceiling. In the corner on the hall side was a large play structure for the cat, with a thick base, a scratching post, ramps and different levels of carpeted platforms, topped by a pillow that served as a bed. The furniture consisted of a modern-looking living room set – two sofas, several stuffed chairs and a large coffee table. When Cliff appeared to have finished surveying the room, McNabb invited us to sit. He asked if we'd like tea.

I looked over to Cliff. I knew he'd prefer a beer and his hesitation showed, but he graciously accepted. I followed suit. McNabb called to Bernice for some tea. She called back that she'd start a pot. Since McNabb didn't want to show us the office until Bernice was gone, we decided just to play the relatives-come-to-visit role for a bit. We assumed that Bernice would be able to overhear at least some of our conversation.

"So how is Libby and her family?" Cliff asked nodding toward the kitchen to let McNabb know he was aware of Bernice.

"She's doing well. She has her hands full with Porter. He's a very active lad. He'll be starting kindergarten next year."

The family chitchat continued for another fifteen minutes or so when Bernice entered carrying a tray with a silver teapot and three cups. She set it on the coffee table in front of Charles. There was a plate of cookies on the tray. I was actually pretty hungry so I grabbed a couple while Charles was pouring my cup. Lady's first. They were store-bought, not homemade, but I'm no cookie snob. Crisp, sweet. Yum.

"What's Libby's husband's name again?" Cliff asked when Bernice was out of the room. He was being polite because I knew Charles had never told us his full name, just the last name Hawke. I would have started researching him if he had.

"Leonard. Leonard Hawke."

"Ah, yes, Leonard. And he's in software you said? Those guys jump from firm to firm I hear. Silicon Valley and all that."

"Indeed. This is his third company in six years if I'm not mistaken. This one has something to do with those self-driving cars."

I hadn't said boo since I'd arrived and was beginning to feel guilty for making the client pay for my time, not to mention the room and board for the weekend, but I got an alert on my phone right then. I'd been watching a twenty dollar Liberty gold coin on e*Bay. Someone had just upped the bid. There were a ton of these coins, called double eagles, listed, but this was one of very few 1874-S coins, the year and mint Charles seemed sure his had been. It was ungraded and not certified, unlike most of the other coins for sale. The seller didn't accept returns either. So he wasn't a professional rare coin dealer and probably hadn't taken it to an expert to get graded. It looked pretty good from the photos and would be worth a lot more if graded and certified. That had made me suspicious. I'd started the search right after Charles had left our office even though from his story the coins could have been stolen years earlier and would probably have been disposed of then. There was no way to know if this one came from Charles's safe. Cliff had encouraged me to keep an eye on it, so I tapped him on the shoulder and showed him my phone.

"Interesting," he said and turned back to Charles. "My partner is tracking gold coins for sale on e*Bay. This one caught her eye. Take a look." He took my phone and handed it to McNabb.

"Oh, I was watching online sites myself for a while after I discovered the theft. There are more double eagles out there for sale than one would surmise. Hmm, and 1874-S. Well, that is the right vintage, but really, what are

the chances it's one of mine? And how would we know? They don't have serial numbers. There's a steady trickle of them on those sites, even the 1874-S, and I've only lost three."

"All very true. But we're tracking these anyway. What if a seller turns out to be in Sutter Creek?"

"I see your point. I hope that's not your main focus, though. I could do that much, and in fact, already did without luck."

I piped up, "It's not. But look, the seller, PrimoDeells, has a good rating, but only eighty-five transactions. He's clearly not a regular coin dealer. All the other coin sellers I've looked at have thousands of ratings and their e*Bay seller names are related to rare coins, gold, or something similar."

"Very well. Keep watching if you deem it worthwhile." He said this barely above a whisper as he looked over his shoulder. He was clearly not comfortable talking about the investigation around Bernice, so I dropped it.

Cliff continued to question McNabb about Libby and Leonard, smoothly and casually so it sounded natural. Like a distant relative might do. We learned that Libby was a good student as a child, but not a star. She'd attended Cal State East Bay, where she eventually got her teaching credential. She was blonde and very pretty, something obvious from the pictures hanging on the wall upstairs. Leonard was a Harvey Mudd graduate. That meant he was a STEM standout – science, technology, engineering and math. Harvey Mudd is expensive, private, and very selective. They'd met on Match.com and hit it off when she was in her senior year. I guess those sites work for some. They never did for me, but that's another story. He was in graduate school at Berkeley at the time. He was swarthy, like he was part Turkish or Greek or something, and not bad-looking himself if you liked the type. The little boy was a cutie if looking rather overfed. He'd probably lose the baby fat. McNabb didn't seem to know a whole lot more about his son-in-law. He knew Leonard's father was in some sort of import-export business in the San Diego area. They'd met only once – at the wedding. His mother died from some form of cancer before Leonard and Libby had met.

"I'd like to see the yard," Cliff said after we'd finished our tea. Charles led us through the kitchen, where Bernice had a hearty stew simmering, through the laundry room into the back yard. It was spacious and beautifully landscaped, much nicer than the front yard.

"I see you have a cat door," I said, emboldened now that I'd actually contributed something. There was one of those rectangular flap things in the door we'd just passed through.

"Yes, that's for Cruiser. He's around here somewhere. Indoor-outdoor. He has to be able to get outside."

As if on cue a large black-and-white cat strolled up to greet us from the far end of the yard.

"Here's our little police cruiser now," Cliff said, immediately recognizing the origin of the name, something I'd missed. He stroked Cruiser's cheeks and received a purr in return.

"Do you keep that door open all the time?" I asked. I know how those cat doors work. There's a Masonite panel you slide into the metal frame to close them.

"No, at night I close it. He always comes in at night. He doesn't like the cold and at this elevation it gets quite cold at night, even in summer. Once in a rare while if it's hot, he stays out, but I close the panel anyway. One has to around here. The raccoons will come in and trash your home if you leave it open. Even possums or skunks. You don't think someone could get in that way do you? The opening is much too small for a person."

"You're probably right," I said, but I was thinking I'd have to test that assertion later.

There was a swimming pool in the yard surrounded by a sturdy metal fence three feet high. There was a gate to the fence with a latch you had to reach on the inside. Easy for an adult, not for a small child. It also had a motorized cover which was now closed. McNabb was obviously safety-conscious. We walked around it to a shady alcove near the back edge of the yard and sat on a marble bench.

"Do you do your own pool maintenance?" Cliff asked.

"No, I have a service."

"Does he come inside – to use the phone or bathroom, maybe?"

"No, never so far as I remember. It's been different fellows. It's a summer job for teens, often. I don't even know the name of the one who comes now. A red-headed kid."

Cliff looked around, spurring me to do the same. Neighbors on two sides had large conifers growing near the fence which were visible over the eight-foot fencing. I couldn't see what was beyond those. The third side was bare of large trees, but the fence blocked my view that way, too. From my

angle I could just see the chimney of a modest one-story house with a television antenna bracketed to it. Towards the front McNabb's house blocked the view of the street.

"How about the gardener?" Cliff continued.

"Yes, I have a fellow for that. Fausto. He's Portuguese. He never comes inside, either."

"Are you normally here during the day?"

"No, not necessarily. I still have a business to run ... or at least help run. I don't run the vineyard any longer, not really. My great-grandfather used much of his money to buy a lot of land in the valley. Most of it is used for grape-growing, but we lease that to Gallo. They do all the planting, tending, and harvesting. There are other holdings – office buildings, a trailer park. It's more of a real estate business than a wine business now, but we do have a boutique winery in town and I like to tinker with the wines. We reserve a plot for our own use. I have a professional enologist to run that, too, but I do some of the sales, check the vines, make comments and suggestions, that sort of thing. I have a lot of connections from my long years and of course I have to keep track of the books and sign checks. I go in three times a week most weeks. I'm usually home the other days, but I'm in and out with errands and whatnot."

"So the gold isn't your entire fortune?"

"Heavens, no. The business is worth at least three times as much and I have a large investment portfolio. I have half a dozen employees who do the office work on a day-to-day basis. When my daughter made clear she had no interest in taking over the business, I sold a fifty percent interest to my general manager. That's Joe. He's now my partner and makes most of the decisions. I'm the last of the dynasty, I'm afraid."

"Do you have many guests? Do your employees come to the house?"

"Of course I have visitors, dinner parties and such. The office employees don't ever come by. The business office is in San Andreas, twenty miles south of here. Only the winery and tasting room are here in Sutter Creek. I'll stop by there almost every day to say hi and glad hand the tourists."

"Do any of them know about your safe?"

McNabb thought about that for a minute. "Joe might. His father worked for my father and would sometimes come by the house to discuss business. They would be in the office. He passed away and Joe moved up to

General Manager. That was maybe fifteen years ago. Joe has come into my office a few times when he needed me to sign a check or something, but I don't recall showing him the safe. His father might have learned about it and told him, though."

"He'd be the only one?"

More pondering. "I think so." Then, after a pause. "I trust Joe completely. He's already half owner. He probably went into debt to buy his share, but he'll be a multimillionaire soon enough. He has no motive to steal and I know him to be an honest upright fellow."

Cliff's questioning about the business and the employees went on for almost an hour. The sun was getting low and McNabb suggested we go inside. He said Bernice only stayed until six, so we'd eat early.

Chapter 3

We sat down to eat at five thirty. The dining room was furnished in a traditional formal style – dark wood wainscoting, a small chandelier over the mahogany table. Bernice had set out fine bone china and elegant freshly polished silver for everyone. The place mats were crisp linen embroidered with a floral pattern. The simple beef stew seemed oddly incongruous, but was delicious. Buttermilk biscuits graced the table along with a Jello fruit salad, another incongruity among the formal setting.

Bernice told McNabb she'd loaded the dishwasher with what she could and said he could leave the rest for her until Monday if he wanted. He told her he'd take care of it and told her she could go home.

"It was nice to meet you," she said to us.

We returned the sentiment.

"Charles, you warned your cousins about the ghosts, didn't you? It wouldn't be fair not to."

McNabb made a dismissive gesture with one hand. "Oh Bernice, now don't go spreading those silly rumors."

She shuddered. "Well, you all are braver than me. I wouldn't sleep here at night."

"I'm sure we'll survive," Charles said., "You have a good weekend."

"You too. Bye then." She left.

With Bernice gone we could talk more freely. Cliff pulled a device out of his pocket. "So far as I can tell, there are no bugs in your home," he announced, holding the device up for Charles to see.

"My word. Bugs?! You thought someone was spying on me?"

"It was – is – a possibility. This is just a low end detector. If someone was using a spread-spectrum device, it wouldn't show up on this. We'd need to get a technician with high-end equipment for that. I've been carrying this around and gotten no hits. The most likely place someone would put a device is your office, and we haven't gone there yet. After dinner that's the first thing I want to do. When we go in there, don't say anything about the investigation or our real identities until I give you the all clear."

"I see."

We finished our dinner and helped Charles in the kitchen, which consisted of loading our dishes and silver into the dishwasher. He put away the leftover stew and other fixings and put the pot in the sink to soak.

As soon as that was done, Cliff went into the office to check for bugs. While he was doing that, I stepped into the laundry room, which was adjacent to the kitchen and got down on my hands and knees. I'd read that a determined, thin person could get his body through any opening that he could get his head through. There are a number of prison escapes that have proven that, although prisoners may have had to lose fifty pounds to get skinny enough. I tried to put my head through the cat door opening. I placed the Masonite panel in the slot closing the cat door. I stepped outside and found that it wasn't hard to lift the flap and slide the panel up and out of the frame from the outside. The heavy rubber flap moved easily enough but the metal frame was too narrow for my head. I just could not shove my head through no matter how I twisted and turned. I don't have a big head, either, not like, say, Cliff's. I doubt a ten-year-old child would have a smaller head than mine so I don't think a kid older than a toddler could manage it, either. I examined the cat door closely. There were actually frames on both sides of the door. Four screws held each in place. I suppose someone outside could remove the outer frame, but I don't see how they could remove the inner one from the outside and even if they did, the opening in the door itself was still too small to get through. The screws all looked old and tarnished, with no signs of recent action. I didn't think anyone had been fooling with it.

Cliff called out to me to join him in the office, so I did. The room connected to the far end of the hall across from the kitchen and past the guest

bathroom. It was a good-sized room, big enough to serve as a master bedroom. It was on the corner of the house, with one wall facing the back yard, one facing the side. Both had high windows. The third wall faced the hall and the fourth, the one toward the front of the house, shared a wall with a utility closet where the furnace and water heater were. It was against that wall that McNabb's massive roll-top desk was located. He had a large flat-screen computer monitor and keyboard on top of the desk work area with the CPU underneath. Next to the keyboard was a mouse pad and around these were the usual desk items like stapler, pens, a phone, scotch tape. In the compartments of the desk were envelopes, pencils, an eraser and scads of other small items.

The monitor prevented the roll-top from being closed. The desk's top level held several family pictures in frames, people I assume were his late wife, their daughter, and a portrait of Libby, Leonard, and Porter together. There were bookshelves above the desk and lining the wall by the hall door on either side of the small fireplace he'd told us about. These held a variety of books, mostly hard-bound, but some new-looking paperbacks on winemaking and finance. One shelf held two framed coin collections. The coins mounted in them weren't gold, though; rather, they were silver dollars. The dates on the coins were very recent and I recognized these as coins the U.S. Mint puts out for collectors. They're not very valuable, just a sort of classy-looking kitsch. A small couch sat under the window to the back yard. The side yard wall had a landscape oil painting hanging under the high window.

In the far corner next to the desk was a side table with an embroidered cloth hanging halfway to the floor like a tablecloth. On top were more family pictures and a partially obscured machine I thought was a coffee-maker until he cleared away the photos blocking it. The "table" turned out to be the safe. Of course he had warned us, but I had to admit that I didn't peg it for a safe when I first saw it. On the safe McNabb had placed a wooden tabletop that overhung the edges by a foot or so, so that it didn't look like it had solid sides. The cloth covering hung loosely so that if you brushed against it, you wouldn't feel metal.

"I've swept the room," Cliff announced. "There are no cameras or mikes unless they're CIA quality. We can talk in here."

"It's a nice office – very sunny," I said. "Your family is beautiful."

"Thank you. Yes, they are."

"How long have you had the coin-rolling machine?" Cliff asked, pointing to the "coffee-maker" on top of the safe.

“At least ten years, maybe more.”

“Where’d you get it?”

“A specialty coin collector website.”

“Can you show us the safe, now, please.”

Finally! I’d been biting my lip up to now since it was up to Cliff or Charles to make that move, but I’d been dying to see what millions of dollars in gold looked like. Charles knelt down beside his desk chair and lifted the cloth up onto the tabletop. This revealed a metal safe door with a traditional-looking spin dial and lever handle. Then he turned to us.

“Please don’t take offense, but could you turn your backs while I open the safe. I don’t think you need to know the combination to do your job. I trust you, of course, but the fewer ...”

“No need to explain,” Cliff said, stepping back and turning. “You’re right. May, you too.”

I turned my back. Several seconds passed. I couldn’t hear the dial turn, but a satisfying thunk indicated when McNabb had turned the lever and opened the door. I turned back around. The big reveal was disappointing. I don’t know what I was expecting ... piles of coins slipping out onto the floor? A blinding golden reflection of the sunlight? All I saw in the dark shadows of the safe were paper rolls stacked neatly. They could have been Life Savers or Roloids for all I could tell, except of course the wrappers were dull brown Kraft paper, not bright candy colors.

McNabb pulled out a sheet of printer paper that lay on top of the rolls. “This is the inventory.” He handed it to Cliff. Cliff gave it a quick glance and then reached inside the safe.

“May I?” he asked, but picked up a roll of coins without waiting for an answer. McNabb said nothing. “Feel the heft,” he said, handing me the roll and picking up another.

It was quite heavy for something so small, over a pound. The paper used for the roll was a commercial product obviously designed for rolling coins but it had no preprinted markings. Banks and many retailers have such coin rolls, but they usually have the denominations and quantity printed on them. The only label on this one, though, was hand-written in ink. It read, “354 1874” I pointed to the markings and looked at McNabb. Cliff was still kneeling down looking in the safe.

McNabb responded, “He took the one right in front on the top shelf, as I would expect. That’s the last one I inventoried. There are three hundred

fifty-four rolls. When I originally wrapped them all I numbered each wrapper before loading it in the machine. I loaded them into the safe starting with the back of the bottom shelf. There are three shelves, so number one is at the very back of the bottom.”

“The other number is the year?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“How many in a roll?”

“Twenty.”

“They make wrapping supplies for twenty-dollar gold coins? These are bigger than any coins I’ve seen.”

“No, not for these, but South Africa still makes and markets Krugerrands that are almost the same dimensions. The wrappers are for those. They aren’t marked because people who buy them are basically buying them in bulk as bullion. You know, people who think the financial system will come crashing down and gold will be the only thing worth having.”

“Survivalists?”

“Well, no, not necessarily, but perhaps some. There are a lot of people who don’t have faith in paper currency or numbers on a bank statement. Some are just commodity speculators. So there are people who make coin sorters and wrapping supplies for those people, too, not just for banks and retailers. I’m sure a dealer would be shocked at the way I keep them, but they are uncirculated and the rolls keep them in pristine condition as long as they’re not opened or tossed around. They were often used in large quantity to settle balance of trade between nations back then. Many foreign banks probably still have large batches of mostly uncirculated pre-1900 Liberties, but I’m probably the only individual in the world with such a large collection. They weren’t used for ordinary commerce back when minted except for very large purchases like land. They were equivalent to somewhere around five hundred to a thousand dollars each in today’s dollars. People didn’t ordinarily carry them around just like you don’t carry around thousand dollar bills in your purse.”

By this time Cliff was standing up looking at another roll. He’d been listening to Charles explain the history, too. “What about this one?” he said. He held out a roll marked in a bluer ink “27 20 78-79.” “That’s not the same handwriting as the first one. And it’s taped.”

“Oh, that’s my father’s handwriting. He started the process of rolling and marking. The ‘78-79’ means there are 1878 and 1879 dated coins in that

roll. It's roll number twenty-seven and has twenty coins in it. After his death I re-inventoried them all, and I reused some of the wrappers at first. But he'd made the wrappers himself. It was tedious and he'd only done about thirty rolls. The rest were loose coins in cloth bags in boxes in the safe. I decided it was worth getting the machine and wrappers. It was still a tedious process and I couldn't get any help for it for security reasons."

"So all the rolls have twenty coins?" I asked.

"That's right."

"So that would be ..." I began, but before I could punch in the numbers on my phone calculator, Cliff finished the sentence without electronic assistance.

"Seven thousand eighty coins."

McNabb handed me the roll that Cliff had asked about. I inspected the writing and something struck me as odd. It took me a few seconds before I figured out what it was. I still had the first roll in my left hand. I switched the rolls back and forth a couple of times. "Do these feel like the same weight to you?" I asked McNabb.

He took them both from me. "Well, I ... they should be." He hefted them back and forth nervously and then handed them to Cliff.

Cliff did the same thing. "I think she's onto something.. We need to open these." He handed them both back to McNabb.

McNabb peeled open the end of the first one, the one marked as 354. A shiny gold Liberty head peered back at him. He then opened the other one the same way and was met with the same image. He breathed a sigh of relief and began, "Oh thank heavens, they're the ..."

"All the way. Open them both up all the way," Cliff commanded, then softening his tone, "please."

McNabb peeled both rolls completely open. Roll 27 had twenty fine-looking gold coins. Roll 354 had two gold coins on each end, but in the middle were steel washers. I didn't count them, but there were obviously the right number to fill the space of the sixteen missing gold Liberty coins. Whoever had done this has considered that Charles might check a roll just as he had started to do now, by opening only one end to see if a coin was there. Since he wouldn't know which end or how far back the paper might be peeled, he'd left two good coins on each end rather than one.

"Oh my. Oh no," Charles uttered.

“We’re going to have to check all of these,” Cliff observed clinically. “Do you have a scale? We can weigh the rolls to save time.”

It took a moment for Cliff’s request to sink in, but Charles pulled himself together and retreated to the kitchen. He returned with an electronic scale designed for cooking or possibly mailing. Without needing further instruction from Cliff, he turned the scale on and zeroed it out. He placed the twenty coins from roll 27 along with the wrapper onto it. The readout showed “1.49 lbs.” He did the same with the other roll. This time it read “1.32 lbs.”

“Good. That’s enough of a difference. Good catch, Maeva.”

I felt a tiny thrill at having been the one to notice it, but a nervous flutter in my stomach accompanied it. We had our work cut out for us.

“May, remember,” I reminded Cliff. “Not Maeva.”

He started handing me rolls, starting with the top shelf of the safe. The three rolls he handed me, the ones from right in front, all weighed about the same as the washer roll. McNabb’s heart sank with each one. Then we started hitting those right at the correct weight for gold and he brightened. We went through all three hundred fifty-four rolls and only the four rolls were underweight. We opened all of those and each had the same four valid coins, two at each end, and a midsection of washers. So that made sixty-four coins plus the three loose ones Charles had told us were missing to make sixty-seven. That was over a hundred grand worth of coins. Charles assured us that the rest couldn’t be counterfeit since no other available metal was as dense as gold, but Cliff opened up a half dozen of the heavy rolls anyway. They were all full of genuine Liberties as Charles called them, so he stopped at six.

Cliff picked up one of the steel washers and placed it under the desk lamp. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a folding magnifying glass. I was waiting for the deerstalker cap, but it never came. “I’d like to keep a couple of these. I don’t see any markings we can trace to a source, but the metal composition might be distinctive enough to an expert such that we can match it to others if we ever find the person who switched these.”

“How much will that cost?” Charles asked skeptically, and I had to agree with him that it didn’t sound worthwhile.

“We don’t have to do it now. Only if we find another supply to compare it too. The perpetrator probably bought a large batch of these once he found they were the right diameter. He might be planning to swap out more of these. Criminals tend to stick to what has worked for them. That’s true of bank robbers, serial killers, embezzlers, gigolos, con men, everyone.”

“Take as many as you need.”

Cliff slipped two in his pocket. “Okay, put the rest back in the safe. This is a crime scene. We should report this to the police.”

“I’m afraid I can’t permit that.”

“Why not? You said you were a friend of the sheriff.”

“I am. But that’s precisely why. He complains to me all the time about the local police. We’re in the city limits so this is police territory. They’re mostly decent fellows and all, but not the brightest bunch. And they’ve been known to transgress on occasion, I’m afraid. I’m not sure if that’s just departmental jealousy.”

Cliff smiled slightly at the word transgress. “You don’t trust them.”

“I’m afraid I don’t. The bright young fellows don’t stick around here. The city police get the ones who aren’t college material, even a few who dealt pot and shoplifted in high school, at least according to the sheriff. They don’t even have a real detective that I know of since they all have to patrol. They won’t solve the case and the word of my gold will spread. I’d have to move it or sell it, both of which could be problematic. Word of the crime would no doubt reach the papers and eventually local television news. The local town weekly reports on all the crimes. ”

“You’ll need a police report number if you plan to file an insurance claim.”

“Cash and bullion are excluded from the policy without a rider – which is very costly. I don’t have one. I can’t claim on my insurance. Can’t we just wait and see whether you solve it? You’re a former FBI agent. You must know people there. Can they take it over?”

“There’s no FBI jurisdiction, not unless we can prove the coins have been sold or carried interstate. At this point it’s just a house burglary. I can’t force you to report it and I’m not obligated by law to do so. If you want, I can continue on the case, but it’s now more serious a matter and could be more costly for you in my time. In the meantime, you can’t leave them here. Someone has obviously figured out how to get into your safe and has done so multiple times. We’ll have to stash them elsewhere in the house for now. Do you have some other place no one goes?”

“Not really. The utility closet, perhaps.”

“No, a repairman or Bernice might access that. How about your attic room? It looked like no one has been in the back part in years.”

“Oh, I see. Well, yes, but it’s all the way up there. These coins weigh over five hundred pounds. I could barely make it up the stairs to show you. I ...”

“Maeva – May – and I will take care of it. Can you get us something to carry them in. A heavy backpack or suitcase, maybe. We’ll have to make several trips. And a container to store them in once we’re up there.”

“There’s an old box of fabric and sewing things my wife used to use. It’s half empty. There’s plenty of room for the coins there. It’s way in the back. Bernice never goes there.” He went upstairs and returned with two suitcases. “I need these for travel, but you can use them for now. Just store the coins in the fabric box.”

Chapter 4

Cliff handed me the smaller suitcase, not that the size mattered. After I put thirty-five rolls in the bag and lifted it, I realized I’d never get that up two flights of stairs. I removed ten rolls. I wasn’t hired for my muscle. Cliff, on the other hand, proceeded to load his suitcase with fifty rolls. He bent over and lifted it from the sides, apparently fearful he’d break the handle if he tried to lift it that way. After a moment he lifted it up onto his shoulder and straightened up like it was an underweight parrot.

“Lead the way, partner,” he directed.

I headed up the stairs. He climbed behind me without difficulty. Charles stood at the foot of the stairs watching us haul his fortune out of sight. He must have wondered what he had gotten into by hiring us. Had he let the camel’s nose under the tent?

We found the fabric box. Cliff lifted the fabric and yarn out and we placed the first load of coins inside. I think we made seven or eight trips, but it seemed like the labors of Sisyphus to me. My thigh muscles were screaming at me by the end. I had to sit down, utterly exhausted. Cliff was sweating profusely, too, although not like a stuck pig. I’ve worked on a farm and pigs don’t sweat when they get stuck or at any other times that I noticed. I never understood that expression. I looked it up once and the pig refers to pig iron “sweating” as it cools. The expression is a conflation of squealing like a stuck pig, which makes sense since the bacon-on-the-hoof kind do make quite a racket, and the pig iron thing. Cliff sweated like, well, like a big man pushing

sixty who'd just carried over four hundred pounds up two flights of stairs. I hoped he didn't ask me to do his laundry.

Cliff and I collapsed on the couch in the office. Charles sat in his desk chair as Cliff motioned for him to do so. "Is that your handwriting on the wrappers with the washers inside?"

"Yes, it's mine."

"That means whoever did this knew how you rolled the coins and came prepared to make the substitution."

"Why not just steal the rolls? It would have been years before I noticed."

"He pro--"

"Or *she*," I interjected, then regretted interrupting when Cliff shot me a glare.

"*They* probably didn't know that. But what I can't figure out is why they bothered to conceal the theft at all. They took the three loose coins, which you were certain to notice."

"And why only four rolls?" I added. "It must be a time issue. Whoever it was only had a few minutes to make the swap. I think it must have been done while you were in the house and they had to move quickly before you saw them or returned to the office. I'm sure you're very careful, but is it possible that just maybe you left the safe open once?"

Charles thought about that. "My memory isn't what it used to be, I'll admit, but I would have noticed later. I'm sure I would remember that."

"Not if the thief took the rolls and then closed it."

"But who? Bernice? She has a key to the house. She's here for hours while I'm out sometimes, and she knows when I won't be back any time soon."

"But she doesn't know the combination. It would have to have been when you were here."

"Who else has been here recently while you were here?" Cliff asked. "You've mentioned your daughter and her family, Joe, and dinner guests. What about your guests? There must be times when you've had guests who used the guest bathroom while you were dining, or in the living room. Or even the pool guy or gardener. Maybe you don't remember letting them use the bathroom, or maybe Bernice let one of them in while you were out."

I saw Charles bristle at the mention of his family. "I told you my daughter and her husband have no motive and I trust them completely. Leave

them out of this. They've stayed overnight many times. If Leonard were the thief, he would have had all night alone in the office if he'd wanted it. Besides, that explanation doesn't account for why the three loose coins went missing if the thief was trying to conceal the theft."

I thought it was interesting that he mentioned Leonard by name, but not his daughter. At that moment Cruiser, McNabb's cat, strolled into the room and made a beeline for Charles. The cat leaped up onto his lap and began to rub his face against Charles's hands. Charles began to stroke him gently, evoking a throaty purr.

"You'll have to excuse me a moment. He needs his dinner." He rose, holding Cruiser in a football carry to the kitchen. We were too tired to follow but we could hear the clatter of a bowl and the whir of an electric can opener. Cruiser gets wet food, I surmised. Lucky kitty. Charles returned a few minutes later.

"You're right, Charles," Cliff said. "The three missing coins mean we're missing something. This was not a crime of opportunity. People don't walk around with a pocketful of metal washers of the exact right size. This was planned in advance. Someone has accessed that safe more than once. The first time they must have seen the rolls and inspected them, then returned with the washers and made the swap."

"But that still doesn't explain why they took the three loose coins. Conceal one theft while making another obvious?"

"I can't explain that. I'll have to give it some more thought. For now, your coins are safe. I want to take some additional security measures. For starters, there should be a camera in your office. Why didn't you have one installed back when you had them installed outside?"

"Several reasons. I didn't want anyone, even the security company installer, to know of the existence of the safe. Second, I've heard that hackers can hack into those cameras. There was something on the news about a denial virus or something and they said hackers could spy on you with your own camera. That's why I don't have a camera or microphone on my computer, too. I was afraid someone might see or hear me open the safe and figure out the combination."

Cliff replied, "Distributed Denial of Service or DDOS attack. It's where a hacker gains control of multiple Internet-connect devices, usually hundreds or even thousands, and uses them to send repeated calls to an Internet address to overload the server there. Even a camera can be used that

way. That's what was on the news, but it's not the same as using the camera to spy on you. Spying on you may be possible, though, if your camera is connected to your network. You said several reasons. What else?"

"Well, what good would it be? I don't review the footage every day. Or at all, really. I'd only look at it if there was an incident. The cameras are motion activated. It would have hours of me moving around the office or of Bernice vacuuming, or even Cruiser. He likes to sleep on that sofa. The footage is only kept for thirty days under my security plan. Unless I discovered the theft within that period, which is unlikely since I only open the safe every few years, it would be gone."

"I see. Well now I think you need a camera in here. What I have in mind will not be connected to the Internet. I'll have to pick up some equipment tomorrow and install it. If you want me to continue on the case, that is."

"Yes, I do. Whatever you need."

"Maeva, what did you find about the cat door?"

"I can't get through it. I'm pretty limber and skinny and it just isn't possible. My head won't fit. Maybe a five-year-old could do it or a trained monkey. Wasn't there a Sherlock Holmes story where ..."

"You're not skinny," Charles interrupted. "You have quite a nice figure."

My, my. That one caught me by surprise. So Charles was a lecherous old goat. Well, maybe he was just a discerning admirer of feminine pulchritude. Now I'm sounding like him. He hadn't given me any leering looks or too-familiar pinches or squeezes, even when we hugged out front, so I'll give him the benefit of the doubt. Maybe I am hotter than I think I am, sitting here bathed in sweat and attic dust and spider webs, straggly hair in my eyes. Right.

"Uh, thanks." I looked at Cliff but he was staring at the floor, avoiding eye contact.

"Charles, Maeva and I are beat. I have some ideas, but they'll have to wait until tomorrow. It's early, but I think we'll turn in. We both need a shower and some rest. Bernice won't be here tomorrow, right?"

"That's correct, not until Monday. I need to think about some things, too. We can reconvene in the morning."

Chapter 5

I woke the next morning to the smell of coffee. It was already after seven. I realized I had never set the alarm on my phone, but then, Cliff hadn't told me when to come down for breakfast. My room didn't have a shower, but the long soak in the clawfoot tub had done the job for me last night. I fell asleep in the blissfully hot water, waking when my head slipped down and the water level reached my mouth. I remember enviously hearing the shower running in Cliff's bathroom next door. I still needed to wash my cobwebby hair and I needed a shower for that.

I knocked on the wall to see if Cliff was in his room. There was no response. I stripped off my underwear and wrapped a bath towel around me. I peeked out the door and no one was in the hall. I grabbed a set of clean clothes – underclothes, jeans, and a T-shirt – and tiptoed over to Cliff's room. I knocked softly. No answer. Then I heard Cliff and Charles talking downstairs, so I knew I was safe. I entered the bathroom in Cliff's room which I knew had a shower. Fortunately, the bathroom door had one of those push-button locks. I washed my hair quickly and dressed in the steamy bathroom. When I emerged and dressed, I felt like a new person.

Downstairs Charles was frying bacon. "Help yourself to the coffee, May," he said, pointing to the coffeemaker with his spatula. I grabbed a mug and filled it. "How would you like your eggs?"

"Over easy, thanks." I always ordered over easy. My father had told me never to order scrambled, because you never knew how old the eggs were or what else was in the stuff they served. I wasn't worried that Charles was going to slip some week-old eggs in on me, but I'd just come to like my eggs that way. He cracked two eggs into a skillet. He looked quite jaunty in the frilly pink apron that graced his ample midsection.

"Charles and I were just planning the day," Cliff told me. "I'm going to need to make a trip into Jackson later on. I'll need you with me."

"Okay." I sipped my coffee. I was feeling pretty good, refreshed after a good night's sleep. I was looking forward to working on this case. It was getting to be quite the mystery. I couldn't guess what Cliff needed me for, though.

The doorbell rang. Charles looked surprised. "Could you get that, May? I can't leave the stove."

I walked to the front door and opened it. A fiftyish woman stood there with a bakery box in her hand. She was short and busty. She was also a bottle

blonde, but unlike Bernice, hers was a skilled beauty shop job as was her manicure. The bright red polish matched her lipstick. She wore designer jeans and a lilac-colored tank top under a crisp white collared fitted shirt. For a woman her age she was in good shape, though a bit overdressed for a Saturday morning, if you ask me. "Hello! You must be Charles's cousin," she said. "I'm Estelle. I live around the corner."

"Estelle," Charles called from the kitchen. "Do come in and meet my cousins Cliff and May."

Estelle looked at me expectantly and I realized I was standing in her way. I said hello and stepped aside. We didn't shake since she was holding the box in both hands. She stepped inside and bustled her way directly to the kitchen, obviously knowing the way.

"Estelle, this is Cliff, my cousin, and you just met May, his daughter."

"So nice to meet you," she said, putting the box down on the counter and shaking Cliff's hand with both of hers. He murmured something polite in reply. "I hope I'm not too early. I saw the drapes were open, so I figured you were up. Nancy told me that you were having relatives for the weekend and I thought, well, we must show them some hospitality. I brought some coffee cake. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not. Your timing is perfect. Grab some coffee and join us. Would you like some eggs and bacon?"

"Oh no, thank you. I've had breakfast, but I'll have some coffee and a tiny piece of the cake. I don't dare have more than a sliver. It goes straight to my hips." She started to open the box. Cliff helped her lift the coffee cake out and place it on a plate. Charles brought me my eggs and bacon a second later. Charles got out two more plates and some forks.

We sat around the kitchen table as Charles cut the coffee cake and passed the plates around. He and Cliff had already eaten breakfast, so I was the only one chowing down on the bacon and eggs.

"Who's Nancy?" Cliff asked.

"Oh, that's Bernice's daughter," McNabb said. "She works part-time in Estelle's shop. That's right, isn't it?"

"Yes, she does, although I haven't brought her on this year just yet. The tourist season isn't in full swing. School won't be out for another two or three weeks. We'll extend the hours then."

"She owns a gourmet wine shop downtown."

“Oh, Charles, you’re too kind. It’s really just a liquor store. But I do display your wines prominently. They’re my personal favorite. Especially the 2006 vintage.”

“Some things just get better with age,” he said, hoisting his mug toward her as though toasting.

“Oh, Charles, now you are just being kind,” she said, hoisting her own cup in a similar fashion. A few drops of coffee sloshed onto her white top as she did so. “Oh damn! I’m such a klutz. May I use your bathroom? I need to wash this out.”

“Of course. You know where it is.”

Estelle disappeared into the hall. We heard the door to the guest bathroom shut, then the sound of water running. Cliff and I exchanged significant looks. Charles watched her go and then turned back to Cliff. “I hadn’t really thought about it before, but I guess any number of guests could have gone into my office. I mean, I’m sure Estelle wouldn’t, but I’ve never paid much attention. Visitors do use the bathroom.”

“Close friend?” he replied.

“Well, I suppose one might say so, but only professionally. She sells my wines, so I try to keep on her good side.”

She wants you to keep on her front side while she’s on her backside, I was thinking, but said nothing.

“Is she married?” Cliff continued.

“Was. Oh, I see what you’re thinking. No, it’s nothing like that, although I suppose a man my age could do worse. She’s very sweet, but I’m sure she’d have no interest in an old reprobate like me.”

Estelle came back sans shirt. The skin-tight tank top admirably displayed her now even more obvious cleavage. Charles was either blind or obtuse. “She’d have no interest?” What did he need? A “Divers do it deeper” T-shirt and hot pants?

“I rinsed out the shirt and hung it over your towel bar. I hope you don’t mind. It’s too wet to put down on the furniture. Don’t let me forget to take it with me when I go.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Cliff told Estelle he had some business to take care of, said he was happy to have met her and excused himself. I was still finishing my eggs and bacon and felt I should make an effort at the cake, too, to be polite.

“Where are you from, dear?” Estelle asked me.

Crap. We hadn't rehearsed the cover story that much. Southern California was all we'd settled on. We hadn't thought we'd get into conversation with the neighbors. "Southern California." I stuffed my mouth with the last of the eggs so I couldn't elaborate.

"Oh, where? I grew up in Chula Vista."

I had no idea where Chula Vista was, except it was somewhere down there in Southern California, an area roughly as big as New England. She'd be able to spot a lie in a heartbeat. I chewed noisily and pointed to my mouth as though I was dying to answer but couldn't quite yet. Suddenly my phone beeped at me. It was a text. I held up a finger and swallowed. "Sorry, one minute" I said to her. The text was from Cliff and consisted of one word: ESCAPE. "Oh no, it's my work. I'm on call all weekend. I have to take this. I'm so sorry. It was wonderful meeting you, Estelle."

"You too, dear." She didn't seem too upset to see me go as I dashed up the stairs randomly punching at my phone as though making a call.

"Thank you," I gasped when I arrived in his room. "That was close."

He nodded with an amused expression on his face. "So what do you think of Estelle?"

"He needs an eye exam or a dope slap if he thinks she's not interested. That coffee spill was no accident."

"Oh, he knows she's interested. It just isn't reciprocated. I think he was being sincere when he said he merely tries to keep on her good side. It's part of his responsibilities with the wine brand, perhaps, but I think it's more just him being a gentleman. He's seventy-seven years old. I don't think the bust thrust does it for him these days."

"Bust thrust?! Really, Cliff?" But I was thinking this might be getting into TMI territory. Cliff was pushing sixty and would know better than I would, but I've known, or heard about, some pretty lusty old codgers. It actually made me feel a little better about McNabb's remark to me about my figure. Maybe he meant it as a fact, not a come-on.

"I think she's leaving. That was quick. Charles must want her out as much as we do." The front door could be heard shutting with a resounding solidity. Cliff went into the reading room to look out the front. He saw Estelle walking away and gave me the thumbs up. We headed downstairs.

When we got there, Charles was putting the breakfast dishes in the dishwasher. He still wore the pink apron, but he took it off as we arrived.

“Sorry if we’ve interrupted your social schedule,” Cliff said, pouring himself another cup of coffee.

“Not at all. She can be quite ... keen. Why don’t you have a seat in the living room. I’ll join you in a moment.”

Cliff and I moved into the living room and sat. Cliff started looking around absently sipping his coffee. At least I thought it was absently. When Charles joined us a minute later Cliff asked him, “Your fireplace seems awfully clean. I thought you said you used this one sometimes.”

“I do, but only for special occasions. Now that winter is over I won’t be using it until Thanksgiving or Christmas. I always have Bernice clean it at the end of the season. She removes the grate and scrubs out all the soot. Cruiser will get in there and track soot all over if she doesn’t.”

The black and white cat appeared, perhaps because he’d heard his name. He’d been curled up in the laundry room in his bed earlier. He leaped up to the top level of his play structure and settled on an afghan there.

“Speak of the devil. He likes to be where people are. He’s very sociable for a cat.” Charles seemed proud.

Cliff watched the cat with renewed interest. “He’s very athletic. Does he always jump right to the top like that?”

“I’ve certainly seen him do it often. He climbs on the rest of it, too.”

Cliff walked over and studied the play structure. It had four levels, all of them carpeted. The heavy base was several inches thick, raising the first level flush with the hallway floor. There was a small ramp leading from the living room floor up to that level. The next level was higher, maybe twenty inches up. There was another small ramp leading from the base to that level. The next level up was perhaps a foot and a half higher and offset at right angles to the level below similar to how stairs change direction at a landing. Several cat toys sat on the carpeting there. The top level was yet another eighteen inches up, also offset at ninety degrees so the cat was about four feet off the living room floor. A bunched-up crocheted afghan there served as a bed, one which Cruiser was enjoying at the moment. The whole structure was supported by a stout vertical post, a four-by-four, I think, also covered in carpeting. It showed signs of being used as a scratching post in addition to its structural support role. The side of the structure adjacent to the hallway was open so that Cruiser could walk or leap onto every level from the hall or from the living room. Cruiser reigned over his domain regally from his perch. Cliff began to pet him and was rewarded with satisfied purrs.

“This gives me an idea,” he said. Cliff was standing by the cat structure looking into the hallway. He lowered his head to the level of Cruiser’s head, but he was looking into the hallway, not at the cat. “That’s the table you said was moved mysteriously, isn’t it?”

“The one by the base of the stairs, yes.”

“Good. Maeva and I will be going into town today. Will you be going out?”

“I was planning to stop by the tasting room for a bit, and then out to the vineyard, but I can certainly forgo that. I mentioned to them that I had relatives visiting this weekend and might not be able to make it. Do you need me here?”

“No, that’s fine. I’ll need to go over some things with you when I return, but that can wait. Maeva, we should get going.” He nodded toward the stairs. I rose and followed him up to our rooms. He looked me over and said my shoes would “do.” Do what, I didn’t know. They were regular Nike running shoes. He told me to grab a sweater, sunglasses, and hat as we’d be outside for a while. I was all the more intrigued, but retrieved what he’d mentioned.

Chapter 6

Forty minutes later I learned what Cliff’s secret plan was. Geocaching. We drove through the town of Jackson. A mile or so south of town he hung a right onto French Bar Road and drove up to where it made a right angle. He parked on the shoulder and got out of the car, indicating I should do the same. He booted up the geocaching app on his phone and waited for it to lock into the GPS satellites. I donned my hat and sweater. It was early and the air was still a tad chilly, but the sun was out and it promised to be a beautiful day.

After a few minutes his phone was ready and he motioned for me to help him find the geocache. I’d been through this a few times before, so it wasn’t anything that needed to be explained. I found the cache immediately. He seemed pleased. He signed the log sheet and replaced it just as it had been.

“So that’s your strategy?” I chided. “Charge the client for geocaching?”

“He’ll get his money’s worth. It’s gorgeous out here today. Birds singing, no one around. Enjoy it. The stores aren’t open yet.”

“What stores?”

“You’ll see. The next one’s this way.” He started walking. He moved at a leisurely pace. There was no one on the road so we walked down the middle of it. The rolling hills on either side were still mostly green and grassy scrub. Summers out here are hot and dry and everything turns brown, but the winter and spring rains turn things green for a few months. Oak trees dotted the landscape here and there. The fields were fenced off, but I didn’t see any crops. I assume the area was used for grazing cattle or possibly sheep. We walked along for another half mile or so. Cliff pointed to an area by the side of the road where there was a metal structure, a livestock pen of some sort. We searched for the cache there and he came up with it. As we moved on to the next he asked me about some of the other work in the office and then about a movie I’d just finished and had been talking about to Ashley. We started exchanging recommendations and movie reviews, often arguing, but more often laughing about the scenes we both liked. I asked about his wife Ellen and his kids, and he filled me in on Tommy’s latest impish behavior. Cliff had kids late in life, so they were still small.

“What do you think of Libby and her husband naming their kid Porter?” Cliff said, chuckling.

“You think it’s pretentious? It’s not a common first name, but nowadays ...”

“No, it’s not that. It’s the meaning. Do you know what a porter is?”

It took me a beat to realize what he was talking about. “Oh, yeah, you mean like at the railroad station in the old days? The guy who carried luggage.”

“Exactly. It’s a perfectly honorable job, of course, but not exactly high status. Can you imagine a status-seeker of fifty years ago naming their son that? Why not name him Ditchdigger or Butcher.”

“I know people named Butcher, and an actress named Porter, too. Last names, anyway. I never thought of those names in a negative way. I think you’re being judgmental.”

“I’m not judging butchers or porters in a bad way, or even the Hawkes. I just think it’s funny that in choosing what they probably think is a prestigious-sounding name, they’ve chosen something that actually has a rather menial meaning. I can be judgmental at times, but I don’t see that as a bad thing. More people should be judgmental. I think social pressures,

judgments, not laws, are what keep most people adhering to decent behavior. People today are too accepting. It seems like today anything goes.”

“A glimpse of stocking is something shocking?”

“Cole Porter ... now that’s a clever squelch. How do you know that? A bit before your time, I’d say.”

“I was in the play in high school.” I grinned at having gotten one over on him.

“I underestimated you. You’re one smart cookie. That’s my judgment of you. Sorry for being judgmental.”

I laughed.

“That’s it,” he announced suddenly after he’d found yet another cache. “No more along here.” I realized we’d been talking the whole time and just enjoying each other’s company. At the office it was mostly all business.

“How many caches was that?” I’d found two, but I knew he’d found more.

“Six, counting the one we didn’t find. That one’s probably missing, but that’s geocaching. You can’t always succeed.”

“That’s it? You drove all the way out here for these? They were pretty easy to find. I thought you liked challenging caches. That contest up in Washington ...”

“Those can be fun. But that’s not the essence of geocaching. Let me ask you something.”

“Okay.” He’s more my boss than my partner, so what else could I say.

“If I’d told you your assignment today was just to walk this segment of road and back, and you did it because I’d assigned it, how would you have felt?”

“I’d have thought you were nuts. But I knew that already.”

“How fast would you have done it?”

“I probably would have run it. We’ve only come maybe a mile.”

“Would you have enjoyed it?”

“Not much. I would have thought it was a waste of time and been irritated and I would have ended up tired and sweaty.”

