

# **The Cryptic Crossword Caper**

A cozy mystery

By Russell Atkinson

The puzzles in this book are available online to be worked interactively or to be printed out. See the Appendix for details.

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## Chapter 1

Margaret “Mags” McPherson peeled the wax paper away and lifted off the sheet of dough. She carefully placed it over the bed of strawberries and rhubarb and began crimping the edges to seal in the goodness. It was her turn to bring the treats to the book club and the ladies always liked her pies, especially the strawberry rhubarb. She was the only one who made pies these days. It seems to have become a lost art. They complained that it’s too hard to make the crust. Yet it’s so easy, she thought. You just have to roll the dough out between sheets of wax paper. A homemade crust is infinitely superior to that tasteless leather pre-made stuff you buy in the frozen food section. She looked over to the oven to make sure it was up to heat.

She put the pie in the oven, set the timer, and retreated to the living room. She picked up the book they’d be discussing that afternoon, a mystery by a popular author. At least it was billed as a mystery. She’d never read anything by this author before and was quite taken aback by the salacious nature of this one, at least until she wikied the name and found out that it was a pen name for a romance writer. Well, the other women in the club liked a little spice. No, this was not her cup of tea. She liked a good, meaty detective story. No, not that either, a good mystery, which isn’t really the same thing at all. It’s not about the detective but about the mystery. Something to solve. She liked solving things. All the snappy dialogue and noir ambience is fun, to be sure, but in the end she wanted clues and a clever ending.

Still, this was the book of the month and she needed to refresh her recollection of the plot, such as it was, and the characters. She flipped through a few pages and it quickly came back to her. She’d finished it only two weeks ago, after all. Well, if this wasn’t something to solve, she knew where to find something she could.

She moved to her small desk in the corner. The cottage wasn’t big enough for a separate office and her bedroom wasn’t big enough for her desk, so here it was in the living room. She logged onto the crossword website, and clicked on the

“Cryptic” link. She was learning how to solve the cryptic ones because they made you think and there was always some wry humor in the clues. The regular crosswords were rather easy now that she was doing them every day. She began to solve. Or tried to. It was always hard getting started. Once you had a few letters in to guide you, it got a lot easier.

She read the clue *Removal of too much of that awful medicine (10 letters)*. Finally! One she could do. She typed in EXTRACTION, with a feeling of satisfaction. The word EXTRA, meaning too much, followed by CTION, an “awful” form of TONIC, a medicine. That intersected *Skip the pickle (5 letters)*; of course, CAPER could mean skip or a pickle of sorts – a double definition. She continued working for forty-five minutes and was nearly done with the puzzle when the timer went off. Mustn’t let the pie burn. She returned to the kitchen and pulled the pie from the oven. It looked perfect – just a touch of brown here and there on the crust – and the smell, oh the smell. Heavenly!

The doorbell rang. The growl that made itself heard through the door told her who it was – again. She began formulating her apology even before she got to the door. She opened it to see Rick Moran, the police chief, patiently standing on her tiny porch holding a teacup-sized black dog as it growled menacingly at him.

“Oh, Chief, I’m so sorry. He must have squeezed under the gate again. Raisin! Bad boy!”

“Hello, Mags. This really has to stop. He was harassing Mr. Carson’s chickens again.” Carson was her next door neighbor. He handed Raisin over to Mags. “Mm, something smells good.”

“That’s my pie. I’d offer you some but it’s for my book club this afternoon and it’s still too hot to eat anyway. Would you like some coffee or tea?” Raisin licked her neck as she held him against her chest to prevent another escape.

“No, thank you. I have to finish my patrol. Let’s see what we can do about that gate.”

She took Raisin to the bedroom and shut him in and then followed Rick around to the back yard. They both looked at the four-inch gap under the side gate in dismay. Rick looked around the yard but saw nothing useful. He turned and looked around

the front of the house. Across the street and a few dozen yards downhill he spotted what he was looking for – a section of road that had broken up at one edge. There was no curb and no sidewalk there. That side of the street had no houses since it consisted of nothing more than a stand of trees and a deep canyon. A sliver of the Pacific Ocean could be seen through the pine and fir. He walked down to the broken up section and lifted up a long, narrow slab of asphalt that had come loose. He decided the roadway wouldn't be any worse off without it, just a few inches narrower. He headed back to the cottage.

Mags marveled at how easily he carried the slab considering it must have weighed forty or fifty pounds and he was walking uphill, a steep hill at that. For a man pushing sixty he was in impressive shape. She was less surprised, although more appreciative, of the fact that the town police chief would fix her gate problem unasked and unpaid. She had come to expect that sort of thing in Buck's Gap. That was one of the reasons she had chosen this place to retire. The town was too remote, tucked away as it was in the mountains off the Big Sur coast, to rely on the nearest sheriff's substation, so the town had formed its own three-man police department, if you counted Sally, the combination dispatcher, desk clerk, secretary and all-around gofer, that is.

She had heard that Chief Moran was a local boy who had made it big, becoming an army officer after college and then joining the FBI as a Special Agent. But that life didn't suit him, or maybe it didn't suit his wife Cissy, who was also a local girl, so he'd returned to Buck's Gap where he was hired on as a police officer. That was over twenty years ago. When the previous chief had retired Moran was the natural choice to succeed him. The excitement and danger of the army and FBI were missing here in town where law enforcement consisted mostly of ticketing speeders and illegal parkers and breaking up the occasional bar fight between drunk vacationers, but the peaceful, friendly atmosphere apparently suited Rick, and it certainly was a draw for Mags.

She watched as he lugged the slab into the back yard and placed it on the ground by the gate. It was too long, so he carefully measured the necessary amount and broke off the end of the slab with one quick stomp. He slid it under the gate and

tested it. The gate could swing open and shut without hitting it. There was about an inch of clearance.

“That should do it,” he declared.

“Oh, Chief, that’s perfect. Thank you so much. I’m so, so sorry about that.”

“It’s ‘Rick,’ please. No need for formalities now. Four visits makes me a regular.”

“Are you sure you won’t come in for coffee?”

“I’m sure, but thank you. Let’s hope I won’t need to come by again.”

Mags didn’t say anything in response, but presented him with a rueful smile. He nodded and went back to his patrol car. She watched him drive off before she let Raisin out. Then she returned to her crossword.

## Chapter 2

As she approached the library, Mags carried a picnic basket containing the pie, plates, silverware, napkins, and her copy of the month's book. Vivian opened the door for her before she reached it. Vivian was the librarian and the organizer of the book club. She was a fortyish robust woman, emphasis on the 'bust', who loved big jewelry. She had more hoops than the NBA and more rings than Saturn, and all of them were dangling and sparkling somewhere on her body today. Her husband Bob was even more robust. They ran a bed and breakfast in town that catered primarily to the backpackers that used Buck's Gap as a jumping off point before venturing into the forbidding Ventana Wilderness. The library was only open from 2:30 to 5:30 weekdays – after school hours – and a half day on Saturday, so that left her enough time for the B&B, but Bob did most of the work there.

The library was officially closed now since it was only 1:00, but because it was the only public building in the town besides Town Hall and the K through eight school, it was used for all sorts of civic and social purposes at various hours. Vivian considered it her own personal bailiwick, but she opened it up for almost anyone who needed a meeting space. Today it was the book club.

"Mags, that smells scrumptious. Strawberry rhubarb, right?"

"Right you are. It smells like you got the coffee brewing already."

"Of course. I knew you'd bring pie."

"Help me get this on the table."

The other two women in the room, Elaine and Victoria, stood and came over to help. They began setting out the plates and silver. Elaine was a tall, thin ash blonde with a pale complexion and almost invisible eyelashes that gave her face a slightly alien look. She and her husband ran the local gas station that doubled as the local grocery. The town was too small for a supermarket. Residents who didn't want to drive the twenty miles of mountain roads to the Safeway in Carmel or the thirty to the Costco in Monterey shopped there. So did tourists, but

this was too early for tourist season. Victoria, a svelte brunette and youngest member of the group, was the wife of an engineer turned venture capitalist who'd made some good guesses, including GoPro and some outdoor gear company that went national. She and her husband were outdoor enthusiasts and lived in Buck's Gap in order to be close to the wilderness but close enough for Alek, her husband, to do his work in Silicon Valley. She had always gone by Vicki until watching the PBS series on Queen Victoria. Now she insisted people call her Victoria. The three of them comprised the entire leadership of the Buck's Gap Women's Auxiliary. Vivian was the president. The Auxiliary was the primary organizing and driving force for almost every civic activity in the town – parades, litter clean-up drives, taking up collections for local families struck with sudden illnesses or financial hardships, and so on.

"Mags, guess who was asking about you again in the store yesterday?" Elaine said in that annoying voice some women use when teasing someone.

Mags didn't have to guess. It had to be Morris Butcher. She didn't know how or where he had found out her name, but he had walked up to her table the first month she'd moved there while she was having coffee with Vivian, who was also the realtor who had sold her the cottage. He had introduced himself and asked her if she might like to have a drink with him. The lack of surprise on Vivian's face suggested this might have been a set-up. Butcher was a rather dapper widower with a thick shock of silver hair and the largest house in Buck's Gap. As a newly arrived widow in town, the matchmaking was not unsurprising, she knew, but the approach without an introduction had made her uncomfortable. She'd never heard of him then and knew nothing about him besides his name. His intense stare and vulpine nose had made him seem a tad creepy to her. She had politely turned him down, but he had asked her out again a few days later. After the second rebuff he hadn't bothered her again, but the other book club ladies seemed to have targeted the two of them as a future couple if only Mags could be made to see reason.

"Don't tell me it was Butcher. He doesn't seem to understand the word no."



“Mags, don’t be so negative,” Vivian said. “I don’t know why you talk about him that way. You could do a lot worse. He drives a BMW and the view from his bedroom balcony is spectacular.”

“How do you know so much about his bedroom?” Mags retorted, hoping to deflect the teasing to another victim, but it didn’t work.

“Don’t be silly. I sold him the house. I know every bedroom in town. You’re still an attractive woman, you know. You should make hay while the sun still shines.”

She was right. Mags had been a blonde, blue-eyed homecoming queen in high school. She was still a trim five foot six with the figure of a woman half her age. She’d wanted children but could not have them. Perhaps that had preserved her shape while it had broken her heart. With some chemical help, her hair was still blonde. When her husband had unexpectedly passed away three years earlier, she’d felt alone in the world. She’d spent thirty years working for the county in San Jose, first as a clerk and eventually as Deputy County Executive, and now she had nothing to show for it. No husband, no children, just an empty house that reminded her of her loss every day. She’d known she had to get away to somewhere else. Anywhere else. When she’d hit fifty-five, the minimum retirement age, she left. She knew that with her pension and the nest egg from the sale of her house she could live quite comfortably somewhere where the cost of living was low. She didn’t need a man and she certainly didn’t need more heartache. Nothing in the last eight months in Buck’s Gap had changed her mind about that.

““Make hay”? I’ll land a haymaker on you if you keep needling me. I’m quite happy as a single woman, I’ll have you know.”

“There you go,” squealed Victoria. “You and your wordplay. You two are made for each other. He makes crosswords, you know. His crosswords have appeared in all the major papers, he once told me. You do them, too, don’t you?”

This was the first Mags had heard this tidbit about Butcher. She’d known he was intelligent. He spoke with erudition and wit, but his wit had a hard, cutting edge to it. “That’s hardly the basis for a relationship. I’m sorry but he’s

not my type. Now shall we eat this pie or do you want to start talking about the book first?"

Vivian piped up instantly. "Are you kidding? With that aroma wafting by us we'd never be able to concentrate on the book. Let's get that pie taken care of."

The verdict was unanimous. They were soon digging in with unladylike gusto.

\* \* \*

Rick clocked the truck at thirty-two, only seven miles over the limit. He could ticket him for that, of course, but he chose not to. His patrol car was concealed in a driveway two miles outside of town where he could target drivers entering the town. If he wrote the ticket here, which he had authority to do, the money would go to the county. He knew that the police fines were almost half the operating budget of the city, and more to the point, pretty much covered the entire police department. He didn't like thinking of himself as a revenue generator, although he was. So he didn't. He preferred to think of it as enforcing the law, which it also was. After all, the law was the law and his department's strict enforcement had meant that there had been no serious auto accidents in the town in the twelve years since he'd become chief. The only serious crime, at least by local standards, had been some shoplifting and illegal dumping or burning, mostly by tourists. He didn't count the occasional teenager caught smoking a joint or drinking or the rarer bar fights. It was a safe town and he was proud of that.

This was the sleepy burg he'd grown up in and he'd known what he was coming back to when he'd quit the FBI. Cissy had loved the big city life, but he'd hated it. Life in the FBI hadn't been as exciting as he'd thought it would be. He'd been assigned to the New York Office on a surveillance squad watching organized crime suspects. Sitting in a van peering through a periscope for eight hours and peeing in a bottle wasn't what they showed on TV. The cramped apartment in Hoboken they put up with was no prize, either, but Cissy had found a good job in an advertising firm in the city. When she'd become pregnant, she'd finally agreed to move back to Buck's Gap as it was a more wholesome, and cheaper place to raise children.

Their daughter was now grown and living in Texas with two kids of her own.

He waited for the truck to get out of sight then pulled out onto the road and followed it into town. By the time it hit the town limit, it was at twenty-five, the speed limit. The driver was a regular, the deliveryman for a beverage distributor that serviced the tavern, the café, and several B & B's. He had probably learned the hard way you don't speed in Buck's Gap. Rick watched him pull up to the tavern's back door and drove on by. The truck was benign.

As he swung around in a U-turn, Rick spotted a car he didn't recognize. It was a rent-a-car based on the bumper sticker, which meant an outsider. There was no car rental place in town. The car, a Ford Fiesta, was parked in front of the café. He made a mental note to ask Brenda, the waitress there, who it was. Tourists were rare this time of year and would be for another two months. The rains had been torrential over the winter, and more were expected this week, so the wilderness area was not a good place to be. Trails were washed out and creeks ran too strong to cross safely. Rick cruised around for a bit then headed back out to his hiding spot to wait for speeders. The beverage truck passed him outbound as did the U.S. Mail truck.

When four o'clock rolled around he radioed in to Sally. "I'm about ready to call it a day. Is Bud in?"

Bud was Bud Porter, the other officer. He hadn't been Rick's first choice when it had been time to hire another officer, but then Rick really hadn't had much choice. Rick wanted a younger, more vigorous man, or perhaps less moribund would be a better description. Bud's main appeal was that he came cheap. He was a former transit cop from Los Angeles and thus was already trained and certified as a peace officer, which saved the town the money to send him off to the state training facility in Santa Rosa. He was also willing to work for the pittance the town paid because he had his pension. Bud was solid enough, in both a physical and metaphysical sense. The physical part led the kids to call him Porker behind his back. His gut tested the buttons on his uniform shirt, and he moved like an injured slug, but he showed up on time and treated the citizens with respect.

He was obedient and was willing to take the four to midnight shift, so Rick really couldn't complain.

"He's here. You want him to take 102 or wait for you?"

The town had two patrol cars, designated 101 and 102. The latter ran, after a fashion, but was on its last legs, so the officers usually both took 101, a new Dodge Charger, for patrol. Rick would usually use 102 for his short commute to his house a half mile from station so he would have a police vehicle at home if an emergency happened. Since he was available twenty-four hours a day, the town granted him full use, including for his personal use, of either car as a perquisite of the job.

"Have him wait. He can have 101. I saw the mail truck leave. Anything interesting?"

"No. The usual. Mostly ads. Some wanted flyers. I put it on your desk."

"10-4. See you soon."

When he got back into town, he noticed the Fiesta was no longer in front of the café. It hadn't left town, so it was around somewhere. He pulled into the Town Hall parking lot, parked, and went in. The "station" consisted of a one-room office at one end of the building.

Sally was hunched over her desk working. She was no beauty even in her best days, and her best days had been long ago, but she was the glue that held the department together. She'd been in the department since even before Rick and knew everyone in town. She was clad in food-stained jeans, a K-Mart blouse size XL, and wire-rimmed glasses with lenses the size of quarters. Her hair resembled dryer lint. Rick knew the station needed her as much as it needed him – maybe more.

"Hi, Sally. Hey, Bud."

"Hey, Rick," Bud replied. "Anything I need to know?" Sally just waved a hand as she was tallying some parking tickets.

"Nope. It's quiet. Mags's dog got out again. Carson complained. I fixed her gate."

"Yeah, Sally told me."

"OK. Here ya go." Rick tossed Bud the car keys and watched him plod doorward, finally disappearing into the sunlight. Then Rick sat at his desk, the big one – although its

size didn't confer the expected status it might since one corner was supported by a pile of bricks. He skimmed through the paperwork, signed what he had to sign, gave Sally what he didn't, and threw out the rest. He took the new wanted poster and picked the keys to 102 off the hook.

"I'm going over to the store to post this."

"Okay."

Rick walked outside, but before getting into the car he strolled across the street to the café. It was too early for the dinner crowd and the only customers were two blue-collar types in their twenties nursing their coffee. Rick didn't know them, but he knew their county truck parked out front, which told him they were in the area doing maintenance, probably on the bridge three miles out of town. He looked for Brenda, the high schooler who covered the afternoons. She came out from the kitchen in response to the sound of the door chime and took her place behind the counter.

"Hi. What can I get ya, Chief?"

"Nothing right now, Brenda. Hey, I saw a rental car, a small Ford, parked here about an hour ago and didn't recognize it. Can you tell me who it was?"

"I don't know cars. I don't really pay attention to what's parked out front."

Brenda wasn't the swiftest on the uptake, but patience was Rick's middle name. He had lots of middle names depending on the occasion. "I don't really care about the car. Did anyone come in here about an hour ago that you didn't recognize?"

"You mean the old guy?"

"That must have been him. Do you know who he was or what he was doing in town?"

"No."

Rick thought for moment and took another tack. "What did he look like?"

"Oh, you know. Kinda tall. Pretty old."

Brenda was five three. Tall could mean anything. "Taller than me?"

"I guess. Maybe a little." That made him at least six feet.

"And how old was he, do you think?"

“Gee, I don’t know. I didn’t really pay attention. He just had coffee and one of the jelly doughnuts.”

“Older than me?”

“Oh. I don’t think so,” she said and blushed fiercely, finally realizing that she had called the man old and now that must mean she thought Rick was ancient. “About like my dad, maybe.”

Rick knew her father taught in a private school off Highway 1 halfway to Carmel, the same school Brenda went to. He was about fifty, he thought. He didn’t bother asking Brenda the man’s race since he knew she would have mentioned it if he’d been anything other than white. He also knew the man must have been alone because she would have said “those people” or something similar instead of “the old guy” earlier. He also knew that Brenda was very chatty and friendly with strangers in order to encourage big tips, which led him to his next question, “So what did you guys talk about?”

“Oh, nothing. He said he’d never been here before. I told him I liked his shirt. It was plaid, red and black, one of those, um, what do you call it ...”

“Flannel?”

“Flannel? No, I, I’m not sure what that is. You know, the scratchy kind.”

“Wool? A Pendleton?”

“Yeah, that’s it. A Pendleton. It looked brand new.”

“Okay. What else did you talk about?”

“Nothing.”

“Did he tip well?”

“Yeah, he told me to keep the change from a five-dollar bill. The bill was only like three dollars or something. I think he liked that I could tell him where to find his friend. That’s when he paid and left. He didn’t even finish his doughnut.”

*Brenda, Brenda, Brenda. You might have mentioned that back when I asked you who he was or what he was doing in town.* “Oh, really. Who was he here to see?”

“Mr. Butcher. He just called him Morris, but I knew who he meant. He comes in all the time. Mr. Butcher, I mean. He’s the only Morris in town, at least that I know of. I told him I didn’t know where he lived, but he comes in here for lunch a lot and I’ve seen him walking on Upper Creek along the trail.”

“Did he tell you his name?”