“Did you enjoy what we did today?”

I hesitated before answering, but my answer was honest. “Yeah, I guess I did. We don’t talk like friends all that often. We should do that more.

It is a beautiful day – really peaceful. I liked when I found that first cache before you, too. You aren't always better than me at everything."

"Of course I'm not."

"But we could have just taken a walk and talked. We didn't need the geocaching."

"Didn't we? Don't you think it strengthens our bond just a bit when we have a common goal, when we're working together to achieve something?"

"Wait a minute. Did you just sucker me into a team-building exercise? What's next – a video on sexual harassment in the workplace?"

Cliff just smiled an enigmatic smile. "Now you understand geocaching a little better. So, do you have plans for Memorial Day?"

We continued to talk on the way back to the car and as we did I realized that our relationship had changed somehow. I'd gone from being his employee to his partner a few years ago, but that still was a business relationship. We got along well and I liked him, but I'd liked him as you like a good boss. Today I liked him as a friend. Sometimes there's no bright line that tells you someone you've known for a time has just become a genuine friend. Today wasn't the day we'd become good friends. That had happened some time earlier, but today was the day I fully realized it. As we reached the car, Cliff started to get in the driver's side, but I stepped between him and the door. I threw my arms around him and gave him a big hug. He didn't hesitate an instant. He returned it with the same feeling then let go. We didn't say anything. We didn't need to.

Fifteen minutes later we were in Jackson at the local pet supply store. I still had no idea what we were doing there. Cliff studied the various cat toys intensely and finally picked one out, a plushie with a bean bag bottom. After he bought that, we walked outside and put it in the car. Cliff looked on his phone and started searching for something.

"There's one in walking distance." He marched off down the street. I had to hurry to catch up, His legs are a lot longer than mine. His business pace was a lot faster than his geocaching pace. Downtown Jackson was a quaint touristy place. The shops are all faced like an old western movie set. I half expected Matt Dillon to come striding out of the local saloon. We passed a boot shop, a crafts place, campaign headquarters for the local judge, and two jewelers specializing in gold, a tribute to the gold mining history of the town. We reached a bookstore and Cliff went in. It didn't take him long to find

books on wines. He picked out two thick, expensive books on the history of wine and wine-making.

I still didn't know why he'd brought me along. I didn't think it was just for the geocaching. When we got back to the car he asked me if I'd brought a sewing kit. "A sewing kit? No. Why would I?"

"That's okay. Charles probably has something, but I'd rather he think we came prepared. Tell me what you need."

"What I need? For what?"

He pulled a small camera out of his pocket. I'd seen these before and even helped him buy a few for cases. It's amazing how small they can be. These were top-end models and not cheap. I hadn't realized he'd brought it along. There were more in the bag, too. "I need you to sew this into the cat toy so that it can have a view out. See where the bottom section meets the top here, where the pattern stops at the seam? I think a small hole there will blend right in."

"That's why I'm here? To be a seamstress? You could do that. You could have done it back at the office for that matter."

"Me? I'm no seamster."

"Seamster's not a word."

"It is now. Come on. I couldn't do it until we got here and learned about the cat structure. This will fit there with a view over the hallway. I've seen you pull out your crochet when we've been stuck waiting in offices. You're good with needle and thread. You even made your own skirt once."

Crochet and sewing a custom job like this were two very different things, but the truth was I was pretty good at sewing. I was surprised that Cliff had remembered that I'd made that skirt. That had been for an undercover thing I'd done a while back. And Cliff was clumsy about small detail handicraft things. His handwriting was atrocious.

"Fine, I'll try it. We passed a crafts store back there. They should have what I need."

He handed me the company credit card. We were partners, but he was the only one with a card. That's what it means to be a senior partner. I had to get my expenses approved. "Whatever you need. Just get a receipt."

I took the card and walked back to the store. I returned with scissors, needle, a zipper, some eyelets of different sizes and colors, and spools of two different colors of thread. "You want me to do this here? Right now?"

"No time like the present."

“Not here on main street. Find some shady spot out of view of passersby. It’s getting hot.”

He put the car in gear and we moved to a parking spot under a tree on a side road. It took me less time than I thought it would. One of the eyelets was the right size and color to match the pattern on the upper fabric well enough. They came in a package of ten. I won’t bore you with the tailoring details, but the end result was serviceable. I sewed on all ten eyelets so that it looked like they were all part of the pattern. Only one had the hole for the camera. The zipper was along the seam just underneath and to the side of the hole so that we could access the camera.

“Let’s test it,” he said when we were done. He reached into the zippered section and turned on the camera. It was supposed to be motion activated, but it also had a start/stop recording button which he pressed. He zipped it shut and placed it on the center console of the van facing the windshield. He pulled out his phone and tapped on some app. “Bluetooth,” he said. In moments we could see a picture on his phone app. The camera was working but it wasn’t aimed right. It was too low, mostly showing the dashboard and only a small slice of the windshield. He moved the toy slightly, tilting the camera up. It worked fine. He pressed a button on his phone and it stopped, recording then went off altogether.

It was lunchtime and we were both hungry. Cliff drove us to a café we’d seen and we had a leisurely lunch. Cliff downed a beer but I stuck to water and then coffee with dessert. Cliff paid with the company card, which he made me return. When it was time to go, Cliff handed me keys to the van. This was something new; he always drove. I knew one beer wouldn’t affect his sobriety or ability to drive. His capacity was a lot bigger than that. But I wasn’t complaining. I liked to drive, or at least to feel like I’m in control sometimes, not just his minion.

I drove us back to Sutter Creek and navigated to McNabb’s without needing any guidance. Cliff didn’t back seat drive or give me any guff. In fact, he appeared to be asleep most of the way. We went inside and Cliff went right to the coffeepot. Charles was home.

“Successful trip?” Charles asked.

“Very. Let me finish my coffee and I’ll show what I have in mind. How about you?”

“I walked down to the tasting room. Tourists are starting to come. The weather’s near perfect.”

“Did you talk to anyone about me ... us?”

“One of the employees asked whose van was in my driveway. I told her my cousin was visiting me, but that’s all.”

“You’ve got a pretty nosy set of neighbors.”

“It’s a small town.”

Cliff was nibbling on a cookie as well as sipping his coffee, but he finished both pretty quickly. He opened the bag with the plush toy and other equipment but didn’t pull anything out. He led Charles into the office and went to the fireplace wall. There he withdrew the books he’d bought and two bookends. I recognized the bookends from our surveillance equipment catalog. One of them had a compartment built in for the exact model of camera I’d just sewn into the toy. Cliff angled the books and bookends such that the camera had a view over the entrance to the den and the safe area.

“If Bernice asks about this, you can tell her that this is a gift from your cousin. Here.” Cliff put a small card on the shelf protruding from under the non-camera bookend. It said “Thanks for your hospitality. Cousin Cliff.” At least, I think that’s what it said. As I mentioned, his handwriting is atrocious.

“What is this?”

“There’s a camera inside one of the bookends. I’ll show you how it works in a minute.”

“But I thought you said cameras could be hacked.”

“I’m going to set up a small Bluetooth network here. Three devices: two cameras and a control unit. I could use your phone, but that’s connected to your wi-fi network. That’s not secure. This network doesn’t connect to the Internet and can’t be hacked.”

“You said two cameras. Where’s the other one going to be?”

“In the living room. I’ll show you.”

We went back to the living room and Cliff pulled out the cat toy. Cruiser was lying on the top level of the play structure. Cliff petted him a couple of times, again eliciting purrs. He then began to position the toy on the end of that level with a view toward the hallway. “Another gift,” he explained. He brought up the app and turned on the camera. Once the screen showed camera view, he turned the display so Charles could see. Charles nodded.

Cliff wasn’t satisfied with the angle, though. The small table that had mysteriously moved was barely on the very edge of the view field. He moved

the toy a bit farther out so it was overhanging the end of the support. He checked the view again, a view of the hallway, and liked it better. Once he was satisfied he switched his phone app to the other camera. We could see the door to the office and the safe clearly. Cliff pressed something on his phone and the screen went blank.

“These are slaved to my phone, but in a minute I’ll slave them to the control device. I just put it in motion activated mode. That saves the battery and space on the chip. These have long-lasting rechargeable batteries, but you may have to recharge the batteries once in a while. Maeva, go into the office and walk over to the safe.”

I did as I was told and when I came back Cliff was playing a video of me. Charles was nodding, but had a look of doubt on his face. “I see it works. But I’m not that tech savvy. And what if no one comes again? So far as we know this was a theft that took place a year ago, or longer. It doesn’t really tell us who stole the coins unless they try again.”

“True, but I mainly want to prevent you from losing any more. Hiding them in the attic is not a long term solution.”

Just then the cat stood up, licked himself and started rubbing his cheek against the new toy. It toppled off the play structure. “Dammit!” Cliff exclaimed. “I thought the heavy bottom would ...” but he stopped midsentence. He stared intently at the play structure for a long minute, and felt the surface of each of the levels. Then he looked around the room and back at the structure.

“Where did you get this structure?” His tone was sharp, almost inquisitorial.

“My daughter gave it to me.”

“When?”

“Last winter, around the holidays.”

“Did she say why? Or where she got it?”

Charles looked at Cliff oddly, appearing somewhat resentful of his tone, or perhaps at the notion that his daughter might have done something wrong. “Well, no. In fact, she denied sending it. It just showed up on my porch one day. There was a card inside that said ‘To a great dad’. I teased her about it and she laughed and insisted she didn’t send it, but said she’d take credit for it. Cruiser loves it.”

“Do you have the wrapper or shipping documents?”

“No, that was all thrown out.”

“Do you remember what delivery company it was? UPS? FedEx?”

“Uh, no. I don’t think it was one of those. It just appeared one morning in a plain cardboard box. Like someone hand-delivered it. I recycled the box.”

“Do you have the card?”

“No. It was preprinted, the kind from a rack in a drugstore. There was no handwriting on it so it didn’t have much sentimental value. I have plenty of other stuff that’s more personal from Libby. I tossed it.”

Cliff mulled this over then began marching around the house. I followed. It was hard to keep up. Something was driving him, but I couldn’t figure out what it was. He checked out the cat door that led outside, even though he’s already taken my word for it before. He closed the panel and then went outside and tried to get it open from that side. He didn’t succeed at first, but I showed him how I’d managed it. Then he came back inside and removed the panel and tried to stick his head through just as I’d done, but as I said, his head is bigger than mine, so that went nowhere.

The room was where the cat’s food and water dishes, bed, and litter box were. It was really sort of an enclosed porch and laundry. There was a door between it and the kitchen which was normally kept closed. There was an identical cat door cut in that one, but no panel for that one. The cat could get through it any time of day or night. Cliff studied it.

He came back into the living room, Charles and me trailing behind. “Do you always keep the door between the kitchen and the laundry closed?” he asked.

“Yes. That room is an extension and isn’t well insulated. Keeping the door closed helps keep the warm air in, or the cool air during summer. There’s the noise from the washer and dryer, too, and the litter box is rather unsightly.”

“I didn’t see a panel for the inner cat door, the one into the kitchen. Do you close that?”

“No. There’s no reason to. Cruiser needs to be able to get to his food and cat box.”

Once again Cliff looked over the room and felt the play structure. “Come on.” He headed to the office. He went to the desk chair. It was on casters and rested atop a firm plastic shield that protected the rug and made it easy to roll. He rolled it completely off the shield onto the rug and lifted the

plastic. "Maeva, you take the far corner there. Charles, you start at the other corner by the bookcase."

"What are we looking for?" Charles and I said almost simultaneously.

"You'll know it when you see it." Cliff pulled the plastic shield out from under the desk and crawled down into the knee-hole. He started lifting the edge of the thick Persian rug that had been covered by the shield. I started lifting the corner of that same rug where I'd been sent, but I still didn't know why. Charles did the same in his corner. I saw nothing under my corner so I continued lifting and peeking and reaching under the edge as I worked my way toward Charles. He was working his way toward me, but the sofa was between us and blocked our progress. I went back to the corner and began working my way toward the safe and Cliff. He was feeling all around the safe and edge of the carpet there. I couldn't see under the carpet because the edge was too close to the wall. I would have had to peel it back the entire length of the room. So I was just feeling with one hand and lifting the edge a bit with the other. Suddenly my fingers felt something under the carpet about three inches in. I knew immediately what it was.

"Oh my god! Cliff. Over here. How did you know?"

Cliff almost leapt over to where I was and began reaching in the same area under the rug. Soon we had them all. Charles had turned to watch us and now came over as we held up three gold coins. Double eagles with mint mark 1874-S.

Chapter 7

"My word! My Liberties! But how did you ... they were here all along?! I don't understand."

"They were never stolen," Cliff said matter-of-factly.

"Then, ... but that's why I came to you. I thought ..."

"You had your coins stolen all right, but it wasn't the three you thought. It was the four rolls we discovered. And it wasn't very long ago. Since Christmas. Probably in the last month."

"I don't understand."

I was hoping Cliff would explain to McNabb because I didn't understand either, but instead he took us back into the living room. "I need you to try to remember everything you can about this play structure. When

did it arrive? Do you have security video of that day? Has anyone commented on it or told you where to place it?”

“Well, I, I’m not sure. There won’t be any security video. I only have thirty days of video in the cloud. Unless I download it, it’s gone after that.”

“When your daughter told you she didn’t send it, didn’t you check the front porch video then just to be sure?”

Charles had to think about it. He paced around in a tight circle before answering. “No. Now that I think about it, I got it in November right after Thanksgiving. It appeared the day after they left. That why I was sure it was from them. They probably had it custom made around here somewhere while they were visiting and had it dropped off. Leonard had really played with Cruiser a lot and talked about how much he enjoyed him. But it wasn’t assembled. I’m not that competent with tools and anyway I wanted to wait for Libby and Leonard to come back for Christmas to share in the fun. We assembled it together on Christmas Eve. That’s why I thought it was Christmastime. The security video would have been gone by then.”

“How did you know how to assemble it? Did Leonard already know?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. There were instructions in the box. Those are gone now, too, I’m afraid. The pieces were marked and screws were inside. It wasn’t very difficult.”

“Why did you place it there in that corner? Did someone suggest it?”

“Well, really, that’s the only place it will fit. Besides, I think some of the pieces had ‘Hall side’ written on them. It was obvious that it was intended to go right there adjacent to the hall. That’s why I knew it was custom-made.”

“Whoever made this, or had it made, stole your coins. And he – or she – is likely to try again to get more. Soon.”

“But what ... I don’t see the connection between this structure and the theft.”

“You will. Slight change of plans.” Cliff picked the plushie up and replaced it on the play structure, but this time on the middle level facing toward the center of the living room shoved tightly against the wall separating the living and dining rooms. “Does the cat use this level, too?”

“Not nearly as much. The way you have it positioned there against the wall I don’t think he could push it off. He might rub on it, though, and block the lens.”

“We’ll have to chance it. The one in the office is more important anyway.”

I couldn’t stand it any longer. I blurted out, “Cliff, are you going to tell us what’s going on? How did you know about the coins under the carpet?”

“Not yet. It’s still a theory. We need proof. If I’m right, you’ll find out soon enough.”

Cliff indicated that we should follow him upstairs. He led us into McNabb’s bedroom. He placed a device on the side table by the bed. I say ‘device’ because I knew it wasn’t what it looked like, which was an ordinary alarm clock. It was the control unit for the cameras. Cliff explained to Charles how to use it. He was to set it at night to activate the cameras to be in motion-sensitive mode. If someone were to move around the living room or the office, the cameras would record them. They would cause an alarm to go off on the control unit, too. There were some problems to overcome, however.

The first was the cat. If he roamed around at night, he would trigger the cameras and fill up the memory with useless footage, not to mention waking Charles up. Cliff reset it so that only the camera in the office would cause the alarm to go off.

“I could close the office door at night so that he doesn’t go in there,” Charles volunteered.

“No, we want it open,” Cliff replied. “Is there a way you can keep him upstairs at night?”

“Probably. He often sleeps up here anyway, either on my bed or the couch in the reading room. I can move his food and water and litter box up to that room. That might keep him on this level at night. I can carry him up when I go to bed to give him the idea.”

“All right, do that. We’ll see how that works.”

“But how could someone get in and set off the cameras and alarm inside without being picked up by the cameras outside?”

“Who says they won’t be? Did you ever check the saved video after you discovered the theft? My guess is that the thief was captured on video when the theft took place but since he didn’t open a window or door, the alarm wasn’t set off. You never knew when it happened; when, or if, you went to check the video days or weeks later, you’d see hours of raccoons and cats and passing vehicles.”

“Wait. I thought you said it had to have happened while I was here, while the safe door was open. During the day, in other words. I don’t have the exterior cameras set then.”

“I can’t rule that out yet. That’s why I need to set this equipment up.”

The second problem was lighting. The cameras didn’t have lights that activated when they did and they weren’t infrared. They were dependent on existing room or outdoor light. Cliff told us we’d need to get night lights that activated on motion like the cameras. He said if Bernice or Libby or anyone asked about them, he could say that he got those for safety, that he was getting old and not as steady on his feet as he used to be and his night vision was worse. Sometimes he forgot to turn on the room light, or he couldn’t find the switch right away. Cliff tactfully added that he was sure that wasn’t true as McNabb was still vigorous, but it would work as a cover story. McNabb didn’t think they’d notice if the lights were placed out of the way. Bernice was never there at night so she wouldn’t see the lights go on and Libby wouldn’t be visiting again until the Fourth of July.

“What happens if the alarm goes off?” Charles asked. “What am I supposed to do?”

“The best thing would be to call 911 immediately.”

“I told you, no police. I’d have to explain where the cameras were and why the alarm went off. The whole thing with the safe would come out.”

“I can’t advise you to go downstairs and confront anyone. If I’m right, the intruder will try to escape when the alarm goes off, at least if it’s loud enough to be heard in the office. But the controller has a display screen. If it goes off, look at the screen to see who’s down there. You can replay the last few minutes. If it looks safe, then go down. It might just be your cat. Check the video and you’ll know what to do. The important thing is to preserve the recordings for both cameras. They have a lot of memory, so they’ll be able to hold whatever was captured for days at least, probably weeks. Just be sure to turn off the cameras when you get up so you don’t record hours of you walking around or working on your computer. That’ll run down the batteries and you’ll have to recharge them too often. If my guess is right, it will happen at night, so normally there will be very little recorded other than your cat. Even if the memory is full, it will record over the oldest video so the latest video will always get recorded and saved for weeks. If the alarm goes and you don’t want to call the police, call me.”

“In the middle of the night?”

“My hourly rate is the same at night.”

“Very well, I shall. But you can’t get here fast enough to do any good. You live in the Bay Area.”

“You hired me as an investigator, not a bodyguard. I don’t have arrest powers anyway. If I’m right, the next morning will be soon enough. I’ll want to know right away. I don’t believe you’re in physical danger in any event.” Cliff gave Charles his home number.

The discussion went on for some time but eventually Cliff got impatient and insisted that Charles practice setting the cameras using the controller. Cliff would set off the cameras, or have me do it downstairs, and Charles would replay the video with Cliff’s help. It took quite a few times for Charles to get quick and comfortable with it. They spent almost two hours practicing with different scenarios. The alarm went off at least a dozen times, although sometimes they would have me set off only the living room camera without going into the office. I confirmed that the alarm was audible from the office area.

Another problem Cliff had been concerned about was the range. The devices were Bluetooth, not wi-fi. Since the office was located directly under McNabb’s bedroom, and the bookend camera was up on a shelf, the distance was only about ten feet. Although the ceiling diminished the signal, it was still strong enough to be reliable. The bigger problem was the living room camera which was a greater distance and had more walls to go through. It worked less than half the time. Cliff was grumbling and moaning about this for a long spell until I reminded him there’s a range extender for that model. I can read the catalogs, too. It’s like a relay. I told him we could get one of those and place it in the medicine cabinet in the guest bathroom. It was about halfway between the living room and Charles’s bedroom. Cliff relaxed after that and said we’d have to add that to our shopping list. Night lights and the Bluetooth relay so far.

By the time the practicing was over and the technical requirements settled upon, it was dinnertime. Charles said we should walk into town. He had reservations at a restaurant there. We were still in our grubbies from the geocaching so we changed our clothes and joined him downstairs. He and I stepped out onto the porch. Cliff went back to the stairway and set the cameras and alarm with his phone app, then joined us. Charles locked up.

Chapter 8

The evening was already rather chilly. I understood what Charles had meant when he said the elevation brought with it colder nights. Still, it was beautiful out and we enjoyed the leisurely stroll from the house to the downtown area. The Milky Way was crystal clear, blanketing the sky from horizon to horizon. I used to be able to see it from the farm in Minnesota as a kid, but in the years I've lived in the Bay Area, I've never seen it once due to the light pollution. Cliff and I found we had to force ourselves to slow down as Charles did not move very fast. After fifteen minutes we arrived at a quaint café and entered. I'd expected something a little more high-end with Charles being so rich, and at first I thought maybe Charles was trying to keep the cost down, taking us here rather than letting us go hog wild and putting it on his bill. Then I realized there probably weren't any four-star restaurants in Sutter Creek.

We obviously didn't need reservations since the place was more than half empty, but Charles mentioned to the waitress who came up when we walked in that he had one. She walked us over to a table by the window. There were no booths. We sat. She asked if we wanted drinks. Charles ordered a rum and coke. Cliff asked what beers they had and ordered something local he'd never heard of. He liked to experiment, hoping to find that special one others don't know about. I seldom drink alcohol, so I asked for water. It's actually illegal in California to serve water unless the customer asks for it, although most restaurants ignore that rule. It's part of the drought restrictions. The waitress left us menus and went to get the drinks. It was what you'd call comfort food: burgers, broiled chicken, steak, meat loaf, pork chops. There were some salads and soups, too.

"Is this a regular spot for you?" Cliff asked.

"Not really. I rarely go out for dinner. Bernice always cooks enough so I have leftovers on the nights she's not there. There aren't too many spots in town, so I do get here from time to time, usually for lunch. This is the first time in months I've been here for dinner."

"Tell me more about Bernice. How exactly did she come to be your housekeeper? You said she was the wife of a winery employee."

"Yes, one of the fellows who works for Joe. Miguel. He's something of a handyman. He fixes things around the winery, things like plumbing and electrical, some carpentry. He also does the same for some of the properties we own down in the valley, especially the apartment house. After my wife

died, her housekeeper told me she could no longer work for me. She got along famously with my wife, but didn't think she could stand working for anyone else. That was really quite a relief as I knew she was really too old. Her work was bad by then. I mentioned it to Joe and two of the women in the office and asked if they knew of anyone. Bernice called me a couple of days later and said she'd heard about the opening. I checked with Joe and the other staff and one of the women knew her and recommended her. That was it. I didn't interview anyone else."

"Is she from around here?"

"I believe so. She's certainly lived here for many years. They have a house just outside of town."

"Does she work for anyone else?"

"She picks up hours in the shops during tourist season. I think she cleans house for the Pasqualis once a week, too. They own another winery in town."

"So they're competitors of yours?"

"He runs the winery. She doesn't have anything to do with it, I don't think. They have five kids including triplets so she's busy at home. You could call him a competitor, I suppose, but we get along fine. We both specialize in Italian red varietals. He mainly does Sagrantinos while we specialize in Sangiovese. It's a friendly competition."

The waitress came and took our orders. As I was ordering the "Chianti burger," one that featured Italian tomatoes but no Chianti, I noticed a woman entering the café. Estelle, the black widow or divorcee, or whatever she was. The waitress left for the kitchen. Estelle spotted us and came over to talk to us. She was accompanied by a scruffy-looking young man she introduced as her son Ben. They sat at the two-top next to our table without waiting for the waitress to seat them there. Estelle sat on the side closest to Charles, which left Ben on the side closest to me.

"Hi, I'm Ben," he said across the aisle, turning his chair slightly to make it easier to face me. He wore a frayed tie-dyed T-shirt and faded jeans. Tattoos covered both arms from the wrists up into his sleeves. He had three pierced earrings on the top of the ear I could see.

"Hello, I'm May. This is my dad, Cliff."

"You're visiting?"

"Right. We're staying with Charles." I lifted my water glass hoping that would signal that I was done with the conversation. I looked at Cliff, who

was sitting against the window. I expected him to bail me out, but he leaned across me and asked Ben if he lived in town.

“Yeah. My mom and I have a house right around the corner from you guys. Where do you live?” he said, looking at me.

“Down south,” Cliff said, answering for me. I was still working on the world’s longest sip of water. “What do you do for a living?”

“I’m a maker.”

“Maker? What do you make?”

“Things. Wonderful things.” He grinned.

Cliff was obviously perplexed. I chimed in, “You know, Dad, like at those maker fairs. They have them every year in San Mateo.”

He obviously didn’t know. Not his demographic. “Oh right. I’ve seen the ads. You can make a living at that?”

“Here I am. I’m living!” he said brightly, apparently a response he’d perfected from repeated use. “So, May, are you married?”

Great, get right to the point, why don’t you. What’s next? You going to ask if I like sex with unshaven living-with-mom twenty-five-year old unemployed men? In fact, I am married to a Los Altos police detective, but our cover story is that I live with my dad, Cliff. It wouldn’t make much sense to be traveling with him if I was married, so I took off my rings for this trip. “I have a boyfriend,” I replied and began to study the salt and pepper shakers, avoiding eye contact.

“That’s fascinating,” Cliff continued, referring to the maker thing. “Tell me more. Do you travel around to different fairs? What ‘wonderful things’ have you made?”

Ben was unfazed by my coldness. “Last year it was a sort of a Rube Goldberg machine that people could ride in. This year we’re making a light shadow wall.”

“Light shadow? Aren’t all shadows made by light?”

Ben laughed. “No, no. Ours is exactly the opposite. You walk in front of the wall and you cast a shadow of light instead of dark.” When Cliff acted confused, Ben continued. “You have this plywood wall covered with dozens of small lights in a grid, like pixels. The kind for outdoor lighting that are photosensitive. You know, they go on automatically in the dark and shut off during daylight. We arrange them in a grid with a power supply behind. Across from the wall several yards we have a light source, just bright enough so that at night it shines on the wall with enough light to keep the pixels

turned off. Then when people walk between the light and the wall, their actual shadow blocks the light to the photosensitive detectors and the pixels turn on, creating a brightly lit ‘shadow’ in your shape on the wall.”

I had to admit, that was pretty clever. My opinion of Ben ticked up a notch, but not enough to give him any hopes. Still, it didn’t sound like anything he could monetize.

“That’s brilliant,” Charles said, apparently unaware of his pun. Estelle had been trying to gain his conversational attention with little success, but she was at that moment giving her order to the waitress, allowing him to join in ours. “How do you program it?”

Ben beamed. “That’s what’s so brilliant about it. There is no programming, no controller. The pixel lights go on and off automatically. All they need is power. Anyone can build it with off-the-shelf items. It really only works at night, though, or in a dark room.”

Cliff seemed inordinately interested in Ben’s “career” as a maker. He’s usually pretty disdainful of the drop-out culture, performance art, things like that. I would find out why the sudden interest later, but at the time I hadn’t figured it out. I offered to switch seats with Cliff and he readily agreed, much to Ben’s dismay. Cliff eventually learned that Ben had been raised locally since the age of eight when his father, an assistant manager in Chula Vista, got promoted and opened a new branch of a national insurance company in Sutter Creek. His parents got divorced. His dad remarried and is now an executive with the company headquarters back east. I figured they’re mostly living off Estelle’s alimony and property settlement. Ben was a mediocre student in high school and never went to college, although he still “plans to someday.” He was always good in shop classes, though, and loves building things. At six-three he was tall enough but neither coordinated or interested enough to play varsity basketball.

Meanwhile, Estelle was trying her magic on Charles with the same results as before. My attention drifted between the two conversations. I was relieved when the food came. Charles must have been, too, because he scooted his chair over closer to the window across from me and struck up a conversation as we ate. With Estelle and Ben so close, we really couldn’t talk about the case, so we just chatted and ate. When the meal was over, I followed Charles outside and was hit with a stiff breeze that chilled me to the bone. I’m from Minnesota and used to much worse, but I’ve acclimated to

California and wasn't dressed for it. I didn't realize how much the temperature drops here in the mountains.

Charles said he'd like to take us by the winery tasting room to meet the folks there, but it was closed. It didn't stay open in the evening until June when the tourists come in greater numbers. He said he'd take us there tomorrow. Cliff said we might not have time tomorrow so he asked to go by there anyway. Charles had a key, so he agreed.

We walked through town several blocks. We entered the winery through a side door. The front area, where the tasting room and sales counter were located was dark. Charles switched on a light and showed it to us. It looked like any other winery tasting room so we spent no more than a minute there. The back area had a light on and we could hear someone moving. Charles took us there and introduced us to a worker named Miguel. He turned out to be Bernice's husband, the handyman Charles had told us about. He was working on some water filtration equipment. The area was much larger than I'd thought from the front and had a bunch of vats and tubing and gauges. It was a working winery, after all. Miguel seemed irritated at the interruption and barely acknowledged us, so we left.

Back at the house Charles offered us drinks. I was grateful for a mug of hot chocolate, which he made for me. I felt fortunate he had the makings. Cliff declined, but Charles poured himself a glass of port.

"Tell me more about Leonard," Cliff said. "What exactly does he do?"

"I don't know more than what I told you. Software. I think the company name is Waymo. Something about self-driving cars."

Waymo is a subsidiary of Alphabet, the parent company of Google. They make self-driving cars and already are permitted to test them on public streets in several cities around the country. They plan to branch into ride-hailing once the testing and permitting process allows it. If they succeed, Uber and Lyft may become a thing of the past.

"You said he makes good money."

"I'm sure he does. They seem to spend like crazy. They bought a fancy Mercedes last year and they travelled to Bali on vacation over the winter. It was a top end resort. I saw the pictures. Their house has all the latest gadgets. I must say, I'm not comfortable with this line of inquiry. I'm sure Leonard wouldn't steal from me, and positive Libby never would."

“I’m not suggesting anything of the sort. I’m just trying to get an overall picture of the situation here. Someone familiar with the house gave you that cat structure and stole your coins. Perhaps one of your neighbors or family inadvertently gave away some information. Did Libby or anyone ever take a picture in the house, maybe post something to Facebook or Instagram?”

“I see. Well, yes, my daughter is always snapping pictures and posting them. I think it’s Facebook, but maybe it’s some other website. I don’t even have an account, so I don’t see whatever it is. I’m too old for that, what do you call it, society media.”

“Social media,” I added, anxious to contribute something.

Cliff dropped the line of questioning and said he needed to get some work done. He excused himself and went upstairs. I was still working on my hot chocolate, which Charles had made so hot I almost scalded my tongue. It was just getting cool enough to drink.

“May, uh Maeva, what is this all about? How did your boss know the coins were in the office? And why would anyone put them there and then steal coins the way they had?”

I didn’t like him calling Cliff my boss rather than my partner, but he wasn’t wrong. “Charles, I have no idea. Something happened when the cat toy camera fell off the play structure. He had some kind of epi... brainstorm.”

“Epiphany,” he said with a twinkle in his eye, a subtle payback for me correcting him about social media.

I wanted to tell him that stashing the coins in the attic wasn’t a long-term solution. He needed to get those coins into a bank safety deposit box somewhere and buy insurance. Someone knows he has them in his house so it could even be a safety issue. In the Bay Area home burglaries and robberies, even including murder, weren’t uncommon, especially among Indian families and others who have a custom of keeping gold and expensive jewelry at home. He was at risk and at his age living alone just increased that risk. Still, I couldn’t be advising the client until Cliff and I were on the same page about that.

“So, Maeva, where are you from originally?”

“Minnesota. I grew up on a dairy farm.”

“A fellow farmer! How delightful.”

We talked about farming life while I finished my hot chocolate. He really was quite a congenial old guy and he showed a genuine interest in me. I liked him a lot and hoped we could solve his case, but until Cliff confided in

me, I didn't see what we could do other than the home security measures we'd just taken and the advice to bank the coins. When I finished my chocolate I thanked him and went upstairs. I'd hoped to prod Cliff into telling me what he'd figured out, but he was on the phone with his wife. I decided to do the same thing and called home. By the time I was off the phone, I had a text from Cliff asking me to finish the emails from the office. It seems Ashley had fielded several calls and emails from troublesome clients on Friday and hadn't handled them well. I had to smooth some troubled waters. By the time I finished up with that, and then my personal emails, it was late. I decided to let things slide until tomorrow.

Chapter 9

Sunday I got up early and went downstairs. Charles wasn't up yet. I scrounged around the kitchen and found pancake mix and bacon. I made up a batch of the batter and located the griddle. When I heard some stirring upstairs I went ahead and started the bacon cooking and made a pot of coffee. It didn't take long before both men came downstairs.

"Smells good," Cliff said.

"Pancakes! It's been a long time since a woman cooked me breakfast," Charles added.

An hour later we'd had a robust breakfast and our usual doses of caffeine. The talk around the table had been routine chat about weather, sports, wine-growing and the like, nothing about the case. When Cliff and I went upstairs I buttonholed him and expressed my concerns about leaving the coins unsecured. I urged him to tell Charles to move them to a bank.

"You know about those home invasion robberies in Fremont. It could happen here."

"Someone's known about the coins for some time. It's not hard to see when Bernice comes and goes and when Charles is alone. If that person wanted to rob him, they would have done so already. I don't think he's in imminent harm."

"Imminent, well, probably not, but still, eventually ... besides they're no longer in a fireproof safe. Cliff, this old house is a tinderbox. We just placed the coins in a junk-filled attic. If there's a fire that would be the first place to go."

"Gold is fireproof."

“Cliff, come on. You know how hot it gets in a full-on house fire? You’ve seen the coverage of the Santa Rosa, Malibu, Paradise fires. The gold would be melted down to slag. It might still be valuable, but at half its value. It wouldn’t be that hard to move them to the bank downtown safely. You and I and Woody could do it. We’re all licensed to carry.”

“Okay, I get it. You’re right, that’s the best long-term solution, but it’s not urgent. If Charles were to bring the coins into the bank with armed guards it would be a big deal. Even if the manager didn’t watch him put the coins in the box, people would know he put something really valuable there. The word would get around. This town is too small to keep that secret.”

“But that’s the point. No one would have an incentive to rob him once the word spread. He should have the bank manager watch to make sure it does. He’d be safe.”

“It can wait. We need to catch the thief in the act first.”

“Cliff, are you putting your ego ahead of the client’s best interest? You don’t have to prove that you’re Sherlock Holmes, you know. That money is probably gone for good, the four rolls. As long as you secure what’s left, and make sure Charles is safe, that’s a win. We don’t need a prosecution. Your FBI days are over.”

Cliff glared at me for the suggestion he was letting his ego drive his actions. “Charles would never be satisfied with that. He’d know that someone close to him, someone who knows the layout of the house, betrayed him and stole from him. He would always have lingering doubts about his own daughter ... well, maybe not her ... but Leonard, Bernice, Joe, Estelle, and who knows who else. It would eat him alive. I agree the prudent thing is for him to move the coins to a bank safe deposit box and take out appropriate insurance if he’s going to keep the coins, and that’s what I’ll advise him, but not yet.”

I wanted to argue more, but I knew ultimately I’d lose the argument. Charles would do whatever Cliff said and there was no point in making him think we were at odds. It was Sunday and we couldn’t go to the bank today anyway. Monday I’d start checking to see which local banks had safe deposit boxes available and what the sizes and rates were. If there was nothing suitable nearby, he could always go to Sacramento or some bigger city. I decided to change the subject.

“Are you ever going to tell me what this great epiphany is you had? What the hell does the cat structure have to do with the theft?” I could see him

debating internally for a few seconds, but then he leaned over close and whispered in my ear. My jaw dropped when he told me his theory. I thought he was kidding. I didn't believe him, but at least I understood why he was doing what he was doing.

"It's too early to tell McNabb," he told me. "If I'm wrong, he'll lose confidence in us, and what we're doing is the best course anyway."

I wasn't sure I agreed with him, but I told him I'd let his idea play out. After we cleaned up he told me he'd done some research online and found a security equipment supplier in Sacramento that had the Bluetooth relay we needed. He said he could pick up the motion sensitive night lights, too. That would be a minimum three hour round trip. He told me he didn't need me for this trip and asked that I stay and continue conversation with Charles to get whatever else I could about people around him. He didn't want me to grill him or do anything to throw suspicion on any of his friends or relatives, just subtly elicit what I could.

Cliff took off to get the stuff and I stayed behind. Once again, I found Charles to be a truly nice gentleman and a good companion. He was rich, but not pretentious, except perhaps a bit in his speech. He usually wore jeans and a flannel shirt. He drove a Buick. He was behind the times technologically, but not bad for someone his age. He was eons behind in pop culture, but that didn't surprise me. We were still chatting hours later when the doorbell rang. I was closer to the door, so I answered it. It turned out to be Ben, the tattoo artist's perma-canvas. Estelle wasn't with him.

"May! May I?" He said, starting to step in and holding his arms open as though expecting a hug. He laughed at his own witticism. "See what I did with that?"

I stepped back, dodging the embrace. "Well, it's not my house ..."

"Come in, Ben," Charles replied. "Would you like some coffee?" I was silently cursing McNabb's cordiality since Ben had still not gotten the hint that he didn't have a chance with me, but I remembered Cliff's admonition to try to find out more about the people around him.

"Thanks, that sounds good." He stepped in and plopped down on the living room sofa, apparently expecting Charles or me to get the coffee for him. I volunteered to do that. I'd hoped Ben would call Charles either by his first name or "Mr. McNabb" since that would give me a better idea of the relationship, but he never did.

“Do you take cream or sugar?” I asked, glad to get out of Ben’s reach and to hear how he conversed with McNabb.

“Both.”

“This is a rare privilege. What brings you here, Ben?” Charles asked.

“Well, I really came to see May, uh, and her dad. You guys seemed so interested in the light shadow board I thought you might want to come over and see it. It’s in the house. You’re welcome to see it, too, of course.”

The coffee pot was down to the dregs which had been sitting on the heat for hours, but I didn’t want to make a fresh pot. We’ve got one of those Keurig single serving things at home, but Charles was old school. I poured the dregs into a mug and loaded it with milk and enough sugar to turn an ox diabetic. Maybe he’d get that hint. I returned with the mug and handed it to Ben. He slurped it and seemed to be perfectly satisfied with it. Somehow this disturbed me more than anything else about him.

“Did you hear that, May? He’s invited you and Cliff to see that light thing he made.”

“My dad’s not here. He had to go out.” I’d had no interest in the project. That had been Cliff. I was sure Ben had only used that as an excuse to get me over there. I looked over at Charles. I hadn’t told him I was married and wasn’t sure if he’d picked up on the lust vibe Ben was emitting.

“You should go see it. It sounds really quite imaginative.”

Ben was delighted with this response. He might get me alone in his house if I agreed. I would definitely go if Charles was with me, but I didn’t trust Benny Boy. Still, my job was to get scoop and I couldn’t wimp out. I’m a detective. I had a job to do and I’ve always been able to handle myself with men. Ben was very skinny and didn’t look physically intimidating. “Sure, that sounds like fun. My dad’ll be back in a half hour. We could do it then.”

“I can’t. I have to be in Jackson by then. Why don’t you come over now.”

“Well, finish your coffee at least.”

“No, that’s all right.” He rose quickly, leaving the coffee on the table.

“Uncle Charles, why don’t you come along,” I said, still hoping I wouldn’t have to do it alone.

“No, no. I can see it any time. I need to clean up the breakfast things. You young people have fun.” His eye had that twinkle again. I realized he thought I was interested in Ben and he didn’t want to be the third wheel. He thought he was doing me a favor. Damn, men can be clueless sometimes.

The weather was like yesterday, sunny and clear. It was already warmed up so I didn't need a jacket or sweater. I had no more excuses, so I sucked it up and smiled. "All right, then. Let's go."

Chapter 10

Ben held the door for me, a bit of a surprise, and we headed down the walk. We took a right at the corner and walked halfway down the next block where he turned up the walk of a green stuccoed ranch house. It was one of the nicer houses in the area from what I've seen, although small and modestly middle class. The shrubs in front were neatly trimmed. I didn't see anything that concerned me. There was an old Toyota Celica in the driveway.

"Is your mom here?"

"No, she's shopping."

Damn. Well, there's nothing for it but to go on in. He held the door for me again and I stepped inside. I was standing on a tiled entry which was part of the living room. The kitchen was to my left, just off the entryway. The living room was small and looked like it had been furnished in 1975 straight from the Sears showroom.

Ben started down the hallway. "It's back here."

I followed. We passed a large bedroom on the left that from the décor was probably his mother's room. Across from it was one on the right. On the door was a carved wooden sign saying "Ben." It looked like a wood shop project from junior high. Ben had passed that room, though, and was holding open the door to the next bedroom on the right, what I assumed was a spare room. I arrived at the doorway. The room was pitch dark, with heavy curtains on the window. This made sense since the light board needed a darkened space. Ben closed the door behind me and turned on the light.

"Shit! She's even hotter than you said," came a male voice from the queen bed that took up half the room. A clinically obese guy lay there smoking, wearing nothing but a pair of shorts. He looked Chinese or Korean, maybe thirty-five or forty. I immediately took stock of my position. Ben was still behind me blocking the door. There was no other exit. "I'm Cho. Sorry for the mess. Have a seat." He patted the bed. I remained standing.

"He's my roommate," Ben offered. "We rent out the room." Ben stepped forward, bumping my behind with his front. I moved forward another step and turned sideways so I could see them both.

“You like our shadow board?” Cho said, stubbing out his cigarette and waving his hand toward the far wall. I hadn’t even noticed the shadow board standing against the far wall before that, I was so focused on my precarious situation.

“It’s modular,” Ben said. “It’s too big to go through the door when all four pieces are assembled. We have these two set up here. The other two are in my room. I’ll show you how it works.”

Suddenly the lights went out. I suppressed a scream but jumped two feet to my right, not sure what to expect. Then a spotlight on the near wall came on, shining directly on the upright panels behind the bed. Cho rolled out of the bed and flipped a switch on a cord somewhere out of sight behind the board. The board was lit by the spot, but none of the scores of small lights on the board were lighted. The photosensors must have detected the light from the spot on the opposite wall. Ben turned the spot off and the board instantly lit up in a rectangular array. He turned the spot on again and the lights went off.

“Go ahead, try it. Walk between the light and the board,” Ben urged. “You’ll see your outline in light, like a negative shadow.”

I took a tentative step toward the spotlight.

“No, not there. You’re too close to the spot,” Cho said. “You’ll just block it completely. To get the effect you have to come around on this side of the bed, right next to the board.”

I didn’t move. “That’s okay. Why don’t you demonstrate it for me. You’re right there.”

“It’s not the same. You have to do it yourself. Move around, swing your hips, stuff like that and see how the lights come on in your shape.”

“No really, I get the idea. That’s very clever.” I turned toward the door and tried to step that direction as though to leave but Ben had moved back there between me and the door. If I moved any closer I’d be shoving my boobs into his chest.

“Relax, we don’t bite,” Cho said, still back by the board. “Let’s have some fun. You wanna get high? I have some really good shit.” He turned off the shadow board.

I glared at Ben but he was grinning like the Cheshire cat. “It’s good stuff, May. You should try it. You’ll like it.” He stepped forward, pressing into me, forcing me back against the side wall. Cho came around the bed and turned off the spotlight. It was now inkpot black. I felt a hand around my

waist, pulling me toward him, although I wasn't sure which him. I spun the opposite direction to get loose, but that took me back farther from the door. I heard the footsteps and could just see the vague outline of a short, fat form move toward me as my eyes were starting to adjust. It had to be Cho, since Ben was a tall beanpole. I launched myself headfirst at where I thought Cho's face would be. I felt the satisfying crunch of a nose being smashed flat at the same time I saw stars and fell to the floor.

"Bitch!" yelled Cho.

Ben cooed. "Don't be like that, baby. We just want to have some fun." He lunged.

I leapt onto the bed to avoid his grasp, but I tripped on the rumpled bedspread and lost my balance. I fell onto the bed. An instant later I felt two hundred fifty pounds of human flesh land on top of me. I struggled to free myself, but he was more than double my weight. I stopped wriggling, which he had seemed to enjoy, and let out a scream right in his ear.

"Bitch, shut up," Cho hissed, pressing his meaty hand on my neck.

I thought I was going to pass out when I heard Ben say something about a noise. Suddenly the door burst open. The light from the hall flooded the room as the door opened. The next thing I knew, I saw Ben flying across the room and smashing into the light board, busting several of the pixel lights. Then Cho's weight left me so I could sit up and see what was happening. What was happening was Cliff was pounding on Cho's face with his right hand while holding him against the wall with his left.

Cho kned Cliff in the groin causing Cliff to fall back groaning onto the bed in a sitting position. Cho grabbed something off the floor. I couldn't make out what it was for a second, then I realized it was a screwdriver. He thrust it at Cliff just as Ben grabbed my hair from behind and yanked. I let myself go with the force instead of resisting it, and twisted as I was propelled toward him.

I clawed at Ben's face with both hands. He could block one with his free hand, but he still had my hair in the other. I raked by nails across his right cheek, drawing blood in four fat streaks like a cluster of maggots was eating his face. He let go for an instant and I jerked back.

A scream in a man's voice split the air and I whirled to see if Cliff had been stabbed. Cho was sitting on the floor, his back to the wall, holding his right arm with his left in a decidedly awkward position. "You broke my arm!" he panted.

“It’s just dislocated, you filthy slug. If I’d wanted to break it, it’d be broken.” Cliff stood over him, the toes of one foot resting gently on Cho’s groin. By this point I was standing next to Cliff a foot from the open door.

“Don’t, Dad. Leave ‘em. They’ve had enough. Come on.” I tugged at his arm. Cho was whimpering like an infant begging for someone to help him.

Cliff turned toward Ben who was starting to come around from the other side of the bed, holding his hand over the cheek I’d scraped. When Cliff took one step toward him, Ben stopped, stepped back, and cowered like a dog caught with a shredded sofa cushion.

“Ben, you just took up the insurance business, just like your old man.”