“No. He just thanked me and left.”

“All right, that’s great, Brenda. Thanks.” So the man was a white male, six feet, aged around fifty, wearing a red and black plaid wool shirt and here to visit Morris Butcher. It took some work, but he’d gotten there. He didn’t bother to ask about a credit card since she’d said he’d paid with cash, but he didn’t really care what the name was. He didn’t meet the description of the fugitive on the new wanted poster, a Vietnamese male in his thirties. Whoever it was appeared to have legitimate business in Buck’s Gap, visiting a friend, although it seemed odd to him that someone would come this far off the beaten track to visit someone without knowing the address. Why didn’t he call once he got in town? They had no cell service because they were in a steep three-sided canyon and the nearest cell tower was eight miles away down near the highway, but there was still a pay phone in the gas station and everyone had land lines. Brenda would have let him use the café’s phone.

He left and walked back to the parking lot and climbed in unit 102. When he got to the market, he took the wanted poster inside and tacked it up on the bulletin board. There was no actual post office in town, but Elaine served as the town’s contract Post Office. Folks could mail packages, buy special stamps, and a few other things there while doing their grocery shopping. The store bulletin board was the closest thing the town had to a central notice location. People came to the store a lot more often than they did to Town Hall so this was the logical spot for the board.

“How are you, Elaine?” he said when she called a greeting to him.

“I’m fine. How about you?”

“Fine, thanks. Just putting up a new poster.”

“Sure. How’s Cissy? I haven’t seen her in a while.”

“She’s fine,” he lied. “I’ll tell her you asked,” he said and left the store.

### Chapter 3

Mags strolled down Buck Street, the town's main street, with Raisin leading the way. Raisin was always animated after an overnight rain with the air redolent from pine and fir and California bay laurel. He darted left and right sniffing everything in sight – and things invisible for that matter. Mags always made a point to take an extra-long walk on those mornings both for his enjoyment and hers. Today she turned left onto Lower Creek and followed it down until it ended at the mill. The turn-of-the-century sawmill, the *raison d'être* for the town, was erected by Ebenezer Buck, the town's namesake, over a century ago. It was no longer in use as a mill, logging having been banned in the surrounding wilderness area decades earlier, but several of the town's wealthier citizens had chipped in to buy it and restore it with a bit of kitschy charm. It now was the main tourist attraction in town, with the obligatory gift shop bringing in some revenue for the town coffers. It was closed until the summer and the parking lot was empty.

Here the stream ran full and fast. Mags kept a tight hold on Raisin's leash as he tugged her closer to the water's edge. If he were to get loose and enter the stream, he'd be out of sight in seconds. She contemplated what it must have been like living here a century ago, picturing an idyllic, simple life, but Raisin woke her from her reverie with some violent yapping. He'd taken issue with a noisy jay who was giving back as good as he got. The cacophony was more than Mags could stand so she hauled on the leash and headed back up the road. When she reached Upper Creek she turned right, staying next to the stream. There was a trail there that led along the creek for a mile then bent around back to Buck Street and the commercial area. Houses lined the road on the opposite side, most of them largely obscured by the thick stands of trees on all sides. The lots were very large and the privacy afforded by the forest and the charm of the stream were prime draws to this street. The most expensive homes in town were here, including Victoria's.

She heard the telltale click of the trekking poles before she saw the user, but within a few seconds Mags saw Victoria round a bend in the trail.



“Mags! Good morning.”

“Good morning. Getting your morning exercise, I see.”

“Of course. I have to stay in shape. Alek and I are going skiing next weekend.” She continued to pump her legs in a marching motion as she stood talking. “If he can get away,” she added, rolling her eyes. Alek was notorious for canceling their excursions due to work.

“You’re lucky to have this trail running past your house. And the stream is so impressive this time of year.”

“But I don’t have a view of the ocean like you,” Victoria teased.

“Pfft! A view of the ocean, my foot. A tiny sliver of blue through the gap when the fog isn’t in.”

Victoria bent to pet Raisin, who responded by trying to lick her face. “You’re so cute. I gotta keep going.” She stood and resumed her marching.

“Okay. See you.”

“Bye.” She chugged off at a vigorous pace.

Mags continued to walk up the trail, but she soon slowed as she got winded. This was a longer walk than usual and this part of the trail was steeper than below. Raisin seemed to have run out of steam, too, so she stopped to let them both catch their breath. As she stood there she noticed something unusual. The front door of the house opposite was standing wide open. She saw no one in the yard.

She crossed the street and walked halfway up the walkway to the house.

“Hello!” she yelled. “Can you hear me? Your door is open.”

She looked around again and walked around the yard so she could see down both sides. She didn’t know who lived here, but it was a beautiful home with an extensive garden dotted with clusters of hyacinth, campanula, and snowdrop anemone. A custom fountain imitated a natural waterfall. The architecture echoed a mountain lodge motif, with extensive stonework and open beams in evidence everywhere. The outside was shingled in cedar shakes. A large balcony of unfinished wood extended from the second floor great room. Floor-to-ceiling windows lined the entire wall of that room. Mags tried to see if there was any movement in that room but the room was darkened and the

reflection made it impossible to see inside. She called out again and got no answer.

She moved closer to the door. As she did so she saw that there was a puddle in the entryway. It had rained overnight and it looked like the door must have been open all night. She walked up to the front door still calling out. She pushed it open farther to see if anyone was there. She thought perhaps someone was on the phone or had earphones on and couldn't hear her, so she stepped inside. The entryway wasn't large. The walls were knotty pine with a few small paintings of western scenes hanging haphazardly. The wind must have blown them around. Straight ahead was a hallway that led toward the back yard and the garage. The floor was dark-stained planks; muddy paw prints told her that a raccoon or other critter had explored the entry, confirming her guess that the door had been open all night. To her right was a stairway to the second floor, which was obviously the main floor of the house. Raisin began yipping, clearly upset about something.

Mags decided that this was a police matter. The homeowner must have left the door unsecured and it had blown open. It needed to be secured, but she wasn't the one to be doing it. She wasn't comfortable prowling around in a stranger's house. She called out once more, but when there was still no answer, she began to look for a phone. Cell phones didn't work in town and she didn't even carry one, but there should be a land line somewhere. Not finding one on the ground floor, she walked up the stairs. Raisin's yips turned to a whine.

She emerged into a short hallway. To her left was the great room and to her right was the kitchen and dining room area. As she scanned the area, her eye was drawn to the massive stone fireplace on the far wall of the great room. Flanking it were mounted animal heads, a moose on the right and an elk on the left. But her attention immediately turned to the furniture which was overturned. The sofa and chair cushions had been tossed all over. Paintings were ripped from the walls and thrown to the floor. Someone had ransacked the place. Raisin's whining was more pronounced now, which only served to heighten her anxiety. She had to find a phone.

She hurried to the kitchen and spied a house phone on a countertop on the far wall. As she rounded the island in the

center of the kitchen she stopped cold. There on the other side of the island was a man lying face down in a pool of blood. Or, more accurately, it was a dead body lying in a pool of blood. Sticking from its back was a large kitchen knife with the handle missing. After a moment of shock and a gasp, Mags rushed to him and knelt down to take a pulse. His hand was cold and he showed no signs of life. His skin was a bloodless white. She was sure he was dead so she did not attempt to resuscitate him. Instead she picked up the phone. She knew that if she called 911 she'd be connected to the county emergency system, and she wasn't sure that made sense. An ambulance would have to come from at least thirty miles away for no reason. So she called the local police number, which, thanks to Raisin's repeated run-ins, she now had memorized.

"Hello, this is the police department, how may I help you?" It was Sally's voice, of course, a familiar voice, which Mags found comforting.

"Sally, it's Mags. I ... I'm calling to report a murder."

"Now, now, that's not funny. If your dog has ..."

"No. Listen. I'm serious. I was walking my dog and this house had its door open so I tried to get the attention of the owner. When I went inside I found a man with a knife in his back. He's stone cold. I'm sure he's dead. You need to get Chief Moran over here."

"Where are you?"

"I'm in the house. His house, I mean. I guess it's his house. I'm in the kitchen. He's right next to me."

"What's the address?"

"Oh, right. I don't know. I'm on Upper Creek. It's a big house with a fountain and a moose head on the wall and ..."

"Mags, just stop for a second. What's the number on the phone?"

She looked for one, but the phone did not have a number on it. It was digital and had a window displaying the number she had just dialed and the battery level of the handset, but not the number of the phone. She knew there must be a way to display it but she didn't know how to do that. Raisin was howling now, making it nearly impossible for her to hear Sally, and she was frantically trying to keep him from stepping in the blood.

"I'm sorry, I can't find one. I'm about five or six houses uphill from Alek and Victoria's house where the trail gets steep. Just send him here and I'll be outside to wave him down." She hung up without waiting for a response. This was just too creepy. She had to get out. She rushed down the stairs and out the front door, Raisin in tow.

Within four minutes Rick drove up and came to a screeching halt in the driveway next to her. He almost leapt from the cruiser and hurried to her.

"What's going on?" he asked with an urgent tone.

She pointed to the front door. "He's upstairs in the kitchen. There's a big knife in his back. Watch out for the blood. There's a lot of it."

"Don't go anywhere. I need to talk to you." Without waiting for an acknowledgment he rushed into the house. A few minutes later he came out. "Sally's calling the sheriff to send a forensic team out to do a crime scene. They'll send an ambulance to take the body to the coroner, too. There's nothing for me to do in there. I'd just mess up the scene. Let me get a statement from you."

Mags told him how she came to discover the body. He asked a few questions and filled in the report form that he dug out from his cruiser. He took her basic identifying information, although he already had it back at the station, and filled in all the blocks. When the form ran out of space, he pulled out a small notebook from a shirt pocket and began jotting notes.

"When was the last time you saw him?" he asked.

"The victim? Right when I called the station. Ten or fifteen minutes ago."

"You've never met him before?"

"I don't even know who it is. He was face down and ..."

"It's Morris Butcher. You really didn't know that?"

"Morris Butcher! No I didn't know. I mean, I know Morris, I just didn't know it was him."

"So when's the last time you saw him?"

"About four or five days ago I saw him in the market. We just nodded to each other. We didn't even talk."

"Did you see anyone else in the vicinity in the minutes before you arrived at the house?"

"I chatted with Victoria on the trail a few minutes earlier. She was doing her power walk. I think a car drove by as we were talking, but I didn't pay any attention to it."

"Which way was she walking?"

"Downhill."

"I'll talk to her. Maybe she saw something."

At that moment Bud Porter drove up and parked. He got out and lumbered over to them.

"Sally said we have a homicide," he declared in a flat tone.

"We do. The sheriff is sending a team and a coroner. I need you to protect the scene while I canvass the neighbors to see if anyone saw or heard anything. Then you'll have to take over patrol until I can finish dealing with this. I'll need to stay here for hours probably."

"Sure, Rick. Whatever you need. You authorize the overtime?"

"Yeah, yeah. The town will have to come up with it somehow." He turned to Mags. "Are you okay? Do you need a ride home?"

"I'm fine. Thank you but I can walk. I'd rather walk. It'll help me calm down."

"Okay then. Why don't you go on back home. It'll be bedlam here soon. Just stay available in case anyone needs to talk to you."

Mags nodded and started to walk back the way she had come, glad to be free of the scene. *Well, the town will certainly have something to talk about now.*

## Chapter 4

Rick spoke with the detective from the sheriff's office, a Mexican-American with a pompadour and bifocals, while the crime scene team worked. He told the detective, who identified himself as Frank Martinez, about the Ford Fiesta and the stranger in town yesterday who'd been asking about Butcher. Martinez agreed that was important. Together they reinterviewed the neighbors since by this time everyone was aware of something big going on and almost the whole town had gathered outside beyond the crime scene tape. They didn't really have to do another canvass since everyone they wanted to talk to had come to them. Rick made notes of who had been interviewed and listed the people living nearby who were at work or simply not there so that he could interview them when they came home.

Martinez spoke to Brenda, the waitress, at length, with Rick reminding her what she had said the previous day. Her memory was already pretty foggy about that customer, but she thought she could recognize him if she saw him again. Neither she nor Rick could positively connect him with the Ford Fiesta, although it seemed likely that was the car he'd been driving. Rick was now kicking himself for not recording the license plate, although he knew there was no reason at the time to have done so.

None of the interviews turned up any new information. No one had seen the Ford Fiesta or any other unfamiliar car in the area the previous day or today. The nearest neighbors had not heard any unusual noises in the evening or overnight.

When the crime scene team was getting ready to wrap it up, the team leader joined them. It was agreed that the fingerprints, DNA swabs, and other physical evidence would be taken to the crime lab in Salinas and kept in evidence there. Since it happened in the town limits, it was police jurisdiction, not sheriff's, so they would leave for Rick all the personal papers and things that didn't need further testing. That left the computer. Computers are normally backed up by an IT specialist and an exact clone copy of the hard drive made to preserve the original. Examination of the clone should really be

left for the lead investigator. The team leader agreed to take the computer and make the clone and let Rick know when he could pick that up for review. It would be on an external drive so he could plug it into a USB port and look through it at his office.

Martinez offered to be a consultant for Rick, but said the department was short on resources and he couldn't work the case full time. He worked in Salinas, an hour and a half away, but he'd be available for an occasional trip out here if necessary. Otherwise, it was Rick's case. His first murder. His first big case of any kind, in fact. Even in the FBI he'd only done surveillance and never been a case agent on even a petty crime. He realized he was in over his head, but hoped he'd said nothing to Martinez that made that obvious.

The coroner had taken the body away and the team was ready to leave. The leader agreed to walk Rick and Martinez through the house and point out what they'd found. They started with the kitchen where the body had been found. Since the door had been open all night, the inside temperature had dropped down to the forties overnight and was just coming back up to the sixties by the time the team arrived. The body was about room temperature, so it had probably cooled below sixty overnight and then started to warm as the temperature came up. That meant the killing hadn't happened in the hours immediately before its discovery, but probably overnight or the previous evening. The knife had apparently come from the knife block on the counter since it was of a similar style and there were several empty slots in the block of the right size or bigger. Without the handle, though, it was hard to be sure. The killer probably had not come with the intention of killing if he'd used a knife that was on hand, the victim's own knife at that, Martinez explained to Rick. The blade had been broken off. The blade had passed deep into the victim's body, between the ribs, and then stuck firmly in a rib on the front side of the lung. It looked like the bleeding had mostly been internal and the large pool of blood resulted from slow seepage, not a spurt at the time of stabbing. There was no blood splatter, just the pool.

The kitchen drawers had all been pulled out and the contents dumped out onto the floor. So far as the team could tell, all of it was normal kitchen utensils except for some broken glass. They'd determined that the glass was the remains of a

brandy snifter. There was some residue of a liquid on the glass and there was a brandy decanter on the counter. There was a built-in wooden rack that was designed to hold four such snifters, he pointed out, and two clean snifters were hanging upside down in it. One was shattered on the floor. One was missing, assuming there had been four to start with. From its placement, the one on the floor had probably been held by the victim at the time of the stabbing.

"So what you're telling me," Martinez said to the team leader, "is that the killer and victim were having a brandy together and something went wrong and the killer grabbed a handy knife and stabbed the victim. Then he realized his fingerprints would be on his glass and on the knife handle and took the glass with him. He tried to do the same with the knife, but couldn't get it out so he broke off the handle and took that, too. And he probably isn't splattered with blood."

"That's what it looks like to me, detective."

"No sign of forced entry, then?"

"That's correct."

That all made sense to Rick, but he knew he wouldn't have figured that out for a long time, if at all. These guys were pros.

"So are you getting any other prints that might be useful?" Rick asked.

"There are prints all over the place, but there's no way of telling if they're useful. It may be none of them are from the killer. The same goes for DNA. If he had the presence of mind to take the glass and knife, he may have taken anything he touched. There are probably hair and fibers on the furniture, but if it's someone he knew, even if we match them, which is unlikely, it doesn't prove much. They could have been deposited there days or weeks ago, even months or years. We've taken swabs from all the doorknobs, drawer handles, and other logical places."

"What about the other rooms?"

"Everything's been photographed. Someone ransacked the place. It's not vandalism. It looks like they were looking for something. Since they had the smarts to remove the glass and knife handle, they probably went and got some gloves or something before doing it. He could have used a dishtowel,



oven mitt, or almost anything he found around here and taken that with him too.”

“Did you find anything in all this mess,” Rick asked, waving his hand toward the clutter in the great room.

“No. We didn’t take anything from that room, other than photos. Once we’re gone you can take anything you think has lead value. The upstairs bedrooms had nothing, but the killer went through those, too. It’s the workshop downstairs that might be significant.”

“Lead the way,” Martinez said.

The three of them went down to the entryway, down the hall and stopped at the doorway to a small combination laundry/mud room. It had a door to the outside. Drawers that held towels, rags, and cleaning materials had been dumped over. The contents were strewn about the floor. A box of laundry soap had been dumped into the deep sink, the empty box lying on its side on the counter top.

They moved back to the hall then into a huge rec room that opened onto the back yard. Through the sliding glass door a stunningly beautiful swimming pool was visible with its automatic pool sweep gently patrolling the bottom for leaves and debris. One end held a built-in hot tub. The rec room had a pool table, a ping pong table, and a couch. A large television was mounted on one wall. The furniture here had been overturned just as in the great room upstairs. Board games and cards were all over the floor. The team leader took them through to the far end of the room and through the door there. It led into a three-car garage. In one bay was a late model BMW sedan. The next bay held a Range Rover. Both cars had been given the same treatment as above. The glove compartments and trunks had been rifled and the contents tossed on the cement floor.

The third bay had been converted to a workshop. There were top-quality power tools for woodworking, including a table saw and router. The wall was adorned with two dozen or more hand tools – screwdrivers, vises, wrenches and many tools Rick didn’t even recognize – hanging on hooks in a pegboard. A large magnifying glass was mounted on an extension arm. The lens was in a mounting that held a circle of small LED lights. The outlines of each hand tool were drawn on the

pegboard so that it was obvious where each belonged. On the workbench was a row of two-pound coffee cans. Each was neatly labeled with masking tape and felt pen. The labels named screws, nuts, nails, bolts, brads, staples, and hooks. There were several different sizes of each. The contents had been dumped onto the workbench, leaving a pile of scattered metal all over, some of it on the floor. Cabinets held yet more woodworking materials, including various finishes, brushes, and glues. A bin held a few dozen wood pieces. They appeared to be exotic woods, no doubt expensive, some dark, some light.

The real story here was what was on the floor. Scattered about were shards of wood, lots of them. It was clear that whoever had been here had utterly demolished the projects that had been made here. There were splinters and small shards on the workbench, too. A hammer lay on the bench among the shards. From the remains on the floor one could see they were – or once had been – fancy boxes of some sort, perhaps jewelry boxes. It was difficult to tell, but from some of the pieces it looked as though some might have been bigger than a shoebox, while others were much smaller. Some of the larger pieces had inlays of contrasting wood in elaborate designs. Some of the pieces revealed corners or pulls of tiny drawers or compartments, now smashed to smithereens. Rick guessed that the boxes had been smashed on top of the workbench and the remains were swept off onto the floor.

“It must have been small,” Rick said, hardly realizing he had spoken aloud.

“What’s that?” Martinez asked.

“Oh,” he replied, now self-conscious. “I just meant whatever he was looking for, it must have been small. Look how he’s smashed apart these little drawers. It would have taken some time to do such a thorough job. He didn’t demolish the stuff upstairs like this. He just turned the drawers upside down and dumped out the contents. And those cans – whatever it was must have been small enough to be hidden in a coffee can.”

Martinez nodded appreciatively. “Hmm, could be. A key maybe? The level of destruction is greater here. Or maybe whoever it was got real angry and just destroyed it all in a rage.”

“Why would little wooden boxes make him angry?”

"I don't know. It's just a guess. You're probably right. He was looking for something small."