“Huh?” Ben replied, still cowering.

“Don’t even think about retribution. That means payback to you. You just became the insurer for my cousin Charles. If anything should happen to him, anything at all, or to his house, car, or family, you will pay the damages but it won’t be in dollars. It will be in pain. More pain than you can imagine. Ten times more than this idiot is experiencing.” Cliff nudged Cho’s arm with his shin, eliciting another scream. I tugged at Cliff’s arm harder.

“And as for you, whatever your name is,…”

“Cho,” I told him.

“Cho, you’re in the insurance business with him. I know who you both are and where to find you. This policy never expires. Anything next week, next year, or twenty years from now happens and I’ll be coming for you. Understand?”

“Yeah, man,” Ben answered. “We’re cool. It’s all on us. I swear, we won’t do anything. You gonna call the police?”

Cliff looked at me, making clear it was my choice. I was the victim. I shook my head no, which made it throb. I still had a headache from when I head-butted Cho.

“Not this time. You’re getting off easy.” He reached down and grabbed Cho’s arm. Cho turned white with pain. “Hold still. I’ll put it back in.” I didn’t see exactly what he did, but it was a quick violent movement with the arm and Cho’s whimpering ceased.

“Thank you,” Cho said, unmoving. Sweat poured off his face.

Cliff finally yielded to my tugging and we both left the room, quickly walking outside. “Are you okay?”

“I’ll be fine. Just a bump on the head. He got the worst of it. Thank you for coming to the rescue. How did you know I was in trouble?”

“You’re lucky I got back earlier than I thought. When I asked Charles where you were, he told me and I knew that couldn’t be good. Ben’s hormones were practically dripping from his ears. Charles said he thought you and Ben made a cute couple. I guess he never heard your exchange in the restaurant. He was being bombarded by Hurricane Estelle. I yelled at him and demanded to know where the house was. He led me here. Then I heard your scream.”

Charles was standing on the sidewalk a few yards away. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, fine, Charles,” I said but Cliff started giving him a tactful tongue-lashing if there is such a thing. He told Charles he should never have let me go over there alone, that it was obvious Ben had designs on me. As we walked back to his place the whole story started coming out. Charles took the chastising without umbrage, even apologizing to me. I waved him off, saying it was no big deal.

Once Cliff and I were upstairs alone, he chewed me out less tactfully. I reminded him that he’d asked me to try to get more info on the people around Charles. He said that could have waited until he got back, or I should have insisted Charles come with me. I knew he was right, but felt compelled to defend myself. I resented the scolding, but at the same time appreciated the protectiveness Cliff was displaying for me.

“I identified a new player, this Cho guy.”

Cliff’s mood changed to one of curiosity. “So what’s his story?”

“He’s Ben’s roommate. He said ‘they’ – I guess that means Estelle – rent out the spare room. Cho referred to the shadow board as ‘ours’ so I guess he helped Ben build it. They offered me dope.”

“Yeah, Ben said ‘we’ and ‘ours’ at the restaurant. I should have realized there was someone else involved in that. Let’s ask Charles what he knows about this guy and about Ben, too. They may have drug offenses from what you’re telling me.”

We went back downstairs and asked McNabb what he knew about Cho. He said he’d seen him around town with Ben once or twice, but thought they were just friends. He didn’t know Cho was living with them. He told us he could find out more, though. He immediately placed a call to the sheriff at his home number. I was impressed that he could reach the sheriff at home,

especially on a Sunday. They were obviously friends. Charles told him that this fellow around the corner named Cho had offered his niece some drugs. He didn't embellish the story beyond that and simply asked whether he knew who this Cho person was and what he could tell him about him. The sheriff told him he definitely knew who he was. Charles put the phone on speaker at that point so we could hear.

"Bruce Cho. C-H-O. He works here in Jackson for a contractor when he has work for him. He's a qualified electrician. We've picked him up a couple of times for DUI, both pot and alcohol. He fought the deputy once and we charged him with assault and resisting arrest. He ended up pleading to drunk and disorderly and got a suspended sentence. He and that tall skinny kid he hangs with are potheads. He's on our radar as someone to watch. Stay away from him. I'd have one of our deputies pay him a courtesy call as a lesson, but his cousin is on the Sutter Creek P.D. and there'd be a political stink."

Charles thanked him and ended the call.

"I got that," Cliff said. "I'll need Estelle's and Ben's last names, too. We need to check out anybody who's had access to your house, especially anyone who could design this cat structure."

"I'm sure this Cho has never been in here."

"But Ben has and the two of them are certainly capable of building this thing."

Charles didn't know Estelle's last name off the top of his head and had to go look it up. He came back with the name and assured us that she was still using her ex-husband's surname and that Ben also had that surname.

"Okay. Now I need to install the relay, and we need for you to test it and practice a few more times."

Cliff picked up the two motion-sensitive night lights which were arrayed on the living room table and plugged one into a wall socket in the living room. He disappeared into the office with other one and then came back. Finally he took the relay and plugged that in to a plug inside the utility closet. It took a few minutes for him to get the setup right. He showed Charles the on/off switch on the lights and instructed him to turn them on before he went to bed every night. If anyone should move through the living room or the office at night, the lights should go on and the cameras should take video. Only the one in the office would trigger the alarm. Charles asked why the

living room one wasn't also set to do that, but Cliff told him just to trust him, that this was the best way.

We all went through the practice sessions again, with me moving around like a burglar. Everything worked as it should. It just depended on Charles remembering to turn everything on every night and to check the controller unit by his bed if the alarm went off. Charles seemed flustered by the time we finished.

"Does this mean I'm in more danger now?"

"How do you mean?"

"You seem to think someone will be coming in at night. I'm all alone here."

"I could arrange for twenty-four-hour guards, but that would be hugely expensive and I don't think that's what you want. I really don't think you're in any greater danger now than before. Probably less. Think about it, whoever it is, if they did come in at night, must have done so multiple times and no one has attacked or bothered you."

"But now the safe is empty. If they open the safe and find it empty, this might make them angry. They could come upstairs and threaten me and make me tell them where the coins are. They could even kill me."

"Charles, you have only so many options here. You could have us put the coins back and let them continue stealing them."

"No, of course not."

"You can move them to a bank safety deposit box and help get the word out that they've been moved there, but then your neighbors and townsfolk would know of your gold, yet we still couldn't be sure the thief would become aware of the fact you've moved them out of the house. They could still enter and find the empty safe, which wouldn't make you any safer."

"No."

"You can move the coins and move from this house to somewhere with other people. Your daughter, perhaps, or a retirement community."

"No! This is my home. I won't impose myself on my daughter and I'm not ready for the feeble farm."

"Or you can trust me. I can't guarantee your safety forever, but I really think you're in no danger. I think this is the best way to make you safe. I think the thief would flee on hearing the alarm. Just don't confront him. If we can catch the thief on video I believe we can identify him – or her – and your problems will be over. At least the risk from this particular thief would

be over. You should move the coins to a bank and get insurance, but for now don't let anyone know, not until we find out who did it. I can arrange a secret transfer to any bank you choose – Jackson, Sacramento, Palo Alto. And you should let your daughter know about them, too, once you've done that. Put her on as successor to access the box. You aren't getting any younger."

Charles sighed and pondered this for a long minute. "I suppose you're right. I wasn't able to sleep last night. The idea of someone I trust ... I can't look at anyone the same way now."

"That's exactly why we need to find out who it is. Let me – us – finish this investigation so you can rest easy again and enjoy your friends without suspicion."

"Very well. I'll call my lawyer in Sacramento to get a referral to a good bank there. He's the one who recommended you, by the way."

"Thank him for me. When you have made arrangements for the box, give me a call and I'll arrange for a safe discreet transfer."

The matter having been finally decided, McNabb brightened. "Would you like some lunch? It's that time. I have leftover stew and ..."

"Don't bother. We have to get going. We'll grab something on the road."

He nodded to me and I realized it was a signal to get my stuff ready to leave. I went upstairs and began packing. Cliff followed a few minutes later and we were soon in the van heading home. I thought he might stop for some more geocaches, but he didn't. We didn't even stop to eat lunch. He pulled into a McDonald's drive-thru and we ate greasy food in the car en route. I do love their fries.

Chapter 11

I took Monday off since I'd worked the weekend. I'm a partner now and I don't need permission. I came in on Tuesday and Cliff was there. He'd come in and dealt with most of the pressing items we'd missed from Friday. By the end of the day we were caught up. Ashley was a big help. I think that day she was alone taught her something about maturity. She realized what a responsibility it was to run a business and have clients who depend on you.

I asked Cliff if he'd heard from Charles, and he said no. We didn't talk about it again for the next two days. Thursday morning when I arrived in the office Cliff said he'd gotten a call in the middle of the night from

McNabb. The alarm had gone off, but it turned out to be Cruiser the cat cruising through the office. If that turned out to be a regular thing, Cliff's plan wasn't going to work. Charles suggested they close the door to the office to prevent that. The office door had a lock, but he didn't have to lock it. A burglar could still get in to trigger the alarm. Cliff told him not to do that. I knew why, but Charles didn't and he was peeved. He said he couldn't be getting up every third night. Cliff told him to make sure the cat was upstairs and to get one of those baby barriers people use at the top of stairs to protect toddlers. The cat was obviously capable of jumping over it, but probably wouldn't. Fortunately that worked. We didn't hear from Charles for another two weeks.

The call came at 3:20 AM. I was sound asleep. My husband answered it, thinking it was his phone. He gets emergency calls late at night on occasion, whereas I never had until that night. He shook me awake and handed me the phone.

"Hello?"

"Get your stuff. We're going to Sutter Creek." I was instantly awake. My heart started pounding like the Wipeout drum solo.

"Were you right?"

"I think so. We'll find out when we see the video."

I hadn't told my husband anything about the case due to client confidentiality and all that, so he was dumbfounded when I told him I had to make an emergency run up to the gold country. That's what the region is called, and it turned out to be appropriate in this case. Since this was a first for us – me leaving him in the middle of the night for a case – he was concerned for my safety, but I told him we were just meeting with a client. He asked why it couldn't wait until morning. I didn't have an answer other than Cliff said we had to go.

I threw on some jeans, boots, and a sweatshirt and put together a few things I thought I might need, like my phone, my private eye credentials, and a flashlight and hightailed it out of there. Cliff was already out front waiting for me when I got out the door.

The sun was just coming up as we pulled into McNabb's driveway. We didn't see anyone or anything suspicious outside. We rang the bell and waited. Charles took a while to answer. I saw the front curtains move. He must have been spooked by the intruder and was checking to make sure it was us. We were admitted and Cliff asked to see the video immediately. I thought

we'd all head up the stairs to the controller unit, but instead Cliff made a beeline for the office and pulled the camera from the spy bookend. He extracted a mini-SD card from it and asked me to go do the same to the one in the cat toy.

I returned with the card. Cliff was already sitting at McNabb's desk computer. He'd put the bookend card in a holder and inserted it in the slot. The computer was still booting up, so we had to wait. After what seemed like an eternity it was fully booted and recognized the mini-SD card. Cliff found the video file from 3:14AM and launched it in the video player. McNabb had a nice big monitor so Charles and I could see over Cliff's shoulder.

At first the picture was completely dark except for the beam of a small light moving slowly across the room. It was only about two feet off the floor and was illuminating the area in the direction of its travel. It moved from the area of the door toward the area of the safe. Suddenly the office night light came on, triggered by the motion. The motion stopped and the scene was revealed in dim light. I clapped my hand over my mouth. Cliff had predicted it, but I was still surprised. There in the middle of the room was a small robot.

The robot consisted of a boxy unit with four wheels and some projections. The boxy part was a little smaller than a typical kitchen waffle maker, low and flat, and had four small wheels. It was made of a frame of metal struts and pieces similar to an erector set. Inside the frame was what could be a battery and an electric motor of some sort. It had more struts and wires and something that looked like a belt. In the dim light and poor resolution, it was hard to make out detail. On top was a hinged mast with a camera on it. The camera appeared to be fixed, not rotatable, at least not left and right, but maybe up and down. I knew this because the whole robot turned toward the night light. A strip at the bottom of the image included a timestamp and a red dot that flashed. Cliff explained that the red dot meant the alarm was signaling. The video did not have an audio track so we couldn't hear anything. The robot paused for a few seconds facing the night light then rotated back toward the doorway where it paused for a few seconds more. Then it turned back and continued toward the safe. When it got there another projection unfolded, a short arm.

"Damn," Cliff said. "The alarm didn't scare it off. Maybe it doesn't have a microphone. I thought it must have one. Or maybe whoever is driving it isn't monitoring the audio, only the video. They weren't scared off by the night lights coming on, either. Whoever it is is pretty bold."

The robot was only four or five inches from the front of the safe. Its arm extended forward and we could see a grasping mechanism on the end. It was a pair of quarter-circle arcs covered with rubbery-looking pads. It reminded me of those pincer-like things used to fish corn on the cob out of boiling water. The claws opened and fitted themselves over and around the safe dial, then clamped down. Clearly they were custom made to fit the dial.

“I think that’s where it was when I looked at the live monitor upstairs,” Charles said. Cliff paused the video. “The little screen on that thing wasn’t nearly as clear as this, and I didn’t have my glasses on. I wasn’t sure it was a robot. I thought it might have been a machine someone had placed there on the safe. Someone could have been standing out of range watching or waiting for the machine to do its work.”

“What did you do at that point?”

“I started yelling as loud as I could. I was yelling ‘Who’s there?! I know you’re down there! I’ve got a gun. I’m calling the police.’ Something of that nature. I was so excited I’m not sure exactly what I said. Then I called you. I didn’t watch the rest of the video and I didn’t call the police. This is the first I’ve seen it clearly.”

“That’s good. I told you not to confront anybody. Someone could have been down there. Let’s keep watching.”

The robot arm started rotating the dial very rapidly. In less than three seconds it had turned the dial to all three positions. The arm moved to the handle of the safe door and clamped onto it, then the robot began to back away, pulling the door open. Suddenly it stopped. The robot backed away and sped out of the room at a much faster pace than it had entered. It looked like something out of a BattleBots competition. Whoever was driving it had to be a skilled driver and knew the route out of the room. It was out of the picture within seconds, but the night light and camera stayed on for another thirty seconds after that. Then the video ended. There were no subsequent files on that memory card until the one indicating Cliff’s entrance into the office this morning. Cliff popped that card out of the computer.

I handed him my card from the living room. There were two video files on it of interest. The first one was prior to the sequence in the office and the second was just afterward. Cliff played the first. On this one, the night light must have started before the camera was triggered because the robot was lighted at the beginning. The robot was in the middle of the room approaching the cat structure. It came right up to the structure, so close in fact that it

looked like it intended to strike or disable the camera. It had to have been on the structure itself, as the camera could see nothing but the very top of the robot distorted by the fisheye lens. The robot turned and disappeared from view in the direction of the hall.

“Where did it come from?” Charles asked. “It just appeared in the middle of the room.”

“The next video should show you,” Cliff answered.

The next video started in the dark. There had been enough of a time lapse while the robot was doing the safecracking for the motion detector to shut down the night light. When the light came on, the robot was in the middle of the room again, but this time it was zipping toward the fireplace. We could see the arm extend and reach down to grab something on the floor of the hearth. I realized it was a solid rubber ball like you throw for a dog, about the size of a tennis ball, maybe a bit smaller. It had a cord of some sort running through it with a knot on one end. The other end ran into the fireplace and up the chimney. As soon as the claws clamped shut, the camera mast folded down flat and the cord tautened and began pulling the robot up the chimney. Within seconds the robot disappeared.

“Incredible,” Charles gasped. “But you knew this was what it was going to be, didn’t you?”

“I figured it out, although I wasn’t certain. I’ll explain in a minute, but first I need to know what you did after the yelling. Did you see or hear anything?”

“I kept yelling for a minute or two and then I heard something upstairs. I ran to the stairs and started to go up, but I was afraid to go all the way up. I thought someone was inside and, well, it would be dangerous. But I got right up near the top and I could hear a clatter coming from the direction of the play room. A few seconds later, maybe a minute, I heard a truck driving away from the front of the house. It sounded like a truck anyway.”

“You didn’t see it out the window?”

“No. I just went back to my room and waited for you. After an hour or so I came downstairs, but I didn’t see anything. I didn’t touch the cameras. You told me not to.”

“Just as I thought! The thief had a truck, probably a box truck or tall panel wagon like UPS and FedEx use, and parked it right next to the portico. He could climb up on his truck with a short ladder and place it on the balcony

outside the play room. From there he could climb up to the roof and lower the robot down the chimney.”

“How in tarnation did you figure that out?”

“Have a seat, Charles, and I’ll explain. Why don’t you start a pot of coffee.”

Chapter 12

I was impatient to hear the explanation, but I needed coffee more than the data dump right then. It turns out Bernice had made a pie – strawberry rhubarb – the previous day and there was plenty for all of us. We could get a calorie fix at the same time without having to wait for Charles to cook us something. It didn’t take long before we were gathered around the dining room table sipping and chomping, waiting to be enlightened by Sherlock Knowles.

“The first thing I was worried about was your physical safety,” Cliff began. “Someone had gotten into your safe. I didn’t know if it had been while you were here during the daytime, like Bernice or a guest pretending to use the bathroom but sneaking into your office. Once I saw how the rolls of coins had been altered, though, I was confident whoever it was wasn’t violent. I know that someone had to have accessed the safe multiple times either personally or possibly had someone else photograph the contents or open up a roll. They certainly had a good idea how much wealth was in there, and could only have come prepared with the washers on a subsequent occasion. If they’d been violent, there wouldn’t have been any need for stealth, for the steel washers. They could have come to your door and knocked some day when you were alone and forced you to open the safe at gunpoint, then cleaned it out and left, maybe leaving you tied up or even killing you.

“That meant we were dealing with a sneak thief, not an armed robber, someone who wanted to avoid violence. It’s possible they weren’t so much worried about the violence to you as they were wanting to keep secret the fact that a theft had occurred. That would make it easier to fence the coins. So that meant we couldn’t be sure they weren’t armed or violent.”

“So you eliminated Bernice. She had whole days in the house to herself. And she had a key.”

“But not the alarm code. I considered Bernice as a suspect, but if she could get into the safe, as you say, I couldn’t see why only four rolls were

taken, or why the three coins were. She could have cleaned out the safe herself at her leisure. Of course, she might also let someone else in who only had brief access without her knowledge, such as a friend who pretended to use the bathroom. She might let her husband in, or Joe, for example, people she would trust. Maybe even a deliveryman.”

“She’s not supposed to.”

“You’d be surprised at what domestic servants do when the employer isn’t around. Anyway, the fact that only four rolls were taken and altered with the washers convinced me that whoever accessed the safe had limited time and probably limited carrying capacity. Someone who was pretending to use the bathroom, for example, couldn’t hide five hundred pounds on their person. Another explanation that occurred to me was that someone was getting in at night somehow and was worried you’d wake up and confront them or call the police. It would be difficult to move all that gold out silently and quickly, but just a few rolls at a time wouldn’t be that hard. Still, that didn’t really seem to fly.

“First of all, I didn’t see how they could gain entry at night while you were sleeping without triggering the alarm on the doors and windows. You have a top-notch system and every entrance I could see had a sensor affixed. Second, if they were able to do so, why not take everything, or at least more than four. That seemed like a very small number. At night they would have hours and could probably flee quickly if they heard you stirring upstairs. Third, and the thing that really bugged me, was why take the three loose coins? They went to all the trouble of altering the rolls so you wouldn’t know they’d stolen those coins, but then made it obvious they had by taking the loose pile.

“Then I realized that it made sense if the person taking the coins wasn’t the person altering the rolls. I thought someone was inside opening the safe and bringing the rolls to someone outside, who then altered the rolls with the washers, and sent the inside person back to replace the rolls. That would make sense if the person inside was a small child, for example. A small child would explain some things, like maybe being able to get in through the cat door and not be able to carry a lot of rolls. A small child might obey daddy and bring him the rolls as instructed, but then spot the shiny gold coins sitting loose and taking them for himself, not telling dad. Maybe even a trained monkey, but how reliable would that be? Still, that had problems. How would

a small child or a monkey open the safe? How would anyone, for that matter? I still hadn't solved that mystery."

I'd been listening now for a good ten minutes and getting more and more impatient. "Cliff, you changed completely when you were putting that cat toy camera on the structure. Something hit you then. I can't stand this long story. Will you tell me what it was before I pee my pants."

"You can use the bathroom," Charles offered.

"It was just a figure of speech, Charles. Your dining room chair is safe."

"The ramp," Cliff said softly.

"What?"

"The ramp. On the cat structure. I bent down to pick up the toy and noticed that there was a ramp from the floor up to the first level of the structure. That's eight inches. What cat needs a ramp to climb eight inches? One in a wheelchair? Cruiser can jump to the top level without batting an eye. Not only that, why put the first level eight inches off the floor on a thick base and not simply on the floor? It was flush with the hall floor, that's why. A small motorized vehicle like a toy car or robot couldn't surmount that eight inch gap. It needed a ramp to get from the living room floor to the hall."

"But robots can climb over things just like bugs," I objected. "Ones with legs like cockroaches, some jumpers like pogo sticks. I've seen scads of YouTube videos."

"Yeah, yeah, but those are very sophisticated and require a lot of hardware and software, serious robotics chops and usually are tethered. A small one on wheels is much, much easier to build. You pretty much can take a remote control car from off the toy store shelf and slice the top off to make a steady platform. They even come with their own control units. Then you'd only need to worry about the hard part, the part that opens the safe and the camera used for guidance."

"So that's why you were so interested in the cat doors," Charles added.

"Well, at first I thought that might be how a child could get in, but once I focused on a robot, I wondered why they didn't introduce it through the cat door. The robot we saw is probably small enough to fit, or could be built to fit. A person on the outside could slide up the Masonite panel and put the robot inside, but you keep the door to the kitchen closed and the robot wouldn't be able to climb through the second cat door or open the kitchen

door on its own, not without a longer, stronger arm and probably different grasping mechanism. It had to find another way. Hence the chimney.”

Charles was unconvinced. “That seems even harder to get through to me. He’d have to get on the roof which is both difficult and puts him in a hard spot to escape from. And what about the damper? I keep it closed.”

When he said that, I walked over to the fireplace, kneeled inside, and looked up. There was light visible above and I felt a cold flow of air on my legs. The damper was open. I retrieved the rubber glove Charles used for the dishes and moved the damper into a closed position using the metal lever. My legs immediately began to feel warmer. It didn’t require a lot of force, but I didn’t see how it could be done from the roof. It was stiff enough that you really needed the lever to provide, well, leverage. I told them it had been open. Then I replaced it so the crime scene would be untouched.

“The damper poses a problem,” Cliff said. “I’ll have to give that more thought, but I think the thief knew it would be open. Someone on the inside must have left it open, either intentionally or accidentally. I looked up chimney designs when I got back to the office. The flue, that’s the passage up the chimney, is not located directly over the fire. It’s slightly behind. The back of the firebox slants forward both to reflect the heat into the room and to provide a barrier so that rain and downdrafts don’t come down into the firebox. That creates a shelf at the bottom of the flue directly over the firebox. Sometimes those are flat; other times they’re slightly concave to reflect drafts back up.”

Cliff asked Charles for some gloves, like the rubber gloves he’d seen Charles use to wash dishes. Charles brought him some. Cliff reached up through the chimney’s throat and felt around.

“The thief has gone to a lot of trouble. The shelf has a thin ramp lying on it with a very slight slope to it. It must have been dropped or lowered there at some time in the past. The robot is built to be very flat when the arms are folded, so it can just slip through the throat. All that’s necessary is for the damper to be left open.”

Charles was shaking his head in dismay.

“And once you realized it was a robot, that explained the missing loose coins,” I observed, finally catching up with all of Cliff’s thought process.

“Exactly. I realized that any robot manipulator would have to be custom designed to do three things: spin the safe dial, open the safe door, and

grasp rolls of coins. Picking up a coin lying flat on the floor and replacing it on a stack would require something entirely different and more difficult. Here's what I think happened. The thief opened the safe with the robot somehow. There are various YouTube videos showing robots doing that, although under very different circumstances. The thief probably didn't know how many rolls would be in the safe and may not have known what type of coins they were. The robot was small and had limited carrying capacity. He probably assumed it was a relatively small number of rolls. Once he saw what was in there, he took one roll with the robot and closed the safe.

"Once he examined it, and then realized how much gold was in there, he devised a bold plan. He bought a large supply of washers of the right size and made a second trip. The robot was small. It had to be to get in through the chimney, so it still had limited carrying capacity. It's hard to tell how much from the video, but my guess is quite a bit more than four rolls. In any event, the robot opened the safe again, replaced the first roll with washers in it, took three more, and at that point, I'm guessing, accidentally knocked the pile of loose coins off the shelf onto the floor. The thief then had to make a decision.

"He realized the theft would be discovered if the coins were found lying on the floor. He decided to take what he already had, so he brought the three rolls back, replaced the center coins with washers, rewrapped them, and sent the robot back to replace the modified rolls. He then found that with the depressed robot arm he could push the coins around on the rug although he couldn't pick them up. He found a spot where the edge of the carpet was slightly buckled and managed to push the coins over to that spot and under the carpet. This must have taken quite some time, maybe hours, and he decided to call it a night. He probably got scared and never returned until now, waiting to see if the theft had been discovered."

"And you figured that out from looking at a ramp on a cat structure?"

"I should have figured it out sooner, as soon as I saw that thing."

"But how did the thief know about the safe and get the combination?"

"You don't keep that as secret as you think. Bernice knows about the safe. The previous housekeeper knows about it. Your daughter. Who knows who they've told? You have a coin set mounted on your bookshelf and a coin sorting and rolling machine on the tabletop. You'd only need such a machine if you had rolls of coins somewhere, and most likely in that room. Anyone who's been in there could have figured that out. You've already mentioned Joe has been there and we've seen that others going down the hall to the

bathroom who could have seen it. That hanging cover isn't that much of a camouflage. I stood next to you at your desk when you showed me how your security setup works. I knelt down for a few seconds and looked under the cloth and I could see the safe and the word Bostic. You didn't even notice."

"That explains knowledge of the existence of the safe and coins, perhaps, although it seems a stretch to me. But that doesn't explain how they opened the safe. Can those robots open any safe just like that?"

"No they can't. All the ones I've seen online are custom made for a particular safe. The dials and door handles all differ in dimensions, placement, and so on. Yours is a Bostic model from the 1940s if you're right about your father buying it. Someone would have to design or perhaps modify a robot just for that, so he would have to have examined it enough to get the model number or a good view of the front. The second entry would be easy because the thief would have the combination by then, but I haven't figured out the first entry. Those robots can spin a safe dial with incredible speed and accuracy, but with sixty notches on the dial, that's over two hundred thousand combinations to try. Based on what I've seen, it would take over one hundred twenty continuous hours of spinning the dial to do that, much longer since they probably had to test the handle after every one. Someone has either stolen the combination from you or knows how to cut down on the possible combinations to try. I thought it might be using an acoustic device. Some safe models make a faint noise when the tumblers are properly aligned. That's why I thought it would have a microphone and detect the alarm going off. Instead, I think the thief on the roof heard you yelling."

"I wish I'd run downstairs and grabbed the robot."

"No, you did the right thing. You didn't know there was a robot down there at that point. And even if you had, someone could have been down there watching the robot, as you pointed out. Or even if they were outside, they might have decided they couldn't let you keep it and broken in to kill you."

"You've mentioned inside help," I volunteered. "You must be considering Bernice. She could have opened the damper and taken a picture of the front of the safe or gotten a model number. She scrubs out the fireplace like it's an operating room. So that the robot doesn't track soot?"

"So that Cruiser doesn't track soot," Charles objected. "I gave her that instruction myself."

"I have to consider her the prime suspect, but there are obvious problems with that. She must not be the robot builder. If she had the

combination she'd just open the safe and modify the rolls as needed, or for that matter simply take all of them at once. Someone else must have been the safecracker."

"And she wouldn't put the coins under the rug," Charles added, clearly struggling to find reason to exonerate her.

"True. Even if she didn't enter the safe, if she's in cahoots with whoever did, he'd warn her about the coins. She would have retrieved them. Let me ask you something, Charles. Did she work yesterday?"

"Yes. Monday, Wednesday, Friday is her schedule."

"We need to interview her."

Chapter 13

Cliff got Bernice's address from McNabb. "We need to do it fast. If she's involved, we have to get to her before she has a chance to get together with the safecracker. The safe door was left open and the thief fled, so they know the jig is up. Have your phone ready."

"Do you want me to record the interview?" I asked.

"It's not legal without permission. I'll try to get consent. But have the video on without the microphone. As long as we don't record sound, we're okay. I want to get her reaction recorded when we show up at her door, and proof we didn't intimidate her."

We told Charles not to disturb anything until we got back. We left for Bernice's. It's a small town but she lived quite a way outside the town limits, way up off Gopher Flat Road. It took us almost fifteen minutes to get there. I had my phone videoing the house as we approached. I wondered if it was even safe, considering the circumstances. If she was involved, she or a conspirator could be waiting with a gun, but I trusted Cliff. He rang the bell. We waited. He rang again and we waited even longer. There was no sign of activity. The lights were off inside. They could be sleeping, although by now it was after eight on a weekday, so I thought that unlikely.

Cliff told me to go around the right side and look for signs of anyone. He went around the left, where the garage was. We ended up meeting in the back yard. "Nothing," was his only comment, and I nodded my head in agreement.

“There’s no car in the driveway. I couldn’t see into the garage so there could be one there. All the curtains are drawn. She may have fled. Come on.”

I followed him back to the front door. There was a transom window over the door. “Give me your foot.” Cliff locked his fingers together and held them down in the traditional boost position. I put one foot in his hands and he hoisted me up like it was nothing. I peeked through the transom.

“Jesus, I think that’s her.”

“What’s she doing?”

“Lying on the floor of the entryway. I think she’s dead.”

“Do you see any blood?”

“No.”

“She may be alive. We need to get in.”

“Shouldn’t we call 911?”

“We will, but it’ll take them a long time to get here with an ambulance. We have to get in and see if she’s alive first. I can give her CPR.”

I realized I’d been recording the whole scene up to the point when Cliff boosted me up. I’d had to put the phone in my pocket then to grab the transom with both hands. I pulled it out again; it was still recording. “If we’re going to break in, shouldn’t we record the condition of the outside first. This could be a crime scene.”

“Good idea. Record the whole thing and put the microphone on. You make a quick pass around the house to show its condition. I’ll get the crowbar from the car.”

I did as I was told. We returned to the back door, which led into the kitchen, and looked less substantial than the front door. Also, it was farther from the body and we wouldn’t be as likely to disturb any evidence as we entered. Her body was so close to the front door that we might have had to shove it with the door to get in that way. Cliff made a short statement to the camera announcing that he was breaking in to render aid because we saw a woman lying on the floor of the entryway. Then he pried open the rear door and we entered. He called out in a loud voice for anyone who might be there but there was no response. I continued to video.

We headed toward the front of the house. Cliff kept calling out Bernice’s name as we approached her but I saw no signs of life. Cliff knelt down next to her and checked for breathing and pulse. Neither was detectable.

There was no blood anywhere that we could see. He touched her cheek with the palm of his hand, then stood.

"She's dead, several hours at least. This is a potential crime scene, so we will now leave." He said this in an official-sounding voice looking right at the camera. He walked past me and I followed, still filming. When we got outside he told me to stop the video.

"I'll call 911," I said, starting to dial.

"Hold it! Don't. We need to go back to McNabb's. Did you ever locate a bank with a suitable safety deposit box?"

"Charles got the name of one from his lawyer, remember? It's in Sacramento."

"We need to get that gold out of his house. When the police get here, his house is going to become a crime scene, too. She was strangled, I think. This is obviously connected to the coins. The thief probably came here directly after Charles scared him away. She must have known something that could identify him."

"What about her husband, that Miguel guy? Where is he?"

"Good question. One the police will want to investigate, but not our worry now. The main thing is to get that gold in a safe place. You remember what Charles told us about the police here. All it takes is one light-fingered officer searching the attic and Charles could lose more than four rolls. They may even take all of it as evidence and who knows what would become of it in the evidence room."

"So what's your plan?"

"The video is evidence and it protects us. It has a time stamp on it, which means we can't both leave and come back later. They'd want to know where we went and what we did and why we didn't call immediately. So I'm going to head back over to McNabb's. He could actually be in danger, so that's a legitimate reason. When the police arrive just tell them that I had to go back to make sure Charles was safe. You don't have to say anything about the gold right away. I'll take care of that, or Charles will, later. I just need you to stall them here until I'm well on my way to Sacramento with Charles and the coins. The bank should be open by the time we get there."

"Are you armed?"

"My gun is in its case in the car. I'm going to put it on now before I head over. How about you?"

“No, I didn’t bring it. But I’ll be okay. I have my dagger. I’m about to call the police so they’ll be here soon.”

“You need to be careful. I doubt the killer is hanging around, but it’s possible. Stay out of sight until the cavalry arrives.”

“Okay.”

I watched as Cliff opened the trunk of his car and unlocked his gun case. He put the gun in a holster and strapped it on his belt. He wore a windbreaker to cover it. I ran over to grab my bag, a small backpack, out of the car. I’d need it. Then he drove off. I dialed 911 and was connected to an operator.

“What’s your emergency?”

“There’s a dead body. We need police and a coroner. I think she’s been murdered.”

“Are you in a safe location?”

“Yes. I’m at the victim’s house and she’s inside. I don’t think anyone else is here.” I gave her the address.

“What’s your name?”

“Maeva Hanssen. I’m a private investigator. Are you sending someone?”

“Police are already on the way. Are you sure the victim is dead?”

“My partner checked for vitals and felt her temperature. He said she’s been dead for hours. He’s a retired FBI agent and has dealt with dead bodies before. I’m sure he knows what he’s talking about. We left the scene to avoid contaminating it. I’m standing outside.”

“Okay, don’t touch anything.”

She wanted me to stay on the line, but I told her I needed to hang up. I didn’t want to give her the whole story over the phone. It would delay things more if I could wait and give it all to the deputies when they arrived. That would give Cliff and Charles more time. I called my husband to let him know that I was going to be here all day. He wanted to know what was going on and I told him that Cliff and I had found a dead body and I was waiting for the police. This got him riled up. He was chastising me for putting myself in a dangerous situation, and also mansplaining to me what to tell the police. I was a bit miffed at his attitude, but touched at how protective he was. He’s a sweet guy. I could have cut him off, but I wanted to keep him on the line because the 911 operator was calling me back and I wanted to have a legitimate excuse for not answering her. Finally the operator gave up calling me, so I my

made my excuses and ended the call with my husband. I sat on the stoop waiting for the police.

Chapter 14

Eight minutes later a Sutter Creek police patrol car rolled up with lights and siren going. I walked up to the patrol car, my empty hands splayed so they'd know I didn't have a weapon. "I'm Maeva Hanssen, the reporting party." The officer seemed to ignore me. He called in some code on the radio and told the dispatcher that he was on the scene with the RP. I wondered why he didn't immediately go in to check on Bernice. Why come blazing up with lights and siren and then dilly dally when you got there? Instead he made some notes on a clipboard and asked the radio dispatcher when the deputy would be arriving. I realized it was some kind of jurisdictional thing. We were probably outside the city limits, so it was the sheriff's case.

A second patrol car, this one a sheriff's car, arrived a few minutes later. The police officer finally got out of the first car and asked me, "Where's the victim?"

"In the house, near the front door. The door's locked, but you can get in through the back."

The town cop, whose name tag said 'Dillon,' was a good-looking young guy with wavy brown hair and a cleft chin. He was built, too, although part of that manly chest was the protective vest under the shirt. Hey, I'm human. I can enjoy the eye candy. My husband certainly does. I think he watches the 49ers games more for the cheerleaders than the game. Lord knows the team hasn't been worth watching lately. The cop started around the back as an older deputy got out of the second car. No one had exited the ambulance yet.

"You the private eye?" The deputy asked me.

"Yes. Your partner just went around back to make entry. The body's inside."

"He's not my partner. Is the house secure?"

"We didn't search it. As soon as we confirmed the victim was dead, we left. We weren't armed. So far as I know there wasn't anyone else inside. We called out many times with no answer."

He left me at that point and strode around the back. I presume he wanted to make sure the house didn't have a murderer or more victims inside.

I walked over to the ambulance which was just arriving. The driver was a woman. She looked Mexican and spoke with a slight Mexican accent. A hefty white guy was in the passenger seat. The driver rolled down her window and told me they had to wait for the deputies to tell them the scene was clear.

“So is this a PD case or a sheriff’s case?” I asked.

“Doesn’t matter to us,” she answered.

“It seemed like there was no love lost between those two.”

“True that.”

I realized that if the sheriff’s office was doing the murder case and the police the robbery, there could be a screwed up investigation if the departments didn’t play nice. While I was waiting I shared the video I’d taken with Cliff and saved it in the cloud so I could always retrieve it. I was afraid they’d impound my phone. The police officer came out and walked over to the ambulance.

“It’s clear. The victim’s dead. We need you to go in and pronounce her.”

The two EMT’s, if that’s what they were, followed cleft chin around to the back. I did too but he told me to stay outside. They left the back door open, though, so I could hear them inside. The woman EMT called in to some place that I assumed was a medical examiner or coroner’s office. She and the man were taking readings and reciting them over the phone, like zero pulse, no papillary response, no respiration, low body temperature and a few more things. I couldn’t follow all of it, but apparently they checked whatever administrative box they had to in order to declare her officially dead or maybe the person on the other end of the line did. I couldn’t see what they were doing, but they all came out right after that. The deputy told me it was a crime scene and I would have to move away. He led me over to his car and told me to wait there. He radioed in a code and pulled out a clipboard and pen. “We have to wait for crime scene. I need to take a statement from you. What’s your name?”

We spent the next ten minutes going through my personal details: name, address, phone and so on. He asked to see my private investigator’s license as well as my driver’s license. I was glad I’d remembered to grab my bag from Cliff’s car; I was able to produce both. He eventually reached a point where he began asking about the actual case.

“What was your relationship to the deceased?”

“None, really. I’d only met her once a couple of weeks ago. She’s the housekeeper for a client of ours.” I gave him her full name and said I didn’t know much more about her.

“You said ‘ours’. You and who else?”

“My partner, Cliff Knowles. We were both here when we discovered the body.”

“Dispatch said a former FBI agent was on the scene. Is that him?”

“Yeah.”

“So where is he?” He looked around and only now seemed to realize that there was no car here other than the emergency vehicles.

“He went back to the client’s home to make sure he was safe. He was afraid that whoever did this to Bernice might target our client.”

“Why did you come here?”

“We needed to interview her about some things that were missing from the client’s home.”

“Who’s the client?”

“I’d rather keep that confidential until I get permission from him to share it with you.”

“What was missing?”

“I’ll keep that confidential for now, too. Sorry. I’m sure the client will let us share all that with you, but I can’t do it yet. I’ll need to talk to my partner first, too.”

The deputy gave me a hard stare before moving on, but he decided not to press it. “Tell me what happened when you got here.” He looked down at his clipboard and flipped a page. The next form was basically just a blank page with a lot of lines on it and a heading. This had to be the part for the narrative.

“Give me your email.”

“What?!” He looked up, startled.

“I videoed the whole thing. We were going to confront her and wanted her reaction. I can send you the video if you give me your email. You can see exactly what happened instead of relying on my memory.” I pulled out my phone.

“Let me see your phone.”

I hesitated. “Just give me your email – or a department email if you don’t want to give me yours – and I’ll send it to you.”

“Just give me your phone. You’ll get it back.” He reached for it.

I noticed he didn't say *he'd* give it back, only that I'd get it back. I stepped back. "When?"

"It's evidence. I need to take it."

"The video is evidence and I'm happy to give that to you right now if you'll give me an address to send it to. The phone isn't. Cliff's a lawyer and he told me not to surrender my phone. He was a lawyer for the FBI. You don't want to taint your case with an illegal search."

The deputy was visibly upset but I knew from his demeanor that I had him doubting himself. "How do I know that there isn't another video on there that you don't want to show me? Or threatening phone calls? Maybe you killed her to teach her a lesson not to steal from your client, then you came back here to make this phony video to make it look like you just discovered the body."

"Right, and we made a video of us murdering her and then didn't delete it? Get real. Look, this phone has my whole life on it, all my apps, my wedding pictures, my email, my passwords. There's attorney-client confidential communications on there. We work for a lot of attorneys. I'd be screwed if you took it and you'd be violating privileged communications so you would be too. How about we do this. I'll let you see anything on the phone from the last twenty-four hours as long as I keep it in my possession. You can tell me what buttons to press and you watch. I'll send you whatever you want off it." I was ad-libbing, but I did make it through one year of law school, so I felt pretty confident I was on solid ground.

I think it was the attorney-client thing that scared him, but he agreed. Just then two more sheriff's vehicles arrived. Two older men in plain clothes got out of one of the marked cars. My deputy went over to talk to them. They conferred for at least ten minutes and then the other men came to talk to me. I watched them while the other vehicle, an SUV, emptied out four people who proceeded to haul bunny suits and other forensic gear around to the back of the house. One of those four, a small Asian woman, began taking photos of the outside

The two plainclothesmen identified themselves as detectives from the sheriff's department. The tall one, named Simmons, had a grizzled, western look to him, although I'd be hard-pressed to tell you exactly what it was that made him look western. He wore an ordinary polyester sports jacket right off the Sears rack. He kind of looked like the *Longmire* actor, but not that good-

looking. He was in charge. His partner was short, dark and balding. He wore glasses with thick black frames.

"I understand you have a video you'd like to share with us?" Simmons began. Thanks for that. I was afraid he was going make me start all over with name, address, the whole works. The deputy must have convinced them to do it my way.

"Sure. Give me your email address."

He did. I pulled up my video and hit the share button. I knew it had gone dark at the point where Cliff boosted me up to look over the transom because I'd put it in my pocket, but I'd kept it going and pulled it out for a moment to shoot the scene through the transom. As soon as the detective saw it download on his phone he began to play it. The shorter guy watched right next to him. I stood on the other side. I actually hadn't seen it myself. It took longer than I'd thought to watch it all the way through.

"What did you do after you turned off the video?"

"We had to talk about it, about what to do. Cliff was sure she was dead, so we didn't think it was critical to call 911 immediately. He thought whoever did this might also target our client and his safety was our most important concern. He left to check on him, and to provide protection. I called 911 then."

"Neither of you went back inside?"

"No."

"Did you touch anything?"

"Other than the back door, no, I don't think so. Cliff touched the body, checking for vitals."

"Why did you think your client was in danger?"

I had to think about this one. We didn't really think he was. That was just a cover for why Cliff left the scene. "You'd have to ask my partner."

"What was stolen?"

"Money."

"How much money?"

This was another tricky one. I knew how many coins and their face value but of course the real value was much higher. "It was in the thousands."

The two detectives looked at each other. "In cash?" the shorter one said.

"Yes."

"Your client keeps thousands of dollars in cash in his home?"

Just then I got a text. Once again Cliff saved the day for me. The text said they'd loaded the coins into the car and they were leaving for the bank. "No, not any more. He did, but we've persuaded him to put it in the bank."

The two detectives gave each other another look splitting the difference between disgust and amusement. Simmons took charge again. "We need to talk to your partner. What's his phone number?"

"He's driving the client to another location right now. He won't be able to talk to you."

"We need it anyway. He's a witness."

I gave them Cliff's mobile number. Simmons called him, but it went to voice mail.

"You told the other officer that the victim stole some 'things' from your client. Now you say it's cash. What else did she take?"

"I never said she took anything. I said we wanted to talk to her about the missing things. It's a little confusing. The cash was coins, collectible coins. The face value is much less than the value to collectors, so that's why it's hard to put a value on them. Since there were more than one taken, I used the word things. So far as I know, nothing else was taken."

"You think she was involved."

"We don't know who did it." My evasion was too obvious, and I'd hesitated too long to say it, too. Simmons bore in on me.

"So you wanted her to talk and you came here to make sure she did."

"Hold on. We just wanted ..."

"Your partner, this Cliff Knowles, he's a pretty big guy. He lifted you up to that transom like you were a toddler."

Shit. I'd screwed up. This was not going the way it should. I wasn't sure where I'd done it, but I'd let it get out of control.

"Don't be ridiculous. We didn't hurt her. We would never do that. Cliff is former FBI. I'm a licensed P.I. and married to a police officer. I don't appreciate the implication that we're some kind of hired muscle."

"Things can go south sometimes during an interrogation. We understand. Emotions get stoked. Just tell us exactly what happened."

"I did! I showed you the video. That's exactly what happened. Nothing more. You have our cell phone numbers. You can get our location information from the carrier. We were in the Bay Area when this happened if Cliff's right about the time of death. Check it."

This shut them up for a while. They stepped away and conferred in whispers. If I'd had a car, I would have left, but I was stuck there. They approached me again but I needed to pee and realized that would be a good excuse to find refuge. I asked if I could use the bathroom inside the house. They told me no, it was a crime scene, which is what I'd hoped for.

"Well, then I'm going to have to find one." I marched off to find a friendly neighbor, but as I left I called back over my shoulder, "Maybe you should be looking for her husband. We want to talk to him, too. His name is Miguel."

The short detective started to follow me, but Simmons pulled him back, telling him 'Let her go.' There was no neighbor directly across the street or next door in this rural area, but I'd seen a couple of people gather near the patrol cars, presumably neighbors who'd seen the cars and ambulance arriving. I went up to them and asked if they lived nearby because I really had to use a bathroom. I actually wasn't that bad off, but it wasn't hard to seem desperate. One of the women, a smartly dressed young woman named Anna, took pity on me and walked me to her house right around a bend in the road. This got me out of sight of Mutt and Jeff. She let me into her house and waited for me while I used her john. When I came out she asked me what was going on.

I told her that Bernice was found dead and the police were investigating, but when she tried to get more details, I claimed ignorance. She asked me who I was, how I knew Bernice and I just said I was a relative visiting from the Bay Area. I apologized for being so shaken up and she dropped the questioning. She offered me a cup of coffee, which I accepted gratefully since this gave me some respite from the detectives. I sat in the kitchen while she started heating the water.

I decided to do a little sleuthing. "So do you know Bernice well?"

"Of course. We're neighbors."

"I saw the police talking to some of the neighbors. Did you talk to them?"

"Certainly. Whatever I can to help the police."

"What did they ask you?"

"They asked me if I'd seen or heard anything unusual overnight or this morning."

"Had you?"

“No, not until the ambulance and police cars came. They asked me if I knew if anyone would want to hurt her. I told them no. Then they asked me if she and her husband had fought. I mean everybody fights sometimes, right? I didn’t tell them that. I mean, not like that, not fighting like violence. Just arguing is what I meant. So I said no. They seemed like a normal couple.”

“Speaking of Miguel, do you know where he is? I want to check on him and see if he’s okay. He was at the winery last night.” I was glad I could throw in this bit of data to give her confidence that I was family. Using his name and workplace turned the trick.

“I don’t know. He doubles as an apartment house manager down in the valley somewhere when he’s not at the winery. You think he killed her?” She said it while shaking her head as though she couldn’t believe it, but the gleam in her eye told me she would have loved to be the first with this juicy piece of gossip if it was true.

“Oh, I can’t believe he’d do anything like that.” I was afraid she was going to start asking me more about what I knew or thought happened, so I changed the subject. She had pictures in her entryway of young boys. I gushed over them and asked where they were. She told me they were in school, grades three and five and began to brag about them nonstop for the next twenty minutes.

Chapter 15

At the bank, Cliff stayed with the car and the gold while Charles went inside and signed the contract for the safety deposit box. I wasn’t there, of course, but Cliff told me about it later on the phone. The tricky part was transporting the coins inside without anyone realizing what it was going into the box. Cliff knew from his FBI experience that banks do get burglarized and safety deposit boxes do get rifled when they are. The public rarely hears about those. Unlike the regular accounts, those boxes are not federally insured. It’s important to keep from bank employees the fact that a particular box has something valuable and sellable, like gold. Burglars virtually always get that kind of information from insiders and target those boxes.

Cliff had found some large cardboard boxes in the attic he could use for camouflage. At Cliff’s direction McNabb had told the bank manager that he needed the deposit box for his business archives. Once he had that box open in the vault Charles said his security man would be bringing the records

in. The manager stayed in the vault while Charles went out to the car, and Cliff lifted the first of three boxes. Each box held over a hundred fifty pounds of coins. Cliff had used half a roll of duct tape sealing the boxes, both for strength and for security. He'd written on each box terms like ledgers, deeds, and various dates of years past.

He and Charles went inside with that box. Cliff had to carry the box without making it look too heavy, although a large box of ledgers and business papers would be heavy, so some strain wouldn't be overly suspicious. Once they were inside, the manager left them alone with the deposit box. They put the first load in and locked the box. They repeated the process twice more. How many people could even lift that much weight in a box, much less hold it like it weighed fifty pounds instead of one-fifty? Cliff told me later he'd done a Torquemada on his back.

When he was done, he checked his phone and saw the voice mail from the detective, but he checked my text first which said for him to call me as soon as he could. He called me first and I gave him the scoop on Mutt and Jeff and how we'd become suspects.

He snorted with a hint of derision. "I'd probably think the same way in their shoes."

"I told them that they could check our phone records with the carrier to verify we weren't here at the time of death. I hope they can establish that it was hours earlier like you said."

"That's good thinking. I'm sure we'll be off their list as suspects soon enough." After a pause he continued, "I'm more concerned about something else. I misjudged the thief badly – very badly. I told McNabb that he was in no danger. You heard me reassure him. But now we know the thief is capable of murder. Bernice must have been involved and he killed her to keep her silent. That means Charles could still be at risk. If he hadn't yelled that he had a gun, the thief might have broken in and killed him last night."

"Don't beat yourself up over that. You couldn't know. Besides, he's okay. Did you tell him about Bernice?"

"Only that we'd had to call the police and ambulance to her place and that the story of the theft would have to come out now. He agreed to move the coins to the bank, but I didn't tell him she was dead, only that she was lying on the floor when we looked inside so we called an ambulance. I didn't want him thinking she'd been murdered, not right then. I wanted to get the coins handled first."

“The burglar left the safe open. He must know that the coins aren’t there anymore. He has no reason to go back. And killing Charles now wouldn’t stop any investigation, so it wouldn’t do him any good. Bernice could identify him. Charles can’t. That’s the key. So I don’t think he’s in any danger now.”

“You’re probably right. Still, I screwed up big time.”

“I haven’t told the police who the client is yet, but they’ll be pressing us both soon. I suggested they look for the husband. It’s usually the husband or boyfriend as suspect number one, isn’t it?”

“That’s true. We need to find him before the police scare him into silence. I didn’t see any sign of him at the house.”

“Are you with Charles now?”

“He’s still inside the bank talking to the manager. I’m outside. I’ll ask him if he can reach Miguel. It’s that guy we saw at the winery last night, so I’ll bet he has the number in his phone.”

“Okay. I’m at a neighbor’s now, pretending to have the longest pee in human history. I can’t stay here forever. If I go back out there, they’re going to try to get the details from me. I’d rather you handled that. Can you pick me up?”

“No. I want to get to Miguel before the police. Can you cadge a ride from the neighbor?”

“I can try. Where should I meet you?”

“Go to the tasting room where we saw Miguel last night. Oh, here comes Charles now. Text me if you can’t find a ride.”

“Okay.”

Anna had been considerate enough to give me some privacy for this call. I’d been in her living room while she’d stayed in the kitchen, but I didn’t know if she’d heard any of it. I asked her if she could give me a ride into town and she agreed without asking me why I needed one. I had her drop me off at the restaurant where we’d eaten with Charles that night so she wouldn’t know I was associated with that winery.

After she drove away, I walked down to the tasting room but it wasn’t open yet, so I walked back to a coffee shop two blocks away and ordered a scone. It had been hours since I’d had that slice of pie, and the lack of food was catching up with me. Starbucks is taking over the world. It was over a half hour later when I saw Cliff’s car cruise by. I walked back to join him.

“How are you doing, Charles?” I said as we met in the parking lot. He seemed pretty shaky getting out of the car.

“This is all rather distressing. I’ll be all right, I’m sure. What about you? How’s Bernice? Were you there when the ambulance arrived?”

I looked over to Cliff. He still hadn’t clued Charles in. “Let’s go inside,” he said. I didn’t reply to Charles. Charles took us in the side door again and we sat in the small office area in the back.

Cliff looked McNabb in the eye. “Charles, I wanted to wait until the coins were safe and we were in a safe location before I told you, and now is that time. Bernice is dead. She was murdered.”

“Dear God, no.”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Because of me? Because I kept those coins in my safe instead of putting them in a bank earlier?”

“Not because of you. No, of course not. If she was involved, and that’s what led to her murder, then she brought about her own death. She and the person who killed her.”

“Maybe it was a heart attack. Or something else. Her husband ...”

“Maybe. That’s what we need to find out. We need to talk to him before the police do. He’ll probably either be in custody or will clam up once they do. Do you know where he is?”

Charles pulled out his phone. “I can call him. Just wait a minute while I figure out this thing. His number is in here somewhere.”

“Just tap the phone icon in the lower left,” I offered, “and when the contacts appear, start to type Miguel. If he’s in your contacts, his name should pop up.”

Charles followed my directions and the phone began ringing on the other end. After four rings it went to voice mail. Charles left a message for him to call as soon as he got the message. “He always answers me or Joe. He must not have his phone on, or he’s out of range. I’ll call Joe.”

The next call went through to Joe.

“Hi, Charles. What’s up?”

“Joe, I’m trying to reach Miguel. Do you know where he is? He didn’t pick up.”

“Yeah. We’re at the lower vineyard. He’s outside building a new set of trellises. He probably couldn’t hear the phone. He’s got the saw going and the pump’s on, too. I can go out and ask him to call you. What’s going on?”

“It’s about his wife. Have you heard anything?”

“No. What is it? Is she okay?”

“I ... it’s serious. I don’t want you to alarm him. Don’t say anything to him. Just tell him to drop what he’s doing and come straight to the winery. Tell him I need him here. I’ll have more information by the time he arrives.”

“Will do. Call me when you find out about her, okay? Bernice is a fine lady.”

“By all means.”

“Okay, bye.”

Cliff nodded his approval. “Well done. When he arrives, let me do the talking.”

Chapter 16

Miguel arrived at the winery ten minutes later. As he entered, he was holding his phone in his hand watching it ring, but he didn’t answer it. The place still hadn’t opened up, so we had the place to ourselves.

“Miguel, you remember Cliff, don’t you? My cousin.”

Miguel gave Cliff and me a skeptical look. He knew something was off. “Oh yeah. Hi.” He didn’t extend a hand.

Cliff stood and offered Miguel the chair he’d been in. Mendoza, for that was Miguel’s last name we learned, shook his head no and remained standing.

“Miguel, I’m not really Charles’s cousin. I’m a private investigator. This is my associate Maeva. We need to talk to you for a few minutes. Would you mind turning off your phone for now?” Miguel did so. “We’re investigating a theft that occurred at Charles’s home. So far we’ve been successful in keeping it from the police because we don’t want to make trouble for anybody.”

“I didn’t take nothing. I haven’t even been to your home since that company barbecue three years ago. Remember?” He looked imploringly at Charles.

“No one’s accusing you, Miguel,” Cliff continued. “But Bernice may have information we need about people who have come to the house. We tried to reach her earlier, but couldn’t. Did you talk to her this morning?”

“She wouldn’t steal from you, Mr. McNabb.”

“Miguel, just answer Cliff’s questions.”

“I didn’t talk to her this morning.”

“Why is that?”

This question gave him trouble. He took a long time to formulate his answer, shaking his head and shifting his weight back and forth from foot to foot. I hadn’t paid much attention before then, but it struck me that he was as big as Cliff, maybe bigger, and a lot younger. If he decided to lash out, it could go south in a hurry, especially with Cliff exhausted from hauling the gold downstairs and into the bank.

“I wasn’t at home last night.”

“Where were you?”

Even more agitated, Mendoza hissed, “None of your damn business.” He shot a sidelong glance at Charles, wondering if this was going to cost him his job.

“What’s her name? Don’t worry, Charles isn’t going to fire you for cheating on Bernice.”

“I wasn’t cheating. Bernice knew. We’ve been ... having a rough patch. I moved out.”

“I need a name.”

Mendoza’s shoulders sagged and the surrender showed in his eyes. “Chastain.”

“Chastain’s married!” Charles exclaimed. It seems she was one of the women working in the tasting room. Cliff put his hand up in a stop motion like a crossing guard to quiet Charles.

“We don’t care about your love life. We really don’t. Bernice is in trouble. When did you last talk to her?”

“The night before last. The furnace pilot light went out. She needed me to relight it. I was over at the house.”

“Where are you living?”

“I have a trailer. It’s parked at the lower vineyard. Joe said it would be okay.”

“Is that where you and Chastain ...”

“No, I was at her house last night. Her husband is out of town. His mother is sick. He’s back east.”

“All right, this is important. You really should sit down for this.” He gestured again for Miguel to sit. This time he accepted. “Miguel, when we

went to interview Bernice, we found her dead. I think she was murdered. The police are looking for you, or will be soon.”

I’d expected more of a reaction, but all I saw was stunned silence. Miguel looked at McNabb for confirmation, which came in the form of a pitying nod. Then Miguel’s eyes filled with tears. “How?”

“I don’t know. The police are there now and we’ll have to hear from the coroner. They’ll probably suspect you at first. I need to ask if you know why anyone would want to kill her. If you know of anyone else they should look at, you should tell me now. It may be the best way to protect yourself. Will Chastain confirm you were there last night?”

“I ... I think so. Uh, maybe. Her husband doesn’t know. She might ... I don’t know.”

“When exactly were you at Chastain’s?”

“I got there about twelve thirty. I left at four. It had to be dark so the neighbors wouldn’t see me. I parked a couple blocks over so they wouldn’t see the truck.”

“That’s not good. You don’t have a solid alibi. Listen carefully. We think Bernice may have been involved in the theft of a large amount of money. Can you think of anything she may have done or said to confirm that?”

“Money? No, she’s just scraping by. She wouldn’t steal from you, Charles, I told you that.”

“When did you and Bernice split up? I mean when did you move out?”

“Three weeks ago. I’m still paying the house bills – the mortgage, utilities. She only has to buy her own food. I didn’t ...”

“It’s okay. We’re not saying you did anything wrong. What do you know about the play structure for the cat that someone gave to Charles.”

“What?”

“There’s a play structure made out of plywood and carpeting that someone gave to him. It looks handmade. Did Bernice say anything about that?”

“No. I don’t know anything about that. Why? What does ...”

“Someone was on the roof, at the chimney last night. Did she ever say anything about the chimney or the fireplace?”

Mendoza straightened up like a meerkat; his eyes almost popped from his sockets. “The chimney guy!”

Chapter 17

“Chimney guy?”

“Yeah, yeah. That must be it. A couple months ago some guy paid her some money to leave the damper open on the chimney at your house.” He looked at McNabb with the eyes of a dog that had been caught with the pillow feathers scattered all over the living room. “I’m sorry, Charles. I, I didn’t know about it. She did it on her own. He gave her five hundred dollars. I would have told you, but she said she was doing you a favor.”

Cliff leaned over Mendoza and placed his hands on Mendoza’s shoulders. “Don’t look at Charles. You can do that later. Focus on what I’m asking you. If you’re telling me the truth, I’m probably the only one who’s going to investigate to find the killer. That call you declined when you were walking. That was probably the police. They’re going to come looking for you. Now tell me about this chimney guy. Do you have a name? A description?”

“I never met him. I didn’t even know about it until after.”

“You said that she was doing Charles a favor. How is that possible? If she left the damper open at night, it would get cold and the furnace would run hot all night. His bills would go through the roof.”

“That’s what I said. But she said he was a nice guy. He was a rep for some heating and air conditioning outfit. He said they had this new high-tech system, singlegistic, something-gistic, I don’t know what kind of tech stuff. He said it cuts heating and cooling bills by forty percent. He said that in this town Mr. McNabb is an influencer. That’s the word he used. He said he’d replace the whole heating and A/C system for free if Charles’d agree and that he’d be so happy with it, and with how much it cut your bills, that the whole town would soon be buying his system when you told everyone.”

“Why didn’t he just come directly to Charles?”

Once again Mendoza turned to McNabb. “He told her that he’d tried to sell you on it, but you said your bills weren’t high enough to where you’d want to upgrade, even for free. So he paid her five hundred just to open the damper on a cold, clear night every few days. Your bills would shoot up he said, then maybe you’d reconsider.”

“I was never approached by any such salesman,” Charles said.

“How did she know what nights to do this? Was it up to her or did this man tell her which nights?”

“I don’t know. I know the first night she did it she got the five hundred. I think she did it again, but I don’t think she would have told me. She knew I didn’t approve.”

“Are you sure it was a man? Can you tell me anything at all about him?”

“She called him a salesman. She just said he was a nice guy. He said he noticed her at the house the day he came to talk to Charles and then later recognized her at the store. That’s when he approached her. She didn’t remember him visiting the house.”

My phone started ringing. It showed a local number. I figured it was Simmons. I didn’t answer it. Moments later Cliff’s phone started ringing. The cops were getting antsy. Cliff let it go to voice mail then said, “We all need to get to the police or they’ll think we’re conspiring. You should call them first and let them know you’re coming. I’ll call them in a minute and tell them we’re at Charles’s house.”

“What should I tell them?” Miguel asked.

“I’m in no position to give you advice on that. If you refuse to talk, they’ll think you did it. If you lie to them, they’ll think you killed her for sure. If it were me, I’d tell the truth, but you should get a lawyer first. I hope Chastain gives you the alibi you need, but it sounds like even if she corroborates what you told me, the time of death may be outside that range and if she doesn’t, they’ll think you lied. The main thing is to come forward and not look like a fugitive.”

“I can’t afford a lawyer.”

“I can help you out,” Charles said.

“I’d advise against it,” Cliff contradicted him. “If you pay a witness, even his legal fees, especially if he takes the fifth after getting the legal advice you paid for, it’s probably a crime, like paying hush money. It could be considered obstruction of justice. Remember Michael Cohen and Stormy Daniels? You’ve got a motive, too. The police suspected me of going to teach her a lesson at your direction, remember?”

Charles looked crestfallen, but nodded his head in acquiescence.

“Time to go.”

Chapter 18

We left Miguel talking on the phone with an officer, probably Simmons. I only caught the beginning of the conversation. He told him that he'd just heard about his wife from us and was heading for the house. The rest of us began walking to McNabb's. Cliff didn't want his car there when the police arrived since he thought they might want to search it or even impound it as part of the murder scene.

Cliff called the number that he'd been ignoring up to now. It was Simmons's phone. Fortunately, or not, it was busy, probably because the detective was on the phone with Miguel. He left a message telling Simmons that we would be at McNabb's and were happy to talk to them.

When we got to the house we had to think about what to do, not with a thought of altering a crime scene, but because of how it might look. There wasn't going to be any forensic evidence besides the videos, at least not inside. No fingerprints or DNA, and we don't have the robot or any of its parts. We didn't want to look like we were covering something up, even though, in a sense, we were – not a crime, but the existence of a fortune in cash.

We debated whether to close the safe, for example. The robot had succeeded in opening it and the perpetrator probably saw that it was empty, but our video camera could only see the door being opened. The door and the robot blocked the view to the inside. The police may think there was something there. If they asked what was in the safe, Charles could say, no doubt would say, that it was empty, but that would inevitably lead to the story of the previous theft. We hadn't touched the safe, so we decided to leave it open and we'd all be able to honestly say that it was in exactly the same condition it was in when the robot opened it, including its emptiness.

We made copies of the videos and sent them to our own internally shared accounts, knowing the police would take the original memory chips. We checked the carpets for tracks. We thought maybe the robot left impressions, but it must have been too light to leave anything identifiable on the thick, patterned rugs.

My phone rang. It was a local number but I didn't know whose it was. I answered.

“Hello.”

“Miss Hanssen?”

“Yup.”

"This is officer Dillon, Sutter Creek P.D."

Oh yeah, the cute one. "Yes, officer."

"The deputies said you fled the crime scene during the interview."

"What! I didn't 'flee the crime scene.' I had to pee. I asked them if I could use the bathroom in the victim's house and they said no, so I asked a neighbor to let me use hers. The detectives knew that and didn't try to stop me."

"They thought you were coming back."

"They thought wrong. I gave them the whole story and the video of what happened. There was no reason to talk to them anymore. I had to get back to join my partner to make sure our client was safe."

"Where are you now?"

It was obvious that there hadn't been much information sharing between the two departments. "I'm at the client's house. Charles McNabb. My partner just left a message for Simmons that we're here and happy to talk."

"Mr. McNabb? He's your client? He had money stolen?"

"Right." I could have told him that you shouldn't ask multiple questions like that. The answer can be ambiguous.

"Someone's coming over to take a report. Don't leave this time."

"We'll be here."

Cliff heard my end of the conversation and nodded in acquiescence. He and Charles hadn't eaten anything since the pie, and that was around four. It was now almost ten. I'd at least had a scone, but I was hungry, too. We didn't have time for a real breakfast, but Charles cut us each another slice of pie. By the time I'd taken my third bite, there was a knock on the door.

Charles answered the door. The two officers standing there could have been poster boys for some Riefenstahl propaganda film – tall, fit, clean-shaven Aryan icons in uniform – but I don't mean that as a comment on their politics. They could be ultraliberals for all I know, but somehow I doubt it. One of them was Dillon. He's the one who spoke.

"Hello, Mr. McNabb. May we come in?"

"Hello, Josh. Come in." He stepped back and made a gesture with his hand toward the living room.

"This is officer Schultz."

Charles nodded at Schultz since the officer held a notepad in one hand and a pen in the other and couldn't shake.

“How’s Libby?” Josh asked.

“She’s fine. She has a little boy now.”

I sensed a hint of a shiver as that statement hit Dillon. A spurned ex-boyfriend, perhaps? He would be about her age, maybe a year or two older and definitely boyfriend material. If McNabb knew him by his first name, that seemed likely enough.

“I’m here about a theft. I have a report that your housekeeper stole some money.”

“No, no, I never said that. I did have some money stolen, but I don’t know who took it. I never said it was Bernice.”

“Bernice, the woman who was found dead this morning?”

“Yes, she was my housekeeper. What a terrible thing. Please, have a seat.” The conversation up to that point had taken place in the hallway, but they all stepped into the living room as Cliff and I joined them from the dining room. The policemen stood waiting for an introduction before sitting.

Cliff spoke before Charles could summon the right words. “I’m Cliff Knowles and this is my partner Maeva Hanssen. Mr. McNabb engaged us as investigators. We discovered the body.”

I’ll spare you the grisly details but suffice it to say that the next hour was spent giving our names, dates of birth, employment, and all that rigamarole. I thought he was going to ask about the murder scene and how we discovered the body, but he didn’t. He said he knew I’d given a statement to the sheriff’s deputies and provided the video, so he wouldn’t go over that again with me, but told Cliff the deputies would need to take a statement from him. Cliff said he’d be glad to provide one.

Josh, who I now learned was a Detective-Sergeant, finally moved on to his real purpose. “I’m here because of the theft. When did that take place?”

“I don’t actually know. I discovered some money missing from my safe about a month ago. It was coins – collectible gold coins.”

“A month ago? Why didn’t you report it?” Schultz glared at Charles.

Cliff cut in. “He didn’t want the police coming around and questioning all his friends and relatives, causing distrust and resentment. He thought the loss at that time was only three coins, but we learned later it was larger. He hired me because we can be discreet. We put up a video system and caught another attempt last night. I think a lot of your questions will be answered if you just watch the video.”

Schultz started to object to Cliff's interruption, but Josh waved him off. "Let's see it."

Cliff led us all into McNabb's office. He sat at the desk to run the computer video. Everyone else stood behind. Both policeman noted the open safe door, but said nothing. Cliff started with the video in the office. When the robot appeared on screen, Schultz let out a "No way!" separated by a colorful modifier. When it ended he blurted out, "You should have put cameras all through the house so we could see where it came from."

Cliff simply started the video of the living room without bothering to reply. This time both officers displayed their expletive vocabulary. Josh turned on his heel and headed for the living room. He went right to the fireplace and looked up the chimney. The damper was still open.

"Did you touch this damper?"

Cliff was now the one answering all the questions. "No, we left it as is. We thought you'd want to check it for fingerprints. Mr. McNabb normally leaves it closed, so someone must have opened it at some point."

I had to correct Cliff. "Actually, officer, I moved the lever to see how it could be worked, but I used a glove and put the damper back the way we found it."

"So that's why you were at the cleaning lady's place." Dillon was obviously a quick study. Schultz not so much.

"That's right. We were just there to interview her, not accuse her. If she were the thief and had the ability to open the safe, she wouldn't need the robot. But she was dead when we got there."

"So the safe was empty last night, like it is now?"

"Yes. We haven't touched the safe either."

"How much was taken a month ago?"

"Sixty-four coins, each a twenty dollar gold piece. They're collector pieces, so their value is much more than the face value. Maybe ten or twenty times more."

Josh whistled as he did the math in his head. Schultz looked like he wanted to count on his fingers. Josh continued, "So you think the murder was connected to the theft." It wasn't stated as a question. He was looking at Charles, but Cliff answered.

"That's very likely. The timing would be a remarkable coincidence otherwise. There's no audio on the recordings, but Mr. McNabb was awoken by the alarms and heard the intruder on the roof. He shouted that he was

calling the police and had a gun. That's why the robot immediately turned and went back. He – whoever – must have known he'd been discovered. He may have seen the safe was empty, too. We can't be sure. Bernice was killed within the next few hours. We think she could have identified him."

"The sheriff's department is thinking the husband did it. Or maybe you did to send the thief a message. Where were you last night?"

"At home sleeping until Mr. McNabb called me. That was 3:20 in the morning. I picked up Ms. Hanssen and got here as fast as I could from the Bay Area. You can check phone company logs and verify that. Mr. McNabb can confirm it, too."

Dillon looked over at Schultz, who was taking notes, and nodded approval when he saw what Schultz had written. I guess they really were going to check our phone records. He then started asking questions about who had access to the office, who knew about the coins, and all those same questions Cliff had asked when we were here before. Most of them, anyway. Cliff let Charles answer without interrupting. When that round of questions was done, Cliff spoke up.

"We just spoke to Bernice's husband, Miguel Mendoza. He says Bernice was approached by a man who asked her help to convince Mr. McNabb to install a new heating system by having her open the fireplace damper so that his house would get cold and the heating bills would skyrocket. He claimed he'd install the new one for free as a promotion to get others in the town to buy the system. That was obviously a ploy to get her to open the damper for him without telling her the real reason why. You should talk to him. He left us to go talk to the sheriff's deputies at his house."

"Did you get a description?"

"No, not really. Talk to Mendoza, but he didn't give us much more than that. He never saw the guy."

"If there was a guy. Mendoza is your Mr. Fixit, isn't he?" The question was directed at McNabb.

"He works for us doing light construction and repair work."

"He sounds pretty handy. Could he build a robot?"

"I ... I don't know. I don't think so. He's been a good employee."

Cliff interrupted, "He seemed pretty credible to me. If he was acting ..."

Dillon cut him off. "We'll take it from here, Mr. Knowles. We can make our own judgments on who's credible."

I could see Cliff's hackles come to attention at that remark but he held it together. "Very well. You take it. My colleague and I are going to head back home. We've been up since the middle of the night and we need sleep and food. You have our contact information."

"You need to stay. The sheriff's deputies will need to take your statement."

"You have it. You can give them your report. They have her statement, too, and the video from when we approached the victim's house. Mr. McNabb will share copies of these videos with you. If they need more from me, they can make an appointment and come see me in my office. Charles, I'll call you tomorrow and we'll talk about where to go from here. Come on, Maeva."

Chapter 19

When we got back to the office, the situation there was somewhere between hectic and utter bedlam. Ashley was frantic at all the calls from our other clients and Simmons, the Amador County sheriff's deputy. She had not been briefed on what had taken place overnight. Cliff had missed an important meeting and I was due to get a report in to another client by the end of the day. Cliff and I took care of the other clients first, putting out a few low-grade fires. We ignored the sheriff department calls. I held it together long enough to get the report out, and then went home early. Cliff was still there when I left.

I begged off on cooking and on watching the Netflix movie we'd planned to watch that night, irritating my husband, but he was good about it. I was in bed, dead to the world by 8:00 PM. The next morning, fully rested, I went into work. Cliff had stayed late and come in early. He looked like hell. His eyes had gym bags under them and he hadn't shaved. He told me he'd returned the deputy's call at 4:59 on the assumption the deputy's quitting time was 5:00, hoping to miss him, but the deputy was still in. Simmons wouldn't take a statement over the phone, though, and insisted on meeting with Cliff. They'd made an appointment for the next day, meaning today, and sure enough he showed up right on time that afternoon.

I wasn't present during the interview, so I can't give you details, but Cliff told me later that it was pretty plain vanilla. He stuck to what he remembered at the scene, which was consistent with the video there, and told

him to check with the town police to get the videos from McNabb's house. He refused to give another statement about McNabb and the money, referring him again to Dillon, the town cop. He said it could hurt his credibility at trial when they caught the murderer if he gave two inconsistent statements and he didn't remember exactly what words he'd used to describe everything with the police. Simmons seemed mollified, especially when Cliff had said "when you catch the murderer." Cliff never told him about the rest of the gold coins and Simmons hadn't been astute enough to ask the right questions to force a clear response.

When that was over Cliff returned McNabb's call. The upshot there was that Cliff said he'd have to step out of the way while the police and sheriff were going full bore on the theft and murder cases, which were still being handled as two separate cases. Charles was very upset, as might be expected, and said he was now fearful not only for his own life, but also that he could no longer trust anyone around him: his neighbors, his company employees, his friends. I was on the call, too. I noticed he left out his daughter and her husband. Cliff convinced him that the danger had passed and just to let the police and sheriff's office do their jobs. Charles told him he was going to take some time to travel. He wasn't comfortable staying in the house right then. It turns out that's exactly what he did. He flew to Scotland to explore his ancestral roots.

~oOo~

Four months later the case had largely faded from our thoughts. We had other work and busy lives. McNabb had paid his bill and the murder case no longer appeared on local news in the Bay Area where more gruesome murders occurred almost every day. This changed when Cliff got a call from McNabb. He was back from Scotland.

"Cliff, I need you to come back," he implored.

"Why? What's going on?"

"The D.A. told me they're going to charge Miguel with the murder. The D.A. called me and left a bunch of messages while I was abroad. They'll need me to testify."

"Miguel Mendoza? Bernice's husband? Does he have the skills to build a robot like that?"

"I wouldn't think so. I thought he was telling us the truth when we talked to him."

“I did, too.”

“I told this to the D.A., but he said that Miguel had bought some carpeting a few weeks before I received the cat structure. He is a good carpenter. He could have built it, and he’s been in the house, so he knew the floor layout at least for the living room. Bernice knew about the safe, of course, even though she didn’t know what was in it.”

“I’m not prepared to take on a murder case. Maybe he was involved. He could have built the structure and someone else built the robot. His lawyer can hire an investigator.”

“I don’t want you to be his defense investigator. I still don’t know whom to trust. I haven’t been sleeping well. I need you to find out who stole from me. I might still be on someone’s target list. The police aren’t looking now that they think they have their man. I don’t. You’d be working for me, not him.”

Cliff was silent for a good forty seconds before replying. “Have the stolen coins turned up?”

“No.”

“I’ll have to think about it.”

“No, no, no! You owe me this. I hired you to investigate a theft and you got my housekeeper, a loyal employee, killed.”

“Now wait a minute. That’s not ...” Cliff took a deep breath before continuing. “... accurate. Assuming Miguel was telling the truth, she died because she helped a criminal commit a crime, even if it was unknowingly. I did not put her into that crowd. Putting a camera on a safe or other spot filled with cash is a normal security precaution. If I hadn’t, you’d probably be out twelve million dollars worth of coins by now.”

“The money isn’t important. I’d gladly give it up to have Bernice’s life back.”

Charles wasn’t taking responsibility for his part in her death, for keeping all that gold in his house, and I could feel Cliff was straining not to blast back at him. “Well, we know that’s not possible. The money seemed important enough to you to hire me back then. Neither of us knew this could happen. It’s tragic, but not foreseeable.”

“So you don’t take any responsibility?”

Cliff exhaled heavily. “If you want me to resume investigating to identify the thief, I’ll accept that assignment, but with the same conditions. I can’t guarantee success. No one can. And it’s not because I feel responsible

for her death; I don't. It's because you are still worried and sleepless over this and I haven't solved that problem. You're a valued client and I care about you receiving full satisfaction."

McNabb's voice softened. "Thank you. I'm sorry if I, that is, I know you aren't responsible for Bernice's death. I shouldn't have implied as much. When will you be able to get back at it, as it were?"

"Not until next week."

"Very well. I shall see you then."

They hung up.

"You were going on vacation next week," I commented.

"Thanks for rubbing that in."

"I didn't mean it like that. I just mean Ellen's going to strangle you."

"Last year we canceled a vacation because she got subpoenaed on one of her cases. That happened to me when I was in the FBI, too. She'll understand. At least my calendar's clear of any client conflicts. Clear yours, too."

"Cliff, I can't. We have ..."

"I'll bring in Woody. I told him I was going to be on vacation and might need him. He told me he'd be available. Do the stuff you have to handle yourself this week and save for him whatever else there is. Contact any clients you think necessary to let them know Woody may handle things."

~oOo~

We both spent the week clearing our calendars. Woody Braswell reported for duty on Friday. Cliff briefed him on everything and he told us both not to worry. He was a solid investigator and had a professional presence. He got right to work on the background investigations for our biggest corporate client.

Thursday we drove up to Sutter Creek, arriving late. Charles put us up in his house again. He greeted us just as warmly as the first time and was very apologetic about having snapped at Cliff on the phone. Contrition oozed from his pores.

The first thing I noticed when we entered was the absence of the cat play structure. The police had taken it as evidence. It seems they had done a thorough search while McNabb was in Scotland, but they hadn't needed a warrant since Charles had granted permission before he left. His daughter

came up from Palo Alto to be present when it took place, and to close up afterwards. They'd dusted for prints on the fireplace damper and the safe and did a general sweep of the whole house and yard looking for anything useful. The balcony outside the top floor was thoroughly inspected as was the chimney and roof area around it. Charles didn't know what they found of interest.

"Who's Miguel's attorney?" Cliff asked before we were even settled.

"The Public Defender, I'm sure. He doesn't have much money."

"Do you have a name?"

"I'm sorry, no."

"I'll have to find that out first thing tomorrow."

Charles had a big dinner in the oven for us despite the late hour. After we decamped to our rooms, we ate, quite well, too. Lasagna and garlic bread, green salad, and a hearty red. After dinner the serious talk began.

"Have they told you why they charged Miguel, why they think he did it?" Cliff asked.

"Only what I told you on the phone."

"Do they know about the gold we moved to the safe deposit box?"

"No. At least I didn't tell them. They only know about the ones that were stolen. And I'd like to keep it that way. I haven't told my daughter, either."

"Hm."

"So what's our next step?"

"Tell me everything you know about Miguel. His background, his work."

"He's a native of the area, not an immigrant, I know that. Born to Mexican immigrants in the valley, I believe. Went to high school around here, somewhere and worked on the local farms and vineyards during summers including ours. Joe noticed that he was handy with tools and had him do some general labor of that sort. After high school Joe put him on full-time and he's been our go-to fellow for general repairs. He never went to college that I know of, unless it was night school at the local community college."

"When did he marry Bernice?"

"I have no idea. Or perhaps I should say they've been married for at least ten years, but I have no idea how much longer."

"Was the marriage happy? Did Bernice tell you of any problems or issues?"

“We didn’t talk about her life. That wasn’t our relationship. It was strictly employer-employee. I didn’t know they’d been going through problems or that he was living in the trailer.”

“How about computer skills? Was he handy in that way?”

“I wouldn’t know. I never had him do anything here at the house and we had people in the office to handle those things. You could ask Joe, but I think the answer is going to be no.”

“Did you point this out to the D.A.?”

“Yes. He questioned me a bit about Miguel, but he didn’t seem very interested in my opinion or about Miguel’s work history, only my theft losses.”

“You said something on the phone about carpeting.”

“Yes, he told me Miguel had purchased carpeting a few months before the play structure showed up.”

“Do you know where he bought it?”

“Sorry, no.”

“Did he say anything about others, about other possible suspects, I mean?”

“Like who?”

“Ben, Estelle’s son, for one, and that Cho guy who lives there?”

“No.”

“You didn’t say anything to him about them, or to the police?”

“I didn’t think it was my place to cast suspicion on others when I talked to the police. I didn’t know they’d charge Miguel at that time.”

Cliff hemmed and hawed before asking the next question. “Did you mention to anyone about your son-in-law, Leonard Hawke?”

Charles stiffened at the question. “I’m sure he wouldn’t do anything like that. And he has no motive, as I’ve told you. I didn’t hire you to attack my family ...”

“I understand, and you’re almost certainly right. But he is the one with the best robotics skills of anyone we know of. And you yourself told me that you didn’t know whom to trust. The defense lawyer, if he’s any good, will bring him up as a possible suspect. It’s probably impossible to keep him out of it. We need to talk to him, at least to alert him to the possibility of that.”

“I see. Well, you know more about that sort of thing than I, but I think that’s premature. Don’t talk to him or my daughter. If it has to be done, I’ll do it.”

“I’d rather you didn’t. He might take it the wrong way coming from you, like his father-in-law suspects him of being a murderer. Why don’t you let me handle that. If there’s going to be a bad guy, let him think it’s me. I’ll make clear that you’re adamant he had nothing to do with it.”

“They won’t believe you. You’re a stranger and they’ll wonder why I sent you in my stead. The answer is no.”

There was a break in the conversation, so I took the opportunity to butt in. “Do you have copies of the local paper for the last few weeks? We might learn something from the coverage of the case.” Cliff looked at me approvingly, relieved to be off the sticky subject of Leonard.

“Unfortunately, no. I was in Scotland, as you know, so I stopped delivery of the town newspaper. You should be able to get copies of some of it in the county library, though. I don’t know how far back they keep copies.”

“That’s good thinking. That’s your assignment,” Cliff told me. “Read all the coverage, and if you can, talk to the reporter who’s been covering it.” Turning to Charles, he asked, “Where would the local library be?”

“The main branch is in Jackson. That’s the closest one, I believe. I don’t really use it. I buy the books I want to read. I think authors should get paid for their work. The newspaper office is there, too.”

“All right, I think that’s enough for tonight. It’s late. Let’s regroup in the morning.”

~oOo~

The next morning I got up early, jogged around the area, and came back for a shower. It gets really hot there in the summer and I knew I wouldn’t have time later anyway. It was a nice temperature for running at 6:30. After the shower I put on a nice slacks and blouse combination since Cliff had said to look professional when we went to meet the attorney.

When I came down for breakfast, Cliff and Charles were already talking. Cliff was explaining his strategy. He was wearing slacks and a sport coat with a dress shirt, but no tie.

“What I need is to know what the police know. Maybe Miguel is guilty. Even if he doesn’t have the ability to make a robot, he could be in cahoots with someone else who does. Or it could have been a domestic dispute and the timing with the robbery attempt is pure coincidence, although I doubt that.”

I jumped in. “Cliff, you know I ran Miguel’s criminal record before we came. One disturbing the peace conviction in his twenties and a drunk driving arrest that was reduced to driving without proof of insurance three years ago. That’s it. No domestic violence, no violence or theft crimes at all.”

“I know. It doesn’t matter. They charged him for some reason and I need to know what their evidence is. They probably won’t give it to me, but the defense counsel might. I called first thing this morning to the public defender’s office but they weren’t open yet. The prosecution has to give the defense everything. My guess is they never really explored anyone else as a suspect.”

Charles had fixed coffee and a pot of hot oatmeal, but otherwise it was scrounge time. I dished out a bowl, poured milk and sugar on it and found some juice. “Okay, so how do you want to work this? I’ll need to go into Jackson for the library and newspaper office.”

“That won’t open until later. I’ll want you with me when I talk to defense counsel. They open at 8:30, which is ten minutes from now. Finish your breakfast. If I can get through, and he agrees to see me, I’ll want to go right away.”

“Okay.” I started scooping the oatmeal in, but burned my tongue, so I had to slow down. By the time I finished, Cliff was on the phone again. I overheard him tell the receptionist he had some information that might help the defense counsel for Miguel Mendoza. He was on hold for a while, but was eventually put through. I heard something about being in court at 9:30.

“We can go right now,” he told me. “Grab your stuff.”

The Public Defender’s Office was located kitty-corner from the courthouse, a sickly yellow two-story stucco monstrosity that had to be the ugliest court building I’ve seen in a long time. The Public Defender’s office was in a white building built in an awkward cross of faux colonial and ranch styles wedged between two churches that loomed over it. This turned out to be general county offices with several other administrative departments. There was no full-time public defender. Instead the work is farmed out to local defense counsel, but they can use the conference room and filing cabinets there.

“This is where he said to meet him?” I asked, a little dubious.

“Yep.”

He turned out to be a she. Lydia Correa was her name and she looked like a high school senior to me. She was thick in the middle, wore no makeup,

and her suit looked like she'd sewn it herself as her first Home Ec project. Her stringy black hair framed a plump face. This was not looking good for Miguel, although I know it's unfair to judge on looks that way. She was standing in the hall outside the conference room as we entered and she directed us inside with a gesture. Her body language was wary, almost hostile. She didn't waste time on pleasantries.

"All right, you got here. You said you had information to help my client?"

We hadn't even sat down yet. "Yes, quite a bit, possibly."

"I have to be in court in half an hour. So what is it?"

"Well, as I explained on the phone, I work for Mr. McNabb, Bernice's employer. I interviewed Miguel with McNabb. He probably told you about that. It would be helpful if we could start with what the police or D.A. have shared with you. Much of what I know might already have been disclosed to you. Can you tell me ..."

"You told me you worked for Mr. McNabb. He's the victim of the robbery and a friend of the homicide victim. I'm not telling you jack shit. You'll just go running to the D.A."

"Whoa. Hold on. You've got this wrong. McNabb thinks Miguel is innocent. So do I. We're interested in finding the true killer. He's hired me to work on this because he suspects there's still someone out there after his money and possibly after him. We're on your side here."

She looked at him skeptically. "So what's your story exactly? And you," she added, looking at me.

"My name is Cliff Knowles. This is my partner Maeva Hanssen. I'm an attorney and retired FBI agent. We're both licensed private investigators."

"Hanssen and Knowles. I know that. You two discovered the body. I've seen your names in the reports. But you haven't really told me who you are – I mean who's side you're on, what you're really after. And you still haven't told me what the information is you have that'll help my client."

"I know of at least three possible suspects besides Mr. Mendoza. I assume you have the police reports and sheriff's office reports. Do they identify ..."

She cut him off again. "I only have the sheriff's reports. The D.A. says the police reports on the robbery aren't relevant. That's what the hearing is about today. I don't know of any other suspects except some 'chimney guy'

my client's babbling nonsense about. So give me names." She had a yellow legal pad on the table and picked up a pen.

Cliff sat, finally, and made a motion for me to do the same. He looked at Correa appraisingly in silence, waiting for her to sit. He motioned for her to do so and she begrudgingly plopped into a chair across from us.

"Ms. Correa, you aren't prepared to defend Mr. Mendoza, are you? I can help, really I can, but you're going to have to trust me. Have you ever tried a murder case? Or even a major felony?"

She shot him a searing look that quickly dissolved into a quivering lip. "I'm ... I'm his lawyer and I'll do everything ... oh shit, who am I kidding." She pulled out a tissue and blew her nose.

"How do you plan to defend him? Do you have an investigator assigned? Someone experienced? Maybe I can work with him."

"I'm not even a county employee. I work from my home because I can't afford a real office. That's why we had to meet here. There's one investigator assigned to the entire public defender's office. He's part-time and a retired deputy who's a buddy of the deputies who are trying to convict my client. He has seventy other cases. He told me to plead this case out to second degree murder or manslaughter if I can. He said he could make a few phone calls for me, that's all."

"Is that what you're going to do? Are you trying to persuade Miguel to plead?"

"What I tell my client is confidential. What I'm trying to do is persuade the D.A. to charge it as a death penalty case."

"You want your client to face the death penalty?" I exclaimed, but Cliff waved a hand at me to be quiet.

Correa looked at me forlornly. "I do. That's the only way he's going to get a fair trial. If it's charged as a death penalty case the state office of the public defender will assign a real lawyer and a full-time investigator. Maybe more. We might even get a change of venue. If it stays a simple first-degree murder case, it's just me. I've only been practicing law fourteen months. I've tried two felony cases, one domestic abuse, and one burglary. I lost them both. My record with misdemeanors isn't much better. I barely graduated from a third-rate law school and it took me two times to pass the bar. I know what I am. Mr. Mendoza deserves better, but I ..." Her lip started quivering again.

Cliff put his hand on her arm. She didn't withdraw it. "Ms. Correa, you have to trust somebody. Surely there's a more senior defense counsel

who'll help you with this, or legal aid of some kind. There are organizations. I can't volunteer to work for you or I would. My client is Mr. McNabb, and my loyalty must be with him, but I can help you if you trust me. I'm convinced that whoever built the robot is the one who murdered Bernice, and I don't think Miguel has the ability to build one."

"Robot? What robot?"

After I scraped my jaw off the table, I sputtered, "They didn't even tell you about the robot? The one that stole the gold coins from Charles?" I hadn't realized until that moment that Miguel didn't know about the robot either, at least not if he was innocent. We never talked about that when we spoke to him.

She stared at me dully. Suddenly she said, "Jesus, it's almost time. I have to get to court. Look, there are only two other defense counsel here on the public defender panel. They see me as competition and want me to fail or get out of town. They used to get all the work and with me getting every third case now, their business is down one-third. There's no one who's going to help me on this. Tell me about this robot thing on the way over there, will you?"

We walked over to the courthouse, all of two hundred feet away. Cliff stopped her before we entered. He said he didn't want the police or D.A. to see him with her. They wouldn't cooperate with him if they did. He told her very briefly about the robot stealing the gold coins and the burglar on the roof the night Bernice was killed, then told her to go on in ahead of us.

Chapter 20

As we entered, the judge was walking from the bench to her chambers. People were filing out. Cliff explained to me that it looked like it had been an arraignment calendar on traffic or other minor offenses. The people filing out appeared to be unrepresented by counsel, so it was probably traffic. Correa was sitting at the defense table and there was a man in a suit at the prosecution table flipping through papers. We stood aside to let everyone out the narrow doorway. The place emptied out except for Correa, the D.A., the clerk, a court reporter, the bailiff (a frail-looking black man pushing fifty), and us. Cliff led me to the front row where we took a seat on the bench directly behind the D.A. He looked at us quizzically. Cliff introduced himself

as representing Charles McNabb. Cliff said he wanted to see justice done in this case. He introduced me as his colleague.

The D.A. looked more than a little surprised. He looked over to Correa, but she was fiddling with some papers, trying mightily to look like she knew nothing about us and cared even less. The D.A. mumbled a greeting and introduced himself as Roger. The court clerk, an intimidating biddy, overheard Cliff and called him forward. He walked in front of the railing – that thing that separates the audience from the lawyers and court personnel and which is technically “the bar,” which is why lawyers are said to be admitted to the bar – and asked him to spell his name. Cliff did so. She wrote it on something and waved him back to his seat without looking up. As Cliff was returning to his seat, a slim man of thirty or so wearing jeans and a checked shirt entered the courtroom from the rear and seated himself in the back.

The bailiff disappeared into a side door and shortly thereafter emerged with Miguel in handcuffs and an orange jumpsuit. Mendoza was seated next to Correa. The bailiff nodded to the clerk who went back through the other side door, the one the judge had used. She came back out quickly and nodded to the bailiff.