"This is good for us," the crime scene leader said. "Whoever did this would have gotten tiny wood fragments on his clothing. We've taken samples of all the different kinds of wood. At least I hope we got them all. You can actually match wood DNA now, just like with people. If you catch the guy, his clothing may still be identifiable with these."

The three men went back into the rec room and did a search of the bathroom at the end of it. There was nothing there of interest. Finally, they went out into the back yard. There was a wet bar built in next to the hot tub. Rick was impressed at the luxury. He had no idea anyone in town had this posh a lifestyle. It was basically a small country town with no industry. Half the houses were vacation homes and occupied only during the summer, sometimes only two weeks a year or less. The locals worked at blue collar or pink collar jobs or ran small shops. Most of the retirees were pinching pennies. He knew of several citizens like Victoria who were wealthy and lived there full or part-time because of the remoteness and natural beauty, but the town was too lacking in amenities to attract many of those. The absence of cell phone coverage alone was enough to drive most away.

The team leader took them to the top floor where there were four bedrooms, but it was just as he had said. Bedding was scattered on the floor and the drawers were all pulled out and emptied, but beyond that nothing of evidentiary value was found there. One bedroom had been converted to an office. There was a file cabinet standing surprisingly intact, but the desk drawers had been dumped onto the floor like in the other rooms. A computer monitor stood on the desk, but the computer itself had been removed already and taken by the technicians.

"This is your assignment," Martinez said. "Look for a calendar and any recent correspondence. Maybe he gets a paper phone bill, but I wouldn't count on that. Most of that will probably be on the computer, but your victim is old enough to still be doing everything on paper. He'll probably have a personal phone book in hard copy. I'll help you with the paperwork for getting the phone records."

Rick nodded in what he hoped was a knowing fashion. He was beginning to get a little excited about the case. If the FBI had given him assignments this interesting he would never have quit.

Martinez said he had to get back to Salinas and they all headed back outside. The crime scene team was milling around impatient to get going. The sheriff's people all took off, leaving Rick standing there alone inside the crime scene tape. There were still several townspeople standing at the tape watching. He told them the show was over and to go home. Slowly they began to filter away.

He went back inside and went upstairs to the office. He pawed around in the litter on the floor. Finally he found what he was looking for: a small booklet labeled "Addresses." He had to notify someone of the death. He had no idea who Butcher's next of kin was, but he hoped this would help him find out.

He didn't have any keys, but locked the front door from the inside, went out through the sliding glass door in back, securing it with a few loops of yellow crime scene tape, and left for the office.

## Chapter 5

When Rick got back to the station, it was surprisingly quiet. Sally told him they had received a bunch of phone calls from the townspeople asking what was going on, but she told them all to just quit calling and leave them alone. He thanked her and plopped down at his desk, exhausted. Notifying the next of kin was still foremost in his mind. He opened up the address book. He turned first to the B page to see if there were any other Butchers listed. Presumably his relatives would bear that name, the male ones, at least.

The name Butcher didn't appear on that page, but a prominent entry at the top read Will and had a phone number after it. Numerous erasures told him that the number had changed several times and Morris had kept current with the changes, probably over a period of quite a few years. The absence of a last name suggested it was someone close to him, so close that the last name didn't need to be written. He wasn't sure, but it seemed very likely this was a relative named Butcher. The number began 011-61. That was an international number, he realized. He was about to look up online what country that was, but decided it didn't matter. Under the circumstances, he would call no matter what the time of day it was. He dialed.

"What the hell!" answered the voice after the fourth ring. "Don't you know what time it is?!"

"Sorry, no I don't. I'm calling from California. I'm not sure where I'm calling to. Is this Mr. Butcher, Will Butcher?"

A long pause followed. "Yes, I'm Will Butcher. Who is this?"

"My name is Rick Moran. I'm the police chief in Buck's Gap."

"Is my father all right?!"

"Morris Butcher is your father, then?"

"That's right. Is he okay?"

"I'm sorry to tell you that your father died."

"Died? He was healthy. He said he was fine. We just Skyped three weeks ago."

"I'm afraid he was murdered. His body was just discovered this morning. I found your number in his address book. You're the first person I've called. Other than the authorities here, I mean. Where are you located?"

"I'm in Perth, Australia. I'm teaching at the university here. How did this happen? Do you know who did this?"

"No, we don't. Obviously we have opened an investigation and will do everything we can to find the killer. Is there someone else we should notify? Someone local, perhaps, other relatives?"

"No. My grandparents are all dead. Dad had a brother, but he passed away last year. I don't have any brothers or sisters."

"Is there anybody else? A business associate? An employer, or partner?"

"My dad was retired. He made a lot of money in the stock market and retired early. He doesn't ... didn't have an employer or a partner. It was just him and his puzzles."

"Puzzles?"

"He made puzzles. He made puzzle boxes and sold them online. Other kinds of puzzles, too – folding paper, crosswords, cryptograms, sudoku, almost anything. He was a brilliant man. Oh, you know what – you should contact his lawyer. He's in Carmel."

"What's his name?"

"Oh, something Italian. Started with a Z. It's probably in his address book. I've got it here somewhere. It's what, one, two in the afternoon there?"

"Two P.M., a little after."

"Okay, I'll look him up and have him call you. You have my permission to get access to his records or whatever you need. Find out who did this."

"We didn't find his house keys. Whoever killed him might have taken them. Do you know where there might be another set?"

"He keeps a door key hidden in the back yard by the hot tub. There's a loose stone at the base. You'll see it."

"Are you coming here?"

After a pause Butcher replied, "I'll have to make arrangements here, so that'll take a couple of days. I don't know

what the current flight schedule is to California. You can expect me in three or four days. Maybe Monday your time if I'm lucky. I'll let you know when I've booked a flight."

"All right. I'm sorry for your loss. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"No. I don't think so. Well, just make sure the house is okay, not vandalized or anything. He had some valuable things in there. Artwork. His puzzle boxes."

"I have to tell you that the house was ransacked. His puzzle boxes were all smashed to bits. Apparently the killer was looking for something. Something small. Do you know what it could be? Or who might have done it?"

"No idea. I'll think about it and let you know. Give me your contact information. I've got your phone number already from the caller ID."

"I've got your email address. It's here in the book. I'll send you all of it."

"All right. Thank you for calling me. I'm sorry about swearing at you."

"No problem. I'm sorry to be bringing you bad news."

"I'll be in touch. Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

After he hung up Rick realized how much work was ahead of him. He needed to start creating reports. He'd filled his notebook all the way to the end and had to flip it over and start writing on the back of all the pages. That would all have to be reduced to typed, legible, well-ordered reports along with his recollection of everything at the crime scene, and that would have to be done immediately, before his memory faded. His notebook was barely readable even by him and in a jumbled mish-mash.

"Sally, as you know, I'm no typist. I'm old school. I'm going to have to dictate a bunch of reports on this. Hours worth. I'm going to need you to put in some overtime typing them up."

"Rick you know I'm not that good a typist myself and I'm swamped here with the calls and accounting. Our annual budget request is due to the mayor next week. I think this is just the start of things now that we have a murder. You need to get some additional help."

"I can't afford another officer."

“Some part-time office help, at least. Someone who can take dictation and type. I’ll be busy enough with everything else. How about Mags? She’s retired and used to work for the county. I’ll bet she can type.”

“I’ll have to clear it with the mayor, but that’s a good idea. I need to call her anyway. She’s the reporting party. I owe her an update.”

\* \* \*

Mags was getting frustrated. She was both curious and a bit frightened at the events of this morning. Finding a dead body! My Lord, who would have thought. She would have thought police or FBI or someone would be at her house interviewing her by now, or whatever it is they do. Would she be fingerprinted? Would she become a suspect? She’d called Elaine to tell her the news, but she’d heard something about it already from the other women. None of them, however, had heard the details she had to share, and some of what they’d heard was completely wrong. In fact, none of them had heard that Mags had discovered the body. As it turned out, she ended up listening to Elaine tell their versions instead of telling hers.

Vivian had heard that someone had chopped up Butcher with a meat cleaver, which seemed a bit ironic and, at the same time, appropriate somehow, but was probably just based on someone overhearing the name and mistaking it for the modus operandi. Elaine had heard that it was probably an angry cuckolded husband, although Mags had a hard time believing any of the married women in town would be interested enough in Morris Butcher for that to be plausible. At least now her girlfriends wouldn’t be pushing her to get together with him. Just as she was about to set Elaine straight on the wild rumors, and reveal her part in it, Raisin began barking wildly at something in the back yard. She hung up to see what was the matter. It turned out to be a brazen raccoon rummaging. Mags chased it off with a broom.

After several hours she decided to log on to that crossword website again. She was starting to get the hang of these cryptic clues now. The real definition of the word was always there somewhere, and the rest of the clue was



intentionally misleading, but always accurate in its own way, describing the word in a different way involving wordplay. *Happy pill for Mr. Efron? (6 letters)*. That name, Efron, sounded familiar, but she wasn't very good on pop culture, so she searched his name online. It must be Zac Efron, an actor. She'd never seen any of those movies he'd been in; they looked like they were geared for teens. So a word with Zac in it? PROZAC, no question. "Happy pill" is the real definition, PRO means "for" and then ZAC. She filled in the squares.

Her phone rang. It was Chief Moran ... finally.

"Hi, Mags, it's Rick."

"Chief, mm Rick, I was wondering when I was going to hear what happened. Do you need me to come down to the station."

"No, I've got your statement already. I mean, actually, yes I do, that is, can you type?"

"You want me to type up my statement?"

"No, well, yes."

"You're not making any sense."

"Let me start over. We're swamped now with this murder. I've never handled anything like this. Sally is fielding calls and the radio all day and has to get out our budget request. I have a dozen reports that I need to dictate and get into a real homicide file. Sally suggested you might be able to help type up my dictation. She said you worked for the county. I'm afraid it's only part-time until this blows over, and I can only pay minimum wage. That's all the city budget can stand. I was hoping you could help us out here."

"I see. Well, I'd like to help. I was a clerk-typist when I started thirty years ago, but I've never taken live dictation, only from a tape or rough draft. I don't know shorthand. I can type, though."

"That's fine. I can dictate into a tape and you can transcribe it."

"When do you need me?"

"Can you start tomorrow morning? I'll have a couple of tapes dictated by then."

"Yes, I can do that. Can you tell me what you found? Do you know who dunnit? I mean, did it?"

Rick paused at this. "Mags, you know this is the real thing, not a whodunit. I need you to take this very seriously, and to keep everything you learn confidential."

"Of course. I'm sorry. That was silly of me. Don't worry, I was Deputy County Executive when I retired. I take official responsibilities very seriously."

"Very well. I'll see you here tomorrow at 9:00. And no, we don't know who did it."

They said their goodbyes and hung up. Mags was becoming excited. A real murder mystery! Now she'll learn all of the inside scoop. She'd have paid them to work on it. But the down side was she couldn't share it with her friends. She resolved to keep her lip buttoned. The best thing would be not to tell them about this part-time job. If they knew she was working there, her friends would hound her relentlessly.

She brewed herself a cup of tea and treated herself to a piece of the pie. The club had only devoured half of it and she got to take the rest home. She had to fortify herself for the work tomorrow.

## Chapter 6

She showed up fifteen minutes early. Rick was already there dictating into a machine. He looked like a research subject in an insomnia study – red-rimmed eyes, mussed hair, a growth of beard.

“Mags, there you are. Come on in. Here, you can sit at Bud’s desk.”

“Are you okay, Chief? You look kinda tired.”

“It’s Rick, remember? I’m fine. I grabbed a few Z’s. Don’t worry about me. There’s a coffee pot in the corner. Help yourself.”

Mags looked at the pot, which was less than a quarter full. She could smell it from across the room, and it wasn’t the pleasant aroma of fresh brewed. It had obviously been boiling down all night almost to the consistency of maple syrup.

“Why don’t I start a fresh pot?” she suggested.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that. I’m not that sexist or anything. I can ...”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake, Rick. You keep at your work. You didn’t order me to make the coffee. I’m doing it out of self-preservation.”

“Uh, okay, go ahead then.”

As she dumped the old pot and started a new one, she asked, “So what do you want me to start on?”

“I dictated three tapes so far. They’re on Bud’s desk. The player is there, too, with headphones. When you finish each one, send it to me for checking. I want to make sure there are no inconsistencies with my field notes. When I approve it, print it out and I’ll initial it. Sally will show you how to file the paper copy.”

Mags brought a cup of fresh brewed coffee to Rick when the pot was ready, took his old cup and washed that, then poured herself a cup. Rick seemed oblivious to the process as he was deep in searching through his notes for some detail he thought was there. Then she sat down at Bud’s desk and booted up the ancient computer there. As it was slowly coming to life like a zombie sloth, Sally arrived on the dot of nine.

“Mags, thanks for coming in to help. It’s been really busy. We ...” As if to prove her point the phone rang at that moment. She doffed her sweater, put down her purse next to her chair and picked up the phone. “Police. ... Who’s calling please?” She hit the hold button and turned to Rick. “Another reporter. You want to take it?”

“No.”

“I’m sorry, he’s not available. No we don’t have any further information to release. When we have something to share with the media, we’ll contact everybody and do a press release. Please don’t call again.” She hung up without waiting for a reply. The phone rang again almost as soon as the receiver hit the cradle. “See what I mean? They know we open at nine and that’s when it starts. I’m going to let that one ring. They can leave a message.”

“If there’s anything I can do, let me know.”

“You are. The typing. That’s what needs doing.”

Mags nodded and put on the headset. The computer desktop was finally up and there was an icon for the word processor front and center. She clicked on it and pushed the button on the tape player to open it up. She plunked the first tape in and snapped it shut. She glanced over at Sally, who was now at the sink. Sally was holding the nearly full pot up and looking at Mags with a smile. When Mags made eye contact, she gave her a thumbs up and poured herself a cup of coffee. Mags returned the gesture, then hit Play and began typing.

The tapes had been dictated in chronological order, starting with two days earlier. Rick’s voice described in detail seeing a beverage truck enter town then noticing the Ford Fiesta at the café. He remembered the color, the make, model and the fact it had had a rent-a-car sticker on the rear bumper, but he didn’t have the license plate, nor did he remember which car rental company it had been. He hadn’t seen the driver, who had apparently been inside the café at the time. This was followed by a description of his conversation with Brenda, the waitress. Mags hadn’t known a thing about this mysterious stranger in town and was getting more and more excited as she listened to the account. Already this Mr. X, Mr. Fiesta, had to be the prime suspect, she decided.

It took an hour to finish the first tape. She knew she used to type faster, and was a bit rusty, but she could tell her speed was picking up. She was surprised at how detailed the reports were. In her job with the county she had previously seen police reports on various matters and they were usually rather crudely written, with less-than-perfect grammar and spelling, and full of cop jargon and acronyms. Rick dictated in full, clear sentences. There was no fancy vocabulary or jargon, just simple English, but she could tell he was a well-educated man with sharp eyes and a good memory. She stopped the tape and began proofreading what she'd typed. Then she realized Rick was on the phone with someone.

"Make Nikki pull it down or wash it off. I'm not coming out there for a T.P. prank and Bud's not on until later. ... I know she didn't do it, but I can guarantee you whoever it was did it because of her. That's just the way an eighth-grader tells a girl he's got a crush. She may complain that it wasn't her fault, but she'll secretly relish the chance to be out there with the hose advertising to the world how cute some guy thinks she is. Leave it up until she gets home from school so all her girlfriends can see it. It's a badge of honor. There's nothing I can do anyway. I'm sure you heard what happened yesterday, so please just don't bother us with petty stuff."

After he hung up, he noticed Mags looking at him. "Homicide, toilet paper, all in a day's work," he said.

"What is the matter with people?" she replied.

"He didn't really want me to come out there. I think it was just an excuse to try to pump me for information. Everybody's curious. How are you doing on the tapes?"

"I finished the first one. I'll send it over to you." She forwarded it to his email.

"Okay, thanks."

A middle-aged Asian woman wearing a heavy coat and knit cap walked in. "I need to see Mr. Moran," she said, huffing as though out of breath. She looked directly at Rick, the only male in the room.

Sally put a hand up and said, "Chief Moran is busy right now. Is there something I can help you with?"

The police "station" was a single large room, but there was a wall separating the front area from the main part forming

a miniscule anteroom with a few chairs in it. The separating wall had a large sliding window in it, always open, where Sally's desk sat facing into the anteroom. Sally saw that the woman was holding some papers and reached out to have her hand them to her. Instead, the woman came barging through the open door into the main area and right up to Rick's desk.

"Hey, you can't come in here," Sally yelled, leaping to her feet, but it was too late.

"You've been served," the woman said and snapped a picture of a very surprised Rick Moran at his desk with legal papers on top. She turned rapidly and started to leave.

Sally and Mags both rushed to grab the woman, but Rick said, "It's okay, let her go."

Both women stepped back, letting the woman leave, but they couldn't help but notice that the top document she had dropped on the desk was captioned "Petition for Dissolution of Marriage." Rick quickly slipped the papers into a desk drawer.

"I'm sorry, Rick," Sally said. "We should keep the door closed." She closed the door as the process server disappeared down the street.

"It's all right, Sally. It's not your fault."

After an awkward silence, both women returned to their desks and resumed their duties. The next tape was much longer. It was Rick's account of Mag's original call to the police station, Sally's calling him, then his meet with Mags at the scene. At this point, it stopped being strictly chronological. Rick had been observing the scene and the victim while talking to her at the same time. This tape continued with his interview of her at the scene. It was strange to be typing up her own interview. Had she actually said that? Was that accurate? Had she forgotten something important? It was hard not to second guess herself as she typed. She noticed one or two small details that she knew weren't right, things he had misunderstood or she had said wrong. She made a note of those, but typed up exactly what he'd dictated, even if it was wrong. She'd mention these points later and he could correct it if he thought it was important. She now realized how important it was that witnesses stick strictly to what they know and clearly remember. If she'd told him that the blood was "all over" but it was actually in a single pool

under the body, that could be twisted by a defense attorney someday in a way that made her seem unreliable.

By the time she finished that tape it was almost noon. Rick was still engrossed in dictating and taking calls. She didn't want to interrupt him, so she sent him the next draft along with some notations in the email about the minor discrepancies she'd found. She decided to take a lunch break. Sally said she had to stay, and held up her own brown bag lunch, which she'd already begun unpacking. Mags headed over to the café.

\* \* \*

Rick realized it was over. He and Cissy had been through counseling, and he'd thought they still might be able to work it out. But the divorce papers made it crystal clear: she wanted out. She'd been staying with her sister in San Francisco for a month now. She'd called him two days earlier to tell him she'd found a marketing job with a high-tech firm there. She was already making more than he was. She didn't even want alimony. At least the property settlement would be easy. The thing that really hurt was when she'd told him she was seeing someone else.

Sally interrupted his thoughts and told him detective Martinez was on the line for him. He was glad of the distraction. Martinez told him he'd been checking with rental car agencies in the county and found eight different Ford Fiestas had been rented out at the time the stranger visited the café looking for Butcher. He didn't have time to follow up, but he had a list of the names and driver's licenses of the lessees and suggested Rick follow up with the waitress. Rick agreed that was a good idea. He told Martinez to email him the list.

The list arrived a few seconds later. He looked it over. Two of the eight customers were women, but that didn't prove anything. The car could have been leased by a woman even if it was a man driving it that day. For that matter, a woman might have been driving but didn't come into the café. The list didn't include the color of the car, but the driver's license information had descriptive information. Three of the men were either too young, too short, or too Chinese to be the man in the café, but

the same rule applied: someone else might have rented the car. He couldn't eliminate any of these yet.

He went to the terminal that connected to the Department of Motor Vehicles computer and printed out the driver's license pictures of all eight customers. Maybe Brenda would recognize one of them, if not the man, maybe a companion. He'd have to wait until she got back from school, though.