He croaked in a raspy voice, “All rise. The court is now in session. The Honorable Margaret Everly presiding.”

An obese woman of about fifty entered wearing a black robe and dangly jewelry about her wrists. Her hair was heavily coiffed and sprayed to within an inch of its life; I think it probably provided more skull protection than a motorcycle helmet. She sat at the bench. “Be seated. I’m hearing a discovery motion on the case of State versus Mendoza. Counsel state your appearances.”

The D.A. rose. “Roger Butts for the state.” I suppressed a smirk. He hadn’t given us his last name.

“Lydia Correa for the defendant who is present.”

The judge looked at Cliff and me. “And who is this?” I’m glad he was there. I hadn’t expected the judge to address us and wouldn’t have known how to answer. One year of law school doesn’t really teach you anything about getting around in a courtroom. Cliff stood, still behind the bar.

“Cliff Knowles, your honor, representing the victim Charles McNabb.”

The judge shuffled uneasily in her seat and looked at Butts. “The victim? I thought the victim was dead, and a woman.”

Butts started to answer, but Cliff talked right over him. “Your honor, the deceased worked for my client, Mr. McNabb, who was the victim of a related crime – the robbery of his home. He has engaged me to follow the course of this prosecution. I am not here to appear as his counsel at this time or to intervene in the matter, only to observe and report. This is my colleague, Maeva Hanssen.”

“Are you an attorney, Mr. Knowles?”

“Yes, your honor.”

“I see. Very well. Please be seated. Ms. Correa, this is your motion, I believe.”

“Yes, your honor. I’ve asked Mr. Butts for all the police reports and records pertaining to this case and he has not complied. He only gave me the sheriff’s department report, but I need the Sutter Creek Police Department reports on the case, too.”

Butts replied, “I provided all the relevant reports, your honor. This is a simple homicide case. The defendant killed his wife in a domestic dispute. It took place outside the Sutter Creek city limits and the police did not investigate except for the initial response. We provided the reports of the officer who arrived at the scene of the crime.”

Correa shot back, “That’s not what I’m asking for. The victim was killed the same night Mr. McNabb, her employer, was robbed. Robbed by a robot! The cases must be related. We think whoever built the robot got assistance from Mrs. Mendoza and killed her to prevent her from identifying him. My client knows nothing about robots. The state is trying pin this on the victim’s husband, the easy target, instead of finding out who built that robot. They should be trying to find the real killer.”

The man in jeans moved up front and was jotting things furiously in a notepad. I realized then he must be a reporter. I made a mental note to remember what he looked like.

“The real killer!” Butts said with derision. “This is not the O.J. Simpson case. The real killer is sitting right there, your honor. If Ms. Correa knew anything about the law she’d know it was a burglary, not a robbery, and it had nothing to do with this case.”

“This is the first I’ve heard of this robbery, or whatever it is,” the judge said. “Let me correct that. There was something a couple of months ago

in the paper about some gold coins being taken. Is that the case you're talking about?"

"It is," Correa answered. The reporter was still jotting furiously.

"I don't remember anything about a robot in the paper. Do you care to explain how it relates to the murder?"

"Your honor, I must protest. Ms. Correa has just compromised a police investigation. That information about the robot wasn't publicly released. I ask that you issue a gag order on that. The Ledger is here now so they're subject to your jurisdiction. The cases aren't related but that case is an important one and ..."

"I'm not going to issue a gag order, Mr. Butts. These two cases happened on the same day, you say?"

"Same night, yes, your honor," Correa answered.

"It seems to me that there is reason to believe they could be related. Mr. Butts, you will provide the defense with all the police reports and access to the forensic evidence in that case."

"Your honor, I don't have those reports. No one's been charged. It's still under investigation. She can subpoena the Sutter Hill Police Department if she wants them."

"And yet you seem to know a great deal about the case for someone who doesn't have the reports. They could be Brady information. Mr. Knowles, does Mr. McNabb have the reports? I believe the victim has a right to police reports."

Cliff stood. "Your honor, my client received a copy of his initial crime report, but not any subsequent ones. He has not been kept apprised of developments in the case but would like to be. He's been abroad most of the time after the homicide and has only recently returned. That's why he engaged me. We would of course comply with any order you may make to provide a copy to the defendant of whatever police reports we do have." Cliff shrugged apologetically at Butts, implying that he had no choice.

"That won't be necessary. You aren't a party. Mr. Butts, don't be coy. You can get those reports from the police. I'm ordering you to do so and to provide them to the defense."

Deflated, Butts replied, "Yes, your honor."

"And while you're here, has the state decided whether to charge this as a capital crime? There are a lot of things we need to put in place if you do. I asked you before, and I don't want to have to ask again."

“We will not be seeking the death penalty, your honor.”

“Is there anything else, then?”

“No, your honor,” both attorneys chorused.

“All right then. I’m putting this on the calendar for a status conference in thirty days. The clerk will give you the date and time.” The judge rose and left the courtroom.

The attorneys went to the clerk’s desk and consulted their calendars until they all agreed on when they could all make the next conference. We made a point not to get close to Lydia while the D.A. might see us. Cliff approached the court reporter and gave her his card. I was too intimidated to follow him up in front of the bar since I wasn’t an attorney and wasn’t sure whether it was allowed. When he came back he told me he was requesting transcripts of all the hearings in this matter, including past ones. It was going to cost Charles a pretty penny, but you do what you gotta do. Court reporters are delighted with such requests because they get paid handsomely for transcribing. The salary is nothing compared to what they charge the lawyers for copies put into English. Most people don’t realize that the parties don’t get those automatically and have to pay for them, although maybe for indigent defendants they don’t charge.

Just then I realized the newspaper reporter had just gone out the doors. I told Cliff I wanted to catch up with him, and he told me to go. I bolted from the courtroom and saw the reporter hustling down the street looking at his notepad. I sprinted after him.

“I want to talk to you,” I huffed when I caught up and he stopped.

“I want to talk to you, too. So is this robot thing for real? Old Man McNabb was ripped off by a robot?”

“Let’s get some ground rules straight. I’ll answer that question off the record but you have to tell me what you’ve heard on this case, what the inside scoop is from the police and sheriff’s office.” I looked around nervously but no one seemed to be watching us. He realized my concern and motioned me over to stand between an SUV and a box truck parked in a nearby lot where we wouldn’t be noticed.

“Off the record doesn’t do me any good. I can go with what I heard in court, and true or false, that’s going to be the biggest story of the week. If it’s true, it could go national. That would be the biggest story of my career. I need something I can use from you.”

I looked at him. His “career” was probably attending city council meetings and the local high school basketball games for the last couple of years. “I tell you what. You can go with what the defense counsel said, ‘The defendant’s lawyer claimed the real killer used a robot, blah, blah,’ and then say it has been confirmed by sources close to the investigation. You can’t name me, my partner, or Mr. McNabb as being your source.”

“So it’s true? The real killer used a robot?”

“Hold it. Do we have a deal?”

“Yeah, okay, I won’t name you guys except I’ll have to say McNabb was robbed, but not as a source.”

“All right. I can confirm that a robot was used to enter Mr. McNabb’s house and take some money. I don’t know whether the person operating the robot killed Bernice, but it’s very possible. Don’t say you confirmed the real killer thing.”

“Got it. Was he there when it happened? McNabb. Did the robot point a gun at him?”

“He was there, but no one pointed a gun at him. I can’t give you any more details, at least not until I see what’s already been reported. That’s what I need from you. More than that. I can read what’s been printed if you tell me where to get back copies. I need to know what you’re hearing that isn’t reported, too.”

“They don’t take me seriously. The cops do press releases and send them to my office. The editor reads them and tells me what to write. Once in a while I get assigned to come over here for a bigger case like this one. This is not the Washington Post and I’m not Woodward or Bernstein.”

“So you can’t help me?”

“Look, once I write this up, I think I can. This really is a scoop. A robot. That’s why I think my editor will let me go after this full time. I have some people I can talk to to get the skinny. It’s a small town.”

“Okay, give me the Reader’s Digest version of what’s been reported and I’ll read it all later.”

“Reader’s Digest?”

“Jesus, you’re younger than I thought. Just summarize it already.”

“We reported that Mrs. Mendoza was found dead by visiting relatives and sheriff’s office determined it to have been homicide. Then her husband was arrested and that sources reported they’d been having marital difficulties. I think it was three days later or so that the Sutter Creek cops let out a press

report that there had been a report of a theft at the home of Mr. McNabb and the case was under investigation. There was no mention of the murder from the cops. The two cases were never tied together and the police reports themselves were never released. I didn't even know they happened on the same night."

"Did you report what was stolen?"

"No, just that some money was taken. They didn't report how much. How much was it?"

"Sorry, I can't talk about that."

"I tried to talk to McNabb, but he was out of town. Is he back now?"

"Yes, but I doubt he'll talk to you. How'd you know it was relatives who discovered the body?"

"We asked the sheriff. My editor did, anyway. They wouldn't comment. I ended up talking to a neighbor who said a woman relative was visiting Ms. Mendoza from out of town and found her. The neighbor gave her a ride into town. Do you know who it was? I'd like to interview her."

I hesitated a moment too long before replying "I can't really say."

He picked up on my delay and gave me a hard stare. We were in the parking lot of the paper by this time. "Wait a minute. You know, don't you?" He flipped through his notes. "Mayvah Hanson. I can look you up. Are you the relative?"

I looked at his notes. He had my name spelled phonetically and quite wrong. He'd have a hard time looking it up, actually. I was tempted to tell him to be sure to spell my name right, but I didn't want him spelling it at all, so I kept to the simple, if misleading, truth. "Go ahead and look me up. We identified ourselves in court. It's no secret. I'm not related to Bernice Mendoza."

"And what was that about a robbery or burglary. Which was it? What's the difference anyway? You're a lawyer."

"I'm not a lawyer but I can tell you the difference. Reporters get it wrong all the time and it's grating. A robbery is when the criminal takes something directly from the victim with force or threat of force, like in a mugging. It can happen in the home, too, if the person is present. If they use a weapon it's armed robbery, but there doesn't have to be a weapon to qualify as a robbery. A burglary is entering a home or business to commit a crime inside. They don't even have to take anything. They only need to have the intent to commit a crime – any crime. It can apply to locked vehicles, too."

“So which is this? The robot entered the home while McNabb was there, right? Was he frightened?”

“He was. That’s a good question, actually. Whoever operated the robot didn’t enter the house. It’s not clear to me which this is, but let’s just go with robbery. I don’t think the legislators have devised a statute for this situation – robbery by proxy. So can I get back issues of the paper at the library?”

“Yeah. It’s within walking distance.” He pointed the way. “But the archives are online. You don’t need to go there. Just go to the Ledger website and click on Archives.”

“When are you going to print this?”

“The print paper comes out Tuesdays and Fridays, but this’ll go on the website by the end of the day, I’m sure.”

“Great, thanks. What’s your name? You have mine.”

“Jayden. Give me your number and I’ll text you mine.”

I almost complied but then gave it a second thought. I didn’t see any good that would come of his having my correct name and number. I knew I could reach him at the paper when I wanted. There couldn’t be more than one Jayden there. “I’ll contact you.” With that, I headed back to the courthouse while he hurried off to post his scoop. Cliff was waiting for me outside.

“What’d you get?” He asked.

“They didn’t even know the two crimes happened on the same night. The police reports weren’t released, only a plain vanilla press release. Off the record I confirmed for him that a robot was used in the robbery since that was disclosed in court. He tried to get me to confirm the ‘real killer’ was whoever built the robot, but I wouldn’t.”

“Is he going to print our names?”

“I got him to commit not to name me as a source, or you either, but he was there in court. He got our names there when you spoke, so there was nothing I could do about that.”

“Right. That’s okay. I talked to Correa again. She hid out in the ladies room until the coast was clear and then found me and told me to meet her over in that same place where we were before.”

We headed over to that building and found her inside. She was bubbling over with enthusiasm. “I won that! I won the motion! You guys did it. That robot thing did the trick. I owe you big time. Miguel told me that you

said there was someone on McNabb's roof that night, but he didn't say anything about a robot."

"Right. We never told him about it. I'm surprised that it hasn't leaked out before now. The police are keeping close-lipped about it for whatever reason. Maeva told me it hasn't been in the papers."

"Today was the first I've heard about it. So you think Miguel was telling the truth? About the guy bribing his wife to open the damper?"

"It sounds far-fetched, but, yes, it's very likely true."

"Did McNabb see the robot?"

"Not directly, but there was a video. Two videos, in fact."

"Videos! Do you have copies?"

"The police do. It's better if you get them directly from them as part of discovery. Go back to the judge if they don't produce them. I'd appreciate it if you don't mention to the D.A. that you know about it yet. I don't want the sheriff's department or the police to find out we've cooperated with you. We need to know where they are on the case and they're more likely to cooperate with us if we're seen as victim's reps rather than the opposition."

"Who do you think did it? Do you have other suspects?"

Cliff gave me a look that told me to keep my mouth shut. "I'm not going to give you names, at least not yet. I don't want you going around talking to them or others around them and spooking them yet. You should have a lot of time before trial. If we find anything that exonerates Miguel, of course we'll let you and the police know. We have to keep in mind that even if he can't build a robot, it's possible he was working with someone else."

"Whose side are you on? I thought you said you thought he was innocent."

"I do, but at this point we have to keep an open mind. I'm not sure of anything. It could even be that the D.A. is right. Miguel was having an affair. Did his girlfriend corroborate his alibi? Maeva, what was her name?"

"Chastain."

"No. Apparently she told the deputies that she was alone that night. That's what the report says. Miguel says she's lying. She's married, after all."

"So he doesn't have an alibi."

"Not that I can prove."

"Can you give me copies of your discovery from the D.A.?"

"Why should I? You just told me you aren't giving me names."

“You told me you owe us big time. It was our info that won you that motion. And it gave you a defense, too. If you can show Miguel doesn’t have the skills to build a robot, it throws suspicion on someone else. There’s reasonable doubt.”

“Reasonable doubt! Let me give you a lesson, Mr. Bay Area Liberal. This is Amador County and my client is Mexican. A native-born American, but still a Mexican in the eyes of the fine citizens of Amador County. His wife was white. This county went for Trump by an overwhelming margin. I could show them a time-stamped video of Miguel in bed with Chastain the whole night and the jury would still come back with a guilty verdict before lunch. They’ll be going into the jury room with MAGA caps on. I’d be lucky to get even two Latino jurors on the panel, and even if I did, they’d probably be too intimidated by the white majority to oppose them. The white jurors would probably be their employers, supervisors, or the bosses of one of their relatives. You heard the president: Mexicans are rapists and murderers.”

I was startled at the bitterness in Lydia’s voice and the strength her language. Judging by his expression, so was Cliff. I hadn’t really thought about the racial prejudice aspect to this case before now. I thought it was funny in a disconcerting sort of way that she called Cliff Mr. Bay Area Liberal. Not every white guy from the Bay Area is liberal, I’ve learned that. He’s ex-FBI and, like my husband the cop, is a pretty conservative law-and-order guy. Still, in this crazy new world where the Republicans, previously the friends of law enforcement, are now attacking them, especially Cliff’s beloved FBI, I’m not sure how that plays in his mind. I know he considers himself an Independent. It took him a long time to respond.

“If he’s innocent, as we all think, this shouldn’t get to trial. We should be able to identify enough other suspects, maybe the killer himself, to make the D.A. drop the charges. I need those reports, though, to get started. What have you got to lose? You told me your investigator is worthless. Mr. McNabb is wealthy and funding our investigation. He believes Miguel is innocent.”

Correa’s shoulders slumped. “You’re right. I guess you’re my best chance, not that I can really trust you. I’ll give you copies. I got all paper copies from the D.A. I’ll have to make copies for you. Give me your number and I’ll call you when they’re ready.” She paused a moment and then added, “You know, I was planning to use you for my defense before you showed up here today. I was going to try to make you two the prime suspects. You were

first on the scene. You discovered the body. You were videoing it. That just seemed too convenient, like you killed her and then went back outside and staged the video like you knew you'd need proof."

I couldn't hold my tongue any longer. I'd never been accused of murder before. "We didn't kill her! We were making the video to protect ourselves and our client from civil liability, so she couldn't claim we harassed her or assaulted or threatened her. The sheriff's office checked our phone records and confirmed we were home in the Bay Area at the time of death."

"Jurors don't understand all that tech shit. They think anything can be faked. You could have given your phones to someone else to set up an alibi. It was my best shot. I may still have to use it if you don't come up with some better suspect. I gotta do what I gotta do. Sorry. But I'll get you the reports."

Chapter 21

Back at McNabb's house Cliff asked me to go ahead and review those newspaper archives about both the murder and the theft. He sat down with Charles and updated him on what happened at the court and with Correa. It didn't take me long to read what had been in the papers. There really wasn't much more than the summary the reporter had given me.

When I rejoined Cliff and Charles, Cliff was explaining that judges and prosecutors treat victims with kid gloves. Ever since victim rights became a hot button issue in the media a few decades back, no judge in a criminal case wants to be seen as ignoring the wants and desires of victims, especially victims of violent crimes. Crime victims are voters and sometimes crusaders.

Back thirty years ago, crime victims were just irritants that got in the way of plea bargaining or refused to testify the way the D.A. wanted. Now a judge or district attorney, both elected officials, could lose his or her job if the press portrayed them as disregarding the victims. Judge Perksy in San Jose was just recalled in a popular vote when an activist law professor went after him for imposing on a sex offender a sentence she thought was too light, even though it was legal and in line with normal practice. An Oakland judge refused to accept a plea bargain that was reached by the parties in the big warehouse fire that killed a bunch of artists because the victim's families objected that it was too light. That's why Cliff wants to continue to present us as McNabb's representatives, a crime victim, not as someone working on behalf of Mendoza. It's also a more accurate characterization of our role.

“What’s your next step?” Charles asked.

“I’ve taken care of the sheriff’s reports, it looks like, assuming Ms. Correa comes through. I’m not going to talk to those deputies, because they’ve already decided Miguel is the perpetrator. There’s no point in arguing with them or suggesting they’ve got it wrong. I’m not sure about the local police. They’re working on the robbery and haven’t cleared it after all this time, so they’re more likely to want to cooperate. It sounds like they don’t get along that well with the sheriff’s department. I plan to talk to them next.”

“Cliff,” I said, “I didn’t find anything useful in the newspaper archives, but I’ve been following the coin sales and that PrimoDeels guy just listed another one.”

“1874-S Liberty?”

“Right.”

“What happened to the last one? Do you know if it sold or was taken off the market? This could be the same one.”

“No, that one sold for \$1650.00.”

“Does the new one have a ‘Buy It Now’ price listed?”

“Yes, \$2400. He claims it’s in perfect mint condition.”

“Good, he’s overreaching. eBay has a contact seller feature, doesn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s find out where he is. Contact him and say you might be interested if you can inspect the coin in person to verify its condition. That will give you a reason to ask his location.”

I did as he asked, clicking the link and leaving a message. I said the photo wasn’t good enough to verify its condition so I needed to see it in person. I asked where he was. There was no immediate response, but I set the app so it would alert me on my phone if there was a reply.

Cliff talked some more with Charles, going over his notes from before in more detail. He mulled things over and then said he was ready to go to the police station. We got in the car and drove over there, even though it was within walking distance. It was located on Main Street across the street from a “cheese shoppe” and an art gallery. We walked in the door and behind the counter there was a woman wearing a uniform, but it looked civilian; she wore no badge or gun.

“Hello, I’d like to speak to Sergeant Dillon. It’s pertaining to the McNabb case.”

“And you are?”

“Cliff Knowles. He knows who I am.”

“Is he expecting you?”

“No. I was in court and didn’t know how long I’d be there, so I didn’t make an appointment.”

“And you?”

“Maeva Hanssen. He knows who I am too.”

“Hold on.”

Two minutes later Josh Dillon emerged through a door and led us back to a miniscule interview room. It was obviously intended to double as an interrogation room and a temporary holding cell.

“Make yourselves comfortable,” he said as he sat on the cop side of the table. Comfortable was not the adjective I would have chosen to describe myself, but I sat on the prison-made chair. A moment later Schultz, the other cop who’d appeared with Dillon, came into the room and stood next to Josh.

“We’re here about the coin robbery investigation,” Cliff began, looking only at Dillon, the obvious lead. “Mr. McNabb has retained us to follow the progress of the investigation.”

“Mr. Knowles, we’re working diligently on it.” His mispronunciation of the word did not give Cliff or me confidence.

“I’m sure you are. Have you identified any suspects?”

“You know Mr. Mendoza has been charged?”

“With the murder, yes, but not the coins. He doesn’t know how to build a robot like that.”

“The sheriff’s department thinks they’re unrelated, or possibly he was working with someone else.”

“Which is it – unrelated or a related conspiracy? Those are mutually exclusive.”

“You’d have to ask them.”

“I’m asking you what you think. You’re investigating the coin theft.”

Dillon looked over at Schultz briefly. “We understand and respect Mr. McNabb’s concern, but there are details we can’t share.”

So you don’t think Mendoza did it, but you can’t publicly undermine the S.O. Correct me if I’m wrong.”

Dillon cast another look at Schultz but neither said anything immediately. After a pregnant pause he replied, “If you have any additional information that might help us, we’d love to have it.”

“What about Bruce Cho and his sidekick Ben? Charles told me that he told you about their maker project. They could probably build a robot. Cho’s an electrician.”

“We checked them both out. Cho was being held overnight on a drunk and disorderly the night of the burglary. Ben says he was home and his mother confirms it, although she was probably asleep and not really able to verify he was in his room.”

“Did you interview him – or Cho?”

“Mr. Knowles, as I said, we can’t share ...”

I butted in. “Did you know the judge in the Mendoza case just ordered the D.A. to provide all your reports on the coin theft? That’s where we were a few minutes ago.”

“Seriously?” Schultz said. I could read his lips for the expletive he suppressed.

“Yes,” Cliff answered. “They’re going to the defense and will probably make their way to the press.”

“They can get a gag order,” Dillon hastened to counter.

“The D.A. asked for one and the judge refused.” This time Schultz didn’t suppress the expletive. Cliff continued, “You might as well give us copies of the reports. I was in law enforcement, too, so I understand your reluctance, but really, we can help you and it’s going to be public very soon.”

Dillon let out a sigh then replied. “Look, we talked to both of those guys. I don’t think they’re capable. Like I said, Cho was in jail. I didn’t show them the video or anything, but I talked to a friend of mine who knows a guy who works on robots. He said they would need to be able to program some ardingo board. The B B Boys both said they knew about those, but had never worked on one. They said their shadow board didn’t need any programming, just electric power. The lights went on and off automatically based on light hitting their sensors. They come right from the hardware store wired that way. We checked out the board and they were right. There’s no circuit board.”

“An Arduino. That’s likely. They could be lying about their abilities, though.”

At that moment my phone beeped an alert. The coin seller had replied to my message. He said he could see me today if I could come to Stockton. I showed my phone to Cliff.

“Stockton! That’s local. You go. I have more business to do with the detectives. Take the car. Be careful, though. Just get an I.D. Don’t press him too hard. If he’s the thief ...”

“What’s this all about?” Schultz said. “If you have a suspect, ...”

“Don’t worry, we’ll tell you. It’s probably nothing. Just a guy selling gold coins.”

“We looked at that. There are dozens of them constantly offering coins.”

I gave Cliff the thumbs up and he handed me the car keys. I walked outside, Schultz by my side, I guess to keep me from stealing anything on my way to the door. He went back in as I phoned the seller, since he’d provided a telephone number. He gave me the address and I said I’d be there in an hour. Stockton was about thirty miles away, so I knew it wouldn’t take me that long, but I wanted a chance to research him a little and supposedly I was coming from the Bay Area, which was farther from Stockton. That also gave me time to change into my casual clothes.

I drove to the local library, and, as I’d hoped, it had a wi-fi network I could use. The seller had given me his first name, Theo, and a telephone number. A bit of googling with his name, the number, address, and PrimoDeels pointed me to a pawn shop in Stockton. I called Woody back at the office. He’s a licensed bail bondsman in his other job, and has quick access to DMV records and criminal history. Fortunately, he was in. I gave him what I had on Theo and he said he run it and get back to me.

I headed to Stockton. By the time I got to town he’d texted me Theo’s full name, Theodore Czerny, home address, car make and license, and “no crim record.” I drove around awhile longer to take up time, then parked on the curb a few stores down from the pawn shop and went in. There was a heavily tattooed young man, white, I think under all the blue and red ink, talking to a customer, and an older black man behind the counter sitting at a small work station facing away from the customer area. He had a jeweler’s loupe in one hand. I walked over and leaned over the counter toward him.

“Excuse me. Theo? I talked to you about the double eagle.”

The black man turned to look at me. “That’s Theo,” he said, pointing to the tattooed guy. “What’s this about a double eagle? You have one to sell?” He rose. “A Saint-Gaudens?” I’d learned enough by this point to recognize the term. Double eagles referred to any twenty-dollar gold coin and included

both those with the Liberty head, like McNabb's, and those with the later design called a Saint-Gaudens, named after the sculptor who designed it.

This exchange set off alarm bells with Theo, who broke off with the customer and came hustling over. "That's for me, boss. She's not selling, she's buying."

The black man said, "Since when do you have a double eagle?"

"I don't, boss, it's for a buddy. I tried to get him to come in here and sell to us, but he didn't want to. He wanted full price."

The boss man harrumphed and went back to his louping or whatever it was.

"I'm sorry," I said to Theo. "I didn't mean to start anything. If you don't have it, then ..."

"No. No, I do. Hang on." The customer had gone, so Theo called to his boss that he was going to be outside for five minutes. We stepped out onto the sidewalk. He looked around but no one was in the immediate area. He pulled out a gold coin in a display packet designed for coin collectors. It was a clear plastic envelope with a thin cardboard strip at the top with printing on it. "You can't touch the coin with your hands, but you can hold the packet. He handed it to me.

I didn't know much about coins, but this looked to me like the ones Charles had lost, like the ones from under the carpet. I turned it over and studied both sides carefully like I thought a real collector or dealer might do. Then I handed it back to him. "Your price is too high," I said, "but I like the quality."

"How about twenty-two hundred? I could let it go for that right now if you have cash."

That was fast. I hadn't even countered. He was no bargainer, which was surprising for a pawn shop clerk. That raised a red flag for me, especially since he was keeping this from his boss. I looked at him more closely. Now that he was out from behind the counter I could see that he had something wrong with his leg. He'd limped on the way out and his left foot angled outward sharply. He didn't look like someone who could negotiate a quick climb or descent on a ladder, so was unlikely to be the man on the roof, and therefore, probably not the murderer. I decided to improvise.

"I work for a dealer back east. We sell matched sets. We need more 1874-S Liberties. Is this the only one you have? We're more flexible on the price if you can provide more, like maybe ten."

“I don’t have any more, but I might be able to get more. How much would you pay if I got ten?”

“You can get ten? Where from? I’m only out in California for a few days.”

“No you don’t. I’m not giving you my source. I have a friend in Jackson, that’s a small town near here, who invests in gold. If he has them, I can get them in two days. If he wants to sell, that is. He’ll want to know the terms, and I can’t front the money myself so you’ll have to bargain directly with me and then pay him if he approves. I’ll get my finder’s fee from him.”

“I don’t care how you guys split it up. I just know the price I’m willing to pay.”

“Yeah? How much?”

“If all ten are this good, eighteen hundred apiece.”

“Make it two thousand each.”

“You’re not listening to me, Theo. Eighteen hundred, no more. Call your friend.” Theo pulled out his phone and for a delicious moment I thought I had him. If he made the call, the cops could get a warrant to trace it. But it was not to be. He put the phone back in his pocket.

“Okay, look, I’ll email him tonight, then I’ll get back to you if he’s interested.”

“Okay. You have my number. No later than nine tonight. I go to bed early. I’m still on east coast time. Remember, I’m only around a few more days.”

“What about this one? I’ll take eighteen hundred.”

“No deal. That’s too high for just one. I’ve got travel costs. I can’t go flying all over the country for every coin. I wouldn’t be here for this one if I wasn’t here for other business. Call me after you’ve talked to your buddy. My name’s Carol, by the way.”

“Got it.” He walked back into the pawn shop and I walked back to my car. I called Cliff, but he didn’t pick up. I decided to wait and see what else I could learn.

I found a spot in a greasy spoon across the street and a few doors down where I could see the front door of the pawn shop. I ordered a ham sandwich and a Coke, since I didn’t think they could mess that up. I nursed the Coke for half an hour or so after I’d polished off the sandwich but it was getting boring and unproductive, so I got up to go. Just then I spotted Theo coming out the door of the pawn shop and he was headed across the street

right towards the restaurant. I took the check to the register and threw down cash with a good tip. It was a cash only place. It was lucky I had enough since I always pay with credit cards or an app these days. I ducked into the ladies room and hid there for three or four minutes. After someone rattled the doorknob a couple of times, I figured I'd better come out before she made a commotion. When I emerged, I sneaked a peek into the table area. Theo was there, but his back was to the front door, so I slipped out unnoticed.

I made my way back to the pawn shop and entered. There were no customers. The black man heard the bell hanging over the door, alerting him to my entry. He stood up, then recognized me and sat down again. "He's not here. He just went to lunch."

"I know. That's why I waited to come back. I think he's cheating you."

"Cheating me? How?" He stood and walked over to be right across from me.

"I think he's trying to sell me a coin from a customer who came into the shop. He asked me not to say anything to you about it, but I'm not comfortable with that. I think he low-balled the customer and bought it himself and is now trying to make the profit for himself. He could be competing with you on his own."

"That's not what he told me. He said his buddy has it and he's only negotiating for him because he knows the value of gold things better, from working here."

"Who, the guy up in Jackson? Cory or Darryl, or, what's his name ..."

"Kyle? You know him?"

"Yeah, I think that's it, an electronics guy."

"Kyle's a dealer at the casino, I think. He's pawned a few things here, but never any gold."

"Oh, different guy, then. I probably shouldn't have said anything."

"If Kyle'd come in here with a double eagle, I would have known about it."

"Sorry. I was just guessing. Theo probably didn't do anything wrong. Don't say anything to him. I'm still interested in the double eagle and I don't want to piss him off."

I hurried out and got back to the car. Cliff still hadn't called me back, but I didn't have any more business in Stockton to do, so I headed back to

Sutter Creek. Cliff finally called me back as I was driving, so I pulled over to take the call.

Cliff told me that he'd spent a good hour with the police. The cameras in the front of the house hadn't caught anything useful the night of the theft. There was a light above the door that was supposed to be motion-sensitive, but it wasn't working when they checked it. The bulb had been unscrewed slightly to prevent it from lighting, so it was too dark for the camera. In short, someone else may have unscrewed it sometime before the theft, but police couldn't find anything like that on the video they reviewed, which only went back thirty days. The driveway was paved with paving stones, which didn't hold any tire tracks. We know it was a box truck, but that's all. There were no good fingerprints on the balcony or roof area, but that'd been considered a long shot. Cliff went over some of the other forensics, but none of it helped.

The issue that took on some new life in Cliff's mind was Leonard Hawke. The police had interviewed Charles at length, but he hadn't mentioned to them that his son-in-law was an engineering expert in self-driving cars. Cliff had learned this only indirectly by the absence of any mention of Hawke since Cliff didn't want to identify him by asking what they knew about him. Cliff knew that Charles wouldn't want him to point the police toward his own family, but he felt it was too important a lead to go unaddressed. Hawke had to be the most technically qualified of all the possible suspects. Even so, Cliff felt he had to hold off until he'd had a chance to talk to Hawke himself.

The detectives kept asking Cliff about Joe, McNabb's business partner and close associate of Mendoza. It became apparent to Cliff that they were focused on him. They said something about him having enough money to hire a robotics engineer and he was one of the few people who had been in the office and probably knew about the safe. Joe was also a big guy who knew Bernice. Cliff had emphasized that Charles didn't consider Joe a suspect. By the end of the meeting, the police had become curt and impatient. They'd stayed professional, but in relatively tactful terms had told him in effect to buzz off and stay out of the investigation.

"What about Estelle and the two clowns under her roof?"

"Charles told them about Ben and Bruce, her own little BnB. The police say that Ben and Estelle alibi each other. Bruce Cho was in jail. Of course, that's convenient if they're all in it together. Ben could have climbed onto the roof, even if Cho built the robot. Charles says Estelle has been frosty

toward him lately and doesn't show up with baked goods anymore. He's quite relieved."

"At least we accomplished something." I told Cliff about my encounter with Theo.

He seemed interested and said we should pursue it. "It looks like we're going to have to pay a visit to the casino to find this Kyle."

"You want me to stop there on my way back? I have to go through Jackson anyway."

"Go for it."

Chapter 22

The Miwok Indians run a casino and hotel in Jackson. I drove into the parking lot and sat for a few minutes watching who came and went. It was surprisingly busy for so early in the morning, or so I thought. I've since learned that it's never early for a casino. Half the people gambling there had probably been there since the previous night.

I was dressed in jeans and a matching denim jacket over a light sweater. I probably didn't look like a high roller, but I needn't have worried about that. I was dressed at least as nice as most of the people there. I was greeted at the door by an older Miwok gentleman, judging by his looks. He asked me, "What's your pleasure, miss?" At least it was "miss" and not "ma'am" although I was wearing a wedding ring. I don't like being called ma'am, a little vanity of mine.

"Is Kyle working today? I had good luck at his table last time."

"Let me call the pit boss." He had a radio to call, which struck me as an anachronism. Does anybody use those in this cell phone age? He spoke into it for a minute and then replied to me, "Kyle no longer works here, I'm afraid, but we have other excellent dealers and all sorts of games of chance. You like blackjack, then? Those tables are to the right past the slots."

"Sure, in a minute; that sounds good. But what happened to Kyle? I thought he was popular."

"I really have no idea. I didn't know the gentleman."

"Can I talk to your pit boss?"

This gave the greeter pause. He looked me over. His eyes narrowed. "About what?"

“Well, maybe it was the luck of the table, not Kyle’s dealing. He could show me which table was Kyle’s.”

I could tell he wasn’t buying it, but he got back on the radio. I heard him describe me to the pit boss. I was a “young red-headed lady wearing a jeans jacket.” “He said he’d meet you at the blackjack table area. Just go on through to the right.”

I did as instructed. When I arrived, I was surprised that most of the dealers were white, although at least one appeared to be Miwok. I had checked out their website on my phone back in Stockton and they did advertise themselves as an equal opportunity employer. There were at least thirty tables playing either blackjack or poker, but only twenty or so were in action just then. A hard-looking man in his fifties, also white, approached me.

“I’m the pit boss. I’ll show you to your lucky table.” He stretched out his left hand in a magnanimous gesture.

“Hold it. I’m not really here for that. I’m looking for information about Kyle.” I whipped out my private eye license. I have it in an ID wallet. When I flip it open, my business card is visible in the adjacent pocket. It has a logo that looks a lot like an official seal of some kind.

“Put that away,” he barked and looked around furtively. No one seemed to notice. “I’m going to have to ask you to leave.” He took my arm and actually turned me around toward the door I’d come in.

“Hold it. I think he stole from you.” This had worked back at the pawn shop, so I thought I’d give it a shot here.

He stopped. “Tell me something I don’t know. Who are you, exactly?” He let go of my elbow.

“I’m a private investigator working with the Sutter Creek Police on a major case. Kyle’s name has come up. I’d like to talk to him.”

“He no longer works here.”

“The fellow out front told me that. Did he quit or was he fired?”

“I don’t discuss personnel matters. Now please leave or I’ll have to call security.”

“Just tell me his last name and I’ll leave.”

He put the radio to his mouth. “Security to Pit 1.”

“Okay, okay I’m going. What did you mean you already knew about him stealing?”

Seconds later two large people appeared from out of nowhere. The larger one was a woman, although the man, a Mexican-appearing guy, was no

shrimp. Both wore casino polo shirts with “Security” embroidered on the chest. The pit boss walked away and I never even got his name, much less Kyle’s. I began walking toward the front door, a security person on either side. I decided what the heck and gave it a try with them.

“Hey, were you guys involved in Kyle’s firing? He stole from my client, too. I’m just trying to locate him. The cops are trying to pin it on an innocent Mexican guy.” Neither said a word.

We walked all the way out into the parking lot together. They wanted to get my license plate, I guess. As I got in my car, the man leaned over to me and whispered. “Try the mine.”

“Wait, what?”

But he closed my door and stepped back. The woman thumped on the side of my car and signaled for me to leave. I backed out and headed to Sutter Creek. It wasn’t much, but I thought I’d gotten a crumb to work with.

Chapter 23

When I got back to Sutter Creek, I updated Cliff on my efforts. He thought that Kyle was a good lead. He told me more about his interview with the police. They’d talked to Fausto, the gardener, and the red-headed pool boy that Charles had mentioned. Both insisted they’d never been in the house and knew nothing about anyone going up on the roof or stealing anything. They both claimed to be home in bed the night of the murder. There was no evidence that either had anywhere near the education or skill to build a robot.

The cause of death had been determined to be strangulation. Attempts to lift fingerprints or DNA samples from her body had been unsuccessful. The killer had no doubt used gloves. So far the police were going along with the sheriff’s office that Mendoza killed Bernice, although they seemed to agree that someone else had to have done the robbery. They’d been unable to lift usable prints from the cat play structure, but they’d confiscated it. They thought maybe if they ever found the person who built it, they might be able to match the wood grain if he still had some of the original lumber. Apparently they can even do DNA matching on wood now, but they hadn’t found any wood to try to match either at Bernice’s house or Mendoza’s trailer, and even if they’d found a match, there were probably hundreds of pieces of lumber from the same tree out there somewhere.

This update had been in the car. I'd picked Cliff up in front of the police station. We went back to McNabb's house from there. Charles was back from his morning stint at the tasting room. "You two make any headway?" he asked.

"We're just getting started," Cliff replied. "But I think we made pretty good progress." He explained what had happened at Correa's and in court.

"Well, that's good. It sounds like you've given Miguel a chance."

"Maeva, tell him what you found about the coin seller."

I explained about Theo and Kyle and the casino. "Do you know what he was talking about when he said 'try the mine'?"

"Of course. That's my family's mine. It's a tourist attraction now. They call it the Kennedy Mine. My grandfather is actually the one who discovered the gold, but Kennedy took all the credit. There was another partner, too, and they all got rich. My grandfather took his gold and had it turned into the coins, then sold his share of the mine and invested the proceeds in land. It continued to produce until 1942, then was closed. It's over a mile deep, one of the deepest mines in America. I surmise this Kyle fellow works there now."

"We'll check that out," Cliff said. "But I have to talk to you about something else. The police have checked out almost everyone except Leonard. I haven't told them about Leonard's experience out of deference to you, but I think it's going to come out eventually if the defense attorney does her job. She'll tie the theft together with the murder and then show that there are other suspects."

Charles stiffened. "I'm sure it wasn't Leonard. That's not possible. And I doubt the public defender is going to be able to investigate more thoroughly than the police. She can name all these other people, this Cho fellow, Ben, the mysterious furnace salesman as suspects. She doesn't need more. You haven't told her about Leonard, have you?"

"No, but don't underestimate her abilities. Besides, none of these other so-called suspects look very likely. The police seem to have eliminated them all. Leonard is much more credible as a robot-maker at least theoretically and more likely to raise reasonable doubt."

"I don't want my family thinking they're under suspicion, believing that I think he's a thief. I won't have it. We talked about this earlier."

"Perhaps if I talked to Leonard first he might voluntarily talk to the defense attorney ..."

“No! Absolutely not. I forbid it.”

Cliff sat back stiffly at the rebuke. “As you wish. I won’t say anything to her.” Cliff fiddled with his notes awkwardly for a minute then put on what I recognized as a fake smile. Cliff and I went upstairs. I noticed that the place was showing the signs of having lost the housekeeper. Dust lay heavy on windowsills and shelves. Cat hair was all over. Charles was still downstairs so Cliff decided he could talk frankly.

“If Mendoza is really innocent, and we think he is, Correa needs to know about Hawke. I promised I wouldn’t tell her, but you didn’t.”

“Wait a minute! No way. If the client says no, that’s the end of it. Your promise bound us both. That’s not like you, Cliff.”

“Okay, okay, you’re right. I’m sorry. I just don’t want an innocent man convicted. Let’s focus on what we can for now. Why don’t you check out that Kennedy mine online. See if there’s a tour today or tomorrow. I’m going to call the office and have Woody see if he can identify Kyle. He can do it faster there than me using my laptop on this spotty wi-fi.”

I went back to my room and looked up the mine. It has an interesting history. Charles was right. It’s one of the deepest gold mines in the world. The features in the tour include a spot where they melted gold flakes into bricks for shipment to the San Francisco Mint. There’s tailing wheels, steam boilers, and a testing facility where ore is checked to see if it’s rich enough to be worth mining. There’s much more and the admission is free. But for a fee they also give guided tours that give you a history. They used to allow people to go into the mine itself, but no longer. The facility is only open to the public on weekends, though. Today was Friday, so that would have to wait until tomorrow.

Then my phone rang. It was Jayden, the reporter. His name popped up on the display. I’ll be damned, he figured out how to reach me even though I hadn’t given him my number. He’s more resourceful than I gave him credit for. “Hello, Jayden.”

“Yeah, it’s me, Jayden.”

“I know. That’s why I said ‘Hello, Jayden.’”

“Right, right.”

“So, you got my phone number somehow. Bully for you.”

“Yeah. Sorry about that, but I called your office and told the girl there that I had some urgent information to help in your investigation in Sutter Creek and needed to reach you.”

I made a mental note to talk to Ashley about that. She's not supposed to give out the number. She should have called me directly and asked if it was okay. It's hard to blame her, though. We used the same ploy to get in to see Correa. She was only trying to help. "And do you?"

"Do I?"

"Do you 'have urgent information to help in the investigation'?" I tried to imitate his breathless tone.

"Oh. Well, kinda. I have a source over at ... well, a source who says that sheriff's department detectives were in with the Sutter Creek Police about an hour ago. There was some arguing going on. I don't know exactly what about, but the source heard the words 'other suspects' in there. I kinda figured it was to do with what happened in court."

"Jayden, you surprise me. That's good work. Woodward and Bernstein, move over." I could almost hear him blushing over the phone.

"Oh, shit, no, but, uh, thanks. So I thought you'd want to know."

"Yes, I do. Thank you. So did you get anything else?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe? Jayden, let's not play games here. Do you have something more for me or not?"

"I'm sorry. I thought ... oh shit, well, can I meet you again? It's already up on our website, about the robot, I mean. My editor is really jazzed about this and I thought if I help you, maybe you can tell me more about this robot thing. Do you have pictures? I ..."

"Whoa. If I had pictures I couldn't give them to you. Your best bet is the defense attorney. If they existed, the police and sheriff's office would have them. If they have them, they would have to be turned over to the defense. You heard the judge."

"That doesn't help me. Why would she..?"

"Jayden. Are you listening? It's in her interest to let the potential jury pool out there – that's your readers – know that there was a robot committing a robbery that same night Bernice was killed in the place she worked; in other words, that this wasn't a simple domestic matter. Assuming it wasn't. If someone were to ask her if there was a photo OR VIDEO of that robot in police possession, don't you think she would demand a copy? And release it to the newspaper?"

"Video? If I could get video, my editor would put this out over the wire for sure. Thanks, Maeva, that's rad. I'll call her right now."

A thought occurred to me. “Hold it. There’s more. I’ll meet you. Where are you now?”

“Jackson, the newspaper office.”

“Where we were talking before? I can be there in twenty minutes.”

“No, don’t come here. I need to go there. They want photos of the McNabb house for the next story.”

“Jesus, okay, I guess I can’t stop you. It’s a public street, but don’t tell anyone I gave you permission for that, because I didn’t.”

“Off the record. I know. Don’t worry, I’ll stick to the deal.”

“Okay, when you get here, text me. You have my number now. I’ll come out, but do it when no one’s on the street looking.”

“You got it. See you in half an hour.”

I went next door to tell Cliff, but he’d gone downstairs again and was talking to Charles. They were going over the list of people who’d been in the house, especially those who’d been in the office. There were no new names, but if you included everyone who might have gone down the hall to use the bathroom, it was over a dozen people. No doubt there were more. Charles didn’t keep a log of bathroom usage, of course, and just couldn’t remember every houseguest he’d had over the years.

I told Cliff what I wanted to do, which was to release the videos of the robot to the paper. He reluctantly agreed with me. He explained to Charles, “The videos are already in the hands of the police. With the court order today, they’re going to be in the hands of the public defender by the end of the day, probably. Tomorrow at the latest.”

“But that’s not public,” Charles objected.

“There’s no gag order, so there’s no violation of any law or court order. The defense attorney could be the one to release them, and almost certainly would very soon. This way, if we do it anonymously, the paper can say that they’ve obtained a copy of the video which the police have kept from the defense. It makes them look bad, like they know it exonerates Miguel.”

“I see. Very well. I’m happy to help Miguel, but I still need to know who killed her and who stole my coins.”

“Of course.”

A few minutes later the text came and I met Jayden outside, hopping in his car quickly. We drove off and parked in the back of the local recycling center. “Pull out your phone,” I told him. He did. “I’m going to share three

videos with you. You got these from ‘a source close to the investigation.’ Got it?”

He was almost salivating, but nodded agreement. We weren’t near a wi-fi hotspot so he had to use his data minutes and it took a long time for the videos to download. They were already in the cloud so I didn’t have to upload anything, only click the share and put in his email.

While they were downloading, I made a confession. “Okay, you can’t name me as your source on this either, but I was the ‘relative’ who was visiting Bernice and discovered the body.”

“What!? You said you weren’t.”

“No, I said I wasn’t related to Bernice, which is the truth. I told the neighbor lady I was a relative because I didn’t want to go into the whole rigamarole with her. I’m sure that’s where you got your information. Which was inaccurate, by the way. Everything I’ve told you has been the truth.”

“Why’d you change your mind about the video?”

“I had to talk to my boss and Mr. McNabb. This is going to blow the whole thing open and it’ll be harder for us to do our job, but it’s going to come out very soon anyway. I wanted to give you the scoop. Like you said, you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours.”

I saw him look at my torso at that last remark and for a second I imagined him pawing my body. Poor choice of words. “Eyes front, Jayden. I didn’t mean that literally.”

He corrected his eye wandering and met mine. “Outstanding, Maeva.” Before he could go on, the first video finished downloading. He started watching the robot cross from the center of the living room to the cat structure. Of course, he couldn’t tell that it was a cat structure since the camera was sitting on it and looked out over the room. “This is incredible. Oh. My. God. This is going on our website tonight.”

“Just wait for the other two.”

When the other two finished playing, I was just glad I wasn’t laundering his underwear that night. He could hardly contain himself. “I gotta get back and get this on the website. Man, I can’t thank you enough.”

“Hold on. Let’s get this straight. The story credits everything to a source close to the investigation. Put in that part about the argument in the police station with the sheriff’s detectives, then this. If you do it right, you can make it look like they all came from the same source without actually saying so.”

“But my source at the P.D., I mean, my source ...”

“Jayden, you know I can’t unhear you. It was obvious your source was at the P.D. already, anyway. Who else could overhear a conversation that took place there? If you’re going to be this careless about my identity, you’re not going to get any more help from me.”

“Right. Right. Sorry. I won’t. I swear. But I don’t want h... them ... to get fired.”

“Your source took the risk. Telling you one thing or three things doesn’t really increase that risk. This is the biggest case you’re ever likely to handle, so don’t blow it. Just trust me and suck up the glory while you can. Did you get the photos of the house while you were outside?”

“Shit, no. Thanks for reminding me. Now I do have to get back.”

He drove me back to the house. There was no one around; I hopped out and went inside quickly. He stayed outside taking photos for a few minutes. The light was good for that. Cliff was still talking to Charles. They were on the topic of Libby.

“You told me she came over to let the police in to search the house while you were in Scotland.”

“That’s right.”

“What did you tell her exactly about what had happened, why the police were searching?”

“I told her there’d been a break-in and that some things were stolen. I said the police wanted to dust for prints and look for clues. That’s all. I didn’t mention the robot.”

“You didn’t tell her about the gold coins?”

“She asked me what was taken and I told her some collectible coins from my office. I didn’t tell her they were gold or that they were worth thousands or that they had gotten into the safe, if that’s what you mean.”

“Did she seem surprised you had collectible coins?”

“What are you getting at? You aren’t trying to cast suspicion on her now are you?”

“No, no, not at all. You told me before that she didn’t know about the gold in the safe, but parents don’t always know what their kids really know about them. It’s hard to keep secrets in a family. She might have peeked in one day when she was little and saw you open the safe. Your wife may have told her about them and told her not to tell anyone. I’m trying to see if maybe

she could have said something to someone else. If she wasn't surprised, she might have known about the coins already."

"I'm sure she didn't know. She didn't seem surprised, but that doesn't mean she knew about the gold in the safe. I have those silver dollars mounted in my office. She knew I dabbled in coins, but she didn't know that I did that only so the coin sorter would look normal."

"Those silver dollar collections are still there. Did she seem surprised when she saw them there?"

"I don't know. I was in Scotland when she came to the house to let the police search. I saw her when I came back and she never said anything about it."

Cliff's phone rang. He let it ring two or three times before looking at it, then he noticed it was the lawyer, Correa. He answered. I only heard his end of the conversation, but from that I gleaned that she had just received some of the Sutter Creek police reports the court had ordered. She must have asked how long Cliff would be in the area because he told her probably through the weekend, but wasn't sure after that. He seemed upbeat at what he was hearing. He agreed to meet her in forty minutes.

"We're going back over to Correa's. She got some of the discovery."

"Right now?" I asked. "It won't take forty minutes."

"I want to look at the press coverage before we go. It's going to be important to know what's public knowledge when we talk to her. Do you have the link to the Ledger's website?"

I sent it to him. He and I both looked at it, me on my phone, him on his laptop. Charles didn't use his phone for web surfing yet. He was still bound to his desktop, but he sat next to Cliff on the sofa and read over his shoulder. There was a thin red banner at the top saying BREAKING NEWS followed by a huge headline reading "Robot Robber in Sutter Creek." There were no pictures yet, but I expected there would be within the hour. Jayden wouldn't have had time to get that to his editor yet. The story below read as follows:

In a surprise twist in Amador Superior Court today the defense attorney for accused murderer Miguel Mendoza claimed that the killing of Mendoza's wife last spring was related to the robbery of the house of leading citizen Charles McNabb of Sutter Creek, a crime she claimed was committed by a robot. Informed sources have confirmed

that a robot was in fact used to enter the McNabb house at night, the same night Bernice Mendoza was killed, apparently with the purpose of committing a robbery.

The defense counsel, Lydia Correa, implied that the sheriff's office knew the crimes were related but did not provide police reports because they knew the defendant was not capable of building a robot. The court ordered the district attorney to provide all the police reports related to the robbery of McNabb's house to the defense. The district attorney's office confirmed that they are in the process of collecting those reports, which should be turned over to the defense by the end of the day. Prosecutor Roger Butts described the issue as "a routine discovery matter" and said the material had not been previously provided because it was irrelevant to the murder case.

"So all they've put out so far is what happened in court. That's going to change soon." Cliff seemed relieved. As soon as he said that I got a text from Jayden telling me to check the Ledger website. I told Cliff to refresh the page and I did the same on my phone. The headline was the same but the article had updated. Jayden now had a byline. There was a still photo of the robot just under the headline, obviously taken from the video.

The first paragraph was unchanged but the second one was pushed to the bottom. In between was the following:

According to a source, the sheriff's department detectives working on the murder case were arguing with Sutter Creek detectives after the court hearing. The Ledger has obtained a copy of a video of the robot from McNabb's security system (see photo). It can be seen crossing the living room, entering the office and opening a safe there, then returning to the living room where it disappeared up the chimney. The full video will be uploaded to this site as soon as feasible.

We have also learned that the person we reported last spring as a relative visiting the murder victim and the one who discovered the body was in fact Mayva Hanson, a private detective hired by McNabb to investigate the robbery. She and her partner, Cliff Nolls, appeared

in court at the morning hearing and represented to the court they were there as McNabb's representatives.

Below that was a photo of McNabb's house with a caption identifying it as the location of the robbery.

"The cat's out of the bag now. Expect reporters at your door, Charles. You may want to stay at a hotel for a few days." Cliff tried to sound sympathetic.

"Oh, my. I just returned from Scotland and I found traveling to be more trying than I had expected. I'm not so young any more. I just want to stay in my own home. I can ignore them. I'll unplug my house phone. No one but you, Libby, and the office have my cell number. If they get too obnoxious in front of the house you can shoo them away."

"That's not a good use of my time and could backfire if it looks like I'm too heavy-handed. It's better to use the police. I'll call them now. You should call Joe to give him warning and have him let the company personnel know not to comment about it. You should call Libby, too."

"I need to call Libby first. She'll be hurt if she hears it on the news first."

"All right, do that, but then Joe."

Cliff called the number Dillon had given him. A woman's voice answered and Cliff had to go through a waiting game with her, but Dillon finally came on the line. "Knowles, what the hell did you do? There's a reporter from a Sacramento TV station calling asking my chief about the robot."

"I didn't do anything. There was a reporter for the local paper in the court room this morning like I told you earlier, but I never talked to him or any other press. This is the first I've heard about a TV reporter. That's why I'm calling, though. Take a look at the Ledger website. They've got the video. The town is going to be flooded with reporters soon. I'm requesting assistance at Mr. McNabb's residence. He was named and there's a picture of his house."

"Are there any out there now?"

"No, I don't think so. The doorbell hasn't rung."

"Tell him not to answer the door or the phone unless he knows who it is."

"I did, but I think there could still be trouble."

“Thanks to you. You leaked that video, didn’t you?”

“The article says their source knew about an argument in your police station. I think you should be looking inside your own department. It doesn’t matter, anyway. The court ordered everything be turned over to the defense. It was bound to come out.”

“She ordered the police reports to be turned over, not physical evidence like the video.”

“So you didn’t include it? If the D.A. told you not to, you’re both in hot water. I don’t think the judge will see it that way. But let’s worry about that later. I have to go. Just provide protection for Charles, will you?”

“Shit. Okay, I’ll give you the number for Dispatch and let them know of the situation. He can call them directly and an officer will respond, but tell him to do that only if he really needs to. We’re a small department and we’re not bodyguards.” He gave Cliff the number. Cliff wrote it on a scrap of paper and handed it to Charles, who was busy leaving a voice message for Libby.

I hit the bathroom while I had the chance and when I came out Cliff was ready to get going. We got in the car and headed for Jackson. Charles’s cell phone rang as we were going out the door. I would have liked to have heard the conversation, assuming it was Libby, but we didn’t get a chance.

Chapter 24

We got to Jackson but didn’t head downtown to where we’d met Correa before. I asked Cliff where we were going and he explained that Correa had told him the conference room there was being used by another agency, so we were headed for her home.

Her home, which doubled as her office, was a small, older home on Alma Street. It was modest, but the exterior was neat and tidy. There was no sign advertising this as a law office. She probably was violating a city ordinance about conducting a business in a residential zone. We knocked and she answered promptly.

“Thank you for coming,” she said, relief evident on her face. She stepped aside as we entered and waved her hand at an array of cardboard boxes in the living room. There were papers scattered all over the large central coffee table. Clearly this was evidence from the case. “You’re a trained investigator. I’ve never handled anything this big. I don’t know what

to look for. I need your help. You wanted to see the police reports. Well, here's your chance."

I was surprised at the volume of material. Most of it was actually from the sheriff's office, but the boxes that were open were from the Sutter Creek Police Department. That was apparently the stuff that had just been delivered to her based on the court order. She had probably reviewed the sheriff's material already.

"Have you shown this to your investigator?" Cliff asked.

"Not yet. I told you what he said before about pleading out the case."

"You told me he was buddy buddy with the sheriff's office. There's some hard feelings between the departments. He'd probably be eager to tear apart the work of the police department. That would help your client."

"Oh. Good point. I hadn't thought of that. I'll give him a call."

"That can wait. We're here now and want to look at this stuff, as you said, so let's all have a crack at it, shall we? Have you seen the news on the Ledger website?"

"No. What is it? They report how the court hearing went?"

"Yes. They broke the story of the robot and even posted a video from McNabb's security set-up. You can actually see the robot open the safe."

"A video! I didn't get any video. Just papers."

"You can use that with the judge, although the police told me the order only included police reports, not physical evidence."

"Bastards!"

"Anyway, you'll be inundated with reporters soon, I imagine. One from Sacramento already called the police chief for comment on the court order. Once the video gets circulated, you're going to be busy with them, I imagine."

"I can use that. There's no gag order so I can say whatever I want."

I pulled up the video from the newspaper website and handed her my phone to watch it. She was as incredulous as everyone else when they first saw it. In the meantime, Cliff had pulled out a couple of volumes from the police reports. He handed one to me and started reading the other.

My volume contained interview reports with Ben and Cho. Just as the police had told us earlier, Cho had told them he was in jail that night and they had verified that. His alibi was solid. Of course, he could still have built the robot and Ben could have operated it. He had told them about the Arduino board, which showed that he at least knew enough about robotics to

understand what circuitry was necessary. The report spelled it as “ardingo” just as Dillon had pronounced it. I scanned the tabletop and saw a stack of the small size Post-Its and stuck one on that page with the correct spelling. It may sound petty and judgmental, but you can really make the police sound stupid by pointing out spelling and grammar errors in official reports, especially to a judge, who likely is good at spelling and grammar, but you have to be careful in front of a jury since they aren’t likely to be any better at those things and may resent it. It’s a useful tactic.

They had interviewed Ben and his mother, Estelle, and both had confirmed that he had been home that night, but of course they didn’t sleep in the same room and there wasn’t any way to confirm that. Ben was certainly physically able to climb up on the roof. They had interviewed neighbors all around the house for several blocks. There were pages and pages of writeups from them. A few had security cameras, but they weren’t very close to Charles’s house. One commercial camera caught what was probably the robber’s truck passing by. It was at an intersection on Main Street so there was light from the street light, but it was blurry and just showed an unmarked box truck heading out of town toward Jackson.

I realized that I’d been absorbed in reading reports for a half hour or so when I heard Cliff saying something to Lydia about McNabb. “What did you say?” I asked.

“Look at the interview the police did with Mr. McNabb,” he replied and handed me the report. It was several pages long, but he held the binder with his thumb on the spot he wanted me to read. It was where they had asked him about who else had access to the house and whether they knew about the safe. His thumb was on part where he mentioned his family. He’d told them the same thing he’d told us, that Libby knew about the safe but not about the coins inside. They’d asked what education and job she had and he’d described her as an elementary school teacher who knew nothing about technology. When they asked if she visited the house, Charles had told them she came to visit occasionally with her four-year-old son. The report then went on to mention others like Joe and Estelle.

“So his daughter knew,” Correa said. “Is she a suspect?”

“I’m not suggesting that,” Cliff answered. “I have no reason to believe she could build a robot or would have any motive to steal from her father. I’ve never met her and can’t comment beyond that.”

“There’s something you’re not telling me. What is it?”

“That’s shoddy police work.”

“Why?”

“Where’s the follow-up questions?”

“Like what?”

“Like the daughter’s address. Did they ever interview her? I looked for a report of that and didn’t find one.” He looked at me expectantly. I flipped through the binder I was working on and shook my head no. He went on, “They would have written down her address and phone number here if he’d provided it.”

“I guess, but so what, if she’s not a suspect? You think he lied about her technical skill or something else? Her son is just a little kid. He can’t be the one.”

“True.”

“Then what?”

“Do you know how children are made?”

“What the f...” Then the light dawned. “The father. There’s nothing about the boy’s father. You’re telling me to look at him.”

“I’m only pointing out shoddy police work. You’d think they would have asked if she was married and what her husband did and whether he visited, too. I’m not saying anything about my client’s family.”

“Right. Cool. I get it. But if she was married, why didn’t McNabb tell them about the husband?”

“I wasn’t there and I’m not going to speculate about why he answered questions as he did. People tend to answer only what is asked. Why didn’t the police ask? As I said, it’s shoddy police work. Do you have the report from the sheriff’s office of their interview of McNabb?”

She pointed to one of the other boxes. “It’s somewhere in that one.”

Cliff dug through the box until he found it. Their interview focused mainly on Bernice and Miguel, but they had asked Charles about the robbery and who might have known about the safe. He’d told them that he’d gone through all that with the police and they should get that report. I started to say something when he told us that, but he cut me off. I could tell he didn’t want Correa to hear us discuss it, so I shut up.

Cliff went back to reading the police reports so I did the same. The police had gone to all the local car and truck rental companies, even all the way to Stockton, and tried to identify who might have rented the truck, but there were too many possibilities. None of them seemed to fit the time frame

well and without a good description of what kind of truck it was and any markings or paint job, that lead went nowhere.

When I finished that binder I grabbed the next one. It showed that the police had contacted a dealer who specialized in gold, including bullion coins, and asked if anyone had tried to sell him any 1874-S Liberty double eagles recently. He'd said no, but he told them he'd put an alert in the group forum that certified gold dealers used. That was followed by dozens of reports of dealers all over the country reporting some individuals coming in with those exact coins. They were obviously more common than I'd thought and the police couldn't follow up on them all. There was only one fairly local transaction listed, and that was in Sacramento. They'd traveled there and interviewed the dealer. The coin had been part of a set mounted in a frame with other collectible coins, none of them double eagles. A woman in her sixties, accompanied by her son, had come in and said her husband had been a collector and had passed away. Now she was liquidating his collection. She had old receipts for most of the coins, including the double eagle. The dealer said he recognized the receipts as legitimate ones from other dealers or from his own firm. That lead, too, was a bust. The police had given up that line of inquiry after a month.

There was another lab report, this one on the light bulb taken from the front porch light, the one that was removed. It had been dusted for prints, but the only prints were Bernice's. That would be consistent with Bernice having replaced the bulb originally, since that was part of her job. If she hadn't loosened it, whoever had done so had probably used gloves. The burglar had probably done it in preparation for a later attempt. Obviously he couldn't have loosened it the night of the murder. He would have shown up on camera just before it went dark since the light was triggered by a motion sensor and so was the camera. The police had reviewed all thirty days of video from the front camera and nothing had been on it like that, so whoever it was had planned well in advance. This was consistent with what the police had told Cliff.

Cliff tapped me on the shoulder. "Look at this." He handed me another police report. This one was an interview with a locksmith in Placerville, the closest one they could find. He'd told them that he'd never seen or even heard of a Bostic safe and didn't know how to open one other than by drilling it. He said any qualified locksmith could drill one but beyond that he didn't know of anyone who'd be able to pick it or program a robot to

open one. He told them that Bostic was no longer in business because he knew all the safe makers active today. They apparently gave up on that angle since there wasn't any more.

"That's something we should follow up on," he said.

"How?"

"Ellen might be able to help." Ellen is his wife. She's an FBI agent.

"Okay." Right then my phone rang. It was Theo, the guy from the pawnshop. I knew the phone number, although his name was blocked. I answered. "Hello?"

"Uh, hi, Carol?" Carol was the name I had used with him.

"That's me."

"I talked to my friend and he said to tell you he doesn't have any more of those coins, so we can't do the deal. I'm sorry."

"Hold on. He said to tell me he doesn't have any more, or he doesn't have any more? Telling and having are two different things."

"Uh, he doesn't have any more. That's what I meant."

"Theo, I can up the price. Really, if he can get more, there's some real money in it. Let me talk to Kyle and let's see what we can do."

"Kyle? How'd you get his name?"

"Your boss told me. Look, maybe if I could talk to Kyle one-on-one. I'd make sure you got your finder's fee. What's Kyle's last name? How do I reach him?"

The line went dead. I looked at my phone in disgust.

"No deal with Theo, huh?" Cliff said.

"Right. I think I scared him."

"Or scared Kyle. That reminds me. I should call Woody and see if he's come up with anything."

Cliff called the office and got a hold of Woody. I heard Cliff start to tell Woody about the newspaper article and video, but he obviously got interrupted. Woody was all excited and not in a good way. I learned that reporters were already coming to the office and had scared the bejeesus out of Ashley, sticking a camera right in her face. Woody hadn't known what was going on or why they were there and he was giving Cliff a piece of his mind. Cliff is a pretty imposing guy, but Woody is too, someone my mom would say was 'not someone you want to meet in a dark alley.' Is there anyone you'd want to meet in a dark alley? Anyway, Cliff acted chagrined and admitted he should have warned Woody about the press coverage. Woody had

been able to get rid of the reporters with a few ‘no comments’ but he was glad he’d been in when they arrived. If Ashley had been there alone it could have gone south and she might have been more traumatized. The phone had been ringing off the hook, too, figuratively speaking, since phones didn’t have hooks anymore.

After Cliff endured the tongue lashing, he managed to get Woody to tell him that he hadn’t had any luck. There were too many Kyles and without a more definite location or name or description, there wasn’t much he could do. Since he already had Theo’s name and address, he’d tried to see if he could find a record of those two together through Google or otherwise. He assumed Kyle was probably about the same age as Theo since they were buddies, which meant the mid-twenties. That meant he’d have been born in the mid-1990’s, probably in California, but that hadn’t helped. There were over seven thousand Kyles born just in California from 1993 through 1996, Woody informed us. Good to know.

Woody was still complaining to Cliff when Cliff got a second call on his call waiting. It was Charles, so Cliff told Woody he had to go and took the other call. Reporters had begun to show up at McNabb’s house, too, it seemed. He wasn’t frightened and had simply not opened the door, but he was concerned because when he’d talked to his daughter on the phone, she’d become upset with him for not telling him about the whole thing. She’d insisted on coming over immediately to give him support in dealing with the press and police, even though he had tried to dissuade her.

“We’d better go,” Cliff told Correa. But here are other potential suspects the police have identified for the robbery.” He used the Post-Its to mark the reports on Ben, Cho, Estelle, Fausto the gardener, and the pool boy. There was a thick binder that he hadn’t said anything about yet and he put a sticker on that one, too. “That’s Joe, McNabb’s partner.”

“And his son-in-law,” Correa said slyly, adding, “which you didn’t tell me about.”

Chapter 25

Cliff asked me to drive so that he could call Ellen. He reached her and explained about the safe. He asked her if she could get the name and number of the FBI’s safe expert, or if not, another expert willing to talk.

I asked Cliff what he had seen in Joe’s file.

“I didn’t really have much time to look at that, but I talked to the police about him some after you left this morning. It’s obvious he’s their prime suspect. Judging from the thickness of that binder, they did quite a thorough workup on him.”

“Does he know anything about robotics?”

“Not that they could find, but he was an electronics technician in the navy back when he was nineteen or twenty. They think he’s capable. And he’s in deep debt. He had to borrow heavily to buy out his half interest in McNabb’s business.”

“He’s, what, fifty years old? Navy electronics thirty years ago probably consisted of stringing wires and plugging in tubes in the radar. That’s nothing like programming a robot.”

“You may be right, but that’s where they’re headed. They say he has no alibi other than sleeping in his own bed at night.”

“Is he married?”

“His wife was out of town, visiting her sister. And he has a criminal record, or at least that’s how they describe it.”

“You’re saying it wasn’t?”

“Drunk and disorderly, again back in his twenties. He’s from the Jackson area and returned there after the navy. It seems he got in some squabbles in a local bar a couple of times.”

“No thefts, fraud, shoplifting?”

“No.”

“That’s not relevant then. A bar fight thirty years ago doesn’t make someone likely to steal from his partner.”

“Tell it to the police.”

“We haven’t talked to Joe. We should do that.”

“That can wait. We’ll probably have to go through the same drama with Charles. He’s not going to want us to make Joe think Charles doesn’t trust him.”

“He doesn’t trust those close to him now, but he doesn’t want us to upset any of them by investigating them. What’s he paying us for then?”

“We’ll do what we have to do, but let’s hold off on Joe for now. He doesn’t look like a promising suspect to me, but he may be able to provide more information about Miguel and Bernice.”

“Okay, so what’s going to happen at the house?”

“Charles said there are at least two camera crews set up there. One was CNN and the other he couldn’t tell. He’s not answering the door.”

“Do we want to go in the front door? We’ll get photographed. If we try to talk to anyone else, like Kyle if we ever find him, we’ll be recognized.”

“I don’t see any way to avoid them. Charles wants us there for when Libby arrives and there’s no way into the back yard except from the front. You saw those fences. We’ll just walk in the front like we belong there. The important thing is not to talk to the reporters and try not to look at the cameras. If they don’t get good visuals and no sound bites they probably won’t put us on the air. They have other people who are more willing to appear on camera and more desirable as interviewees, too – the police chief, sheriff, Lydia, the D.A., Bernice’s neighbors. ”

“I could have brought my blond wig.”

“But you didn’t. This isn’t an undercover op and I’m pretty hard to disguise with my size.”

I pulled my comb from my purse and used the mirror on the visor to tidy up a tad. I smiled. Nothing in my teeth, but I wasn’t planning on showing them. It had been a long day and my blouse was disheveled. I tucked it in again and reslotted a button that had come out of its buttonhole. At least I was dressed professionally for the cameras. I usually wear jeans and running shoes. I’d never had a case move this fast and I was never in the spotlight like Cliff, so I was nervous.

When we reached McNabb’s house I was pleased to see a police car out front. An officer was keeping the camera crews back from the house on the sidewalk. There were now three: CNN, an NBC national reporter I recognized, and a Sacramento station with an ABC logo on the camera and mike. CBS and Fox would be here soon, I surmised. We drove in the driveway as always and parked where we usually do. Fortunately, one of the massive trees in the front yard obscured our car from the street. When we got out of the car one of the reporters yelled, “Who are you? Are you the private detectives?” We didn’t answer and hurried into the house. I’d called ahead a minute ago to Charles to let him know we were arriving so he’d have the door unlocked for us.

“Thank you for getting back so quickly,” Charles said as we entered. “Libby was quite frantic.”

“Are reporters at her house?”

“No. Her name hasn’t been in the news. I don’t think anyone knows who she is.”

“They’re at my office. They’re probably over at the police station and sheriff’s office, too. Maybe Bernice’s. If you just don’t answer the door most of the ones here now will probably go over there. If you want I could go out, or Maeva to see where they are and ...”

“It’s just after five. We can see where they are just by turning on the early news.” Charles was no dummy. We all went up to the second floor where he had that big TV on the wall. The local news from Stockton was leading with the story:

“We have breaking news. A winery owner in Sutter Creek has been robbed by a robot. That’s right, a robot. We have video. Take a look at this. [The video played, showing it open the safe and then a cut to it disappearing up the chimney.] Ted, have you ever seen anything like it?”

“No, Lisa, I haven’t. That’s incredible. We have Bob Duncan in Sutter Creek now with the story. Bob, what can you tell us?”

[Duncan live in front of the Sutter Creek Police Station]

That’s right, Ted. I’m here in Sutter Creek where the police just released a video of a robot robbing the home of a winery owner here in town. You just played the video. That was taken by a security camera in the home of the victim, Charles McNabb. The robbery took place last spring, but the video is only being released now. It’s unknown what if anything was taken by the robot. The police are asking for anyone with any knowledge to come forward, even anonymously.

[Ted] What’s this about a murder? We have a report that the robot is connected to a murder.

[Bob] That’s right, Ted. I understand that a woman who worked for McNabb was killed the day after this video was taken. Her name was Bernice Mendoza. Her body was discovered by a visiting relative. Her husband Miguel Mendoza is currently being held awaiting trial for her murder. The District Attorney is not confirming that the two cases are related. He said that he was unable to comment on a pending prosecution but said that his office makes the safety of its citizens its highest priority. He assured the public that there is no threat to the public.

[Ted] Bob, what's this I hear about famed detective Cliff Knowles being on the case?

[Bob] That's right, Ted. As you may recall, Cliff Knowles is the retired FBI agent who tracked down the man who killed hundreds of death row inmates at San Quentin a few years ago and was involved in several other high profile cases. He appeared in the murder case hearing today with his assistant as a representative of Mr. McNabb. We can only guess that he thinks the murder and robbery are connected.

[Ted] Well, let's hope he can pull another rabbit out of the hat this time. [Photo of Cliff from six years earlier displayed behind the anchor.]

[Bob] That's right, Ted. We're still trying to get more information on the murder case and the robbery. I spoke to a neighbor of the murder victim a little earlier. We'll have that interview for you at six. Live in Sutter Creek, I'm Bob Duncan.

"Assistant!" I squealed. "I'm your goddam partner." Charles blanched at the cursing and I immediately apologized.

"That's about par for the course in my experience," Cliff said. "Let's count the errors. The video was released by the newspaper. Bernice was killed the same night, not the next day. We discovered the body, not a relative. The banner running across the bottom of the screen spelled my name N-o-l-l, and listed you as my assistant. That's five. And saying I believe the two crimes are connected, that makes six."

"You do believe they're connected," Charles objected.

"Yes, but I never told them or said publicly."

"He said they assumed it. Besides, you've told a lot of people: the police, the defense attorney. The sheriff's detectives."

"Yes, okay, you're right. But a reporter shouldn't be speculating. Maybe he did get someone to tell him that, but he should have reported it as coming from a source in that case. My point is that you can expect the news to get a lot of things wrong, mostly minor details, but the public starts to believe it and imagine even more bizarre things."

"I hadn't realized you were so famous. When I hired you I was just acting on the recommendation of my attorney. This might bring even more attention."

“It would be a big story anyway with the robot video, at least on television for a few days. It’s all about the visuals. Don’t worry. In two weeks at most the news cycle will have moved on to a forest fire or something, even locally. Barely over a third of Americans watch local television news.”

“I hope you’re right.”

We switched channels. Another local station had a similar report, this time with seven errors. The big three network news shows didn’t come on until 5:30 or 6:00, so we tried CNN. It was the last story of the half hour, but they teased the robot video before the commercial break. When they came back they showed the video and said it was from a robbery that had occurred in Northern California last spring and was only now being released by the police. There was no mention of the murder or of McNabb, Cliff, or me. They were either short on time or the reporter just hadn’t had time to get the whole story to the network yet.

We’d just finished when the front door opened. Libby hustled in with Leonard and Porter in tow. “Daddy! What is going on? How did this happen?” She ran over and hugged him. “It must be awful for you. We were listening on the radio on the way here.” She looked over at Cliff and stiffened. “I’m Libby Hawke. You must be Mr. Knowles.” She extended a hand like she was trying to pick up a dead rat.

Cliff shook it. “I am. Pleased to meet you. And this is my partner, Maeva Hanssen.” I shook, too. “And you must be Leonard Hawke.” Cliff reached out to him and Hawke stepped forward and shook. Hawke nodded at me and I reciprocated.

Libby was recognizable as the pretty blonde in the photos, but she was not at her best. She was heavier than in the pictures and wore no makeup. Her hair was clipped in a shapeless mass at the back of her head, but a dozen or more locks had escaped their bounds and dangled onto her neck. Leonard, darker than I’d remembered, had a more brooding look than in the picture. He was tall, almost as tall as Cliff, but much thinner, almost effeminate of build, though he had a strong jaw. Porter was cute enough as far as little boys go, but he ran up the stairs so fast that I didn’t get much of a look at him. I assumed he was headed for the third floor playroom.

“Daddy, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. You didn’t have to come.”

“You never told me Bernice was killed. When you went to Scotland you just said she’d passed away and needed me to open the house for the police because you’d had a break-in.”

“I did have a break in. I didn’t think it was necessary to mention the robot or the murder.”

“We were listening to the radio coverage on the way here,” Leonard added. “How on earth did a robot break in? Were you here when it happened?”

“Cliff is the one who sussed it out. Cliff, why don’t you explain.”

“It wasn’t actually a break-in. No doors or windows were broken. The robot was lowered through the chimney on a tether into the fireplace. It detached from the tether and traveled to the office where it opened the safe. Have you seen the video? It’s on the television news now.”

“A video! No, the radio didn’t say anything about a video. It must have been awfully small to get down through the chimney flue. How did it get into the hall? That step up is a major barrier to a robot that small. Did it have articulated wheel struts or legs?”

“No, it used the ramp on the cat structure. See for yourself on the video if you like.” He pulled out his phone and started playing the first robot video and handed the phone to Leonard. Libby and Leonard watched it intently, saying nothing. When it ended Cliff played the other two videos.

“Well that ramp was damn convenient. Whoever it was must have known the layout of the house awfully well. How could it get through the flue? Don’t you keep the damper closed?”

Cliff answered for Charles. “It was open. We think Bernice opened it for him.”

Leonard looked over to where the cat structure had been and seemed puzzled.

Libby saw his puzzlement and replied, “Honey, the police took it as evidence when they searched. Remember, I told you? I couldn’t figure out why.”

“Charles, where did you buy that?” Leonard asked.

His wife tapped his shoulder. “Don’t you remember? It was a gift. He kept asking us if we gave it to him? He said it came with a card or something.”

“My god. That was last Christmas. So you think someone built that specifically for the robot to use?”

“I do,” Cliff replied. “The cat doesn’t need a ramp.”

“I’d better check on Porter,” Libby said. “Excuse me a minute.” She headed up the stairs. I immediately thought of my room and tried to remember if there was anything dangerous in there. My purse was up there, but I couldn’t think of anything problematic in it. My papers and laptop were harmless enough. I knew our guns were both in the gun safe in the car.

“Let me see the video again, the one in the office,” Leonard said. Cliff played it for him. “That’s a pretty sophisticated piece of robotics. The vehicle is nothing. You can buy an RC car and put a flat cover on it. I think that’s exactly what he did. Look at the paint job on that part. But the extending arms and grippers. That takes some engineering skill, an Arduino, probably two electric motors in addition to the one driving the car. And he must have known the combination. It would take me months to build that and get it working right.”

“That’s our conclusion, too.”

“It left immediately after opening it. I didn’t see it take anything.”

“The safe was empty this time. This was actually the second attempt. Charles had had a theft from the safe last spring. That’s why he called us in to investigate. That’s why we set up the surveillance cameras and lights that got the video.”

“My god. The gold. Charles, did it get all your gold?”

Charles’s eyebrows shot up and his eyes took on the shape of poached eggs. “How’d you know about the gold?” he croaked.

Leonard looked abashed for a minute. “Oh, right. Libby told me not to mention it. She told me about it a long time ago, right after we got married. She said you had gold coins from your grandfather in your safe.”

“Libby! Come down here,” Charles bellowed, his voice back. After a pause he added, “Please.”

Libby came down the stairs hurriedly. “He’s fine. He’s playing with the telescope. What’s so urgent?”

“How did you know about the gold coins in my safe?”

“Oh that. Mom told me years ago. I knew you had something in there. I think I was twelve or thirteen. You closed your office door and said not to come in. I asked her what was going on. You never do that. She told me you had some gold coins from your grandpa and you were counting them, but she said not to let you know she told me. When you told me before your Scotland trip that they’d taken some coins I was confused at first because I saw the

framed ones still in your office, but then I figured it must have been the ones in the safe. I had no idea about a robot. I thought you must have left the door to the safe open or something. Did you lose a lot?"

"Sixty-four coins, that's all," Cliff answered.

"Sixty-four sounds like a lot to me," Leonard said. "What were they worth? Several thousand? You must have had more in there or the robot wouldn't have come back." He was quick on the uptake.

Charles scowled at this line of inquiry, but answered. "I have more but they're safely stored in a safe deposit box in Sacramento. Libby, you're listed as next of kin and successor owner if something were to happen to me. You'd be well taken care of."

"Oh, Daddy, I don't care about that. I'm just glad you got it out of the house. It's not safe to keep that much gold in the house, especially at your age and by yourself."

"I'm perfectly healthy. A little slower, I know, and my arthritis ... I mean I'm not some doddering old fool, you know."

"Daddy, I never said that." She hugged him again and I saw him tear up.

In the silence Cliff addressed Leonard. "So you sound like you know a lot about robotics. Do you have any theory about how to track down the maker of something like this? Maybe a kit seller?"

Leonard didn't reply immediately. His eyes narrowed and he looked at Libby. She was still hugging her dad and not looking at him. I kept my mouth shut. The silence went on long enough to be a little bit pregnant and Libby looked up. Something in Leonard's look clued her in to tension in the air. "What?"

"Mr. Knowles here thinks I did it." Hawke was one smart cookie. That's exactly what Cliff was trying to find out and Hawke had smelled it.

"I never said anything like that," Cliff replied.

"You were thinking it."

"I'm a lawyer as well as an investigator. I know how they think. When the defense counsel in the murder case, or the press for that matter, find out you know robotics and the house you'll have to become a suspect in the robbery at least. Knowing about the gold just makes it even worse. You'll need to be ready for that sooner or later."

"I make almost three hundred thousand a year at my company. Plus stock options. You really think I'd steal a few thousand dollars from my own

father-in-law and risk a jail sentence and losing everything? Leave my son and wife without a father or husband? Kill someone to cover it up?"

"Daddy, how could you?"

Charles shook his head so hard I thought it would come loose. "No, no, no. I never suspected you for a moment. I told Cliff not to interview you. I know you would never do such a thing. I was afraid of this."

I couldn't stay quiet any longer. "That's true. He was insistent, adamant even, that we not involve you. He assured us that you would never do such a thing. He trusts you, Mr. Hawke."

"And yet here I am being questioned about my knowledge of robotics. What next, a DNA sample? You want me to spit for you? I'm half tempted to give you my spit in my own way. Are you going to ask me where I was when this happened? I was probably in bed with my wife since that's where I always am in the middle of the night if I'm not on a business trip."

"I'm just doing my job. Were you on a business trip that night?" He turned the phone so Leonard could see the date stamp on the video. "If you don't want to answer me, you may have to answer this on the stand at a murder trial with the press taking down your answer and drawing a picture of you for national television. I'm just preparing you."

"He was with me at home," Libby said vehemently. "You're a horrible man. Why don't you just leave us alone."

"Come on, Cliff," I said. "Let's do that. They have some family issues to iron out." I tugged at his sleeve and he followed me upstairs. Libby was right behind us and sped to the third floor to retrieve Porter. I guess she thought we might hold him hostage or throw him out the window. She went back down the stairs.

We could hear them arguing, or at least talking rather heatedly, but couldn't make out the words. Cliff asked me to come into his room. "You know that Charles was actually relieved I brought it up with Leonard. He's suspected him all along, despite his words to the contrary."

"Yeah, I know. I saw that look you gave me at Correa's. When the police asked him about his family he intentionally omitted Leonard. Then when the sheriff's people did, he told them to get the police report. He's been worried sick but didn't dare take the initiative because he knew how they'd react. You were good at being the bad cop. Now he's off the hook."

"I knew you'd get it. I'm not sure he will. If he fires us, I guess we'll know."

“Do you really suspect him?”

“He’s the most likely candidate for all the reasons I said: skill, opportunity, knowledge of the house and gold, but I just can’t see it. Assuming he’s telling the truth about his salary and stock options it makes no financial sense, not to mention destroying his own family. Some people do things like that for the challenge, and he might be the type, but I bet he has even more interesting challenges trying to design self-driving cars.”

“I agree with you. I hope I’m not ever called to testify about this conversation. He told us he’d be able to build a robot like that.”

Cliff’s phone rang. It was Ellen. Cliff answered it and I started to leave, but he waved at me to sit down and stay, so I did. She’d called the FBI Lab and got hold of the safe expert. He said he couldn’t get involved unless the local police asked for his assistance. But when he found out who Ellen was, he agreed to do what he could. Ashley is the goddaughter of the FBI Director and Ellen is Ashley’s aunt. It’s a long story, but the bottom line is that Ellen and Cliff are well-known at FBIHQ to be friends of the Director. It helps. He called her back after a bit and gave her the name of an expert on safes, a retired engineer for another safe company now living in Los Angeles.

“Are we going to call right now?” I asked.

“Why not.” Cliff placed the call and put his phone on speaker so I could hear. “Hello, is this Mr. Chaudry?”

“It is. Who is this?”

“My name is Cliff Knowles. I’m a private investigator now but I used to be in the FBI. I got your name ...”

“You’re calling about the safe, right? The Bostic.” He had a slight Indian accent.

“Oh, then the FBI expert warned you I’d be calling.”

“No one warned me. I’ve been watching the CNN video on YouTube. You’re famous. Eleven thousand hits so far. Let me refresh the page. Okay, now thirteen thousand.”

“I, I don’t know what to say. Things are getting out of control with all this instant media. So you recognized the safe as a Bostic. How? You can’t read the name because of the overhanging cloth.”

“The position of the dial and handle, plus the piping around the bottom edge you can see. That’s a Bostic.”

“I’m trying to figure out how the burglar got the combination. Can you help me?”

“Is the combination 17 – 55 – 40?”

“I don’t know the combination. Are you able to read it from the video?”

“No, it’s too dark and too blurry. When he opens the door it comes into the light better, but the camera isn’t good enough to see the numbers with that weak lighting.”

“Then how did you know?”

“Bostic made good safes. They were popular back in the thirties and forties and fifties. We had some samples at our plant. We used to reverse engineer all the competitor’s safes. But they had one flaw. It wasn’t discovered until 1952, I think it was. The factory default combination was 17 – 55 – 40. They should have made it 0-0-0 like everybody else did, but they thought that the apparent randomness of it would make it more secure in case the owner never reset the combination..

“When the installer brought it in and set it up, he would tell the owner that combination but emphasize that he should change it immediately to a combination of his own choosing. The installer had instructions not to reset the combination for the owner because if there was ever a theft the company faced potential liability. The owner could say the only other person who knew the combination was the installer. So the installer would show them how to do it and leave an instruction booklet. It was relatively easy to reset it, but you know how people are. How many people change their computer default passwords, even systems admins? Hackers get in all the time that way.

“A lot of Bostic owners would change the combination but only the final number, which was the fastest to change. I think the owners weren’t told that the combination was the same as all the other Bostic safes. Most probably thought the combination was a random one chosen for this particular safe, so they only needed to change the one number or not even bother.”

“Why didn’t Bostic use a different combination for every safe and just leave a note with the safe with the combo, or use 0-0-0 like you said?”

“They did eventually, but it was too late. There was a theft of some very expensive jewelry – diamonds or something – from some socialite in Chicago back then, 1950 or so. The safecracker was eventually caught trying to fence the goods and it went to trial. It came out in the press somehow that he had opened the safe by using the factory combination. The defendant was a locksmith and had a manual from the Bostic company to always try that combination first before drilling it. Within days four more Bostic safes were

opened and big thefts happened. People couldn't get rid of them fast enough. All they had to do was reset the combinations, but most of the owners had lost the instructions or didn't know if the combination they had was the factory setting. They just dumped them and bought new ones from us or other companies. Bostic changed their policies as you said and offered to come and reset any owner's combination for free, but it was over. Almost no one would buy from them and the market was flooded with used safes for anyone who was willing. They went out of business within a year or two."

"Like I said, I don't know the combination. If it's something else, how could it be done? I've seen shows where the safecracker uses a stethoscope and ..."

Chaudry laughed. "That's just television. The wheels are silent when they turn, or that is to say, the tiny sound is the same whether the wheel is rotated to the correct position or any other position. It is only when the fence falls down into the slot that you can hear the noise. That only happens after you have the right combination, all three wheels turned correctly. You'd have to try thousands of combinations and have a good microphone right against the safe at just the right time. If the room is silent you can usually hear it without a stethoscope."

"So how would they do it?"

"I don't know. I'd drill it or use a plasma cutter, but then I'm not a safe-cracker. That's the whole point of a safe. It's very difficult to open without the combination. Check with the owner. If that's the combination, then you're probably dealing with a locksmith or someone with that kind of training, maybe someone who worked at a manufacturer, like me. If it's something else, then you're probably looking at an insider. Someone who obtained the combination from the owner somehow. Maybe he found it written on a piece of paper."

"Couldn't the robot do it by brute force? Try every combination? Robots can spin those dials very fast and very precisely."

"Does the dial have sixty numbers on it?"

"Yes."

"Bostics all had three wheels. If it was one of those owners who only changed the final number, you could try all sixty combinations in a few minutes. But otherwise, if all three numbers were reset, that's two hundred sixteen thousand combinations. A robot in perfect laboratory conditions could probably do it in thirty or forty hours, but the robot you have there can't do

the rapid turning. I can tell from the video. It would probably take seven or eight seconds for each combination. That's four hundred twenty continuous hours to do them all. Of course it could get lucky and hit the right combination early, but really, I don't think anyone would try that. That's seventeen days unbroken. Did the robot have some acoustic device on it? All I could see on the video was the gripping arm."

"I don't think so. We haven't recovered it."

"Then I don't think it had any way to know when it did hit the right combination. Whoever it was had the combination. Either the factory one or another."

"You've been a tremendous help. Thank you."

"My pleasure. Catch the bastard, will you? He's very clever. I was sort of rooting for him until I heard about the murder. You think the safecracker killed the woman?"

"It's a good bet, but we don't know. We're keeping an open mind."

"Good luck, then."

Chapter 26

While Cliff was on the phone I'd gotten a text from Correa. I had been too engrossed in the phone call then, but I opened it right afterward. It was a picture of a receipt for carpeting from a store in Jackson. It showed that Miguel had bought carpet material about a month before the cat structure was delivered to Charles. The accompanying text asked us to check it out. This was obviously part of the case the sheriff's deputies had against Miguel. Their theory must be that he'd built the cat structure, probably using Bernice to help him with dimensions and information like the fact Libby was coming for the holidays. There were a number of problems with that theory, including the fact the D.A. was arguing that the robbery was unrelated, but I could see where it might be persuasive to a jury if the two cases were tied together at trial. Correa's text said that Miguel claims he used the carpeting in his trailer for warmth since he was sleeping there by then.

I showed my phone to Cliff.

"Find out if the carpet store is open tomorrow. We shouldn't be shagging leads for her, but it may be on the way to the mine. Anything that casts doubt on the prosecution theory makes it more likely the sheriff's

detectives will start looking harder at who did the robbery. Text her back and ask her where Miguel's trailer is now and whether we can get in."

I texted her and got the location of the vineyard where the trailer was still parked. She didn't know whether it was accessible. She didn't have keys. Cliff seemed satisfied.

"Come on, let's ask Charles about the combination."

We went downstairs. Charles and his daughter were hugging. Hawke had poured himself a drink, a stiff one by the looks of it, and sat sullenly on the sofa.

"Charles, we need to talk to you," Cliff said.

McNabb turned to Cliff with fire in his eyes. "You've nearly destroyed the relationship with my daughter. I'm done with your services. Take your things and clear out."

"Leonard was going to become a suspect sooner or later. We had to go through this, as upsetting as it was. But I think I can prove that he didn't do it."

"How?"

"What's the combination to your safe?"

"What!? I'm not giving you my safe combination, especially after ..."

"Is it 17-55-40?"

I thought for a moment Charles would have a heart attack. His face drained of color and stuttered a moment before replying, "No! No, that's not it."

"I can tell from your reaction that it's either correct or very nearly right. That's a good thing. It's proof that Leonard didn't do it."

"I, I – you have to explain."

Cliff summarized the conversation with the safe expert. "That combination is the factory default. People are supposed to reset it. If that's the combination or there's only one number changed, Leonard wouldn't need a robot nor would anyone else. The safe could be opened by hand in a few minutes. He's lived in this house for days at a time while visiting. He could have come down in the middle of the night and opened it. Only someone without access to the house would need a robot."

Charles and Leonard looked at each other as relief washed over their features.

"The combination is 17-55-44. My father bought the safe when I was a little kid. Before that my grandfather had just hidden the gold in a false

panel in his office. When he passed and my parents moved into the house, my father knew that they needed to remodel and couldn't leave it there. Workmen would be opening up walls. He didn't tell me about it until I was much older, but he bragged about how he got the safe cheap from an insurance company who was getting rid of theirs. He knew about the Bostic safe being compromised, but he didn't know exactly how, only that a safecracker had gotten into one because he knew the combination. He told me he changed the combination. His birth year was 1917 and mine was 1944 so he thought this combination would be easy to remember. I suppose he just changed the final number as you said, thinking that would be enough."