\* \* \*

Mags sat down in the far back corner of the café, the farthest spot from the front door. This was the worst table in the place, but it was the only one free. The place was much busier than usual. She didn't recognize several of the faces. She had to wait because the waitress, Beryl Jackson, was swamped. Beryl and her husband Clarence, the only black couple in the town, owned the café. Beryl was in her late seventies, but Mags would have thought she was in her fifties if she hadn't been told otherwise by Vivian. In tourist season there would have been two or even three people serving, teenagers working summer jobs, but this was too early, so Beryl had her hands full.

"Mags, I'm sorry for the wait. You can see how busy I am. You know what you want?"

"I'll keep it simple, Beryl. A BLT on wheat, heavy on the mayo. And a diet root beer."

"Comin' up." She started to turn away when Mags touched her arm.

"Hey, what time does Brenda come in here?"

"Brenda? Three fifteen. Why?" Beryl never missed a beat. That was not a casual question and she could sense it.

"Well, I heard there was a man in here two days ago asking for Morris Butcher and ..."

"Where you hear that?" Beryl exclaimed. Then she stood so that only Mags could see her hands and waggled her finger next to her belly in a no-no gesture. Mags finally realized that the stranger two tables over was craning his neck to listen. "Oh, I'm glad you came by. I have something to show you. Come on back to the kitchen."



Mags realized she'd already been indiscreet. The strangers could be press, or worse. She gave herself a mental kick in the pants as she followed Beryl back into the kitchen. Beryl put Mags's order slip down on the counter next to the others. "Clarence, you remember Mags."

Clarence nodded and smiled as he stood ladling soup into bowls.

"Hello, Clarence. I'm sorry, Beryl, was that a reporter or something out there?"

"It was. I've had two of 'em asking questions around here already. I guess Morris was pretty well known in some parts. Now why you asking about Brenda?"

"Well, I'm helping Chief Moran out on the case, typing up his reports and things. I wanted to make sure I had all the details right. She did see a stranger come in and ask for Morris, is that right?"

"I wasn't here," Beryl said, "but that's what she told me. I'm sure she told Rick everything she could remember."

"I was just hoping maybe we could get some better description. I can come back and talk to her later."

"I saw him," Clarence said. "He's bad news."

"You saw him?" both women said almost in unison.

"Yep. He's an ex-con."

"How you know that?" Beryl screeched.

"Tat on his neck. Left side, low." He tapped the spot on his own neck. "When Brenda went out I looked out through the pass-through to see who it was. I saw the tat right off. I wasn't cooking anything – just waiting for an order. Lunch time was over."

"Did you tell Rick?" Mags asked.

"Nope. No one asked me. I didn't even know he came in asking until yesterday after all the hubbub about the murder. That's when Brenda told us." Clarence had finished ladling out the soup and placed a pickle and roll on the plate next to the bowl. "Order's up," he said to Beryl as though nothing important was going on. Business is business. Beryl picked up the order and scurried out with it.

"Oh my. Do you think he's the one who killed Morris?"

"Seems pretty unlikely to be coincidence to me. But Butcher seemed to be expecting him."

For a moment Mags wondered whether she had let out some confidential information about the state of the crime scene, but then was sure she hadn't. "What makes you say that?"

"He came in later. Brenda mentioned to him that a man had come in looking for him. She wanted to make sure he wasn't upset about her telling the man how to find him. Butcher told her it was fine, that the man was a friend." He flipped a burger and lowered a basket of fries into the oil. Next to the burger he laid out three strips of bacon, Mags's BLT getting started.

"I see. And Rick doesn't know that, either?"

"Nope. None of them cops interviewed me. I wasn't out at the house watching the circus."

"I'm going to have to tell him."

"That's fine. I'm not trying to keep it secret. Brenda neither. He can come back later after she gets here and he can talk to both of us. Lunch crowd'll be gone then."

"All right, I'll let him know. Thanks." She returned to her seat out in the dining area. Beryl was rushing around busing dirty dishes, refilling coffee, and assuring people their orders were on the way.

When Beryl disappeared into the back, the man who had been sitting two tables away came over and stood next to Mags. "Hi, I wonder if I could talk to you," he said. "I'm with the Herald." The Monterey County Herald was the local newspaper.

"You're a reporter?" Mags squirmed.

"That's right. I couldn't help overhearing. You said there was a man who came in here ..."

"No, no. That was just gossip. I don't know anything." Mags was a terrible liar. She stuttered and turned as red as the ketchup bottle on the table. The man just laughed.

"Now, now. I just saw you come out of City Hall there. Do you work for the Police Department?"

"No comment." Blushing crimson now, Mags couldn't believe she'd just said that. No comment. Just like on TV. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to be rude. I just want to eat my lunch in peace. Please leave me alone."

"Okay. I'll talk to the waitress you mentioned. Brenda was it?"

Mags kicked herself mentally, knowing she'd blundered. This police business was trickier than she'd thought. At that moment Beryl came out balancing a large tray. She dropped off two orders with another table and then came over to Mags to set down her BLT and soda. She gave the reporter a hard stare and shoved her well-cushioned butt between him and the table as she did so. He moved back to his table.

"Thank you," Mags said earnestly, rolling her eyes towards the reporter, blocked from his view by Beryl.

"My pleasure. Enjoy your lunch." She bustled off.

\* \* \*

When she came out of the restaurant there was an attractive young woman in heavy makeup standing in front of Town Hall holding a microphone. A cameraman was hefting a fancy-looking camera on his shoulder and telling her to do a sound check. The camera was wired to an electronic device on his belt. A panel truck with the logo of one of the Monterey television stations was parked at the curb. Mags tried to look casual as she walked to the Town Hall parking lot and got in her car. She wanted to check on Raisin. He wasn't used to her being gone all day.

She drove back home, a short drive, and found him sleeping on the sofa in the living room. She called his name softly and he perked right up. He wagged his tail so vigorously he practically twisted himself into a pretzel when he saw her. He charged at her and jumped up on her, a definite no-no. She scolded him, but then picked him up in her arms. She knew this was sending mixed signals, but her guilt made her give in to her sentiment. She'd missed him, too.

She decided to take him with her when she went back to the station. She checked her snail mail, then turned on her computer and checked her email; neither had anything pressing to deal with. Satisfied with that, she put the leash on Raisin and took him for a walk. When she arrived back at the house, he started to head for the front door, but she diverted him to the car. Minutes later she was back in the Town Hall parking lot. As she walked past the front of the building she overheard the

woman reporter saying "... the slaying of the well-known puzzle maker ...."

So Victoria was right. He did make puzzles, and apparently was rather well-known for it. She continued to the station and sat at her desk. Sally was standing at the color printer, the one attached to the state terminal. It connected to both the DMV records and the criminal justice system.

"This is the last one," Sally called to Rick. He got up and came over to the printer. Sally handed him a short stack of printouts.

"Hi, I'm back," Mags said to both of them. "I hope it's okay I have Raisin with me. He'll be good, I promise."

Rick shot a dubious squint at Raisin and said, "See that he is."

She tied the leash to the leg of her desk and Raisin settled down next to her chair. "What's that?" she asked, looking at the printouts.

"Driver's licenses of the people who rented Ford Fiestas at the time that stranger came into town asking for Butcher."

"Can I take a look?"

Rick shrugged and handed her the eight printouts. Ignoring the two women and the three men who didn't meet the description, she scanned the remaining three. "I'll bet it's this one," she said almost immediately, pointing to one.

Rick's eyebrows shot up. "You seem pretty sure."

"This one. He's wearing a turtleneck. It covers his prison tattoo, left side of his neck. None of the others have a tattoo there."

Rick's eyebrows climbed another notch, almost colliding with his hairline. Sally's jaw dropped. Mags couldn't help but glory in that feeling of triumph that comes from being the one with the answer, but that lasted only for a few seconds. Slightly apologetically she explained about her conversation with Clarence.

"I see," Rick said. "I'll have to go and interview him myself." When he saw Mags's hurt expression, he added, "Oh, I believe you, Mags. Don't be upset. That's good work. But it's hearsay. I have to talk to the eyewitness myself. I'll need probable cause to get any warrants and hearsay is weak evidence. At trial, too, of course."

“Oh, of course. I understand.” She realized she’d been foolish thinking he’d been questioning her accuracy. She sat at her desk and the glow of having contributed returned.

“Sally, run this guy – Oliver Dunlap – for a criminal record. I’ll make up a photo spread to show Clarence.” He turned to Mags and began, “A photo spread is ...”

“Oh, I know what that is.” She plugged in her headset and popped another tape in the player.

“Nothing in the state system,” Sally said after a few minutes. “But there’s a hit from the feds. He has a conviction for Theft From Interstate Shipment. He served twelve years. He was released three weeks ago.”

“TFIS. That’s an FBI violation. Twelve years is a long time for a theft offense. There must be more to it. That’s normally eighteen months or so. Is he on parole?”

“I don’t know how to tell with the feds. I’ve never had to look that up before.”

“I’ll call them once I get confirmation from Clarence and Brenda that he’s the one who was there.”

“Okay.”

He went to a cabinet where he had a box of driver’s license photos and mug shots. He kept these both for general intelligence purposes and for things like this. They were mostly young people arrested for shoplifting or drugs, but there were some drunk drivers and others in the right age group. Once he collected the right information he went to the state terminal where he entered in the identifying information of the three Fiesta drivers and three more he’d picked from his records in the right age, race, and sex categories. With a few clicks of the mouse he had the system print out a photo spread. He decided to wait until Brenda came back from school before taking them to the café.

\* \* \*

Rick returned from the café three hours later.

“Well?” Sally said before he even made it to the door separating the waiting area, which she now kept closed. Mags took off her headset and listened intently.

“He’s the man, the stranger in town. They both picked him out right off. That doesn’t mean he’s the killer, though. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.” He made eye contact with Mags and gave her a nod of approval. She beamed with pride although she knew she hadn’t done much.

“That was good work, Mags, really good work.”

“Oh, Rick, I didn’t do anything. I was just in the right place at the right time and Clarence spoke up. I wasn’t interviewing him or anything. You would have taken those driver’s license photos over to Brenda anyway.”

“Ah, but I didn’t. I took a photo spread with six white males. And I didn’t use the DL photo. I used Dunlap’s mug shot, which shows his tattoo. Brenda might not have recognized him with the turtleneck on, and if she’d said she didn’t recognize anybody, that would hurt her credibility if she later identified him. Same with Clarence. These little things count.”

“Oh, well, I ... guess that’s good then.” *I helped identify a suspect! In a real murder case!* She returned to her typing in a very good mood. Raisin wagged his tail.

Sally piped up. “Rick, while you were out a call came in that you should return. He said he’s the lawyer for Morris Butcher’s estate. Name’s Zirelli. The number’s on your desk.”

Rick called the lawyer who told him that he had been authorized by Will Butcher to give the police permission to access anything they needed to – the house, the bank accounts, computers, anything. He did have a favor to ask, though. He hoped the police could patrol by the house often and maybe knew of a reliable person, possibly an officer, who could stay in the house overnight until he got there. He was afraid someone would burglarize the place and steal some of the valuable artwork. He also wanted to make sure the utilities weren’t off. He said his father had a large freezer full of meat and fish in the garage which would cause the whole house to stink to high heaven if the power was shut off. Rick assured him they were patrolling by the house frequently and would look into finding someone to house-sit for a few days. The lawyer gave him the alarm code for the house. He said he also had Butcher’s will and some paperwork that might be relevant to the investigation. He asked if Rick could come by the next day. Rick protested he

was busy, but the lawyer was quite insistent that it was important and had to be done in person, so Rick had agreed.

Since Bud Porter had come in during the conversation, Rick had put it on speakerphone for Bud to hear. When the phone call ended Bud spoke up and told Rick he patrolled by the Butcher house a lot on the late shift and had asked the neighbors on both sides to call 911 if they saw anything so the sheriff's dispatch could reach him, even in the middle of the night.

"Do you want to stay there overnight for the next few days?" Rick asked him.

Before Bud could answer, Mags volunteered, "I'll do it."

"You?" the two officers chorused. "Are you sure?" Rick said. "You don't mind sleeping in a house where someone was murdered?"

"Not at all. It sounds like an adventure. And his home is a lovely home. Much nicer than my cottage."

"But it's a mess. You saw it."

"Pfft! I'll bring my own sheets and make up one of the beds."

"I don't think there's much danger of looting, but the killer could come back looking for whatever it was he didn't find."

"I doubt that. Anyway, it has an alarm and you're just a few minutes away."

"Well, if you're sure, I suppose it's okay; it'll save the town overtime for an officer. But if anyone comes to the door, don't answer it. Call me."

"I will."

Rick gave her the alarm code and told her where to find the hidden key in the back yard.

"Any progress on the case?" Bud asked.

Rick explained about how they'd identified Oliver Dunlap. When Bud had heard about Mags's part, he gave her a grin and held up a hand for a high five. It took her a beat to realize what the hand was up for, but it gave her a tiny thrill when she realized, and she slapped his hand like a pro. That was the first time in her life she'd ever high-fived anyone, and it felt good.

“Don’t forget to call the FBI about Dunlap,” Sally reminded Rick. “Now you have a positive ID.”

“Right. Thanks for the reminder.” He told Bud to stick around while he called.

He called his regular contact in the FBI Monterey Bay Resident Agency, located in Watsonville, halfway between Santa Cruz and Monterey. The agent there looked up the name Oliver Dunlap in the FBI computer system and told him that it was an old, closed case, but the case agent on it was still in the division working in San Francisco. After a bit of reading he said it had involved a jewel heist from San Francisco International Airport. Dunlap had been caught with the jewels. He’d previously worked at the airport in security and knew how to get through the security systems.”

“So they recovered the jewels?” Rick asked.

“He had some on him. I don’t know if they got them all. It was an eighty million dollar heist. It’s a big file. I don’t have the time to read through it all. Why don’t I have the case agent call you tomorrow and you can ask for the details. If there are still jewels out there to be recovered, the case will be reopened now that Dunlap has come on the radar again.”

“Okay, that’ll work.”

“You want me out on patrol now?” Bud asked.

“Yes, but first why don’t you escort Mags over to Butcher’s house and make sure everything is okay there.”

“Sure.”

She protested to Rick that an escort wasn’t necessary, but he was insistent, so she gathered up her purse and Raisin and told Bud she’d meet him over there after she made a quick trip home. They both took off.



## Chapter 7

With Bud by her side Mags went around to the back yard and retrieved the spare key. They went back to the front door where they pulled off the yellow police tape, unlocked the door, and stepped inside. She looked for the alarm panel, which was right by the front door. It had not been set by Rick or the crime scene team because no one had had the code, and obviously Butcher had not been able to set it after being stabbed to death. Bud helped her understand how it worked. They punched in the code and then opened the front door and it went off with a loud “whoop whoop.” Mags punched in the code again and it stopped.

Bud walked her around the house. It was still a total mess, every room having been ransacked, but other than the brandy snifter that Butcher had been holding and the puzzle boxes, nothing appeared to be broken, just overturned and dumped out. In the basement there was a freezer as Will Butcher had said and it was packed with meats of various sorts, expensive cuts. It appeared undisturbed. Mags wondered why the killer hadn’t searched it, too, but then realized that if something had been hidden in one of these packages, it would have been hopeless to find it. It would have taken hours for all this meat to thaw. She remembered a TV mystery she’d watched where a stolen diamond had been frozen in the ice cube tray. She resolved to thaw those once Bud was gone.

Five minutes later she was in the kitchen microwaving the ice cubes from the refrigerator freezer. She was sorely disappointed when she ended up with nothing but a bowl of water. Reality set in. This wasn’t a TV show; it was real life. Raisin was acting weird, freaked out from his prior experience here. She needed to restore this place to normalcy, to someplace livable. The crime scene people were done with their work and the son, the new owner, would be here soon.

She began by replacing all the cushions and the overturned chairs to their normal positions. She rehung the paintings and photographs on the walls. It was amazing how much better it looked just from these few steps. She went

upstairs and remade all the beds. She used her own linens for one of the guest room beds.

Slowly the place came together. She decided to leave the garage for last. The workbench area was the biggest mess. It was getting dark and she wanted to tackle that in the daylight. The other trouble spot was the kitchen. The blood pool was still there, now dried and gummy. The broken glass was still there, too. *Well, there's nothing to it but to just get it done. I'm not going to freak out over some blood.* She searched around for a mop and bucket and cleanser. She put on rubber gloves and started swabbing. In less than an hour the kitchen was spotless. *That wasn't so bad!*

When she'd finished, she realized she was hungry and it was already almost eight. She didn't want to leave the house since she was supposed to be housesitting. Bud had come by twice to check on her and she now wished she had asked him to bring her something to eat, but he was supposed to be patrolling and responding to calls. She saw some food in the refrigerator and the pantry but it seemed too creepy to be eating a dead man's food. She called Victoria, who lived only a few houses away, to see if she could pick something up for her, but apparently she and Alek had left early for their ski trip.

She still didn't want to touch anything in the refrigerator, but after a little more thought she decided that it would be okay to eat some of the canned goods that Butcher hadn't opened. She dug around in the pantry and found some hearty stew and an unopened package of crackers. She dumped the stew into a pan and put it on the range to heat. At that moment, the house phone rang. She wasn't sure if she should be answering it, so she let it go to the answering machine. When she heard Elaine's voice say "Mags, pick up." She did.

"Mags, how are you doing? I heard about what happened and was wondering if you're okay. Vivian and I haven't heard a peep from you since that first call the other day. You didn't tell us you discovered the body. I heard you were working over at the police station so I called there and they said to call you here."

Elaine was a good friend. Her whole book club was. She realized she needed someone to share with. What a relief.

“Elaine, you won’t believe it. I found Morris Butcher dead ... in his own home. The sheriff’s office sent out a team and there are reporters and ...”

“Slow down. I want to hear the whole story. Why don’t you come over and have a glass of wine.”

“I can’t, I’m housesitting here. It’s a long story. Why don’t you come over here.”

“You’re housesitting the murder house!? My, my. It must be quite a story. It’s that big house on Upper Creek with the fountain?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

And she was, wine bottle in hand. Mags had just finished her stew and crackers when the doorbell rang. Elaine called out, “It’s me! I’m not the Buck’s Gap Slasher.”

Mags pulled the door open and the alarm started its piercing whoop. They both almost jumped out of their skins, but Mags quickly silenced it. “Oops, sorry. I forgot.” She closed the door and reset the alarm.

“Jesus, you ’bout gave me a heart attack. You okay, here, really?” They went up to the main room.

“Yes, it’s fine. I’m fine. It’s just a house. I haven’t been visited by the ghost of Morris Butcher once. That only happened when he was alive.”

“I’ll say it’s a house,” Elaine agreed, looking around. “A very nice house. I thought it would be all trashed. The sheriff’s people were here a long time.”

“It was. I’ve been cleaning it up. The drawers were all pulled out and emptied. The woodworking projects downstairs were smashed to bits.”

“You cleaned it up by yourself? You should have called us. We’d have helped you.”

“I know, but you have a business to run. Vivian has a job. Victoria’s on a ski trip.” She got out two wine glasses.

“Speaking of Vivian, I called her to come over, too. I hope you don’t mind. You sounded like you could use the company. She should be here any minute.”

“That’s fine. In fact, that’s more than fine. I’m glad you called.”

The doorbell rang again. Elaine told Mags to stay put as she hurried down to the entryway. It was Vivian with her booming voice. "Open up! It's the Buck's Gap Slasher come to finish you off!"

Elaine opened the door, setting off the alarm again. Elaine and Vivian both jumped. "Oh, crap," Vivian said. "I did it too." The alarm continued to ring.

Mags came rushing down the stairs to get to the alarm pad. "The neighbors will kill me. I'm going to leave it off for now. I'll set it when I go to bed." She hugged Vivian and led her upstairs.

Then the phone rang. Mags figured she'd better answer it. It might be Rick calling because of the alarms. It turned out to be Bud, but he was indeed calling because neighbors had reported the alarms. She assured him they were accidents that won't happen again. She said Vivian and Elaine were there with her. He said he was on the far side of town where a mountain lion had been reported in someone's back yard, but if she needed him, he'd get there as fast as he could. She thanked him, hung up, and turned to Vivian. "Now what's this about the Buck's Gap Slasher? Both of you pulled that."

"You haven't been watching TV? That's what they're calling him now. All the Bay Area channels. Even the national news mentioned it. Wow! Quite a place here."

"Would you like some wine?" She stepped over to the liquor cabinet and pulled out another wine glass."

Vivian took one look at the liquor cabinet and exclaimed, "The heck with that." She pulled out a 12-year-old bottle of scotch and a glass. "Get me some ice, would you?"

Abashed, Mags replied, "Um, sorry, no ice. I melted it all."

Vivian gave her a hard look and said, "You come to a murdered man's house and melt his ice. I guess that makes as much sense as anything else that's happened around here lately." She poured herself a shot of scotch and followed Mags to the great room sofa.

They all sat together on the sofa. Elaine raised her glass and proposed a toast. "Now we have a real mystery to solve. Let the clues roll in."

“Hear, hear,” Vivian said. “Now tell us all about it, Mags.”

All the details of yesterday morning came flowing out – the ransacked place, the open door, the animal tracks, the body, calling the police, being interviewed by Rick. It was such a cathartic experience to finally be able to tell her friends all about it. She didn’t hold back a thing. The two women hung on every word, not interrupting once. It took an hour and a second glass of wine – and scotch.

When she’d finished, Elaine asked, “So what have the police found out? You’ve been working there, I hear. Do they have any suspects?”

This brought Mags up short. Her finding the body and everything else from two days ago was her own experience, not something she’d learned from the police. But what she’d learned today was something else entirely. She’d already had a close call with that reporter in the café. She didn’t want to betray Rick’s trust. She couldn’t. It was her responsibility to keep police investigation confidential.

“I’m just typing up reports from the day before, really. I sit there with headphones on listening to dictation tapes. I don’t hear much.” She hoped her fib would pass, but Vivian wasn’t buying it.

“Oh, come on, it’s just us. You can tell us. Who was that woman who went into the police station this morning? A Chinese gal, I heard. She’s not from around here.”

*Boy, nothing happens around here without everyone knowing it.* “Oh, it wasn’t related to the case at all. It was just a personal matter.”

“Personal matter? Like what? Does it have anything to do with the fact no one’s seen Cissy in a month?”

“Come on, Viv. Leave me alone. I can’t talk about what goes on in the police station. It’s your turn. I haven’t seen the TV news tonight. What’re they saying?”

“Well, like I said, they’re calling him the Buck’s Gap Slasher but no one knows anything about the killer. At least not that they’re reporting. Most of it has been about Morris. They’re finding out all kinds of stuff none of us knew. He used to run some kind of investment business in San Francisco. He retired from that at age fifty, quite wealthy. He was some kind of

crossword puzzle champ or something and had a retirement business supplying crosswords and word puzzles to some syndication outfit. He also sells custom puzzle boxes that he makes himself. They're saying it's more of a hobby than a business. He's well-known in puzzle-making circles, it seems, but viewed as something of a recluse."

"I didn't know there was such a thing as a puzzle-making circle," Mags replied.

"Oh yes. They interviewed some puzzle editor who said some glowing things about him and then some guy who has a YouTube channel about puzzles, whatever that is, and he showed some of the puzzle boxes. The woodwork is beautiful. He's good with his hands, obviously, and smart. They said he has an I.Q. of 150."

"Had," Elaine added. "Now it's more of an R.I.P. than an I.Q."

"Did they have any information about who might have wanted him dead?" Mags asked.

Vivian continued. "Not really. There was never any controversy about his investment business. He ran a fund that did well. His clients were all happy with the returns. No scandals or anything. His wife died of cancer. He asked to be bought out by his partners and just retired early. I see a lot of nice stuff here. I guess they didn't rob the place, so that wasn't the motive. Did the detective give you any clues?"

"The detective? Oh, from the sheriff's office, the homicide detective? No, I didn't even talk to him. Chief Moran interviewed me and that's all." She was glad Vivian had assumed the investigation was being run by the sheriff. *They think of Rick as a small-town cop, not a real detective. That could be an advantage.*

"So how is it you're staying here?" Elaine asked.

"I guess Morris has a son in Australia. He'll be here in a few days, but his lawyer asked Rick – Chief Moran – if he could find someone to stay here until he arrives. Just to watch over the valuables and make the place look lived in. I was right there, so I volunteered. I parked my car in the driveway so everyone can see it's occupied."

Elaine said, "So what do think? Is it that stranger who came into town? Brenda, the waitress over at the café, a woman

reporter asked her who the man was. Brenda didn't talk to her, but it was obvious she knew something."

"I think it's some jealous husband," Vivian offered. "Morris was on the prowl. Look how he went after Mags here. I'll bet he hooked up with someone who was married. You know how he'd take those trips twice a year."

"No, I don't. What trips?" Mags replied.

"Victoria knows all the neighbors on this block. The people next door – the older couple from Arkansas or someplace like that, I can never remember their name – they told her that Morris always asked them to pick up his mail and any packages. He'd be gone for four or five days every time. Twice a year. He never told them where he was going."

Mags wondered what she meant by "someplace like that." What place was like Arkansas – another southern state? Another state that that started with A? Alaska, maybe? "Well, he's retired," she said. "That doesn't sound so suspicious. A lot of retired people travel. Maybe he visited his son."

"Maybe, but that seems like a pretty short time to visit someone in Australia. Why go twice a year and only stay there a day or two? I'd think he'd rather go and stay a week once a year. I would. It would be cheaper, too. Airfare's expensive." Vivian threw down the last of her scotch and poured another. "I think he's got some dolly up in San Francisco or someplace and they go off together. Maybe Tahoe."

Elaine was now on her third glass of wine. Following Vivian's lead, she'd switched from the cheap bottle she'd brought from her store to an imported bottle of white she'd found already open in the refrigerator. "I think it was related to those puzzles. Maybe another puzzle-maker. Those puzzle people can be obsessive weirdos. Maybe someone who couldn't open one of his puzzle boxes. You said whoever it was smashed them to bits. Kind of like road rage or something. Or maybe someone thought he stole their idea."

Mags considered herself "puzzle people" and might have taken offense at the comment, but she didn't say anything. She herself thought that it had something to do with Dunlap's jewel heist, but she couldn't tell her friends about it. That part wasn't public. She was bursting with desire to tell them how she'd helped identify him, but she bit her tongue.

While Mags kept quiet, Elaine and Vivian continued to speculate about the case, repeat gossip they'd heard, and giggle about almost anything, a clear indication they'd had too much to drink. Vivian finally realized how late it was getting. She stood up to go and realized she wasn't in shape to drive.

"I'd better call Bob to come and get me," she declared with surprising clarity.

"You can stay here if you want," Mags offered. "There are five bedrooms if you count the one downstairs."

"Here? With Morris Butcher haunting the place? No way." She went to the phone in kitchen and called her husband. After a short conversation she announced, "He's coming. He'll give you a ride, too, Elaine, if you want it."

"I suppose I should take you up on that. I'm a little tipsy. We can leave our cars here overnight. That'll help scare off the killer when he comes."

"Elaine! Don't say that," Vivian scolded. "We're here to calm Mags down, not scare her."

"Just kidding. I'm sure you'll be fine."

After a few minutes of hugs and thanks, the doorbell rang. It was Bob, Vivian's husband. This time Mags was careful to check the alarm, but it wasn't set. Her friends left, calling back assurances that everything would be fine. Mags carefully locked the door and set the alarm.

She hadn't had as much to drink as her friends, but she wanted to get up early to do her morning routine before going in to the station. Raisin was whining at the door and she realized that he needed a walk. She remembered Bud's warning about the mountain lion and didn't want to go walking this late, nor did she want to let Raisin out in the yard by himself. She ended up taking a flashlight and the telephone handset out to the back yard and letting Raisin run around the yard for a while. There was no sign of a lion or a murderer and when Raisin was done, she gladly came back inside and reset the alarm. She went upstairs and got ready for bed. *Tomorrow should be an interesting day.*



## Chapter 8

Mags arrived promptly at nine the next morning only to find the door to the station was locked. She chatted with the Town Clerk, who told her she had seen Rick go out on patrol. Sally showed up a few minutes later and opened the door to the station.

“Where’s Rick?” Sally asked. “He’s always in first.”

“Out on patrol, I heard.”

Mags went directly to her desk and donned her headset. Twenty minutes later Rick arrived. He entered with a look of satisfaction on his face.

“You look like the cat that ate the canary,” Sally said.

“I just ticketed three reporter’s vehicles for illegal parking, including the two in the passenger loading zone in front of Town Hall. Maybe that’ll give them an incentive to leave town.”

“Where was the other one?”

“In the disabled slot at the youth hostel. That’ll be expensive.”

Mags took off her headset in time to hear Sally say, “I went through the messages. You got a call from an FBI agent in San Francisco. She wants you to call back. I put the name and number on your desk.”

“Okay, anything else?”

“Mrs. Henderson called to report her daughter had gone missing. That was at 12:30 last night. Then at 12:45 she called back and said never mind. Oh, and the mayor called and wanted to be sure we were going to get the budget request in on time. I called him to assure him we were. That’s all.”

Rick made a noise of acknowledgment and picked up the phone. Mags pretended to be typing as she eavesdropped on the conversation. Although she could only hear Rick’s side of it, from what she could gather, the agent, Lisa Murphy, had been the original case agent on the jewel theft and laid out the situation for Rick. Dunlap had successfully gotten away with the theft undetected and would have been scot free, but he got greedy. He tried to fence some of the diamonds in Los Angeles a few days after the heist. The theft was well-known and

micrographic photos of all the diamonds had been distributed throughout the industry along with a large reward offer. These were large, high-value stones and jewelers could easily recognize them. The gem dealer he contacted there turned him in. About half the diamonds were recovered in a subsequent search of Dunlap's residence.

The FBI had suspected someone else was involved and still had the other half of the loot, but they couldn't identify another suspect. Dunlap didn't cooperate. This resulted in him getting a long sentence, but he still never said where the other diamonds were. The case was placed in pending inactive, with no one working it, but with the file still open to receive tips and so forth. The federal prison personnel reported on him regularly to the FBI, his phone calls, mail, etc., except, of course with his lawyer. When Dunlap was due to be released, they reactivated the file and have been watching his activity, hoping to recover the rest of the diamonds and identify anyone else involved. The missing diamonds' current value is over forty million dollars. Murphy was actively working it again and wanted to come to Buck's Gap to talk to Rick about it. She didn't yet have any information connecting Dunlap to Butcher, but this murder was certainly suspicious and she wondered if Butcher could have been a partner in the crime. One of the things that raised her suspicions was that Dunlap was known to work the crossword puzzles every day in the local newspaper. He was almost fanatical about it. She wanted to come down today. Rick had agreed to meet with her at three o'clock, which was the earliest she could get here.

After he got off the phone, Rick handed Mags two more tapes he'd dictated at home the previous evening. Then he announced that he was going to go out on patrol again for an hour and would then head on to Carmel to meet the lawyer.

Mags continued her typing for another hour, then took a break. She poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down at her computer. The FBI hadn't found any connection between Dunlap and Butcher, but obviously the two knew each other. The fact that the connection was not known was suspicious in itself, like they were trying to keep it secret. Even though Agent Murphy hadn't found any connection, she'd only learned about

Butcher the previous day. Mags decided to see what she could find.

She began searching the names of both men in combination. She knew the names Dunlap and Butcher were so common, there would be lots of hits, but she decided to start with that. The Google page came back saying there were 348,000 results. *Not going to work.* Next she tried putting both full names in, Morris Butcher Oliver Dunlap. 733,000 results. *Even worse.* Then she put both names in quotes: “Morris Butcher” “Oliver Dunlap.” No exact results, that is, nothing that had both full names exactly as entered, but there were seventy results with partial matches – one of the full names and one of the words of the other name. Most were related to Morris Butcher’s puzzles, including his own website showcasing his boxes. She went through all five pages of results but nothing was identifiable with Oliver Dunlap. She realized her coffee was cold. She went back to the sink and dumped it and poured another cup. She stood sipping the hot brew and tried to think of another approach. An idea hit her.

She gulped down the rest of the coffee, burning her tongue, and went back to the computer. She typed in Dunlap Butcher crossword. About 60,000 results. *Still too many, but better than before.* She started examining the hits that came up. After all, most of the really relevant ones were on the first page. *Crossword puzzle answer for butcher. Nope. Best in Show cast and crew. Nope. ...piece of butcher paper ... Nope.* Twenty minutes later she was on page seven of the results. *Does anyone really ever read through page seven? I should be typing these tapes. One more page, that’s all.* On page eight of the Google search results she hit paydirt. A pdf file with a list of historical winners in an annual regional crossword puzzle tournament held in Sacramento. Butcher was the first-place finisher in 2009 and scored in the top ten twice since then. Dunlap wasn’t there in any of those. Of course, he was in prison and couldn’t participate. Still, there had been a search hit, so maybe his name was somewhere in the document. She pressed control-F and the pdf search box appeared. She typed in Dunlap and, sure enough, he had scored fifth in the year 2001. Butcher was fourth that year. Sixteen years ago, the year before the heist. There it was. Fellow puzzlers in the same place at the same time. They must

know each other. They've known each other for many years, in fact. Well, we knew that already since Dunlap had visited him, but now we can prove a connection. Of course, it didn't prove Butcher was involved in the heist or that Dunlap killed Butcher. She printed out the page of the document on her screen and pulled out a yellow highlighter. She highlighted the two names and placed the printout on Rick's desk. Then she went back to typing.

\* \* \*

Rick entered Zirelli's law office and was greeted warmly, first by the secretary, then by the lawyer himself.

"Thank you for seeing me on such short notice, officer," Zirelli said. "I'm in a bit of a pickle but I want to do the right thing. I was Morris Butcher's attorney, and I'm now the attorney for his son Will and for the estate."

Rick nodded. He did not bother to correct Zirelli on his title. No one outside of town thought of him as a police chief, just a small-town cop. He was, after all, an officer and there was nothing demeaning about that.

"Anyway, I think you'll be glad you came. You see, Morris left his will with me. It's public. I'm required by law to file it with the county clerk, and I did that yesterday, so I can reveal its contents to you. He left everything to his son Will, who is the executor of the estate. That's quite normal since he has no other relatives."

Rick was wondering where this was going. He has assumed all of this already and the son was out of the country, so could not have been the killer.

"I say everything, but there is one exception. It's not in the will. He left a sealed envelope with me." He pulled out a manila envelope plastered with tape. "It came with instructions not to open it. On his death I was to hold it until I was approached by someone who identified himself as 'Ollie.' This man would have a noticeable scar on his left forearm. I was not to ask for any further identification. If the man showed up, I was to give him the envelope unopened and not tell anyone else about it. If he didn't show up within ninety days of Morris's death, I was to give the envelope and these instructions to Will."

"I see. May I see the envelope." He reached out his hand but Zirelli pulled the envelope back out of reach.

"No, I'm afraid not. I'm in an ethical quandary here. Will has told me to give you access to anything, but it's not clear this envelope is part of the estate. It was given over to me by Morris to hold for this Ollie, and I owe a fiduciary duty to Morris. Will can control all the estate assets, which are about to become his, but I don't think those instructions apply to this envelope. Will doesn't even know about it yet. I've requested some guidance from the state bar ethics hotline."

"Then why did you bring me here if I can't see it?"

"I'm sure Morris didn't anticipate being murdered. That changes everything. I don't know if this is related, of course, but the cloak-and-dagger nature of it makes me wonder. I cannot help facilitate a crime; my attorney-client privilege does not extend that far. One thing I know, officer, is that a court order would trump everything. If you were to get a search warrant for this envelope, for example, I would have to turn it over, no matter what. That would relieve me of my responsibilities."

"I see. Has this mysterious 'Ollie' contacted you?"

"In fact, he has. That's why this is urgent. He called this morning, or at least someone using that name did. He wanted to know if he could come in to see me. I was in court at the time so my secretary took the message. I haven't called him back yet, but he could show up unannounced at any minute. Without some form of legal process preventing it, I would have to hand it over."

"Do you have his telephone number?"

"Yes, I knew you'd ask for that. Here it is." He handed over a slip of paper with a telephone number and the name 'Ollie' on it, no last name.

"I don't know how soon I could get a warrant. I think there's probable cause, but I might have to check out this number or do some more investigation. I'll have to write up an affidavit, but I haven't even met with the district attorney on this case yet. Honestly, I've never handled a homicide case before."

"If you tell me you're in the process of getting a search warrant, that's sufficient. Once I've been informed by

authorities that it's evidence in a crime and you're getting proper legal process, I can't dispose of it. I have to hold it and let the court decide.

"All right. I'm in the process of getting a warrant. I demand that you not dispose of the evidence."

"Thank you," Zirelli said, breathing a big sigh of relief. "I'll hold it until I hear from you."

"If I can't touch it, can you at least tell me this? Does it feel like there are small lumps in it, like pebbles?"

"Pebbles?" Zirelli picked up the envelope again and squeezed the bottom seam. Then he laid it flat on his desk and ran his hand over the whole thing. "No, it's perfectly flat. It feels like it just has a sheet of paper in it, or maybe two or three. Why?"

"Now I'm the one who can't tell you something."

"You know who this 'Ollie' is, don't you?"

"Possibly, but I can't tell you."

"Is he dangerous? You should at least tell me that."

Rick thought about that for a moment. "The person I have in mind has never been known to engage in violence, but this is a murder investigation. If – and that's a big if – he is the murderer, then that's another matter. If I were you, I would try to avoid him altogether. Stall him if you can. Set up an appointment for next week. I see you have an office safe. Maybe you could sneak out the back. Does your secretary have the combination?"

"Yes. And so does my partner. He could force them to open it. We can't close the place down. We have clients, and other work. If he shows up and threatens us ..."

"Calm down. You're getting into some heavy speculation. If he shows up, you can tell him I was here and that I have his phone number and know who he is from his rental car records. I don't believe he'd do anything violent. If he's armed and threatens you, which I don't expect at all, give him the envelope. Don't be a hero. One last thing. Keep this all confidential. Don't let the press or anyone else know about it, except the sheriff's office if they ask."

"All right. Thank you. Please do get that warrant. The sooner this is out of my hands, the better."

"Fine. I'll be in touch."

They shook hands again and Rick left. As soon as he was out in his car he called Martinez at the sheriff's office in Salinas. Rick had a cell phone even though there was no coverage in Buck's Gap. He was in and out of town enough that he was often in range of a tower. Most residents of the town carried cell phones when they headed down the road toward the coast. Fortunately, Martinez was in. Rick summarized the status of the investigation and what the lawyer had just said. He agreed to help Rick with the warrant. He asked Rick to come in and write up an affidavit and sign it. In the meantime Martinez would contact the DA's office, since a D.A. would have to see it first and then find an available judge. Rick said he had to meet with the FBI at 3:00 back in Buck's Gap and wasn't sure he could call off the San Francisco agent in time. Martinez told Rick he could leave after preparing the affidavit and he, Martinez, would take the paperwork into the judge and get the warrant. He said the attorney-client thing would probably delay things and he might not be able to get the warrant until tomorrow. The judge would probably want to research the law on that. Rick checked his watch and decided he had time. He agreed, and headed in to Salinas, which was twenty-five miles away. En route he radioed Sally to tell her he was going there to get a warrant and should be back to meet the FBI agent at three.

## Chapter 9

Special Agent Lisa Murphy arrived fifteen minutes early. She entered the police station wearing a smart plaid blazer over an ivory lace-appliqué top, black Alfani slacks, and low heels. She carried a large monogrammed leather purse. Her gold hoop earrings matched her belt. The slacks were form-fitting, and her form was fit to wear them. Her auburn hair had subtle highlights. *The woman has style, I'll give her that, but how does she chase fugitives in that outfit?* Mags thought.