"The thief has some knowledge of safecracking, then. He may be a locksmith. I assume that eliminates you, Leonard."

"Well, it's good to know after you accused me of being a murderer that you've then exonerated me," Leonard said, sarcasm dripping from every word.

"No one accused you of anything. Charles, tell me more about the security company you used for the cameras, HSS, wasn't it?"

"Yes, in Sacramento. What do you want to know?"

"Do you remember who came to the house – physical descriptions, names?"

"No names. There were two of them, I believe."

"Age, race?"

"I'm afraid I don't recall. Caucasian, I think. I'm sorry."

"Do you know if they're a full-service security company? They may be locksmiths or vendors of safes."

"I really can't say."

I added, "Cliff, whoever it was seemed to know that the videos from the exterior security cameras were only preserved for a limited time. That sounds like something a security company employee would know."

"Right."

Porter came down the stairs right then whining that he was hungry. It was approaching dinnertime.

"I don't think I have enough food in the house to feed everybody," Charles said. "Bernice used to do the shopping and I don't keep things stocked up very well."

Cliff said, "Maeva and I can go out. Maybe the press will follow us. You can wait and maybe make an escape if you want to go out."

We agreed on that plan. I washed up and grabbed a coat. We walked out to the car. I waved at the press gaggle as we drove off. It had grown in size. I noticed the police car was gone, but the reporters were staying off the property. He'd probably warned them. We decided to go into Jackson, hoping some reporters would follow us. One camera truck did, but most people stayed where they were.

We ate at a steakhouse. The service was slow, but we didn't mind. We wanted to give Charles and his family time alone. Cliff finally got a beer and I was happy to join him. It had been a stressful day. Cliff asked me about the store where Miguel had bought the carpeting. I told him it was here in Jackson. It was still light out when we finished eating so we decided to check it out. As we came out of the restaurant, the camera truck was still there. The reporter and camera operator approached us. Both were women.

"Mr. Knowles, are you working on the murder case?" The reporter asked. She was of average height, busty, and slathered in enough makeup to grease a hog. Her mike had a Fox News logo on it. She ignored me.

"No. The sheriff's office is handling that."

"What's your theory? Is Mendoza guilty?"

We started to get in the car.

"Is Mendoza an illegal immigrant?"

Cliff was already sitting and in the process of shutting the door, but he stopped and stepped out of the car. "Mr. Mendoza was born right here in California. He's an American citizen. You should be ashamed of yourself for asking." He got back in the car.

As he was closing the door, I yelled, "And I'm his partner, not his assistant." I'm not sure she heard me, but I felt better, at least for a moment. Then I felt ashamed for thinking about myself instead of about what Cliff had said. We drove off. The camera truck didn't follow us. They had a sound bite no one else had, so I guess that's all they needed.

"They didn't even ask about the robot," Cliff said. "I guess we can see where their priorities are."

"You told 'em."

"They won't use it."

We drove by the carpet store, but it was after closing. I knew it would be open tomorrow morning and it was on the way to the mine. The carpet store was near a Baskin Robbins so of course we had to stop for ice cream. It

was a hot summer evening and I must say the ice cream hit the spot. Steak and ice cream in one night. I felt almost decadent. We headed back to the house.

When we got there no one was there. They'd apparently gone out for a late dinner. We went up to our rooms. Cliff found a note on his bed. Charles said he needed the rooms for his family and asked us to find somewhere else to stay. We were being evicted by Post-It. This was a problem because it was late Friday and the height of the tourist season. Was this his way of firing us? His earlier admonition to us to get out had seemed to dissipate when we told the family about the Bostic information that exonerated Leonard. The note didn't make sense if he thought we were going home. We still had investigation to do in the area, so we had to find somewhere else to stay. We both started calling around and everyplace was full up.

I finally found a motel in Pine Grove with two rooms, ten miles up the mountain, but the owner said it was first come, first served. He didn't take reservations, so we grabbed our stuff and headed up there. We were in time and settled in. It was, shall we say, aesthetically and hygienically challenged. We considered driving back down to Sutter Creek to talk things out more with the family, but decided against it. We figured it was better to let the family work things out overnight. We retired to our separate rooms and called our spouses. The place at least had wi-fi, so I watched some Netflix on my laptop.

I tuned in to Fox News at ten o'clock. Of course it was mostly national news, but there was a short segment on the case. The coverage was led by the same busty-body who'd tried to interview us. She repeated Mendoza's name several times, but never actually called him a Mexican, so maybe Cliff's remark had had some impact. There was about twenty seconds of video of the woman holding the mike at Cliff, but not the audio from the exchange. Instead, she'd narrated over the silent video saying "legendary detective" Cliff Knowles was working on the case. This directly contradicted what he had said, but I can't say it was inaccurate. We were in fact working on the case, just trying to stay low-key. They spelled Cliff's name right in the caption this time. The robot video was played four times. Like Cliff had said, it's all about the visuals for TV news.

At eleven I switched to the local news. It was pretty much a rehash of the coverage we'd seen at five. That same Bob Duncan fellow provided his same insightful "that's right, Ted" analysis. I showered and went to bed.

The next morning Cliff and I grabbed breakfast at a local diner (the spoons weren't greasy and the food was surprisingly good). Cliff called Charles and put it on speaker. It turned out that the whole family had made up. As their understanding of Miguel's plight and how unlikely it was that he was guilty grew, Libby and Leonard began to support the idea of the investigation. They "forgave" us, if that's the right word. Cliff told them we were going to check out some leads in Jackson and would meet up with them in the afternoon.

We weren't sure whether we were going to stay there another night, so we took our stuff with us as we left, but we didn't actually check out. The motel had our credit card imprint, so they weren't going to lose anything.

We headed to the vineyard where Miguel's trailer was supposed to be. It was on the far side of Jackson, closer to the valley floor. The trailer was there all right, but there was police evidence tape on it.

"It's been over three months," Cliff grumbled. "Why is this still here?"

It was a rhetorical question, so I didn't answer. Instead, I watched as he tore the tape off and opened it up. The floor was covered in pieces of carpet cut to the shape of each section. There were two colors, a white shag and a dark reddish-brown. We didn't have the cat structure to compare, but we were both sure that neither of these matched the carpet material on that. Of course, Miguel could have bought more carpeting than what we were looking at. We headed back to Jackson.

We arrived at the carpet store right at nine when it opened. There were no customers, only the salesman, a gargantuan man with a full beard and bright suspenders. His name tag said "Paul." I was sure his last name must be Bunyan.

"Hey, you're the detective!" he exclaimed upon seeing Cliff. "I saw you on TV."

"That's me. So you probably know why I'm here."

Paul looked puzzled.

"The carpet material that Mendoza bought. The sheriff's detectives said he bought it here." Cliff looked at me and I found Correa's text with the photo of the receipt.

Paul looked at it. "Oh. I only work weekends. I work in the county Facilities Department weekdays. Someone else probably handled that. No one told me about it. You want me to look that up?"

"We already have the receipt. We were hoping you could tell us exactly what carpet material he bought. We want to see the color."

"It says 'remnants' on the receipt. That could be anything. Here, I'll show you."

He led us to a far corner of the store where there was a bin with small rolls of carpeting of various types on end. I could see the white shag there, the same one that Miguel had in his trailer, I was sure. There was no sign of the reddish brown one used in the trailer. There were two remnants in the beige spectrum, but neither of us could be sure if they were the same shade as the cat structure. We didn't have access to any pictures of the cat structure right then, and we couldn't agree on what color it was. We both felt those. They just felt like regular carpet to me, what the salesman called medium pile. This was not good news for Correa. It looked like the same carpeting used for the structure could have been in the remnant bin when Miguel bought his own pieces.

"When were these pieces put here?" I asked.

"Some have been here months, others weeks. Remnants actually go pretty fast."

"How about these beige ones?"

"I know those came from a job we did in Martell last week, so not long, but it's a popular color and style, so we may have had identical remnants back when this receipt was written."

As I looked over the other remnants I noticed a beige carpet piece that struck me as important. I reached over and felt it. It didn't have a loose pile; instead it had a tight looped texture. "The texture on this one. Feel it, Cliff."

"That's a Berber," the salesman said.

Cliff nodded. "That's it. That's the kind of carpet on the cat structure. Have you had any beige Berber remnants?"

"Berber isn't very popular. This one was a special order, I think. I can't be sure, but I don't think we've had any beige Berbers in recently. I don't see all the inventory."

"Who would have the complete records of all your inventory for the last six months or so?"

“The owner or the assistant manager. I’ll give you their contact information.” He led us back to the register area. He lifted two business cards from holders on the counter and handed them to us.

Cliff thanked him, and we left. The store probably never had the carpet material used on the cat structure. Even if they had, anyone could have bought remnants. It wasn’t proof positive, but it gave Correa another argument. If the prosecution was relying on that purchase to suggest Miguel was in on the theft, Correa could make them look weak and sow doubt about all their evidence. I emailed Lydia a very short summary of our visit to the store with a smiley emoticon. I figured I’d fill her in later when we got together.

Our next stop was the Kennedy Gold Mine. It was farther up into the hills outside Jackson, so the drive took us through beautiful country. As we drove, Cliff remarked, “You know, there’s an EarthCache at the mine.”

“What’s an EarthCache?”

“An EarthCache is an educational geocache approved by the Geological Society of America. It has to teach a lesson in earth science. You don’t physically sign a log. Instead you must do activity at the site such as feeling soil, observing rock strata, and so on, then email answers to various questions to the cache owner before you can log it.”

“Cool. What do we have to do at the mine?”

“Pick up a brochure or something that explains what kind of soil – ore – holds the gold and how it was identified and extracted. Something about the geologic layers visible in the mine.”

“They don’t let us go down in the mine. It’s a surface tour.”

“I know, but they’ll explain all that on a sign or brochure.”

We drove into the parking lot and got out. It’s an impressive place, with large structures looming ominously overhead. We strolled over to the office trying to look like casual tourists. We picked up a brochure. The lady there said the self-guided tour around the grounds was free, but they had paid tours for larger groups.

“Is Kyle working today?” Cliff asked.

“He’s leading a tour in ten minutes. That’s him over there.” She pointed toward a group of Asian tourists. One tall white guy in shorts and a polo shirt stood out; he had to be Kyle. “You can join them if you like. It’s twelve dollars each.”

“Oh good. I hear he’s a good guide. Is he full-time here?”

“Heavens, no. We’re only open on weekends. He works at the Indian casino during the week.”

“Really? I heard he quit there.”

“Oh, you know him, then? Maybe he went back to work at the security company.”

“Ah, right. Mother Lode Alarm, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, that’s it. My husband’s cousin owns it.”

Cliff pulled me aside so we could talk privately. “I think we’re onto something here. My face has been in the news. He must be following the case if he’s involved. Yours hasn’t. Why don’t you join the tour and see if you can get some background on him, like a last name or where he went to school so we can run checks on him. Get a photo so we can ask Charles if he’s the one who came to the house to give a bid.”

“I’m on it. Give me the company credit card.” Cliff handed it to me. I went back to the lady and ordered one ticket. “My dad’s going to walk around but I want the tour,” I explained.

I walked over to the group of tourists. They had a translator speaking Mandarin to them. I can recognize it. You hear a lot of Mandarin in the Bay Area. I pulled out my collapsible selfie stick from my purse and put my phone in it. I started the video recording going and began talking like I was narrating a video for my vast array of online fans.

“Here I am at the famous Kennedy Gold Mine in Jackson, California. I’m just now joining a tour led by this good-looking dude.” I stood right next to Kyle to get a two-shot, interrupting his flow. He seemed irritated but I had my ticket in my other hand so he had to treat me like a paying customer. I turned so that I was facing him and took my phone from the stick to switch to the opposite camera. “Hey good-looking dude, what’s your name?”

“My name is Kyle and I’ll be leading the tour. Would you please let me finish.” His voice was a deep, rich baritone.

I noticed his nametag read “K. Burchard.” I stopped the video and snapped a still. “Sorry. I’ll shut up now.” I could hear the translator translating all of this into Chinese. I didn’t know how to say “rude little bitch” in Mandarin, but I’ll bet I’d learn if I’d recorded it.

Kyle continued. “We’ll be meeting here in eight minutes. If you need to use the rest rooms, this would be a good time. The tour is an hour, but you can leave the group at any time if you need to. I’ll see you in a few minutes.” He left to go back to the office.

While he was gone I checked the photo and it was clear enough to read the name. I group texted the photo to Cliff and Charles. Cliff texted back "GOOD WORK. CHARLES IS THIS THE MAN FROM MOTHER LODE ALARM?" Cliff always texted in solid caps. He still didn't know that it was like shouting.

I stared at my phone hoping Charles could confirm it immediately, but that didn't happen. After a minute I got a text from Cliff saying he was going to call Woody and have him run checks. He continued to move away from the group. I wasn't sure if I was needed here anymore, but I might as well get my money's worth from the ticket. Maybe I could pick up something else interesting.

The Chinese were buzzing amongst themselves in Mandarin, avoiding eye contact with me. I figured what the hell and looked right at the translator and said, "Ni hau ma?" It means "How are you?" I knew that and "Xie xie ni" which means "thank you." That's all the Mandarin I know, but the change in the group mood was dramatic. Everyone started smiling and mumbling "Hau, ni ne," which I guessed meant "Good, you?" The translator said in strongly accented English, "Your Chinese is very good."

"That's all I know. I'm sorry I was rude before." The translator translated it. There were a few murmurs and nods of approval but no one said anything.

"Is it okay for me to take your picture? The whole group, I mean?"

Another translation and suddenly people started straightening their hair or clothes and smiling more broadly. Some did so before the translation started, so obviously there were English speakers in the bunch. I put the phone back on the selfie stick and started the video. I took a group shot with me standing in front and started rambling on mindlessly in an attempt to sound like those brain-deprived YouTube "influencers" with a million followers. I told the translator to ask the group to wave to the camera and immediately there was a flurry of hands in the air.

"Xie xie ni," I said, and turned off the camera. They thanked me back.

Kyle came out of the office and headed back toward us. He was well-built with a short well-trimmed beard and short brown ponytail with sun-bleached blondish ends. I pegged him for about thirty, a little older than his buddy Theo, but the beard made it hard to guess his age. He had a single small gold ring in one side of his nose, but, surprisingly, no visible tattoos. I'd been sincere when I called him good-looking earlier. He was smiling now and

he had good teeth, too, I noticed. As soon as he reached us I started the video again, just to be consistent with my “cover” of being a vlogger, but I kept quiet. Kyle cast a disapproving eye at me but he didn’t say anything.

He led us downhill to the first tailing wheel. It was a fifty-eight-foot monster made of wood. It looked just like a Ferris wheel. He explained that it was not used during the gold rush. Rather, it was built in 1914 in response to a federal law designed to prevent mining debris from fouling the rivers and streams. The wheel received the crushed rock or tailings from the extraction process higher up the hill. This gunk was mixed with water and slime and flowed down a flume to this wheel. This wheel lifted the tailings up to another flume and eventually to three more wheels and flumes into the final destination which was a basin at Indian Gulch. The wheels worked twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Only two of them are standing today. They used to be in buildings, but those were torn down when the mine closed in order to reuse the corrugated iron building materials.

Our next stop was wheel number four, the other one left standing. It was a long walk. I was amazed to see that a new building had been constructed around it to preserve it. The walls were glass. It resembled a three-story museum display case. From there we walked over to the impound dam which was built specifically to create a containment basin for the tailings.

Then it was back up to where the ore was processed. This was slow-going because several of the Chinese were quite old. The ore was pulled up from the mine by the head frame and partially crushed there, but then transported by mule cart along a trestle bridge to the stamp mill where it was crushed more thoroughly and the gold extracted with a chemical process. The ore produced just over a third of an ounce of gold for every ton of rock that was crushed. That was worth about \$6.53 at the time. Those numbers boggled my mind. It’s amazing they could make a profit, but obviously they did. The mine produced over thirty-four million dollars worth of gold in its lifetime. It was able to do this only because it was the deepest mine in North America at the time at almost six thousand feet.

Kyle took us through the mine office and explained about all the small structures, or remnants of structures as we moved along. There were many artifacts of the Argonaut fire. The Argonaut was another mine very close by. It had a disastrous mine fire and miners here at Kennedy tried to tunnel over to rescue the trapped miners there, but without success. A lot of the structures here at Kennedy burned down over the years. Most were rebuilt,

but some lay in ruins all around. I won't go into all the things we saw in the office, but it was fascinating.

The final stop was the head frame which stood directly over the mine entrance. This enormous metal building replaced the original wooden one. I wasn't kidding when I said things burned down a lot. The building is one hundred thirty-five feet tall and looks like a thirteen-story erector set. Cables lifted carts called skips up and down from the mine below. This was the only way miners or the ore could go in or out of the mine.

I saw Cliff watching the group from across the yard. He was pointing at his phone, so I stopped taking video and looked at my texts. Cliff's latest said "HE'S A LICENSED LOCKSMITH BE CAREFUL."

I texted back OK and returned my attention to Kyle. He spoke very well and was really quite charming. I remembered Miguel saying Bernice called the man a nice guy. With his looks and charm, he could easily pass for a salesman and be persuasive. Kyle had certainly leaped into front position on the suspect list, but I couldn't be sure he was our man. We didn't have anything connecting him to robotics.

Kyle showed the group around the ground floor of the head frame building. Tourists weren't allowed up higher. The lower part was enclosed in wooden walls. A metal ladder-like stairway ran up to the top where the pulley was. Kyle finished up the lecture and received thanks from the translator. Several of the Chinese tourists said thank you in English, too. I put my phone in my purse. As we were breaking, I whispered to him, "Theo said you have more coins."

Without missing a beat he smiled and continued ushering out the tourists. I lagged behind as best I could and he whispered back to me "stay here" as the rest filtered out. He remained standing in the doorway until they were all gone. He stepped in and closed the door.

"So that's who you are. The whole video blogger thing was just a ploy."

"You got me. I'm Carol. I just want to buy gold. You want to sell. Let's do a deal."

"That whole story is bullshit. Nobody buys sets of double eagles in that date range. They aren't really collector's items. There's too many of them."

“You obviously don’t know the market. You wouldn’t be selling on e*Bay at crap prices if you did. There’s a market, a very exclusive market, among high-end gold buyers.”

“Who are you, really?” He grabbed my purse strap and yanked hard.

I hung on, but I knew I couldn’t outmuscle him. If he persisted, he’d have it and the game would be up. I was glad I didn’t have my gun in there. “Hey, mitts off, dude.” I managed to get the purse up high enough so that I could bend over and bite his left hand. He let go.

He sucked his hand for a few seconds where I bit it. “You really shouldn’t have done that.” He balled his right hand into a fist and came at me.

I jumped back and ran up the metal stairs to the first landing. “Hey, I’m sorry, okay? I panicked when you tried to take my purse. That’s my stuff in there.” I pulled out my phone and gave it the double press to start the video. “Smile, you’re live on YouTube.” It was a bluff. I was recording video, but it wasn’t going live anywhere, just on my phone.

He actually smiled and waved at the camera. “Hi, there. Let me help you down from there, young lady. That’s dangerous up there.” He stepped up toward me. I started backing up, continuing to face him so the camera would be facing his direction. I thought that would be my guarantee of safety. Unfortunately, I misjudged a step behind me and tripped and fell. The camera went flying, landing face down on the step. Kyle dashed over and grabbed it before I could and turned it off. He threw it down onto the ground floor. Then he lifted me halfway up with his left hand and slapped me hard with his right, knocking me down again. My ears rang and I was disoriented.

Before I knew it he was rummaging through my purse. “Maeva Hanssen, private investigator. And just what are you investigating Ms. Hanssen? Hmm?”

“My partner and I, he’s that big mean-looking guy outside with the gun, are investigating the theft of some gold coins from our client. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

“I didn’t see any big mean-looking guy with you. Neither did Theo. I asked him if anyone was with you.” He came and stood over me.

“Listen, Kyle, if you don’t believe me, just check the phone. There are texts there from Cliff, my partner. He says you’re a locksmith. He’s right outside.”

“Or maybe you just want me to go back down there so you can pull out a gun or mace or something.” He grabbed my elbow and flipped me over

like I was a rag doll. He lifted my shirt and found the Safe Maker II push dagger I had in my waistband. "My, my, my."

I was now on my hands and knees on the first step of the second flight of stairs. While he was inspecting the knife I saw my chance and I sprinted up the stairs to the next landing. I heard him right behind me so I didn't stop. I kept going up and up. I couldn't outmuscle him, but I was in good running condition and did a lot of work on the stair-stepper in the gym.

He was in good condition, too, so I couldn't rest. At the third level he caught me. I raised my arms to protect my face. That's when I heard Cliff's voice calling from below. "Maeva! Are you okay? I'm coming up to get you." He must have seen us running up the stairs. The steelwork is bare bones and you can see it from below.

"So you weren't bluffing," Kyle muttered. He pulled out his own cell phone and placed a call. "Judy, I've got a tourist loose in the superstructure of the head frame. I told her to leave with the tour group but she insisted on seeing the upper levels. When I tried to guide her out she bit me and ran up the stairs. Can you send Victor and call the sheriff." Pause. "Yeah, that's the one. I think I hear her partner coming up the stairs. Maybe he can talk some sense into her. Hang on. Don't call the sheriff yet."

He put his phone back in his pocket. I realized that my phone had been on the step when he hit me. I'd fallen down on my own, not from his blow. The video would only show him being perfectly polite and offering to help me down from the landing before that. And he'd have that bite mark to back up his story. My cheek might still be red from the slap, but it had probably faded by now. And he had my knife to show the sheriff, too. Basically, it was his word against mine and he had all the evidence on his side.

"Who's Victor?" I asked.

"The manager. He'll be very upset with you. Why don't we go down." He stepped aside and made a sweeping arm gesture like a royal footman or something. I didn't waste any time getting past him. Two levels down I ran into Cliff, with Kyle right behind me. I picked up my purse and phone on the way down to the ground level.

"What happened?" Cliff demanded.

"Maeva here insisted on seeing the upper levels. I told her it wasn't allowed, but when I reached out to guide her, she bit me and headed up. It's not safe up there. I tried to get her down." He showed the bite mark to Cliff.

I saw the muscles in Cliff's jaw tighten and he stepped forward nose-to-nose with Kyle. "So help me, if you ..."

"Leave it, Cliff," I said. "I'm okay. The manager's coming. Let's just go. I'll tell you about it in the car."

We got back in the car and headed to Sutter Creek. "Did he hurt you?" Cliff asked.

"He slapped me once. I bit him because he grabbed my purse and was trying to take it from me."

"Was that before or after he hit you?"

"Uh ... before."

"So technically, you were the aggressor, for the physical part."

"No. He was taking my purse, Cliff."

"Don't you carry that little safety knife?"

"He took it from me."

"Great. So he's got proof you attacked him with a deadly weapon."

"Hey, whose side are you on? He was robbing me. I have a right to defend myself."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. Do you want to go back and try to get it?"

"No. He won't give it up and you can't take it from him. He probably wants it in case we call the sheriff."

"You don't think he'll call the sheriff?"

"No. He's our guy, Cliff. He's got to be. He doesn't want the sheriff poking around him."

"How do you know? Did he say anything? What were you doing in there alone, anyway?"

"No, he didn't admit anything. I pretended to be the coin buyer, the one who knew Theo. I was trying to get him to admit he had more gold coins."

"I didn't authorize that. That wasn't safe."

I didn't think "No shit, Sherlock" would be an appropriate response at that moment so I settled for, "Ya think?"

"How'd he get your real name, then?"

"My purse. He knocked me down and took it and rifled through it." I went on to explain the whole encounter. Cliff wasn't happy about it.

"So now he knows we're onto him. At least we've got his fingerprints on your purse. That backs up your story."

I realized I'd been clutching it and rummaging through it to verify I still had all my stuff. I probably smudged his fingerprints. I'd made some bad judgment calls. "I'm sorry, Cliff. I guess I blew it back there. I thought he'd buy that coin merchant ploy. He's obviously after the money."

"Did he admit to having more coins, or even the one Theo was selling?"

"No, but he admitted knowing Theo, asking him if I had anyone with me."

"Not enough even if we could prove it, which we can't. We don't even have proof he's the source of that first coin. It's only Theo's boss mentioning the name Kyle that got you onto him. Did you get any useful video?"

"You aren't going to like that either. It just shows him politely asking if he can help me down from the landing. That was right before he threw the phone away and smacked me." I checked the phone and fortunately it hadn't broken when he'd thrown it down.

Cliff didn't say anything to that. We drove the rest of the way in silence. We got to McNabb's house, but apparently no one was home. No one came to the door. We didn't have a key so we decided to go directly to the police department. When we got there we asked for Sergeant Dillon, but he wasn't there, either. It was the weekend. The clerk said to come back Monday. I guess he worked a regular shift.

"Do you want me to call Lydia and see if she can see us?" I asked back in the car.

"No, I've got a better idea. Call your newspaper guy. Arrange a meeting."

I made the call and Jayden was excited to meet the famous Cliff Knowles. So far no reporters had seen us reenter town, at least as far as we could tell. It was obvious from the lack of cameras and crowds at Charles's house and the police department that most of the national reporters had moved on to other assignments. They'd gotten the chance to put the robot video on the air and likely knew that these murder investigations took a long time, so they wouldn't be back until there was a break in the case. There were probably some stringers hanging around, but no one had approached us.

We met Jayden in the parking lot of the Save Mart in Jackson. After the introductions, Cliff went through the same routine I'd done about it all being attributed to unnamed sources. Jayden made all the same assurances.

Cliff told him a story that was part true, part not-so-true. Jayden told us he'd get this on the website within the hour and left. We ate lunch at Pedro's Café which was right there.

An hour later we got in the car and headed back to Sutter Creek. Cliff turned on the local radio station, country and western, of course. It broke into the music for a news special.

"There's been a new development in the case of Robber the Robot and the related murder of a Sutter Creek woman. Sources close to the investigation are saying that evidence points to a locksmith being involved in the safecracking. Police are looking at sellers of gold coins, particularly twenty dollar gold pieces called double eagles. Witnesses saw noted detective Cliff Knowles today at the Kennedy Mine. Our media partner the Ledger reports that a woman at the mine confirmed that one of its employees had worked for a local security company but couldn't confirm he was a locksmith. She was not aware of any police investigation involving the mine or any of its employees. We have a link on our website to the full story in the Ledger."

"Robber the Robot? That's what they're calling it now? Where'd they come up with that?" I scoffed.

"It's a play on Robby the Robot, a character in Forbidden Planet. It was a major sci-fi hit way back when. He showed up in several other shows after that."

"Before my time, obviously. When was that?"

"The fifties, I think."

"The fifties! Just how old are you, anyway?"

"He was still appearing on TV shows in the seventies and eighties."

I immediately looked him up on my phone. When I saw a picture, I recognized him. I've seen him before, although I'm not sure where. YouTube videos, maybe, or reruns of some of those shows when I was a kid. "Our little guy doesn't look anything like him."

"No, but it's a clever riff on the name."

We pulled into McNabb's driveway and this time there were three reporters outside again. Man, media moves so fast these days.

"Mr. Knowles! What were you doing at the Kennedy Mine? Did you find Robber the Robot yet?"

We ignored them. We knocked and were let in this time. Charles was back and so was his daughter's family. "Hello, everyone," Cliff said. This was the first we'd seen them since last night. "Did you get the photo I sent?"

Libby and Leonard looked at Cliff and said nothing. Charles returned the hello and then said, "I'm not sure. It could be him. The age is right. He was tall, I remember that. But he didn't have the beard or the ponytail."

"Those could be new."

"Play the video of him, the part where he talks to you politely," Cliff instructed me. I found the right clip on my phone and pushed the play button.

"That's him! I recognize the voice."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. He was a smooth talker. He had a very nice voice. Like a singer or announcer."

"Did he go into the office?"

"He was counting all the windows to make a bid, so he must have. He went through the whole house. He took some pictures with his phone, too, I remember that. He said he needed to in order to price it. But he wouldn't have gone over to the safe and looked under the tablecloth. I would have remembered that."

"He could have had Bernice take a picture of it if she was complicit, or possibly used the robot to do so before he built the projecting arm. Still, that's a question. He had to know it was a Bostic before he even began the project of building the robot. You had that coin sorter on top at that time?"

"Yes, I'm sure I did."

"Apparently he left the security company and was working as a dealer at the casino until recently. Maeva found out he'd been fired from the casino for stealing."

"So you think he's the thief?"

"I think it very likely. But if Miguel was telling the truth about Bernice and the salesman, she wouldn't have told him about the safe, or given him a picture of it. We need to figure out how he learned about the kind of safe it was if we're going to build a case against him."

I interrupted. "Cliff, we aren't trying to build a case against him. You aren't in the FBI anymore. This should be enough to give Lydia the reasonable doubt she needs to get Miguel off."

"You're right, but we aren't his defense counsel, either. We were hired to find out who did this so that Charles can rest easy and know that he and his coins are safe. He still doesn't know whom to trust, even Miguel. For all we know Bernice, Miguel, Kyle, and Theo were all in on it."

Charles shook his head. "You're right. This is very difficult on me. I've had trouble sleeping at night. But I think I've told you about everyone who has ever been in that office. Even if some of them figured out I had a safe there, I don't think anyone besides Bernice and my own family would have been able to go in and lift up the cloth and take a good look at the front of the safe. You never told anyone about it, did you, Libby?"

Libby squirmed uncomfortably. "Uh, Daddy, I ... I'm sure it's not ... well, we were just fooling around."

All eyes were now riveted on Libby. "Let's hear the whole story, please," Cliff said in a stern voice.

Libby blushed crimson. "There was one time Josh and I were here and I said something about the safe. I thought it was cool and would maybe impress him, I guess. He asked to see it. You and Mom were upstairs. We went into your office and I showed it to him. He thought it was cool, too. He started spinning the dials. He said why don't we try to open it. I didn't want him to, and I was sure he wouldn't be able to, so I just watched as he kept trying different combinations. He gave up after five minutes and we laughed about it. But he wouldn't steal anything. He's a policeman now. Besides, he's probably forgotten all about it. We were just teenagers goofing around."

"Josh Dillon, the lead detective on the case?" Cliff asked, to be sure.

"Yes. I guess that is pretty ironic. But I'm sure he had nothing to do with it."

"Oh, Libby, you shouldn't have done that," Charles said in a voice that conveyed disappointment more than anger. Leonard put his arm around Libby in a show of support. I thought I saw a flash of relief cross his face now that the specter of blame had shifted from him to his wife.

Cliff asked, "Did you ever tell anyone else about the safe?"

"No. I was only in this house for a few of years, after Grandpa died. Then I went off to college. After what happened with Josh I was afraid to tell anyone else."

"Do you know if Josh told his friends, or anyone else? Did he ever say anything to you about it later?"

"We broke up pretty soon after that. I guess he could have told someone, but he never told me about it if he did."

"Did he dump you or you dump him?" I asked. Tact wasn't my strong point.

“I didn’t *dump* him. Geez. I just told him we were going different directions. I was going off to college and he was staying around to go to junior college and try to get on as a fireman or policeman. He tried to talk me out of it, but in the end, he agreed. It was an amicable breakup.”

“I’ve got news for you. That’s called dumping him. He was hurt, probably resented it then and told all his buddies everything negative about you at the time, most or all of which was untrue. I’d bet he bragged about trying to break into your dad’s safe, too. I’d add to that he probably said there was a fortune in there.”

“That’s not fair. I told him there was nothing in there but papers. I never told him about the gold coins.”

“But he could see the coin wrapping machine,” Cliff added. “He could have told anyone in the school. Or out of the school, for that matter. Did you ever hear of a boy named Kyle Burchard?”

“No. The high school wasn’t that big. I’d know if he was a student there, at least if he was within two years of my class.”

“Who did Josh hang out with?”

“His best friend was a guy named Roland. He was killed in a skiing accident right after high school. An avalanche. He had a cousin Teddy he hung out with sometimes. Teddy wasn’t in our school. We were at Amador High but Teddy went to Argonaut in Jackson. Teddy was kind of a loose cannon. He’d steal liquor from his parents and they’d get drunk on weekends.”

“Teddy?” I exclaimed. “Is his real name Theodore Czerny? Was he ever called Theo?”

“I guess Theodore’s his real name. I never really knew him. I stayed away from him, in fact. He was kind of a bad influence. Josh always called him Teddy. I don’t know what his last name was.”

Chapter 28

Cliff took over again. “It’s time for us to do some background on Josh and Kyle. Theo, too. This has been very helpful, Libby. We’ve got some solid leads to go on. Come on, Maeva, let’s go into the map room. I have some leads for Woody and I need to discuss some of our other cases with you, too. I’ve gotten some texts from Ashley.”

We headed across the hall. Charles was wearing a face that would have made Lex Luthor look cheerful, and Libby was by his side, apologizing for breaking a rule when she was a teenager. He was obviously crushed by what he perceived as a betrayal or at least major disappointment from his daughter. When we were alone, I asked Cliff about the texts. We really didn't have much going on back at the office and Ashley didn't work on the weekend.

Cliff told me there were no texts. He just wanted to give the family a chance to talk things over and reconnect now that these newest revelations had been made. The part about Woody was real, though. The office was closed for the weekend, but Woody's always available on his cell. Cliff called him and explained about the possible connection between Josh, Theo, and Kyle. Woody had already given us general background on Theo and Kyle, but Josh was a new player for him. When Cliff explained that Josh was a police officer, Woody said that wouldn't be a problem. Some records, like DMV records, are suppressed or redacted for officers and federal agents to protect them from criminals seeking retaliation or intimidation. But today, everybody's address, email, phone, criminal history, credit record, and job history are available through social media and aggregating services, even cops'.

"What are we going to do?" I asked. "We can't very well go to Josh and confront him."

"We could go to the press or Correa, I suppose, but really, this isn't just a trial tactic now. These are real leads that need to be followed up by law enforcement. I think we should go to the sheriff's department. They obviously don't much care for the P.D., so they might be receptive to pursuing Josh. I think we should wait until we confirm whether Theo is cousin Teddy."

"Ellen's sister is into genealogy, isn't she? You told me once she asked you and Ellen to have your DNA sequenced. Could she find out if they're related?"

"It's worth a try. I'll give her a call."

He called his sister-in-law. Theresa was Ellen's sister and Ashley's mother. She'd helped Cliff out on a case once or twice before with her knowledge of makeup and wigs, since she's a former model, but this would be the first time with genealogy. She answered right away when she saw it was Cliff, but she was shopping and couldn't do anything at the moment. She

suggested he text her all the information on Josh and Theo and she'd see what she could do when she got back home. He did as she asked.

That put us in waiting mode for a while. I asked Cliff if I could take a walk and he said to go ahead. When I went out, there were a couple of reporters hanging out in front of the house. One of them stuck a mike in front of my face as I turned onto the sidewalk.

"Miss Hanssen, do you know who built Robber the Robot?" She wasn't dressed in broadcast clothes or makeup since there was no camera with her. She was in grubbies and running shoes and decided to walk along with me even though I didn't respond to her question. I started walking faster. When I kept silent, she continued with, "What do you say to those who think you or Mr. Knowles might have killed Mrs. Mendoza at the instruction of Mr. McNabb?" I stopped midstride and turned to her. I shook my finger at her in a no, no motion and started to reply, but managed to bite my tongue. I knew I shouldn't be making any public statements to the press, especially about any accusation against me or Cliff. Since she didn't have a camera, only a mike, I shook a different finger at her, as it were, and took off at a trot. She didn't follow this time.

When I got back to the house, Woody had gotten back to us with Josh's basic data. Cliff forwarded that to Theresa in case it might help her with the genealogy search. Cliff suggested we run by Josh's house just to check him out. It was right in town, a few blocks away. I didn't see the point, but at least it got us out of the house and left the McNabb family more private time. We took the car, even though Dillon's house was in walking distance. We didn't want any reporters following us. After what the reporter had just done with me, we figured they'd be even more likely to follow Cliff, the celebrity. We drove off and Cliff did an SDR. That's surveillance detection run for you mere mortal civilians who aren't spies and don't read spy novels. When we were clean he drove by Josh's house.

The garage door was open. Like many men, Dillon had turned it into a workshop. There he was with safety glasses and ear protection sawing some large plywood panels with a handheld rotary saw. He'd set up two sawhorses in the driveway right in front of the open garage doors within extension cord distance of an interior plug. Sawdust was flying all over. He was concentrating on his work and didn't see us cruise by.

I have to hand it to Cliff. I hadn't thought driving by someone's house would be useful in finding a clue to a murder, but if Josh is a good

woodworker, that means he could have made the cat structure. He'd also be familiar with the McNabb house and its occupants, and be able to place the thing there when he wouldn't be seen. Cliff kept driving.

Since Dillon was out front, Cliff decided not to make any more passes. We were going around the block when Cliff's phone rang. He pulled over. It was Lydia Correa, Miguel's lawyer. She'd heard the news about the locksmith angle and wanted to know what we knew about it. Cliff didn't confirm for her that we'd leaked the story but he confirmed that the safe had probably been opened remotely by a locksmith or someone with access to locksmith printed material. He suggested she hire an expert on Bostic safes. He gave her Chaudry's name and number.

"That's super, Cliff," she said when he'd given her the information. "Now I've got something for you in exchange. My investigator says Josh Dillon is a rotten cop."

"How do you mean, 'rotten'? Corrupt?"

"No, just a lousy detective. He tells me that the sheriff's department detectives wanted to pursue the coin robbery angle more originally, but Dillon and his chief told them to keep their hands off, that it was a P.D. case."

I could hear this from my side. I doubted the investigator's statement since she'd already told us that he was loyal to the sheriff's department and didn't like the local police. Of course, just because he was biased didn't make him wrong.

"Okay, thanks, Lydia." Cliff hung up and we headed back to the house. The family was still having a heart-to-heart, so we decamped to the map room again. We both checked our emails and called our spouses.

When I finished, he was reading an email from Theresa, his sister-in-law. Cliff shifted so I could see the whole screen. She'd attached a screen shot of a family tree. She explained that someone had posted the chart to a genealogy website and she couldn't verify its accuracy. It had these little boxes with frilly corners like plaques or something. Inside were names of ancestors connected by lines. Cliff was looking at a box containing the name Arnold Dillon. He was born in Sacramento in 1916. The chart showed he had two children, Arnold, Jr. and Margaret, both also born in Sacramento. There was a line connecting Margaret to a Filip Czerny, indicating they were married. There were no lines descending from them or from Arnold, Jr. Junior's spouse was not shown. This didn't prove it was the right family, but the dates were right. Arnold, Jr. was born in 1952, so he could have a son

Josh's age. Another clue was the box above Arnold, Sr. His father was named Theodore. So if Margaret was Theo's mom, it would make sense that she would have named her son after her grandfather.

Cliff said we'd better ask Libby, so we headed downstairs. We walked over to Libby, and Cliff waited for a break in the conversation. "Sorry to interrupt, but do you happen to know Josh's father's name?"

"His father? What does he have to do with it?"

"Humor me."

"Mm, no, I don't think so. I always called him Mr. Dillon and Josh called him Pop."

"What did Mrs. Dillon call him?"

Libby took a minute to think about it before answering. "I must have heard her say it. I want to say something that ended in a -y sound, like Tommy or Barney. I'm sorry, I just can't remember."

"Did Josh grow up here?"

"Yes. We went to elementary school together."

"Not Sacramento?"

"No."

"Could his father have been Arnold. Or Arnie?"

"Arnie! Yes, that's it. Like the golfer, what's-his-name, the one with the army."

"Arnold Palmer. Arnie's Army," Cliff added.

"I remember because Mrs. Dillon joked about him going out golfing one time, something about maybe he'd have his own Arnie's Army one of these days. That must have been a weekend when I was over there."

"That's gotta be him," I said. "Theo Czerny, the guy who was selling the double eagle, must be Teddy, Josh's cousin."

"Josh involved in a murder? Bernice's murder? No way! I don't believe it." Libby was obviously distraught. Her arms were flailing around as she spoke. Porter started to cry when he saw his mother acting out of character.

"Hold on," Cliff said. "No one said Josh is involved. Maybe he just mentioned to Teddy one day about the cool safe in his girlfriend's house. Maybe not. He might have had nothing to do with it. We know Kyle was here and scoped out the place. This might all have been Kyle's doing." This seemed to mollify her. She picked up Porter and held him on her lap. He calmed down, too. "We need to rethink our approach," he continued. "Josh

may be totally innocent, but we can't be sure. We need to go after Theo, but we're going to have to leave the police out of it for now."

"What about the sheriff?" Charles asked. "You could go to the sheriff. He isn't going to protect a city cop."

I suppressed a smile at the term city cop. Small town cop, maybe.

"That's an option, but I'm not ready to go there yet. Department rivalry is one thing, but cops usually close ranks when it comes to public accusations of corruption or incompetence. The blue wall is real. Besides, that would undermine their case against Mendoza and make them look bad."

"How are you going to do that?" Charles asked.

"I'm not sure yet. Leave that to me. I'll figure it out." Cliff took me aside and suggested we head over to Jackson to the pawn shop where Theo worked. The drive by Josh's house had been useful, so I said it seemed like a good idea to me.

We got in the car while several reporters called questions to Cliff. We ignored them. One camera truck started following us and Cliff did another SDR until he was sure he'd lost them. We finally reached Jackson and drove by the front of the pawn shop. We couldn't see anything from the street. It was open, which isn't surprising. Pawn shops are always open on the weekends.

We circled the block. Cliff had looked up the car registration information Woody had sent us, so he had a description and license number of Theo's car. We didn't see it anywhere in the area. Cliff asked if I was okay going into the shop again to see if he was in there. He'd go with me if I wanted. He wasn't sure if I was too traumatized from the encounter with Kyle. He's actually a sensitive guy, although he tries to hide it. I told him I was okay. He went in first and started browsing. Then I entered. Theo wasn't there. The black guy was there working on the bench and a young woman was handling a customer. Two other customers were browsing the musical instrument section. I called over to the black guy, asking if Theo was in. Without even turning around to look at me he called back that Theo was off today.

We left the store and talked about our next move. We had Theo's home address from his DMV info, so we decided to check that out and make a decision after that. It was a fourplex in Jackson. When we got there, Theo's car was there, a pimped-up Mustang. His unit was back from the street, so we really couldn't see anything other than the parking area and his car.

“At least he’s here,” Cliff said needlessly. “Let’s just hang around for a bit. Maybe Kyle will show up.”

As with the Josh drive-by, I really didn’t see what we could expect to get out of it, but I’d been wrong then, so I deferred to Cliff’s experience. “Whatever. Can we hit the bathroom first?”

Cliff drove us over to the McDonald’s and we both took care of that. I was tempted to grab a coke or coffee since I knew that staying alert was tough on surveillance, but I also knew that you didn’t want to add any more liquid to your system unless you’re prepared to go pee again during the surveillance. When we got back, the car was still there. We knew what Kyle drove, too, a pickup, and it wasn’t there.

You don’t deserve to be as bored as I was for the next hour and a half, so I’ll skip that part. Surveillance isn’t as fun as it’s cracked up to be on TV. Theo eventually came out and got in his car. We followed him into town and he parked in front of a shop with “Dragon Lady Asian Massage” emblazoned on the sign. On the window it added “Beautiful Asian Girls” in gold gilt lettering. Subtle.

“I think he didn’t come here for the massage,” Cliff said.

“Yeah, yeah, happy ending guaranteed. I wasn’t raised in a nunnery, Cliff.”

“That gives me an idea. Let’s give him ten minutes to get settled.”

“What did you have in mind?”

He explained to me and I was dubious. “You want me to record it?”

“No, not without his consent. It’s a felony, at least if the audio is recorded. But have it ready so all you have to do is push a button.”

“He’s not going to consent.”

“Not likely, but you never know. He didn’t sound like the strong one. Kyle’s the alpha. He might want to serve him up if we scare him enough.”

We waited the requisite period, but Cliff didn’t want to wait too long. You never knew how long it took Theo to reach his happy ending. We walked in and the dragon lady who ran the place, a Chinese woman in her fifties, asked if she could help us. Cliff pulled out a hundred and told her what we wanted. Her lips tightened and she scowled, shaking her head no. He pulled out another Benjamin. She took both and led us to a room in the back. She motioned for us to follow her in. We entered and Theo was lying on his stomach naked, with a towel covering his buttocks. He didn’t notice us at first. Dragon lady picked up his clothes and whispered something to the

topless girl stroking his thighs lightly with her two-inch nails. The two of them picked up Theo's clothes and left the room. Theo turned over to see what was going on.

"Hey, what the ..." He moved the towel across his privates as he turned over. Based on the tent pole, he had a pretty impressive package, I'd guess, but it quickly faded.

"Theo, we know all about you and Josh and Kyle," Cliff said authoritatively, like it was as much an established fact as climate change .

Theo grabbed his phone, which was lying on the table next to him. He turned on the camera and began videoing us. Only then did he speak. "I know who you are. You're that detective. You have no right to be here." Cliff stepped hard on my foot without looking down so Theo wouldn't notice. It took me a second to catch on. If Theo was videoing us, then he had no reasonable expectation of privacy. That's tantamount to consent to record. Anyone who knows he's being recorded and continues to talk waives any right to privacy, even though he may think he's the only one recording. I'd been standing with my arms crossed, holding my phone hidden under my arm, with the video app up and ready to record. I pressed the button, and sneaked the lens out just far enough so that I hoped we'd catch his face, too. He didn't seem to notice. I glanced down and confirmed he was in the picture and the red light was on.

"We have the permission of the owner. It's her property. You're free to leave."

"Without my clothes? Asshole! I didn't do anything wrong. I'm innocent. I'm recording this. Hear me? I'm innocent. Totally one hundred percent innocent." He turned the phone to show his own face for a moment, then turned it back to record us.

Cliff kept talking as Theo recorded us. "Josh told you about the safe and you told Kyle. You all planned the burglary for a long time. Who built the cat structure? You? Josh? He has a nice workshop there."