"You must be Lisa Murphy," Sally said as she surreptitiously checked her own shirt for missing buttons or stains.

"Yes, I am," she said, pulling out some fancy credential case and flashing a badge. "Here to see Chief Murphy." She opened the door to the inner area and walked in without being invited in.

"He's on his way back. He had to get a warrant in Salinas," Sally told her, hoping that sounded like an everyday thing around here, although it was anything but. "He should be here any minute. Can I get you some coffee?"

"Do you have tea?" Murphy replied.

"Yes, I think so," Sally answered. She walked over to the sink area and opened a drawer. In the back was a box of tea bags dating to the Korean War. No one in the office drank tea. She pulled it out and then realized her mistake. She had no way to heat the water except in the coffee maker and she'd just made a fresh pot of coffee. She'd have to dump it to make tea. She wished they had a microwave in the office. Then she remembered that the clerk's office had a microwave. She used it to heat her lunch sometimes. She plopped a tea bag into a guest cup, filled the cup with water from the sink, and said, "Excuse me. I'll just go heat this in the break room. Mags can keep you company." She walked off with cup in hand.

"Mags?" Murphy said. "That's an unusual name."

"It's short for Margaret."

"That's cute. I'm Lisa." They shook hands. "Are you an officer?" she said, although the expression on her face said she



knew she wasn't. With her jeans, 49ers T-shirt, and four-pound dog, she would have had to have been deep undercover.

"No. I'm just helping out with the typing. Chief Moran needed some part-time help what with this homicide case."

"Yes, that's quite something, isn't it? In a place like this. The town's really cute."

"I like it here."

Murphy looked around the office like she was planning to rent a vacation cottage. It took her all of twelve seconds to see everything in the place. "You've got a cozy spot here."

*Cute? Cozy? This is not a dollhouse, lady. We're a real town with real people and a real homicide.* "Thank you," Mags replied, unable to think of anything more appropriate.

Sally returned, her hair combed, holding a cup of steaming tea, the string from the bag hanging over the edge of the plastic cup. She handed it to Murphy. "I just saw the chief pulling into the lot," Sally said. "He'll be right in." She sat down at her desk.

"Thank you. Do you have any sugar?"

"Uh, yes," Sally said, starting to get up again.

"I'll get it," Mags said, and rose from her chair. *Anything else you need? Crumpets? A doily? Bone china?* Moments later she returned with a box of sugar cubes.

Murphy dropped one cube in her tea as Mags walked the box of sugar back over to the sink.

"By any chance do you have something to stir it with? A spoon, perhaps?"

Mags turned and gave her a forced smile. The request wasn't unreasonable, she knew, but this woman was beginning to get seriously annoying. "I'm not sure. Do we, Sally?" Mags didn't use sugar and hadn't worked in the office long enough to know where everything was.

Rick walked in just then.

"Oh never mind," Murphy said, dumping the tea into the sink. "Here's the chief." She handed the empty cup to Mags. *What am I, the dishwasher?*

Rick took a look at Murphy and hesitated a moment before asking, "Are you Lisa Murphy?" His tone suggested he had his doubts.

“In the flesh.” She extended a hand and flashed a big smile.

“Sorry, I was expecting someone older.”

Murphy laughed. “Oh please, I’m forty-five, but flattery will get you everywhere.”

“You could have fooled me,” Rick said. “Come on over here,” he said, motioning to his desk area. He sat down behind his desk and then looked around, realizing he didn’t have a guest chair. “Mags, can we borrow your chair for a few minutes? You can take a break if you like.”

“Oh that’s all right. I don’t mind standing for a bit,” Mags lied. She wheeled her desk chair over to Murphy, then returned to her desk and stood there.

Murphy scooted around behind Rick’s desk so she was seated next to him. She pulled a thick folder out of her purse. “This isn’t the whole file,” she said, laying the folder on Rick’s desk, “but here’s the stuff I can share. It was really a brazen theft. Dunlap somehow stopped the conveyor belt that was carrying the unloaded packages from the cart on the tarmac to the inside freight handling area. The diamonds are shipped in plain, unmarked packages just like any other cargo so they look innocuous. That’s actually been proven safer than sending them with armed guards. Less expensive, too. The buyer, a big San Francisco jeweler, was waiting at the claim area to pick them up, but they never arrived. The package was right at a bend in the belt track when it stopped. No one could see it at that point. Dunlap opened a panel in the trackway and pulled the package out. He apparently had trouble putting the panel back correctly, because it was left lying open, we later discovered. By the time it became clear the stones weren’t among the arriving packages, he was long gone. Our surveillance cameras did catch a few shots of him here and there, but he was wearing a baggage handler’s uniform, a cap pulled down low, and a false mustache and glasses. The pictures were grainy and taken from above, so the bottom line was, we couldn’t identify him.”

“Incredible. Just like a TV show. I wish I’d had a case that interesting when I was in the Bureau. I’d probably still be there.”

"You were in the Bureau?!" Murphy exclaimed. "I didn't know that." She gave Rick a long look up and down. "I should have known. You still have that Quantico fitness."

Rick blushed. "Now you're the flatterer."

"Will it get me anywhere?" Murphy laughed.

*Oh geez, spare me.* This thought was running through Mags's head when she suddenly noticed Rick wasn't wearing his wedding ring. *Well, that was fast. One day after you're served with divorce papers, you've dumped the ring.* She looked at Murphy again and saw she wasn't wearing a ring, either.

"Only three years. I was in New York on a surveillance squad and hated it. I'm not cut out for the big city life."

"Well this town is just the cutest. I could really get behind living in a spot like this."

"It's not always so cute. When winter mudslides close the road, you can feel like you're trapped in the wilderness."

"Where's the rest of your officers? Out on patrol?"

Rick seemed embarrassed at the question. "Well, we're a very small force. I'm the only one in the office right now. Which is why I don't have the luxury of trying to solve the jewel theft. I've got a homicide to worry about. We don't know that Dunlap is connected to that."

"True," Murphy said. "We always suspected Dunlap must have had someone else he was working with, someone smart enough to plan the operation, get the intelligence on the shipment. Butcher fits that description, but his name never came up in our investigation. Other than Dunlap's recent visit here, we don't have any connection between the two of them."

"Actually, we do," Mags said, approaching the desk. She lifted the folder up and pulled out the printout she'd made showing both men had been at the same crossword contest.

Rick and Murphy both looked with evident surprise at the sheet. Murphy spoke first. "Impressive. You've got quite the budding detective here, Chief."

"Please, call me Rick. Everyone does."

"Of course, Rick."

*Uh, how about 'Thank you Mags. You're welcome, Rick.'*

“That’s good work, Mags. Lisa’s right. Maybe I should hire you full-time.” He said it with a laugh that suggested he thought that would be quite a joke. “How’d you find this?”

“Google. They probably even have that in the FBI office.”

The temperature in the room suddenly dropped forty degrees. Sally looked over at Mags uneasily and the smile left Murphy’s face. Forcing it back on, she replied, “I’m sure we would have found it. I only heard about this case yesterday afternoon. This doesn’t really prove anything, though, does it? We knew the two of them must have known each other from before. How else did he know to come here? Dunlap never had any contact with him during the twelve years he was in prison. We’ve had all his calls and mail monitored. Which reminds me ...” She flipped through the papers in the stack she’d given Rick. When she found what she was looking for, she held some pages up for him to see. “He had no visitors except one time twelve years ago - his lawyer. After that he just got magazines and junk mail, except for these. He received five mysterious letters over the last two years. Here are the photocopies. You can keep these. The prison officials open and copy everything, but the originals are sent on to the prisoners. Of course we tried to trace these, but they all had fake return addresses and we got no prints or DNA. Whoever sent them must have worn gloves and used a sponge to wet the flaps.”

Rick squinted at the papers. “You call them letters, but they’re nothing but sheets of numbers.”

“Exactly. I sent these to the crypto unit back in Washington, but they couldn’t make sense of them. Now that we know he and Butcher were acquainted, it would make sense they would communicate by some sort of code. Assuming it was him.”

“Can I see?” Mags asked. Murphy had handed the sheets to Rick so that they were upside down to Mags on the other side of the desk. Rick turned the top sheet so she could see. There was just a single line of hand printed numbers on a blank sheet of printer paper. Below that was a photocopy of the front of the envelope. The return address was in San Francisco as was the postmark. Glancing down, she could see that the next sheet was

similar, although the numbers and the return address were different.

“What if this isn’t a code?” Mags asked.

“What do you mean?” Murphy said, one perfectly plucked eyebrow cocked.

“Morris was a puzzle-maker. What if the message was in his puzzle and this is key? You said Dunlap was a puzzle fanatic in prison. Maybe he was checking for hidden messages.”

“That sounds a bit far-fetched to me, Mags,” Rick said. “Do we know if Butcher’s puzzles even appeared in the papers at the prison?”

Murphy nodded her agreement with Rick. “Right on, Rick. I know he read only the San Francisco Chronicle. That was the only paper the prison had. My source there told me that. I saw a Chronicle reporter right outside. I can check real fast.” She stood and strode out to the street. Several reporters had gathered around the front of town hall, having been alerted that someone interesting was visiting the police. It was obvious some of them knew Murphy when she appeared.

“Lisa! Is the FBI looking into this murder now?” The question was shouted by one of the male reporters who did the crime beat for a Bay Area television station. Cameras rolled as she replied.

“I wish I could answer that, but you know how it is. Only our press relations people or the SAC can do that. I’m not here on a sight-seeing trip, though, I can tell you that.” She winked at the man, conveying the answer anyway. The Chronicle reporter was toward the back of the pack since he didn’t have a cameraman with him. The TV folks needed the unobstructed view. She wagged a finger at him in a come hither gesture. “Vince, can I talk to you for a second?”

The reporter came forward. “Sure, Lisa. What’s up.” All eyes turned to Vince.

“Vince, can you tell me who provides the puzzles that appear in your paper? Especially the crosswords.”

“Was it Butcher?” several voices chorused. “Why is that important, Lisa?”

Vince replied, “I don’t know off the top of my head, but I can find out. I think it’s some kind of syndication service. Are you wondering if Butcher’s puzzles were in our paper?”

“Officially I can’t confirm that’s the reason,” she said, winking again. By this time all the cameras were rolling. Some still cameras were snapping, too. “Can you call someone and find out? Come on in to the police station when you get an answer, okay?”

She turned to go back inside, but someone called out. “Lisa, hold on. Can we get some photos?”

She turned again to face the reporters and straightened up. She brushed her hair back with one hand and stood at a three-quarters angle so that her impressive figure could not be missed.

“Over to the left, Lisa,” another voice rang out. “So we can get the town crest in the shot.”

Murphy moved left and preened again, then said. “Okay, that’s enough. Remember, the FBI has no comment.” She went back inside.

Sally had come out of the station and stood in the lobby goggle-eyed as Murphy wowed the reporters. “That was awesome!” she exclaimed as Murphy re-entered the building. “You’ll be on TV for sure. It must be glamorous being an FBI agent.” She trotted behind Murphy as they returned to the station. Mags watched from the door of the police station office and scowled.

“Sometimes. It’s been a great career, Sally, I’ll tell you that, but TV exposure is nothing special. It’s just a tool we can use to catch the bad guys. That’s the real mission. Just like you folks here do on the front lines.” She returned to the chair by Rick’s desk and spoke to him. “Vince, that’s the Chronicle guy, he’ll be coming in with that information.”

“Great. Now I’ve got some information for you.” He proceeded to tell her about the meeting with Zirelli, the mysterious package Butcher had left for Dunlap, and how Martinez was getting the search warrant.

“Smart. That’s a good lead. When is the warrant going to be ready?” she asked.

“I don’t know yet. Let’s call now.” Rick dialed Martinez’s number. The detective answered and Rick put it on speaker.

“Hey, it’s Rick Moran. I’m here with Lisa Murphy of the FBI. Did you get the warrant?”

“Not yet. The judge has it, but like I thought, he wants to research the law. He’s not comfortable ordering you to seize a confidential client communication. It’s clear it’s relevant and there’s probable cause, but the privilege issue is sticky. He’ll let me know tomorrow, Friday. He did call Zirelli, though, and tell him not to hand over the envelope until he’s ruled.”

“What if Dunlap breaks in or even comes in and threatens them to get it? Did he make a copy and put it somewhere safe?”

“No, I don’t think so. Zirelli asked the judge if that would be okay and the judge said he couldn’t authorize violating the client’s instructions, but he left it up to Zirelli. I’m afraid I gotta go. There was another gang slaying earlier today. I’ll let you know as soon I hear anything. One other thing. I contacted the rental car agency Dunlap used. He still has that Fiesta. He must be staying around here; his home address according to his license is in Sacramento.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“There’s not much more we can do on that angle for now,” Murphy said after the call ended. “It seems to me that the next logical step is to talk to Dunlap. He’s still in the area, and you have his number. Let’s give him a call and get his story. Maybe he’ll confess.” She said the last sentence with a laugh.

Rick thought for a few moments. He had no idea how a real homicide detective would proceed, but this sounded logical enough to him. It would be good to do the interview with another armed law enforcement official, too. “Do you know if he’s on parole? That could give us leverage.”

“No, he’s not. He did his time. He has no restrictions. He can travel anywhere and doesn’t have to talk to us. It’s still worth a try.”

“All right. I’ll call him.” He dialed the number he had gotten from Zirelli. It went to voice mail. He left a message: “Hello, this is Rick Moran of the Buck’s Gap police. I understand you were in town recently. I think you may have some information that would be of assistance in a matter. I would like to talk to you. Can you please call me back so we can arrange a time.” He disconnected.

“We’ll just have to wait,” Murphy said.

*Master of the obvious*, Mags thought, eavesdropping from her desk. She watched as that reporter she'd been talking to walked into the station.

"I'm here to see Lisa Murphy," he said to Sally. "She asked me to come in."

"Vince, so fast! You got the answer already?" Murphy said, hurrying to the front.

"I talked to our features editor. She gets all our puzzles from a syndicated service. She told me Butcher is not a contributor. She said Butcher is well-known and with a different features syndicate, one too high-priced for us."

"That's great. Thanks, Vince. I guess that shoots down our budding detective's theory," Murphy said, turning to Rick. The reporter, who heard the comment, looked quizzically at Murphy but she waved him off with a shrug. He left the station.

Mags, turning scarlet from both anger and humiliation, looked at Rick, who was looking back at her with a sympathetic expression. "That was good thinking, though, Mags. Definitely worth checking out." Murphy made no comment.

Bud Porter arrived for his shift. He took a look at Murphy and said, "What's going on, boss?"

"Bud, this is Lisa Murphy with the FBI. Lisa, Bud Porter, one of my officers."

*'One of my officers?'* Mags thought. *And the others would be who exactly? Now he's trying to impress her.*

"Hello, Bud. Nice to meet you." She extended her hand.

Bud shook and returned the greeting. Then he walked over to his own desk. "Sorry, Mags, I've got to do some paperwork."

"That's okay, Bud, I finished the last tape. You can have your desk back." She rose.

"Well, it looks like the action is going to be tomorrow," Murphy said. "We haven't heard from Dunlap and we don't have the warrant yet. I need to call my office and do a few things online. I brought my overnight bag just in case something like this happened. Is there a decent hotel here?"

"No hotels per se," Rick said. "But several nice B & B's. This is too early for the tourists, so you shouldn't have any trouble getting a room, although you might encounter some reporters."



“Vivian and Bob’s place is the nicest,” Mags said. “I know they still have room.”

Murphy looked at Rick for confirmation. Clearly she didn’t trust Mags’s word.

“She’s right. It is the nicest,” Rick said.

“Fine. Point me there.”

“It’s up a side street. It’s a bit tricky. I’ll walk outside and point it out to you.”

As they walked out of the station, Murphy said, “Is there anywhere a girl can get a drink around here?”

Mags heard Rick answer as they continued beyond earshot, “Sure, the tavern. Meet me there at eight and we can go over the case some more. Maybe Dunlap will call.”

Once they were out of sight, Mags went to Rick’s desk and picked up the sheets Murphy had left there, the five letters that had been sent to Dunlap. She took them to the copier, made copies, and returned the originals to Rick’s desk. Sally and Bud didn’t notice since they were engaged in some heated conversation about Bud’s overtime. She left with the sheets as Rick was returning. Raisin trotted briskly behind.

## Chapter 10

Mags needed time to cool down. Once she got back to Butcher's place, her temporary home, she took Raisin on a nice, long walk. Butcher must have been the one sending those letters. And he must have used some system connected to those newspapers. If it wasn't the puzzles, maybe there were classified ads in the same section. Butcher could have taken out personal ads. After an hour, she and Raisin were both tired and she was no closer to an answer. She returned to the house, locked Raisin in and went to the market to pick up some groceries. She still felt uneasy eating Butcher's food.

At the market Elaine waved as soon as she saw her. "Over here, Mags." Elaine was restocking the soda case. No one else was in the place.

"Hi, Elaine." She made her way over to Elaine, picking up some items on the way.

"Solved the big case, yet?"

"Very funny. You know, I do think we're onto something, but I ... it's just so frustrating. Rick won't listen. There's this FBI woman ... I wish I could tell you. I could just chew nails." Tears began to leak down her cheeks.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa there, girl. It'll be okay. Tell me what's the matter." She embraced Mags tightly.

"I'm sorry. That was stupid of me. I'm okay now. It's just that, ... that woman, treated me, treated the whole town like Hicksville, USA." Suddenly the whole story came pouring out. Mags couldn't help herself. She was revealing confidential information but she just had to tell someone. The whole town seemed to know almost everything anyway.

"Elaine. You can't tell anyone. I'm not supposed to reveal any of that. I shouldn't have said anything."

"Don't worry. We gossip, but this is different. It sounds like that Murphy woman is a real witch."

"I had another word in mind."

"Mags, that's not like you. She must be quite a piece of work. I'll tell you what. I'm calling an emergency meeting of the book club. She walked to the phone and dialed Vivian. After a short conversation she came back over to Mags and said, "Viv

will open the library at seven. Bring those letters. We'll show them. Let's solve this puzzle."

"You know this is wrong."

"Shush. It's too late for that. You've already told me. We're just concerned citizens helping the police solve a heinous crime. I won't take no for an answer."

"Oh, Elaine .... All right, I'll come."

\* \* \*

The three women gathered at the library promptly at seven. Mags had to run through the story again for Vivian's sake.

"I'm in," Vivian said when Mags finished. "It's too bad Victoria's out of town. She'd be an asset. So let's see these messages."

Mags had the letters arranged in chronological order. "Let's start with the most recent one." She tapped the one on the right end. They all peered intently at it. It read:

112414972883713535906462259139

All three women looked at the thirty numbers in silence. "Hmm, this may be harder than I thought," Elaine muttered. "You said FBI cryptanalysts have already tried and failed on this?"

"That's what the feebee said, right?"

"Phoebe? Phoebe who?" Mags replied.

"Not 'Phoebe,' the feebee – the FBI broad."

Mags was confused for only a second. "Ah. Got it. Yes, she did, but the FBI didn't know about the puzzle connection. We've got an advantage."

"What puzzle? I thought they were crossword fans. We don't have a crossword. We need to connect this to a crossword."

The something caught Mags' eye. "Hey look at the envelope! The postmark is November 26."

"So?" Vivian said.

"And the first four digits, the 1124, what if that's a date?"

“You mean it could signify a puzzle that appeared on that date?” Vivian said, her enthusiasm building.

“Of course,” Elaine echoed, “A date indicator. We’ve read enough spy novels to know the secret message has to have a date indicator. So he mailed this two days after the puzzles appeared.”

“Do you have back copies of the Chronicle here in the library?” Mags asked.

“We do,” Vivian replied. “A year’s worth. We toss out the oldest set once a month.”

“This is only four months old. So get the November 24<sup>th</sup> copy already.”

Vivian hurried to a back room and quickly returned with a newspaper. It was a Sunday paper, larger than the the weekday issues.

“Find the puzzle page,” Elaine said.

“I know, I know,” Vivian replied huffily.

Within seconds the puzzle page was spread out before them. It had four puzzles on it: a crossword, a word search, a cryptogram, and a Sudoku.

Elaine spoke first. “We still don’t know what the other numbers mean. Maybe they indicate letters in the crossword. They could spell out a message. Like 14 97 means take the letter in square 14 then the one in square 97 and so on.”

“That’s good!” Mags said. “Let’s fill in the crossword.”

“Hold on,” Vivian said. “Don’t write on the library copy. I’ll make copies so we can all work on it at the same time.” She took the page and went to the vintage copier behind the checkout desk. It took an agonizing four minutes to heat up, but eventually she was able to make three copies and bring them back to the table with three pencils.

“I’ll start on the upper left. Viv, you take the upper right, and Elaine, you do the lower right. It’ll go faster that way.”

They all bore down on the papers in front of them. It was a large puzzle, as was typical on Sundays, twenty-one squares on a side. When Mags had finished the upper left section she moved down the left side to the middle and the bottom. She finished the entire left side before either of the others had finished their sections. The puzzle was harder than they thought, but twenty minutes later they had it filled in.

Mags used Elaine's theory to take the remaining digits as pairs indicating squares of the crossword and wrote out the corresponding letters. Unfortunately, it was gibberish. "Hmm, that's not it," Vivian remarked needlessly.

"Maybe it's not pairs. Maybe we're supposed to take single digits sometimes. Maybe it's not 14,97 but 1, 4, 9 and so on?" A quick examination proved that idea wrong.

"Maybe the first theory was right, but this message is a cryptogram. It looks like gibberish, but we just need to solve it like a code or something."

"It's only thirteen letters long and has no word spaces. I don't think it's possible to solve one that short, not without a key." Mags said.

"What if it's not the crossword?" Elaine asked. "Maybe it's one of the other puzzles. I'm good at the word search ones." She immediately began circling words in the word search puzzle. The other two started pointing out other words running backwards or along diagonals. The theme of the puzzle was things found in a kitchen. Soon *spatula*, *dishtowel*, *fryingpan*, and other words appeared from the jumble of letters. Ten minutes later it was done.

"Now what?" Mags said. "How do we get a message out of this?" They pondered the idea, but none of them could figure out how to do so.

"Let's try the cryptogram," Vivian suggested.

The cryptogram appeared as follows:

W YTBUY UK W AWB QFG EBGQK LFC HJUYC GO  
CPCJTLFUBN WBZ LFC PWDMC GO BGLFUBN. GKYWJ  
QUDZC

"I don't know how to solve those," Elaine complained. "I'm no codebreaker."

"They're easy," Mags assured her. "Look at those one-letter words. Those can only be the word A or the word I."

"Right," Vivian added. "I've done a lot of these. In fact, I'll bet it starts 'A something is a something.'"

"I think you're right. So now we know three letters," Mags pointed out to Elaine. "UK is IS. Here, we need to write out the full alphabet and put the equivalent letters under them."

She wrote the full alphabet on her paper and placed the A, I, and S below the W, U, and K.

**ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ**  
   **S**  **I A**

“That’s the key. Now we copy those letters over the cryptogram”

Once the Ws, Us, and Ks were marked with the A, I and S above them, Vivian called out, “A something is a man who ... I’ll bet on it.”

Mags added the M and N under the A and B of the key and filled those in over the cryptogram. “And those last two words – they’re usually the author’s name. Who’s quotable and has an A and an I in those positions?”

“Oscar Wilde!” Vivian squealed after a long silence. Mags quickly filled in those letters in the key and then over the cryptogram.

“And that must be the word ‘everything’,” Elaine exclaimed once the E’s were placed.

“Very good. I told you these were easy.”

Mags filled in those letters and soon the full quote became obvious: “A CYNIC IS A MAN WHO KNOWS THE PRICE OF EVERYTHING AND THE VALUE OF NOTHING. OSCAR WILDE.”

“How do we apply the numbers?” Elaine asked.

“Maybe you take the 14th letter, then the 97th letter and so on,” Mags suggested. “Somebody count them out and read them off to me.”

Elaine began counting. “Fourteen: H, ninety-seven: oh, that doesn’t work. There’s only seventy letters in the cryptogram. Let’s try single digits. Take the first, fourth, and so on. That’s A-N-A-I-C...”

“That’s not gonna work...” Vivian said. “Try that with the original cryptogram letters, not the solution.”

“WBWU... no good.”

Another silence descended over the group.

“I don’t think it’s the cryptogram,” Mags said. “The only real message you can get out of it is the original Wilde quote. Vivian, is the library computer on?”

"I turned it on when I made copies."

"Look up that quote online and see if it's real."

Vivian went back behind the desk and typed something on the keyboard. Seconds later she called out "It's real. Nothing manipulated. Oscar Wilde said it."

They all looked dumbly at the sheet again. Then Mags exclaimed, "Hold on. Maybe we're looking at this the wrong way. We've been looking at the string of numbers after the date as thirteen pairs of numbers. What if it's supposed to be twenty-six? As in the same number as there are letters in the alphabet?" She wrote the letters of the alphabet over the twenty-six digits after the date code.

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ  
14972883713535986462259139

"Now write in the numbers over those cryptogram letters," Vivian instructed. "Put a 1 over all the A's, a 4 over the B's and so on." Mags did so.

"It's just a string of numbers," Elaine said after they'd all stared at it for two minutes. "How are we supposed to get a message?"

"I still think it's the crossword," Mags said. "That's what they both do – their common thread. The connection." The copied puzzles were getting filled with pencil markings and erasures. Vivian made some clean copies, effectively new worksheets, and Mags filled in every square of the crossword with the number assigned to the letter in the square using this key. Like the cryptogram, though, it just produced a grid of digits. No one could figure out how to get a message from it.

Elaine did the same with the word search, but got no further. The brainstorming continued for an hour with no success. Vivian suggested they go have a drink to take a break, but Mags nixed the idea. "We have to stay mentally sharp if we have any hope," she said. They, however, put their pencils down and got up to stretch and walk around the library.

When they sat back down, Mags saw something she hadn't noticed in the worksheets. They'd filled three of the puzzles, but not the fourth. They hadn't even bothered to solve the Sudoku. She looked at it.

		1		2		3		
	4		3		5		6	
5			7		6			8
	1	2				5	4	
7								1
	6	9				7	2	
9			1		4			6
	3		8		2		9	
		6		3		1		

*[The sudoku and crossword in this book can be downloaded or worked online. See the Appendix for details.]*

“Maybe we’ve been looking at this backward,” She remarked.

“How do you mean?” Vivian said.

“Maybe we’re supposed to convert numbers to letters, not the other way around.”

“You’re staring at the Sudoku. How could anyone put a message in a Sudoku?”

“I’m not sure. Let’s solve it anyway. We aren’t getting anywhere with the other puzzles.” She began filling in the squares with digits. The others watched her work on it and offered help which was as often wrong as right. A half hour and a few expletives later, the grid was filled with numbers.

“That was harder than I thought it would be,” Elaine said.

“Watching me solve it was hard?” Mags said.

“I helped.”

“I suppose you did. At least you kept me sane.”

“Your sanity is debatable,” Vivian said, “but at least you solved the Sudoku. So now what? How do we replace the numbers with letters? If you’re right about these numbers being



the alphabet, then these numbers could each be several letters. Look, the 1 could be A, J, or X. How do we know which one to put in the square? They all have at least two or three equivalents.”

Mags looked at her key again and frowned. “You’re right. Wait, no, not quite. There’s no zero. I hadn’t noticed that before.”

“And that’s the only digit that doesn’t appear in the Sudoku,” Vivian added. “Maybe you’re onto something.”

“That still doesn’t tell us which letter to substitute in the squares.”

“Let’s do all of them,” Mags said. “Draw a big three-by-three grid like the Sudoku but leave the squares empty. Make it big enough so we can fit three letters in each square.”

Elaine flipped her paper over and drew a large grid. “Let’s start with the upper left square and read across. Vivian, you read the number to me and I’ll read the letters that correspond to the number. Elaine you write those letters in the squares.”

Vivian turned the solved Sudoku sheet toward her. “Okay, starting at the upper left, six.”

“Q, S,” Mags called. Elaine wrote a Q and an S in the upper left square.

“Seven.”

“D, I.”

“One.”

“A, J, X.”

“Six! The message starts with a six,” Elaine exclaimed with enthusiasm. “It can’t start with the Q or have the D as the second letter, and I don’t know any word that starts SIA or SIJ.”

“Good. We’re getting somewhere,” Vivian gushed. “Nine.”

“C, O, W, Z.”

“Six cows?” Elaine said. “Is this a rustling case or a jewelry heist?”

“Just write the letters in,” Mags instructed.

“Two.”

“E, T, U.”

The process continued until all the squares had been filled in. The trio looked at the jumble of letters dumbly.

Q S	D I	A J X	C O W Z	E T U	F G P	H K M Y	L N V	B R
E T U	B R	F G P	H K M Y	A J X	L N V	C O W Z	Q S	D I
L N V	C O W Z	H K M Y	D I	B R	Q S	E T U	A J X	F G P
H K M Y	A J X	E T U	Q S	F G P	D I	L N V	B R	C O W Z
D I	L N V	B R	E T U	C O W Z	H K M Y	Q S	F G P	A J X
F G P	Q S	C O W Z	B R	L N V	A J X	D I	E T U	H K M Y
C O W Z	E T U	L N V	A J X	D I	B R	F G P	H K M Y	Q S
A J X	H K M Y	D I	F G P	Q S	E T U	B R	C O W Z	L N V
B R	F G P	Q S	L N V	H K M Y	C O W Z	A J X	D I	E T U

“Are we supposed to read left to right from the upper left, like normal English?” Vivian asked.

“We don’t know,” Mags said. “Elaine, you’re the word search guru. Do you see any words in this thing?”

“I’ve never worked one like this. Can we choose more than one letter from a square?”

“We don’t know the rules.”

“If it’s allowed, there’s SIX COUP MY ... across at the top. It stops there. Going down, maybe STUN MY DIG COAXR. No better. It’s even worse if you just allow one letter per square.”

“That’s good, Elaine, that’s still good. At least we can see some sentences, sort of,” Mags said. “Keep going.”

We need to do it methodically,” Vivian interjected. “Multiple letters from each square won’t work. You’ve got LNV and FGP in every row and every column. There are no

words or even combinations of words that have those sequences. Not that I can think of.”

Mags nodded her agreement. “Vivian’s right. Assume it’s just one letter per square. Start by doing each row. If we can’t find anything that way, then we do the columns, then we do them all backwards. If none of that works then we can think about multiple letters per square, or doing diagonals or something else.”

“Ok,” Elaine said. “Row one: SIX CUP ... nothing. Row two: URP HAVOSI, ERG MAN ... no, I get nothing. Row three: NO HIRS TAP ... NO KIB QUAF. Row four: HAT SPIN BO or maybe HAT’S PIN ROD if you read onto the next row.”

Mags shook her head. “Better, but that doesn’t mean anything to me. Do you think they have some code words, too?”

Vivian answered. “How? Something memorized and kept in his brain while he was in prison for twelve years? I don’t think so. If there are code words, they’d have to have something to reference them with, like a book or dictionary. Keep going, Elaine.”

“Row five: IN BECKS PA ... IN BUZ .... Row six: nothing. Row ...”

“Stop! Go back to row five,” Mags almost screamed. “Not BECKS, BUCKS. Where was he when he wrote this?”

“Here, in Buck’s ... ohmigod, ohmigod,” Elaine sputtered. “In Buck’s Gap. The P is in the first square of the next line. You’ve done it.” She gripped Mags’s arm so hard Mags winced. When Elaine let go, four white ovals blossomed where the fingertips had latched onto her forearm. “Sorry.”

“Can that be it?” Vivian said, unsure. “Is there anything before or after it? Nothing before it. SOB LADEY, no nothing good afterward. I don’t know. Maybe that’s just a lucky coincidence. It’s not really a sentence.”

“In Buck’s Gap? No, not a full sentence, but it tells Dunlap where to find him,” Mags said. “I don’t think it can be a coincidence.”

Vivian was unconvinced. “That’s how they communicate? It’s a good thing he moved to Buck’s Gap. It has no repeated letters. What if he’d moved to Mississippi? I’d like to see that Sudoku.”

Mags wasn't dissuaded. "There's an easy way to find out. Easy-ish, anyway. Look at one of the other letters and try it again. See if there's another message."

"You call that easy? We've been at this for almost three hours," Elaine protested.

"But now we know how it works. I tell you what. Elaine, you keep working on this one. See if there's anything else. Here's the letter that came before this one. Its date code is three weeks earlier. Vivian, you pull this Chronicle puzzle page and make copies like before. The other numbers are different, too, but still twenty-six. It looks like the same system with a different key. I'll write out the alphabetic key again. We'll just do one more to see if it works."

Elaine found nothing more in the first puzzle. The second time around with the new puzzle went a lot faster now that they knew what to look for. Running across the middle row was the clear phrase BIGSURCAL.

"You still think it's a coincidence?" Mags said to Vivian triumphantly.

"Okay, okay. You're right. It's after eleven. I have to get back. The rest of these can wait until tomorrow, can't they?"

"I suppose, but I might want to work a bit on them by myself. Can you at least copy the other newspaper pages for me? I'll take them home and do a little more."

Vivian made the copies and handed them to Mags.

"Super work, Mags," Elaine said. "I have to go, too. We'll meet again tomorrow to finish these off, shall we?"

"I'll call you. Rick may have me doing other stuff when he sees these."

"It's 'Rick' now, is it? Not 'Chief Moran'?" Elaine asked with mock innocence.

"Oh shush. It's what he asked me to call him."

"Hmm." Elaine and Vivian said in unison.

Mags scooped up the papers and headed out the door before she could get teased any more. "I'll call."

When she got to Butcher's house she was too excited to sleep. She wanted to see what else was in the messages, so she sat at her desk and pulled out a stack of fresh paper. Four hours later she looked at the clock and groaned. Three A.M.

Tomorrow was going to be rough, but there was the proof spread out before her. Five messages, in chronological order.

IVEGOTJULZ

WHENURABL

FINDMEPAL

BIGSURCAL

INBUCKSGAP

Butcher was the accomplice, or maybe the mastermind, and had the missing jewels. He was summoning Dunlap to come find him in Buck's Gap. It had taken her a lot longer doing it alone than it had in the library with her friends, especially towards the end. She'd been so sleepy she'd made a lot of mistakes, but it had been worth it. Tomorrow Rick would be really impressed.

## Chapter 11

Rick downed the dregs of his second cup of coffee and walked to the sink to rinse it out. He'd spent the last two hours reviewing the bank and credit card records of Morris Butcher, and he was getting rather a different picture from what he had expected. Butcher had lived the high life, not the sort of high life Rick would have chosen, but one that was probably the envy of many. Expensive wines. Frequent travel to Europe, especially to Belgium. Most disturbing to Rick were the regular credit card charges to Mai Lin's Massage in San Francisco. He'd checked the website for the place and it advertised "Young Asian Masseuses." There were similar charges to an "outcall massage" parlor in Monterey who advertised "well-developed Asian girls" who will come to your house, "satisfaction guaranteed." So Butcher wasn't quite the clean-cut financial whiz he'd led the townspeople to believe. Still, that didn't make him a jewel thief. He'd have to find something more.

Sally arrived ten minutes late and greeted him before getting her own cup of coffee. "Sorry I'm late, Rick. Car trouble. Where's Mags? She's usually here on the dot."

Rick knew "car trouble" was Sally's code for overslept, but he said nothing. She was a good employee. "You're right. I hadn't noticed. I don't know where she is. She hasn't called. She'll turn up, no doubt. Maybe she had car trouble, too."

As they were tending to their caffeination responsibilities, the door opened and Lisa Murphy walked in. Actually, it was more of a saunter than a walk. Right behind her came Mags, trailing Raisin on his leash. Murphy didn't bother to hold the door open for her.

"Rick, that was fun last night," Murphy said with a throaty laugh as she came up to Rick. "Who knew wilderness could be this entertaining. She wore the same blazer and slacks today, but instead of the ivory blouse of yesterday, today it was a bright green silk blouse that buttoned down the front, much lower cut."

“Hi, Lisa.” He leaned to one side so he could also make eye contact with Mags, who was blocked from his view by Murphy’s five-ten frame. “Morning, Mags.”

“Morning, Rick. I was able ...” Mags began, but Murphy cut her off as she turned to look at her as though she had just noticed her.

“You look like something the cat dragged in,” she said. “Late night?”

“Yes, actually. Very late. I stayed up to work on ...”

But Murphy cut her off again. “Rick, have you heard about the warrant yet? Or gotten a return call from Dunlap?”

“Not yet. But I’ve been going over Butcher’s financial records. He spends a lot of time in San Francisco and Belgium. He’s been living large.”

“Belgium, you say?” Murphy mused. “Antwerp by any chance?”

“Yes, exactly. Why?”

“Antwerp is the diamond capital of the world. That’s a strong indication he’s been dealing diamonds. Great work, Rick!”

Rick blushed. “Well, not really. It doesn’t prove he actually had any jewels when he went there. Traveling to Belgium isn’t a crime. We don’t have any real evidence.”

“Yes we do!” Mags blurted out way too loud. “He told Dunlap he had the jewels.”

Rick and Murphy stared at Mags as though they feared she’d contracted rabies and was about to bite them. “You’ve been at Google again, have you?” Murphy said.

“I solved the messages. I made copies of those five letters Dunlap got in prison, and ...”

“You what!” Murphy bellowed. “I never authorized that. The FBI has strict dissemination guidelines. Those documents are evidence in a crime and I was only authorized to disseminate them to sworn law enforcement personnel involved in a related investigation. Not to some clerk-typist. Are you trying to get me fired?” She stepped menacingly toward Mags who drew back instinctively.

Rick put a hand on Murphy’s shoulder to hold her back. “Lisa, Lisa. Cool down. You’re right, she should have asked permission, but let’s hear what she has to say.”

With Rick's assistance in keeping Murphy off her back, Mags was able to lay out the messages and the Sudokus and painstakingly go over how they were deciphered. When she was done she looked up with a big smile.

"See? Butcher solves the Sudoku and then assigns letters to the middle row to create the message he wants. Then he sends the key with a date code to Dunlap. He says he has the jewels and asks Dunlap to come see him here in Buck's Gap. It's all in black and white."

"We can't use this ..." Murphy began, but Rick cut her off.

"That's fantastic, Mags," he said, putting a hand on each of her shoulders and giving her a gentle squeeze. "You just did what the entire FBI crypto unit couldn't."

"I said we can't use this," Murphy resumed. "You aren't a trained forensic expert. We'll need the FBI Lab to confirm this is a valid decryption. You aren't to be examining documents intended for sworn personnel."

Rick put his hand on Murphy's arm. "It's no problem, Lisa. I'll swear her in as an officer. She's obviously making a valuable contribution here."

"We don't even know those came from Butcher. It could be anyone who has the 'julz.'" Murphy protested.

Mags was unable to suppress a smirk. "Right, any puzzlemaker who lives in tiny Buck's Gap and whom Dunlap chose to seek out when he got to town."

"Rick! They've found Dunlap. His rental car was spotted at a motel in Seaside." This exclamation came from Sally who kept the county dispatch radio traffic streaming on low volume as she worked at her desk.

"We need to go interview him," Murphy said. "If he won't come to us, we'll go to him."

"Is it still there?" Rick asked Sally.

"The deputy just called it in, so it's there now. It might not be by the time you get there." Seaside was over an hour away.