Theo didn't answer, but kept filming. "Get out. This is an invasion of my privacy. I'm innocent. That's all I have to say." He was sitting up now holding the towel across his lap with his free hand. "And you, bitch. You lied. You said you were a coin dealer. You're both liars. No one should believe anything you say. Either one of you."

So much for "That's all I have to say." I didn't respond. I didn't want him to notice the phone peeking out from my armpit, so I maintained eye

contact and stared intently, grinning evilly. Cliff pulled out his own phone and made a show of fiddling with it. He held it up to video Theo.

“Take all the video you want. I’ve got my own.” He turned the camera back to his own face for a moment and smiled at the camera, then turned it back toward Cliff. “You can edit your video to be misleading or whatever. I’ve got my own protection to show what really went on here. And don’t bother trying to take my camera away from me. It’s going direct to the cloud. You won’t be able to get to it.”

“I don’t want to take your phone away. I’m happy to see you taking a video to show that we didn’t threaten or intimidate you. Like I said, we’re here with permission of the property owner and you’re free to go. But we know you, Josh and Kyle are responsible for the theft and the murder, too. No one’s come forward yet. You’d be the first. You can still get the best deal at sentencing.”

Theo just stared at Cliff for a minute. Then he stood up, holding the towel over his privates. Cliff turned off his phone, showed the black screen to Theo and then put the phone back in his pocket. This had the effect Cliff wanted. Theo touched his own phone screen, apparently stopping the video, and put it face down on the massage table. He came right up to Cliff and whispered, “Leave Josh out of it. He’s a boy scout. He’s still gaga over Libby. He’d never do anything to hurt her. He just has a big mouth.”

“So it was just you and Kyle?” Cliff said, louder than Theo, knowing I was still recording. I knew this was critical and edged as close as I could so the phone could pick up the conversation. We made a strange picture all huddled together like that. My phone was now filming the back of Theo’s head.

“You think you know, but you don’t know. If those coins were stolen, I didn’t know. I just sell ‘em. I don’t ask where they came from. I’m a pawnbroker. That’s what we do.” He was still whispering, probably so that the women outside the room wouldn’t hear.

“Kyle didn’t know about the safe. You told him.”

“Maybe I have a big mouth, too. That’s not a crime.” He walked over to the door and opened it a crack. He yelled, “Bring me my clothes.”

Cliff nodded to me and I nodded back, signaling that I’d gotten the recording. Of course, I didn’t know how well either the audio or video was going to turn out. The dragon lady didn’t immediately respond to Theo, but we walked out of the room without saying any more to Theo. Cliff nodded to

the dragon lady and she headed back to the room with Theo's clothes. The topless girl rushed in right behind her, apologizing to Theo and saying something about a freebie.

When we got to the car we drove to a side street and watched the video on my phone. I'd gotten all the audio, even the whispers. The video was spotty, often blocked by my clothing or just pointed wrong. I didn't get his tent pole, thank god. I hadn't started recording yet. I picked up a yellow spot on the ceiling. I don't even want to think about how that got there. The main thing is that I got footage of his face and of him videoing us, so he couldn't deny it was him, or say that he didn't know he was being recorded. He even said we could take all the video we want.

"We got him," Cliff declared.

"I don't know. It's pretty good, but he didn't really admit anything related to the burglary or the murder. Maybe possession of stolen property."

"He showed an awful lot of knowledge of the crime. That statement about leaving Josh out of it once he thought the cameras were off, but not mentioning Kyle or himself, was pretty damning. He knew who was involved and who wasn't. And he as much as admitted he told Kyle about the safe with that big mouth comment. I think a jury would understand that the way we do."

"Maybe. Libby should be happy about Josh. Leonard, not so much, at least not the part about still being gaga over Libby. What do you want to do next?"

"In for a penny, in for a pound."

"Which means?"

"Better to be hanged for a sheep than a lamb."

"That sounds appealing."

"I'm saying we've come this far, might as well go all the way. Now that we have the video, which he doesn't know about yet, let's confront him with it. We'll give him an hour or so to stew about our little tête-à-tête and then hit him with it."

"I'm not optimistic, but I don't have a better idea. If it doesn't work, I think it's time to go back to the police. We can go over Josh's head. The police chief will listen to us. The part about boy scout Josh should make the pill not too bitter." I was watching the little upload icon on my phone. It finished its upload.

We drove back to the massage parlor and Theo's car was still out front. I guess he was staying for that freebie. We parked down a full block

away. We couldn't see the door of the building, but we could see the car. After a few more minutes Theo's car started moving. We didn't try to bumper lock. Once he headed toward his apartment we just let him go since we were pretty sure where he was headed. Once we thought he was inside, we drove up to his street and checked. His car was in the same spot it had been when we first came here. We parked out on the street and waited.

After fifteen minutes or so I noticed a pickup truck coming up the street fast. As it got closer I realized it was Kyle. I tapped Cliff on the shoulder and said "Kyle" as I pointed.

Cliff grimaced. "Crap. We don't want them making a united front. We should have done this sooner." He pulled our car across the driveway to the fourplex parking lot just as Kyle arrived. Kyle screeched to a halt to avoid a collision and made eye contact. He didn't know what to do for a second. His eyes bugged out when he realized who we were. Then he smiled and pulled out the little knife he'd taken from me at the mine.

"Quick, take another video of that," Cliff said as he reached back for the gun safe. He'd moved it from the trunk to the rear seat wheel well just in case before we got into a dangerous situation. I had my phone out and took a snapshot before Kyle put the knife away. It wasn't a video, but it showed him clearly with the knife in his hand. Cliff got the gun box open with surprising speed and pulled out his Sig Sauer. He held it up for Kyle to see. Then he began rolling the window down and turning the gun partway toward Kyle's direction.

Kyle hadn't been threatening us with the knife, I'm sure. It was a little push dagger. How can you stab someone in another car with two car windows between you using a dagger with a three-inch blade? He was just showing us that he had damning evidence against me. But he hadn't considered the fact that once you brandish a deadly weapon at someone, not only are you committing a crime, but it justifies the other person defending himself with deadly force. I knew Cliff wasn't about to shoot Kyle, but Kyle didn't know that. He threw the truck in reverse and squealed his tires backing out of there.

Cliff wheeled our car around and peeled out right behind him. The street was slightly downhill our direction so we were both picking up speed fast. Kyle went two blocks and wheeled around a corner, sliding wide and almost hitting a parked car on the far side of the street before straightening up. Cliff made the turn expertly and stayed right with him.

The truck made another fast turn and pulled into a parking lot behind a strip mall. It seemed an odd way to try to evade us, but it soon became clear why he'd done it. At the end of the long service area behind the stores there was a high curb and then a rutty vacant lot. Kyle's truck had oversized tires, four wheel drive, and high ground clearance. He ran right over the curb and headed across the vacant lot. We couldn't follow without risk of blowing a tire, taking out the transmission, or getting stuck. We came to a halt.

"Too bad," I said. "He knows what he's doing. That was clever."

"No, no. That's exactly what I wanted. You have Theo's number, don't you?"

"Yeah."

"Quick, text him our video. Tell him to look at the last two minutes. I don't want him watching the whole thing. We don't know how long Kyle's going to be gone. Theo's expecting him. We can use this."

I sent the text. We headed back over to Theo's building and pulled into the parking lot. There were two empty guest parking spots so we pulled into one. I looked over at Cliff to see if we were going in, but he held up his hand in a wait gesture. A minute later he said, "Okay, that should be long enough. Text him again and say we're right outside and need to talk. Tell him it's either him or Kyle who's going to take the fall."

I furiously entered the text as instructed and pushed the send icon. A few seconds later I got a response: "ill talk 2 u not him". I showed it to Cliff. "I can do it, Cliff. I'm not afraid of him."

"No, it's too dangerous."

"I'll tell him it has to be where you can see us."

"I still don't like it."

"Cliff, this is our chance. We gotta take it." I jumped out of the car and hustled to Theo's door. Cliff yelled at me to stop, but I kept going. I knocked on Theo's door as Cliff was just reaching the edge of the parking lot.

Theo opened the door and saw me, then saw Cliff twenty feet behind. "I said just you, not him." He started to close the door.

"No, don't. Just me. It's just me." I held up my hand in the same wait gesture Cliff had used on me earlier. He stopped where he was. I turned back to Cliff. "Go back to the car, Cliff. I've got this." Then, turning back to Theo, "It's got to be where he can watch. He'll be out of earshot. No more recording."

Theo thought about it for a few seconds. "Okay, follow me." He pointed at Cliff and yelled for him to get back, which Cliff did. Then Theo stepped out of his apartment and walked around the end of the unit. I followed him. The area between the building and back fence was a narrow paved utility space. There were some garbage cans, an electrical junction box and a garden hose. There was an air conditioner unit there going full blast making noise and pumping hot air on us. Cliff moved across the lot to where he could see us from about fifty feet.

"How do I know you're not recording this?" he asked.

"Recording was your idea back there, not ours. But no, I'm not recording you. With this air conditioner going you couldn't hear anything anyway."

He looked me up and down pretty thoroughly, even walking around behind me and staring at my butt. I was wearing a tee shirt and jeans. He still didn't seem convinced.

"For Christ sake, I'm not wired. Here," I said, and pulled off my shirt. I was wearing a pretty thin bra and every bump showed, if you know what I mean. He could definitely see there was no microphone. I guess his freebie back at the spa had drained his juices for the near term because he didn't ogle much.

"What about your pants? They have these spy buckles..."

I unbuttoned my jeans and pulled them down to mid-thigh. My panties were just as revealing as my bra. I looked over at Cliff and he was pacing like a panther and not a happy one. I wasn't wearing a belt so I turned the waistband over so Theo could see there was nothing in it. "I'm not wired, okay? Can I put my clothes on now?" The irony of the situation was not lost on me after what we had done to him a half an hour ago.

"Okay." He turned his back toward Cliff. Maybe he thought Cliff was a lip reader. "What do you want?"

I pulled my pants up and put on my shirt. "I'll bet you're expecting Kyle to show up and get you out of this, right? I've got news for you: he's not coming. He's left you holding the bag. Ask yourself, why isn't he here now?"

Theo looked at his phone as though willing it to ring or chime a text notice. Finally he answered me. "Look, I didn't have anything to do with the murder. I'm no murderer. Suppose hypothetically I knew what happened? If I tell you, what can you do for me? You're not the D.A. or police."

“I can go with you to the police. It’s just a matter of time now. We have you on video. Ours is in the cloud, too. It’s all coming tumbling down. If we go in together I can vouch that you came forward voluntarily. You can come in with your lawyer, too. I know you have a record, so you know somebody.”

“I can’t afford a lawyer, not for something like this. I’m still paying for the last time and it was something petty. It’ll have to be the Public Defender.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that the hammer is coming down. If you really didn’t have any part of the murder, I’m pretty sure you can get off with no jail time, maybe even no prosecution at all. You’d need to provide something good, though. Like the robot. Do you know where it is?”

“Kyle has it. That was all him. I didn’t know anything about it until after. I didn’t even know about the robot until I saw it on the website. I thought he was breaking in to open the safe by hand. He’s a locksmith; he could pick those locks easy. He won’t have it in his apartment, though. He’s hidden it somewhere.”

We’d left hypothetical territory now. “Do you know where?”

“No. But I know he still has it. He told me yesterday he couldn’t dump it because it was a gold mine.”

“Appropriate metaphor.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. Do you know where he might hide something like that?”

“Not right off hand. Maybe if I think about it I can remember some spot.”

“How about the coins?”

“I’m sure he still has those, too. Shit, he knew you weren’t a real dealer as soon as I told him you wanted ten. I should have figured it out, too.”

“Water under the bridge, Theo. Focus. What else do you know? You need some bargaining chips. How did it work? How did Kyle find out about the safe?”

“Back in high school Josh told me about the safe. He said Libby’s dad had one with gold coins in it. He thought it was boss. He bragged about how they tried to open it. We both thought it probably only had a few coins in it, like a collector would have. After high school we stopped hanging out, especially after he got on with the cops, and I didn’t think about it. Later after

I started palling around with Kyle and he got his locksmith license he was talking up how he learned how to drill a safe or pick a safe lock. That's when I told him about McNabb's safe. Not to steal from it, just like, you know how guys are ... 'wouldn't it be cool to get into that rich guy's safe?' I didn't know that he took it seriously. I never knew about the robot or the plan to rob or anything until he brought me the first few coins. I asked him where he got them and he told me the whole thing. The robot, the chimney, pretending to be selling heating and cooling systems, the cleaning lady helping him. All that."

"What'd you do then?"

"I was, like, 'awesome, man' but I didn't really know what to do."

"You sold them."

"Yeah, eventually. When there wasn't anything happening – no police coming around, no big talk about it around town – I figured it was safe. I thought he was probably just blowing smoke up my ass, making it all up. But I tested the coins and they were real gold. So I agreed to sell them. I couldn't do it at work, though. My boss would take them as collateral, but only for like half their value, even less than bullion value. He didn't know anything about the break-in; that's just the way he does business. Buy low, sell high. Kyle wanted more. He knew what they were worth. But he was afraid that if he went to some coin or gold dealer they'd ask too many questions. He thought the cops had probably already alerted them all to be on the lookout."

"So you chose e*Bay."

"Right. I sold a couple of them, but not at prices he liked. So he thought about melting the rest down for bullion."

"He didn't do that, I take it?"

"No. He was afraid to take them to some gold dealer or whoever to melt them down for the same reasons. Too many questions. He didn't have the knowhow or equipment to do it himself. He was looking into it, though. I know he watched a YouTube video about it. He might have bought the equipment."

"That means they could be melting even as we speak."

"I guess."

"What about the murder?"

"I swear I had nothing to do with that. I heard about it along with everyone else. On the radio, Facebook, everyone was talking about it. That's the first murder around here in years, so it was a big deal. It was only after I

learned it was the housekeeper lady for Mr. McNabb that I put two and two together. I wasn't sure even then until it came out later about the robot trying to steal the coins. He called me that day and told me to stash the one coin that I had somewhere safe. He told me to keep my mouth shut about it or I'd be in big trouble."

"Did he threaten you?"

"Not like with violence. I'm not afraid of him, not in that way. But he's smart and I thought he might find a way to pin the murder on me. I promised him I wouldn't say anything."

"Did you know in advance he was going back that night – the night Bernice was killed?"

"No, I swear."

"Did he admit that he killed her, or say anything at all that indicated that?"

"No, just what I told you. To keep my mouth shut."

"Okay, look. If what you're saying is true, and you can convince the authorities, you should be alright legally. You aided and abetted him on the first robbery after the fact, but if you really didn't believe those coins were stolen, you didn't commit conspiracy and the felony murder rule doesn't apply. You might get a slap on the wrist sentence for selling the coins, but if you turn state's evidence against him I can't see you doing any jail time."

"You're a lawyer? Can you represent me?"

"No and no. I went to law school, but I'm not a licensed attorney."

"How about him?" indicating Cliff.

"He's an attorney, but McNabb is his client. He can't represent you. He's not a trial lawyer anyway."

"What am I supposed to do, then?"

"Like I said, I can go in with you, help you explain the situation, and encourage them to give you a deal, but I just can't represent to them that I'm your attorney. They don't have to let me in with you. You really should go in with a lawyer, even if it costs money."

"Can you go in there by yourself and get the deal? Once you tell me it's a done deal, then I could come forward. I could do community service again like last time."

"It doesn't work that way. I can go in there alone and tell them what you told me, but then I'm just a witness who heard you confess. You really should go in with a lawyer."

“I didn’t ‘confess.’ And I can deny this entire conversation. You didn’t record it.”

“That’s true. Call it what you want. You’ve talked to me and what you said isn’t privileged. We have the video recording, too, so your only two options at this point are to make the best deal you can with the police or flee. You know that second option isn’t going to work out well.”

Theo let out a string of expletives. His lower lip started quivering. I thought he might cry, but he held it together. I waved at Cliff to come over. Theo didn’t object.

Chapter 29

Cliff joined us behind the building. He was scowling at Theo, probably because of the strip down he’d made me do. Cliff didn’t know I had done it of my own volition. He didn’t say anything at first because he couldn’t read the situation. He could see that there had been a breakthrough of some kind, but what exactly, he didn’t know. I explained what Theo had said. By the time I’d finished, Cliff’s expression had softened. He turned to Theo. “This can work out okay for you. Do you have any proof of what you’re saying?”

“No. Like I told her, I don’t know where the coins are or the robot. I’m sure Kyle has them somewhere.”

“What about the one you were trying to sell to her?”

“Oh yeah. That one. I still have it.”

“That’s good. That’s something to work with. Kyle’s the locksmith, too, not you. And your phone records will show calls and texts between you and Kyle, won’t they?”

“Yeah. We didn’t buy burner phones.”

“You need an attorney, a good one, someone who knows how to negotiate with the police.”

“I can’t afford a lawyer. I’m still paying off the guy from last time. He told me he wouldn’t represent me again until I paid him. He wasn’t any good anyway.”

Cliff thought for a minute and then pulled out his phone. I watched him scroll through his contacts and push a button, but I didn’t know whom he was calling. He connected with someone, a woman at first, then was put through to a man. He turned his back and walked away from us, but I could

tell that he was telling the whole story to someone. It took him a long time and there was some arguing, well, more like convincing, going on, but when the conversation was over, Cliff seemed satisfied.

“Theo, I’ve got an attorney for you, a good one, if you want him. He’s in Oakland right now, but he’ll contact the D.A. on Monday to arrange a time for you to come in with him. He’ll withhold your name until then.”

“Who is this guy? And who’s paying him?”

“He’s a former law school classmate of mine. He’ll do it for free, at least the part about going in with you and negotiating with the police. He said he won’t represent you at trial if you’re arrested, but he said from the sound of it he didn’t think that was going to happen.” Cliff wrote down the name and number on a piece of paper. “Listen to him and do what he says. He’s a lifelong civil rights activist although he works at a big law firm now. I got him interested only because of Mendoza’s predicament. If you come forward, Mendoza will almost certainly be released.”

“So he doesn’t care about me?”

“He cares about justice. He’s ethical and will represent you to the best of his ability. That’s a lawyer’s duty. You can trust him. But he’s taking the case based on my representation that you want to come in and admit your involvement. Don’t flip on me now. If you do, you’re on your own.”

Theo’s phone buzzed. His face reddened and he scowled at us. “It’s a text from Kyle. He says you two were waiting outside my apartment and chased him off with a gun. That’s why he didn’t show up when he promised.”

Cliff didn’t bat an eye. “Theo, don’t trust Kyle. That’s what got you into this mess. There’s no turning back now. Remember the video.”

“He’s on his way over here now. I can’t turn him away. I called him after you guys came into the massage parlor.”

“Okay. We’re going to leave, but remember what I said. Call the lawyer as soon as you can. When you talk to Kyle, don’t let him know you’re going to the police. He’s dangerous. Avoid him if you can from now on. If you can’t, try to find out where the coins or the robot are if you can do it in a way that doesn’t make him suspicious. We’ll hold off on contacting the police until Monday so you can get credit for coming forward voluntarily, but do it first thing Monday. If you don’t, we’ll have the video in to the police by the end of the day.”

Theo just stared at us. He was looking at us differently now that he knew Kyle had been coming for him and that we had interfered. We had

caught him when he thought Kyle had abandoned him. I could feel the trust ebbing away now. Cliff tapped me on the shoulder and gestured for me to come get in the car. He didn't want Kyle to see us together with Theo. We got in the car and left, taking an indirect route away so as not to pass Kyle coming in.

"What about Mendoza?" I asked. "Lydia deserves to know so she can get him released."

"It's more important to keep our word to Czerny right now. Besides, we don't even know for sure Mendoza's innocent. If we believe Theo, Kyle got Bernice to help. Miguel might have been in on it, too. He could have built the cat structure or helped Bernice cover up the first theft."

"You don't really believe that."

"Knowing and believing are two different things. I think he's innocent, but one or two more days in jail won't kill him. If we go to Correa now and she goes to the police or press with a claim that Czerny confessed to us and named Kyle, that might kill Theo's chances at getting a deal."

"Why didn't you get your law school buddy to help Lydia with Mendoza? We know Theo's guilty at least of fencing the coins."

"I did talk to him about the case before. He's too tied up in trials to take on one up here now. That's why he won't do any more for Theo than help him come in. He's helping Mendoza indirectly by helping Theo."

"So what's our next step?"

"Good question. We need to find the coins or the robot. Awesome job on getting Theo to talk, by the way. If only I'd known the trick was to have you do a strip tease, I could have used you when I was in the Bureau."

"Ha ha, Mr. Comedian. He thought I was wired. He'd just been burned that way. I had to ..."

"I know, I know. Just kidding. Still, great job."

"Thanks, boss."

"Partner."

"Thanks, partner." I was just doing my job, but I must say the glow I got from Cliff's praise made me feel awfully good just then. "So do you think the recording is admissible? I mean, when he was recording, he clearly consented to be recorded, but once he turned his off and told you not to record, isn't that withdrawal of consent? Were we committing a felony by continuing to record? I don't look good in stripes."

“That’s a question for legal scholars to debate. No one’s going to prosecute us. I hope I didn’t hurt your foot.” He was referring to when he stepped on my toe to signal me to start recording.

It actually was still throbbing, but I replied, “I’m good. So how are we going to find the coins or the robot?”

“I’m hoping Theo gets something from Kyle and shares it with us or the police, but that’s probably not going to happen.”

“Theo’s right that Kyle isn’t going to keep those in his house or his car.”

“There’s one place we know that other people don’t go that he has access to.”

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“The mine. That head frame.”

“We can’t just waltz in there and start searching. That’s trespassing or breaking and entering.”

“Yes. No. It’s trespassing, maybe, but we won’t break in. We can just walk in. There are trails.”

“The road has metal gates. I’m sure they close those after hours.”

Cliff pulled over and pulled out his phone. He brought Google Earth up on the phone and searched. “Here. Teresa’s Place on Jackson Gate Road.” He showed me the map. Teresa’s was an Italian restaurant near the mine. Its parking lot backed up to the hill where the mine was located. It appeared that we could just hike in from there with no barriers. “It’s after four now. The place is closed and we have daylight.”

A shot of adrenaline hit my brain at the thought of sneaking in and searching. The rush was part of what made this job great, but of course it was fueled in part by fear. What if we get caught? Would we have to break into the head frame?

We drove to Teresa’s. The restaurant wasn’t open for dinner yet but there were a few cars in the lot. Employees, probably. Cliff parked at the far end in order to attract minimal attention. Cliff fired up his geocaching app and set the mine as the goto. We began hiking up the hill into the trees. In less than a quarter mile we were through the trees and could see the head frame. In minutes we were just outside the mine grounds. We crouched behind a bush for a bit, looking around to see if anyone was there. After seeing no one for several minutes we walked on in casually. If someone confronted us, our story was going to be that we were just hikers and noticed the interesting structure.

No one confronted us; the place appeared to be empty. We got to the head frame, still impressive up close. The door was closed and locked. There was a large informational sign on a post nearby. Cliff went over to read it. I wasn't sure why he saw fit to do that just then, but it soon became clear. He pulled out a shim and worked it between the jamb and the door. In seconds it was open. We went inside and closed the door behind us. Cliff tapped something on his phone and began typing something. I thought he might be sending an email to Lydia or even the sheriff's department. It took him several minutes.

"There. Another EarthCache found."

"Are you kidding me? You stopped in the middle of a burglary to claim a geocache?"

"An EarthCache, not just any geocache. Besides, it's not a burglary. To be a burglary you must intend to commit a crime inside."

"Yeah, yeah, I went to law school. But still, ..."

"Quit griping. Let's get searching."

We were in the main structure in the small entryway. This is where Kyle had spoken to us in the tour group. There was almost nothing here beyond some signs on the walls explaining the parts and their function of this building. We searched the floor level, but it was obvious that nothing was hidden there, not only because there was no place to hide it, but also because a tourist might find anything there. It had three levels but really all the guts were in the main hoistroom, which was the next level up. We headed up the stairs, the same ones where I had tripped and Kyle had taken my knife.

The hoistroom was huge. The hoist itself was a drum hoist, as Kyle had explained, the type commonly used in the Americas, but different from the friction hoists used in Europe and Asia. Kyle knew all this and could have taught an engineering course on it. I'm not surprised he could build a robot. If he wasn't such a creep he could have made it big in tech. The hoist was essentially a winch with a humongous cable wrapped around the drum. The cable led up to the wheelroom at the top of the frame, where there was a big pulley. From there the cable led down into the mineshaft itself, or at least it did when the mine was in operation. Miners were lowered and raised through the shaft on that cable and the ore was brought up that way. Now the cable ran down to the ground and was attached to a skip placed there for the tourists to see.

There were quite a few places to hide things in and around the machinery and controls. We spent fifteen minutes or so there but came up empty. There was a set of stairs leading up to a sort of loft-like platform where there were more controls and maintenance tools in another locked room. Cliff used his shim again and we got inside. There were some cabinets and places where I might hide things if I had access. You could put the coins here in almost any innocuous container like a lunchbox. The coins weren't very big. The robot was another matter, although still fairly small. We spent a good fifteen minutes here, too, but found nothing. As we were about to leave, I pointed out that there was a small gap above the cabinets mounted on the wall. It was out of reach even for Cliff. He nodded and offered his locked hands to hoist me again. We were getting to be a regular acrobat act.

I stepped into his hands and jumped awkwardly as he shoved upward. I still couldn't see over the cabinets, but I could easily reach. I wished I had gloves at that point because I don't like spiders, or for that matter any other bugs. It's generally not a good idea to reach your hand into any unfamiliar place where you can't see. Cliff even told me that when we were geocaching. Still, he was holding me up and this was our only chance, so I started feeling around. At first there was nothing, so I told Cliff to move. I was at one end of the set of cabinets and could only reach about half of the area. He moved to the other end, still holding me, as I swept my hand over the cabinets. Suddenly my hand hit something.

"Stop! There's something there." I grabbed it. It was a small box. It was also heavy. I pulled it to the edge where I could see it. It was labeled as a box of nails just like you'd find in any hardware store.

"Open it," Cliff instructed.

I looked at him annoyed since of course I was going to open it without him having to tell me. I opened the flap on one end. Inside I saw rolls of coins in the same wrappers Charles used.

"I believe 'Eureka' is the appropriate term at this point. It's the coins."

"Don't touch them. The rolls will have Kyle's fingerprints on them."

"Well, duh." I put the box back where it had been. "We should call the police now. This is the evidence we need."

"In a minute. Let's see if we can find the robot. We can't prove those are the same coins taken from McNabb. The robot will clinch it."

"Yeah we can. They'll have Charles's fingerprints on them, too."

“Maybe, maybe not. Charles didn’t report any missing wrappers; Kyle might have his own supply. Let’s try to find the robot as long as we’re here. Finish sweeping the rest of the cabinet top.”

We moved to the other end but there was nothing else on top of the cabinet. “Nada.” Cliff let me down with a grunt. He huffed and puffed like the big bad wolf and complained that I must have put on weight. I told him he was getting out of shape.

Since we’d thoroughly searched the entire room, we went back down the stairs. “There’s only one other area,” Cliff said as we stepped outside. He looked up at the wheelroom perched a hundred thirty-five feet up.

“You’re kidding me. There’s only that one rickety ladder.”

“It’s steel. It must be safe. There’s no sign saying it’s hazardous. Besides, they have to go up there to do routine maintenance.”

“There’s a chain across the foot of the ladder.”

“Easy to step over.”

“You want to climb a thirteen-story stairway?”

“Needs must.”

“‘Needs must?’ You’re starting to sound like Charles now.”

“You can stay here.”

I sighed. “You’re exhausted from holding me up that whole time. I’ll go first.”

“I’m not sure it can take the weight of both of us at the same time. You’re lighter. Take the shim. You may need it to get into the pulley room. When you’re inside, I’ll come up.”

I started climbing. Man! That was hard. I had to stop to rest several times. It probably took me almost ten minutes. The ladder was more like sixty degrees than vertical, most like very steep stairs than a ladder, but it required pulling with my arms as well as using my legs. My thighs and arms were burning by the time I was halfway up. As I got near the top, I learned the hard way not to look down. I nearly lost my grip on the handrail, it was so scary. There were no walls or anything around me besides the railings. Still, I managed to get there. The door wasn’t locked, although there was a sign on it with a red warning message saying that it was hazardous to enter. You’d think that might be better placed down at ground level. But as Cliff said, needs must.

I entered the room. It was very small. I had to squeeze between the enormous pulley and its supporting frame on the one side and the wall on the

other. I heard Cliff get on the ladder. It made a rattling noise as he climbed. In the back of the room was a built-in wooden box, kind of like a large tool box, or tool trunk, really. The room was so small that it was obvious that there was no other spot where the robot could be hidden. I opened the box.

Inside were various mechanical parts and tools. Some large nuts and bolts were of the same size as those on the framing for the pulley. I suppose if one of those broke or stripped or something, it would be better to have the replacements on hand than to have to carry them up on that ladder. I didn't see the robot, but it was very dark inside the box and it was crammed with mechanical stuff. I could hear Cliff getting closer.

I started lifting some of the stuff out. First were some of the nuts and bolts, then the biggest wrench I'd ever seen in my life. Next was a doohickey I didn't recognize but which I guessed had something to do with splicing cable. When I lifted that out, I couldn't believe my eyes. Underneath was Robber the Robot. I didn't touch it, of course. I hurried to the door and poked my head out.

"Cliff! It's here!"

Cliff was almost to the top of the ladder. "Fantastic! Now it's time to call the police. I don't need to see it. Let's go back down." He started to descend. That's when I saw it. Kyle's truck. Theo must have turned on us. Either that, or Kyle bullied him into telling him what had happened. He might have guessed that we'd come here, but he probably just came in order to move the robot and coins somewhere safer and not associated with him.

Kyle pulled his truck right up to the base of the ladder. He stepped out of the truck and drew a handgun from under the seat. Even from that height I could see it was a good-sized semi-automatic. Cliff had heard the truck, too, and was trying to pull his phone out of his pocket while holding onto the ladder. He managed to get it out just as Kyle fired his first shot. The bullet zinged off the ladder inches from Cliff's head. Cliff instinctively jerked left and momentarily lost his balance. He let go of his phone to grab the ladder with both hands. He began to climb up.

"Get inside, Cliff. He can't shoot us up here."

"Call 911. I dropped my phone."

"Yeah, I saw." I dialed 911. "I got a busy signal."

Another bullet hit, this time right by the door jamb. Wood splintered. I jerked back inside and dialed again. Crap. Still busy. I logged onto my

Twitter account and tweeted “SOS! Gunman. 911.” Maybe someone would see that and be able to get through.

Cliff launched his body through the doorway. There was barely room for the two of us. I had to move back against the tool box. “He missed. I’m okay.”

“I’m still trying, but 911 is busy.”

“Sort of defeats the purpose. He’s coming up behind me.” I heard the rattle of the ladder as Cliff said this. Cliff looked out the door. Kyle was climbing while holding his gun in his right hand, which made for a slow, awkward ascent.

“Here!” I called and rolled a large metal nut to him. It probably weighed two pounds.

Cliff took it and instantly got the idea. He took careful aim and hefted the nut outward since the angle meant Kyle wasn’t directly below. I could hear the crack of bone even from where I was sitting. There was rattle from the ladder and then quiet. “Damn! I only got his arm. He fell off the ladder, but he was only five feet up. He landed on his feet.”

“Which arm?”

“His right. He dropped the gun. I think I broke his elbow.”

“A sharp-edged chunk of steel falling from a hundred thirty five feet up will do that to you.”

“He’s picking up the gun with his left hand. His right arm is dangling.”

“Let’s hope he’s not ambidextrous.”

“He wasn’t hitting me even with his right. It’s really hard to shoot up at a sharp angle accurately with a handgun. I think we’re okay at this distance. He’s not going to try climbing again. Call 911 again.”

I started to dial when he let out a cry. “Fire!”

Kyle had gone to his truck and gotten a lighter, then set the flame to the cable leading from the ground level up to the pulley. The pulley may not have been used in ages, or maybe it was used regularly, I don’t know, but it was slathered in grease. The flames shot up the cable and in seconds were in the room with us, engulfing the pulley.

Chapter 30

Ashley was a typical teenager. She loved going to the mall and hanging with her friends. This weekend that's exactly what she was doing. They were at Stanford Shopping Center, one of her favorite places. It had over one hundred fifty stores and, more importantly, lots of cute guys hanging out. She was with her friends Mia and Samantha.

"He's like totally into you, Ash," Mia said.

"He is not. We haven't even gone out."

"I heard him asking Brandon about you," Samantha added with a conspiratorial wink at Mia.

"You guys ... hold on, my phone."

Ashley pulled out her phone and glanced at it. It was just a Twitter alert, so probably not that important. She didn't follow that many people, only forty or so, and most of them didn't tweet much. She'd stopped following celebrities two years earlier. This one was from Maeva. She'd tweeted a couple of times over the weekend about some of the interesting stuff she'd seen up in Sutter Creek and Jackson. Ashley wasn't very interested. She'd only started following Cliff and Maeva when she'd begun working there. They were old people, or that's the way she looked at them. They didn't tweet about stuff she cared about, but it seemed like the dutiful thing to do.

As she was about to put the phone away again, she realized what the tweet had actually said. "Omigod! Look at this." She turned the phone so her girlfriends could see.

"Is that for real? Who's Maeva anyway?"

"She's my boss. One of my bosses. I think it's for real."

"What are you going to do?"

"Her husband's a cop, but I don't have his number."

"You could call 911," Mia offered.

"But what do I tell them? I don't know where she is. I mean she's up in the mountains somewhere."

"What's she doing up there?" Samantha asked.

"Her and my uncle are working on a case."

"Can you call him?"

"Yeah, good idea." Ashley dialed Cliff's phone, but it went immediately to voice mail. She didn't have any way to know it, but Kyle had picked it off the ground and turned it off so it couldn't be tracked.

“What about your aunt. The FBI agent?” The fact that Ashley had an aunt in the FBI was one of those status symbols so important to teens. It was something cool to her friends. To Ashley, she was just her Aunt Ellen.

“Uh, yeah, I guess.” She did have Ellen’s number so that was her next call. It rang three times.

“Hello, Ashley. How are you?” Ellen’s voice was calm and friendly. Caller ID had told her who it was before she answered. She ignored most calls that weren’t from the office because of all the solicitors and robocalls.

“Hi, Aunt Ellen. I’m fine.”

“How’s your mom?”

“She’s fine, too. Um, I got this weird tweet from Maeva.”

Ellen’s tone changed completely. “Maeva? What did it say?”

“It said to call 911. It said ‘gunman.’”

“Did she say where she was?”

“She’s up in the mountains with Cliff.”

“I know that, Ashley. Where exactly are they now?”

“I don’t know. That’s all it said.”

“I don’t have a Twitter account. Can you forward that to my email? Paste it in or something.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Look. Maeva wouldn’t joke about something like that. You need to log onto her Twitter or Instagram or whatever it is you guys share and try to find out where exactly she is or anything else. You know more about that social media stuff than I do. This is important, Ashley. I’m going to take care of the law enforcement contact. You don’t need to worry about that. Just send me the email with the tweet.”

“Yeah, okay. I just did. You should get it any second.”

“I see it now. I’m at my computer. Now do what I said and call me back if you find anything out. I have to hang up to make some calls.”

“Okay.”

Ellen called 911 from her house. She was connected to the 911 operator for Los Altos, the city where she and Cliff lived.

“What is your emergency?”

“I’m an FBI agent. I received an email from my husband and his partner that they are in danger from a gunman. They said to call 911.”

“Where are they?”

“Somewhere in Amador County, I assume. They’re private investigators working a case up there. I don’t have an exact location yet.”

“Alright, I can’t help you from here. I’m going to have to connect you to someone else. It’s going to be the central 911 operator for the Highway Patrol. They cover the whole Bay Area and are in contact with agencies across the state. They should be able to help you.”

Moments later she was on the line with a man from the CHP facility. “911. What is your emergency?”

She went through the same routine with the operator and once again was told they couldn’t help her from there. She was transferred to yet another emergency call center that covered the Central Valley and Sierras where she went through the same few sentences. The 911 operator continued.

“Ma’am, we can’t dispatch anyone until we know where to send them. Do you have any idea where they are?” This operator was a woman with a husky voice.

“The case was in Sutter Creek. That’s all I know. I tried calling him but his phone seems to be off. It went straight to voice mail. I’m on my email now and he didn’t send me anything. It was his partner who sent the tweet.”

“What is that number? We may be able to locate it.”

“Just a moment, I’ll have to look that up. I don’t normally call her, or if I do, it’s the office number, not her cell phone.”

“Go ahead. I’ll wait while you look it up.”

Ellen wasn’t sure she had Maeva’s cell in her contacts list, so she opened up a separate browser window and logged onto Cliff’s gmail account. She knew his password. When the page loaded she was about to hit the contacts app icon when she noticed the top email in Cliff’s Inbox. The subject line read “[Log] Watchlist: CliffNotes found Kennedy Gold Mine.” It was from the Geocaching.com website. The time/date line said it had arrived in his Inbox twenty-five minutes earlier. She opened the email and saw a link to the cache page. She was an experienced geocacher herself. That was how she and Cliff had gotten together. She knew what to do. She clicked on the link in the email and that took her to the cache page. Cliff had logged it and mentioned Maeva in the log, so they were together.

“Operator, I know where he was, they both were, twenty-five minutes ago. He’s probably still there or nearby. It’s the Kennedy Gold Mine near Jackson, Amador County. The sheriff there will know the location. It’s famous.”

“Thank you, that’s what I needed.” A few moments of silence passed. “I’ve dispatched the sheriff’s office to that location. They should be there as fast as they can.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t hang up. I need more information. Can you give me a physical description of your husband and his partner.”

Ellen provided all the information requested. The operator asked more questions trying to elicit the nature of the threat and any other parties, especially armed perpetrators, who might be present, but Ellen knew very little to add to what she had already told her.

~o0o~

When I saw the flames swallow the pulley wheel I dropped my phone and ripped the fire extinguisher off the wall. It was mounted directly above the tool box. I pulled the safety pin out and squeezed the handle. Foam burst out and quickly covered the pulley. My arms got tired after only a few seconds. That climb up the ladder had completely worn me out and this was a jumbo-sized fire extinguisher, not one of those little kitchen-sized ones.

Cliff could see my arms start to flag and he grabbed the extinguisher from me. The flames weren’t completely out, but they were losing the battle with the foam. I sat down, utterly exhausted. It had been a hot day even before we came up here, but after climbing a 13-story ladder and now with flames filling a tiny workspace, the heat was unbearable. The smoke was also beginning to make me gag and cough. There was a small window on the adjacent wall. I had to squeeze past the flaming pulley wheel to get to it. As I did that I felt a searing pain on my butt. There was a metal railing around the wheel to protect people from getting caught on it. That railing had gotten scorching hot and burned me right through my jeans. Cliff sprayed my ass with foam and I felt immediate relief. I got the window open and we both breathed a sigh of relief. The door was still open, so there was a nice cross breeze taking the smoke out and cooling the air down to 95°.

Cliff turned the foam back on the flames and it looked like we were winning that battle. The layer of grease was thin and most of the volatiles had long since evaporated, so there wasn’t much fuel on the cable. The steel wouldn’t burn. Fortunately, the flames hadn’t caught the wood walls or ceiling on fire. After another minute or so, the fire was out.

“What do we do now, boss?” I said.

“Partner.”

“Partner.”

“No clue.” This was not the answer I’d been hoping for.

I looked around for my phone but couldn’t find it. It had gotten covered in foam. “Do you see my phone anywhere? I dropped it when I grabbed for the extinguisher.”

“I think I may have kicked it. I couldn’t see it under the foam. My foot hit something. I heard it go down the hole.” The railing around the pulley wheel protected people from getting too close, but it didn’t have a rail at floor level. A small object like a phone could slip under the lowest rail and fall down the opening where the cable passed through the floor.

“Great. So now we have no phone.”

“Sorry. I guess we’re in a waiting game now. He can’t come up the ladder or shoot us from there and we can’t go down. Eventually someone will show up here. It’s tourist season.”

“Today’s Sunday. They aren’t open during the week. No one’s going to be here until next Saturday.”

Cliff didn’t have an answer this time.

~oOo~

Ashley’s girlfriends thought this was so cool. They were in the middle of some kind of mystery. They giggled insanely and talked over each other, mostly giving Ashley directions on what she should do next. Ashley, on the other hand, was becoming increasingly concerned. Ellen had sounded worried and now Ashley realized she had a responsibility for the safety of Cliff and Maeva, a responsibility she didn’t want. It weighed heavily on her, all the more so because there wasn’t anything she could do besides stare at her phone. Ellen had told her to monitor her Twitter feed but nothing more was coming from Maeva. Cliff had an account, too, but almost never used it.

Her companions’ enthusiasm waned after ten minutes standing around staring at Ashley’s phone. One of them suggested they keep shopping. Ashley could still monitor her Twitter feed while they walked around. Ashley reluctantly agreed. As they entered the Nordstrom’s another tweet arrived. This, too, was from Maeva. It read, “Ingore previus. All OK now.” She breathed a sigh of relief. Her girlfriends looked disappointed when she turned

the phone so they could see. The thrill ride was over. False alarm. Ashley forwarded the tweet to Ellen's email and the trio went off to shop in the teen section.

Ellen had her gmail account open on one tab and Cliff's on another. She was still on the line with the 911 operator. She saw the Inbox tab icon change to reflect the incoming email on her own account so she changed to that tab and read it. She told the operator that another tweet had come in and described what it said.

"Oh, that's good news. I'll relay that to the responding officers," the woman said.

"No, don't!" Ellen shouted into the phone. "This is fake. I know Maeva. She got into Stanford Law School. She knows how to spell. One typo I can believe, but two out of five words? No way, not if she was calm. This was written by someone else. The gunman must have her phone. Either that or she's being forced to type this and intentionally misspelled two words as a signal."

"Well, everyone spells things wrong on Twitter. Besides, I have to relay it to the officers. If I didn't and it turned out to be a false alarm, I could lose my job. They could be rushing code three thinking it's an emergency. That's risky. They could be in an accident."

"It *is* an emergency. I'm telling you, the gunman must have her phone. That means he could have them at gunpoint or even have shot her – shot them both."

The operator hesitated, then replied. "I understand. Don't worry. The deputies will respond. They're already on their way. They should be there in just two or three minutes. But I have to let them know." Ellen couldn't hear what the operator told the deputies because the woman she was talking to wasn't the one talking to the officers. In cases like this, one operator stays on the line with the caller while another one monitors the situation through a headset and makes the dispatch call, staying in contact with the responding officers. All she could do was keep her fingers crossed.

~oOo~

I had almost given up hope when I heard the wail of sirens. Cliff looked at me with a grin. "Your tweet!" he said. "It must have gotten through

to someone.” He poked his head out the door. I squeezed next to him so I could see, too.

There was a sheriff’s patrol car parked at the edge of the property, barely visible through the foliage and Kyle had apparently walked over to meet them when he heard them coming. Kyle was talking to the deputies but they were too far away for me to hear what they were saying. They were upwind, so if I couldn’t hear them, they definitely couldn’t hear us. The deputies had their backs to the head frame. Kyle was facing us. I could see him gesturing to the phone in his left hand – my phone. I could tell by the phone case color. His right thumb was hooked on his belt, trying to support the broken elbow without making it obvious to the officers.

I realized that he must be giving them some kind of BS story. He probably said he found the phone and it must have been left by some tourist, that crazy redhead who’d been there earlier. I realized that it had on it the video I had taken earlier, the one where he offered to help me up when I “trespassed” trying to go up the stairs. The next thing I knew he was laughing. The officers seemed to be laughing, too. He must have shown them the video of me. I’d screwed it all up. The officers turned toward their patrol car.

Cliff had been watching the same thing and realized exactly what I had. He stepped out onto the narrow step in front of the door and yelled at the top of his lungs, but the deputies didn’t hear him or see him. One of them got into the driver’s seat and closed the door. The other one sat down in the car but was talking to Kyle through the open window.

“Quick! Give me another one of those nuts,” Cliff called to me.

I scrambled to the toolbox and hefted another one over to him. He caught it in the doorway and stepped outside again. He threw it as hard as he could. It landed on the ground near the truck with a dull thud.

“Another!”

I already had brought two more over. The deputy started to roll up the window. The driver started the engine. Cliff made another throw and this one landed right in the middle of the truckbed with a clang loud enough to wake the dead. The window on the patrol car stopped its rise. The deputy on that side stepped out and looked toward the pickup. Cliff hefted another nut and this one landed on the cab’s roof. The deputy looked up and saw Cliff waving his arms. He motioned to his partner who was still in the driver’s seat. That deputy got out and pulled his gun on Kyle. Kyle raised his good arm. It didn’t

take long before Kyle was in handcuffs in the back of the patrol car while one deputy ran to the foot of the head frame ladder.

Cliff and I began our descent downward, him first since he was blocking my way.

Chapter 31

I don't have to spell out the details. You can guess what happened next. A passel of deputies eventually showed up, found the coins and the robot, and formally arrested Kyle. Our phones were taken into evidence but the deputies let us use their phones so we could call our families. It turns out my husband hadn't seen my tweet and Ellen hadn't called him, so he didn't even know I'd been in any trouble. I figured he'd hear it on the news soon enough, so I just told him that something had come up and I'd have to stay over another night at least. He said fine. Then I called Jayden. He deserved the exclusive. They let Cliff talk directly to the 911 dispatcher through their police radio and that message was relayed to Ellen. When he got a chance to use a phone he called Charles and proclaimed victory. The McNabb family was more relieved than delighted, but the mood lightened there.

I'm tempted to say we all lived happily ever after but this wasn't a fairy tale. Kyle was convicted of first-degree murder and got life. Mendoza was let go but was still widowed and abandoned by his married girlfriend. Theo was convicted of receiving stolen goods, but his testimony against Kyle was crucial in getting the murder conviction so he got a light sentence. Lydia Correa got such good publicity that she was offered and accepted a salaried job with the public defender in Stockton. Charles paid his bill right on time and gave us each a double eagle as a tip. Cliff got a smiley for finding the EarthCache.

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