"You're right. We need to get his story. His alibi. Let's go." He pulled holster and weapon from his desk drawer, strapped them on and stood.



“Sally, if anything happens while we’re gone, call Bud if it can’t wait. I’ll authorize the overtime.”

“Okay. He’s working tonight, but remember, he goes on vacation starting tomorrow. He’s taking his wife to Hawaii for their anniversary.”

“That’s right. I’d forgotten. Well, I’ll be back this afternoon if anything comes up.” He turned to Murphy. “You armed?”

“Always,” she replied, pulling her blazer back to show a nine millimeter semiautomatic pistol.

“Let’s do it.” They headed out the door.

\* \* \*

They took Rick’s cruiser since he needed to stay in radio contact both with Sally and with county dispatch in case the warrant came in or Dunlap called. When they emerged from the canyon he turned on his cell phone and put it back in his pocket.

“I still can’t believe Mags solved those puzzle letters. How long has the FBI been trying to do that, anyway?”

“Don’t go there, all right? The crypto unit didn’t have the puzzles. We didn’t know Dunlap was connected to Butcher, or to any puzzlers, for that matter, until two days ago. You can’t decrypt something with just the string of numbers alone. Your clerk seems to think she’s quite something, doesn’t she?”

“Well, it is quite an accomplishment, you have to admit.”

“All I have to admit is that she’s a loose cannon. Sneaking evidence from the station. I can’t believe you’re going to swear her in as an officer. How old is she, anyway?”

“Younger than I am. Besides, it isn’t evidence. You have the original evidence in your files. It’s just copies.”

“Humpf. So what’s the plan when we get to the motel?”

“We don’t have probable cause to arrest or search. So all we can do is a knock and talk.”

“He’s a big guy and has been lifting the heavy iron in prison. When he was arrested, he put up a fight. That’s one of the reasons he got twelve years. He injured one of my fellow agents.”

“He doesn’t have to talk to us, so he won’t have any reason to fight us. All he has to do is tell us to go away. We’ve called him, so he knows we’re looking for him. He didn’t make his visit to town a secret, so he’ll be expecting us to try to interview him. We’ll play it nice and easy, just like we would if we didn’t know anything. Don’t let him know that we’ve figured out the messages. The whole purpose is just to get his story. He’s probably got an alibi cooked up.”

“What’s his motivation to kill Butcher, that’s what I can’t figure out? You said the waitress told you Butcher knew he was coming. They were having a glass of brandy. If we credit those decrypted messages, Butcher was summoning Dunlap to give him the stolen jewels.”

“Maybe. But how many? Dunlap got caught with half the diamonds. What if Butcher wouldn’t give him anything from his half? They could have argued, fought. Whoever it was, Butcher didn’t expect any hostility. He’d turned his back on the killer.”

“But why summon him to Buck’s Gap if he wasn’t going to share?”

“Good question. We just don’t know. What if Butcher never got the diamonds at the time of the theft? Suppose Dunlap had them all and hid half in one place, the ones you found, and half in another. Then, after he got out he was planning on retrieving the rest but he found out that Butcher had taken them? Or maybe Butcher wasn’t even involved in the theft, but was holding some of the diamonds as a favor for Dunlap?”

“Possible, I suppose. Butcher’s wealth may have come from his finance business. In fact, he was fairly well off before the heist, we know that. But then, he did send that Sudoku message saying he had the jewels.”

They reached the motel and made a pass through the parking lot, but the rental car wasn’t there. They parked and went in to talk to the manager, a gray-haired woman with an infectious smile despite badly crooked teeth. They learned that Dunlap was staying there and had been for the last three days. She didn’t know where he was at the moment or how long he’d be.

“I’m going to call Martinez,” Rick said. “Maybe he’s heard something on the warrant.”

When Rick got the Homicide unit he was put through to the lieutenant who told him Martinez was on his way to the courthouse now. The judge had called and told him he would sign the warrant.

"He said that if you called, to tell you he'll have a deputy run the original out to the lawyer's office in Carmel. You can meet him there and execute the warrant."

"Great. Thank you, Lieutenant." He disconnected and said to Murphy, "We're going to Carmel. Martinez is getting the warrant. A sheriff's deputy is going to run it out to us."

"That should tell us something. Carmel Ho!"

They arrived at downtown Carmel fifteen minutes later. The deputy with the warrant, they learned over the radio, was still another fifteen minutes away. That gave them a chance to grab a doughnut and coffee at a nearby shop while they waited.

"So, you have any kids?" Murphy asked in a transparent attempt to find out if he'd been married or had any baggage.

"No kids. You?" He took a surprisingly dainty bite from his doughnut.

"No. Not the marrying type. Too career-oriented, I guess. Not that I don't enjoy men's company." She waited a full two minutes for him to pick up on the cue and say something, but he sat silent and managed to nibble away without making much of a dent in the pastry the entire time. When he didn't say any more, she continued, "How big is your force?"

"Just the two of us." Nibble, nibble. Murphy tried to conceal her surprise without success. Rick was used to this reaction from law enforcement. He didn't know of any other two-man departments either. "No jokes about Mayberry, now. I'm not as smart as Sheriff Taylor and Bud's a lot smarter than Barney Fife." It was a line he'd used before.

Murphy chuckled uneasily. "I was thinking more along the lines of *Gunsmoke*."

"*Gunsmoke*? Really? You watched in your diapers? And I'm ... Matt Dillon or Chester?"

"Reruns. You can be Matt if I can be Miss Kitty." She batted her eyelashes with playful exaggeration.

"I think I'd be better cast as Doc." Before she could reply, Rick's handy-talky squawked. It was the deputy with the warrant telling Rick he was pulling up to the lawyer's office.

Rick keyed the mike and replied, "Wait there for us. We stopped for a gut bomb. We're a block away. Be there in two. Over."

"Ten-four."

They both chugged what was left of their coffee and quickly wiped the glaze from their fingers. Two minutes later they swung into the lawyer's lot. The deputy asked them if they needed his assistance, but left when Rick assured him they didn't.

Rick announced to the secretary that they were there to see Zirelli and had a warrant. Murphy flashed her FBI credentials. This flustered the secretary, who stood and rushed into Zirelli's office. Murphy started to follow her despite being told to wait, but Rick held her back. Zirelli came out seconds later, envelope in hand.

"Here it is, detective," Zirelli said. "I'm glad you got that warrant. It makes things a lot easier for me."

Rick and Zirelli swapped documents simultaneously, warrant for envelope. "This is open!?" Rick said questioningly.

"Uh, yes. 'Ollie' showed up this morning unannounced. I couldn't avoid him. He knew what to ask for. I'm sure it was the right man. I explained to him that I had been informed the envelope was evidence in a criminal case and was instructed by a judge to hold onto it until a warrant was issued. I told him I couldn't give it to him, but he asked if the judge had told me not to open it. When I told him no, he said that was okay, just to open it and make a copy for him. He said it was fine to give the original to the police."

Rick and Lisa exchanged glances. "When was this?" Murphy asked.

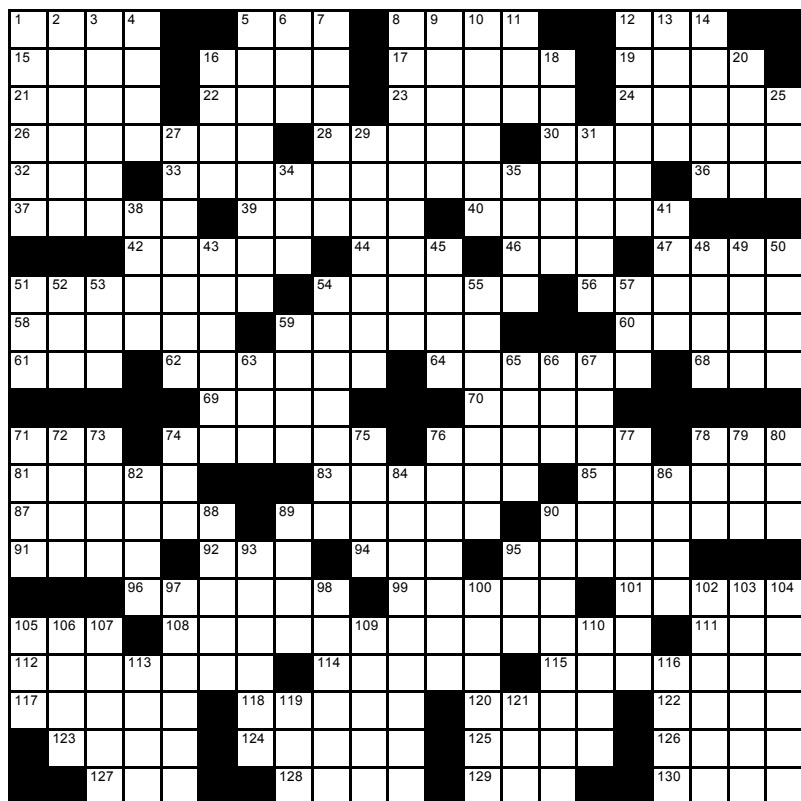
"About fifteen minutes ago. I'm sorry, but I really didn't have any choice. I had no legal basis for withholding it. If you'd called me and told me the warrant had been issued, maybe ..."

"Don't worry about it," Rick said. "We would have had to leave him a copy when we served the warrant anyway. How did he seem? Excited? Belligerent? Worried when you told him there was a warrant for it in the works?"

"No, not at all. He was polite, relaxed. He said he understood and had no problem at all with it. He thanked me for giving it to him."

“So let’s see what’s in it,” Murphy urged.

Rick pulled out two sheets of paper. One contained the grid to a large crossword puzzle. The other held the clues. There was nothing else in the envelope.

**Across****1** Pixar movie**5** "The \_\_\_\_"  
(Uris novel)**8** Small bytes**12** It's a wrap  
**15** On the  
safe side**16** Charlie,  
for one**17** Detached**19** *A tiny one  
mote***21** Balance**22** Ear-  
related**23** Air

freshener

**24** Fingers**26** *Crypto-  
gram, Part I***28** Curly  
cabbages**30** *Crypto-  
gram part II***32** Texas tea**33** *Kind of  
male with a  
piece of a  
helium***36** Dupe**37** *Crazy  
guys in the  
capital***39** Had a bug**40** *Fancy  
Eton style to  
wear in the  
frozen rain***42** Social  
groups**44** 2016  
Olympic site**46** Stat for a  
pitcher**47** Facility**51** Yes men**54** *A nice  
boxer doesn't  
end up in the  
cooler***56** Anthracite  
hauler**58** Concerto

—

**59**  
Entertained**60** Met  
expectations?**61** Buchwald  
or Garfunkel**62** They're fit  
for a queen**64** Over there**68** Approx.**69** *Crypto-  
gram part III***70** Drops  
from the sky**71** Bristle**74** *Golfing  
assistants  
with an open  
fly?***76** *Failed and  
went off  
course***78** Bio bit**81** Birthplace  
of Aaron

Rodgers

- 83** A lot of fish?  
**85** Colored diaphragms  
**87** Write 2 + 2 = 5  
**89** Backpacker's morning pad task  
**90** Nuts  
**91** Ruler's perverse verse in reverse  
**92** "Caught you!"  
**94** Homeboy  
**95** Kind of sexual?  
**96** *I do act like a robber*  
**99** Quotation Mark?  
**101** *Until now it was dark*  
**105** Trip producer  
**108** *Who is eloquent? That is the entire inquiry*  
**111** Grp. of purse-suers?  
**112** *Cryptogram part IV*  
**114** Rush  
**115** *Cryptogram part V*  
**117** *Flat panel*  
**118** Eagle's nest  
**120** In \_\_\_\_ of  
**122** Japanese soup  
**123** Tolkien creatures  
**124** One of the Fab Four  
**125** Vessels for final journeys  
**126** *Deadened gulf*  
**127** Word on a Ouija board  
**128** *Hill dwellers without pee in their trousers*  
**129** Encountered  
**130** Kind of hysteria or media  
**Down**  
**1** Freight  
**2** *Fast actress drives sharp instrument through Star Wars Princess*  
**3** Vend again  
**4** Alien org.?  
**5** Galls  
**6** "Wheel of Fortune" buy  
**7** Forsyth's assassin  
**8** *Biased gal hates homeless women*  
**9** More sick  
**10** They're often heard from people holding flutes  
**11** Turf  
**12** Engine made by Rolls Royce, perhaps  
**13** State with a saltwater shore  
**14** Frolics  
**16** *Loot level*  
**18** Swordsman  
**20** Feature found in 13 Down  
**25** Nurse  
**27** Most tainted (as meat)  
**29** *Outlines on paper customarily are short*  
**31** Intestinal  
**34** Not hers  
**35** Holly  
**38** Just manages, with "out"  
**41** Leap \_\_\_\_  
**43** *Horse-drawn vehicle crashed into AK trio*  
**45** Mind  
**48** "I cannot tell \_\_\_\_"  
**49** Wet septet  
**50** Formerly, formerly  
**51** Palindromic title  
**52** Cur rant?  
**53** Hooey  
**54** Picture  
**55** *Smelly, foul rod*  
**57** Dinghy thingy  
**59** Dry  
**63** "Go on ..."  
**65** Catch  
**66** Patterson novel "1st to \_\_\_\_"  
**67** Beat the draft?  
**71** Coyote's favorite brand  
**72** Fancy  
**73** Not yet final, at law  
**74** *Backward MD wore a cape*  
**75** Cold Slav?  
**76** Blooming  
**77** Some tests  
**78** Bat wood  
**79** Former GM brand  
**80** Feminine suffix  
**82** *Paper club*  
**84** *Oppressors wrong those awful repenters*  
**86** Desktop item  
**88** Russian retreat  
**89** *Liar goes back to rant*  
**90** Confessor  
**93** Uproars  
**95** Univ. attended by James Woods  
**97** Disrespectful  
**98** *Confusing article published in Iranian capital*

<b>100</b> Cuckoo's nest?	<b>103</b> Nile waders	<b>106</b> Stag	<b>110</b> Work	<b>119</b> Zeta follower
<b>102</b> Pretentious boy chased by muckraker	<b>104</b> <i>Eliot has nerve, he tells his classes</i>	<b>107</b> Anne Frank opus	<b>113</b> Grimm beginning	<b>121</b> Cholera up
	<b>105</b> Kind of dog	<b>109</b> <i>Whip that headless shrimp</i>	<b>116</b> Muslim holy man	

*[The sudoku and crossword in this book can be downloaded or worked online. See the Appendix for details.]*

“What the heck!?” Rick and Murphy said at the same time, although her ‘heck’ seemed to have some different phonemes in it. “This is the weirdest looking crossword I’ve ever seen,” he continued. “Look at these clues. Two down – *Fast actress drives sharp instrument through Star Wars Princess*. That doesn’t make any sense.”

“And why is that clue in italics?” Murphy asked. She looked at Zirelli, who just shrugged his shoulders.

“There has to be a message in there,” Murphy said, stating the obvious. “I’ll bet Dunlap is working on it right now.”

“We must have just missed him. Let’s get back to his motel. He’s probably there now.”

They left a receipt for the documents with the attorney and rushed back to the car. Within fifteen minutes they were back in front of the motel in Seaside. Dunlap’s car was parked in front of his room.

“Remember, don’t tell him we know about the Sudoku messages,” Rick said as they approached his door. He knocked.

Dunlap opened the door a few inches. He stood blocking the view of the interior of the room. “Yes? You must be Moran.” His eyes then met Murphy’s and went cold. There was no doubt he could still recognize the woman who had put him in prison twelve years earlier. His lips were squeezed so tight they went white.

“I am. Chief Richard Moran, Buck’s Gap Police Department. Can I talk to you?”



“You are talking to me.”

“May we come in?”

“No. I’m not talkin’ to her. She’s the bitch that arrested me.” He nodded toward Murphy.

“How about if I ask you a few questions then?”

Dunlap stood silent for several seconds, looking Rick up and down. Rick sized him up at the same time. Dunlap was six foot two with a body hardened by years of weightlifting in the pen. He’d put on a lot of weight since his original mug shot had been taken, some of it in his chest and arms, but more of it in his gut and jowls. His black hair was going gray. He was balding, too, but his gene pool had left him a small island of thick hair just above his forehead. He wore it long and combed it straight back in an effort to increase the coverage. His narrow, sharp nose rose high in an apparent struggle to keep his close-set green eyes from merging into a single cyclopean monstrosity.

“You want to know if I killed Morris. I didn’t.”

“You heard about it then?”

“Of course. He’s famous and he was a friend. I knew you’d suspect me. I’d just visited him.”

“Why were you there?”

“Like I said, we were friends. Visiting.”

“You were seen in the café the day he was killed. When did you visit him?”

“I thought he died the next day.”

Rick realized this was an attempt to find out if the police had pinpointed the time of death. The body had been discovered the next day, and that’s when it hit the news, but the time of death was around midnight the preceding evening. Technically, it could have been either day. This fellow was cagey, Rick decided, and he had to be careful.

“It was that evening, before the body was discovered, you visited him, then?”

“Yeah. If I was going to kill him, you think I would have been asking around town about him?”

“How long were you there?”

“He kicked me out about ten thirty.”

“Kicked you out? How do you mean?”

“He had one of his girls coming over. He was real apologetic, but it had been set up before I showed up, he said.”

“Who was this girl?”

“How would I know? I didn’t see her. I don’t know what kind of image he liked to show around town, but he wasn’t as straight an arrow as you think. He had an eye for the ladies, especially Asian ones.” He looked over at Murphy and after scanning her up and down twice, added “young ones, not old bitches.”

“Did you have a drink with him?”

“One beer. I was driving. Have to stay legal, you know.”

“No brandy?”

“I don’t drink brandy. I don’t like the stuff. I’m sure you’ve got my prints on the beer bottle by now.”

“Did he drink brandy while you were there?”

“I don’t remember what he drank.”

Murphy could bite her tongue no longer. “Dunlap, let’s not play games. You went there to get your share of the loot from the diamond heist, didn’t you?”

Dunlap looked only at Rick. “Would you please tell Special Agent Murphy that there are no more diamonds. The FBI recovered them all when they searched my house. The crooked diamond dealers just claimed twice as many were in the package to rip off the insurance company. That case is closed, or should be. I did my time and there’s a few things like double jeopardy and the statute of limitations that say I can’t be convicted again. So tell her to pound sand.”

"I'm working the murder, not the jewel theft," Rick said.

"I told you, I didn't do it. Find the whore who came by after I left."

"What about the crossword puzzle you just got from the lawyer? What's that all about?"

"Morris was a famous puzzle-maker. I'm a big puzzle fan, too. That's how we met, at a crossword contest. We stayed friends through the puzzles he made. He used to send me complex ones that were never published because he knew I'd appreciate them. It was just a nice gesture. It looks pretty complex. He wanted me to have this crowning achievement of his, I guess."

"Have you solved it yet?"

"I'm saving it for some time when I can enjoy it without being harassed by cops."

"Did Butcher ever contact you in prison?"

Dunlap shook his head, but didn't answer. "I'm just trying to live my life. I don't like cops and I don't have to answer your questions. Morris was a friend and I hope you find out who killed him. I understand you have to talk to me since I was there, but I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. That's all I'm going to say. Now please leave so I don't have to shut the door in your face."

"Dunlap ..." Murphy began, but Dunlap shut the door in their faces at the sound of her voice.

They retreated to Rick's car. "He's lying," Murphy spat venomously.

"I know he is. But if he did it, he's clever. Butcher did use an outcall massage service. We can't disprove that story."

"Get his phone records. That'll show if he called the place that day."

"That won't prove anything. I'll follow that through and interview, but those girls will never admit being there. We don't have all the print records yet, but even if we find

the fingerprints there of one or more of the prostitutes, it won't prove anything. We know he was a regular customer. It won't prove they were there the day of the murder."

"Why'd you ask about the brandy?"

"Butcher was stabbed while holding a full brandy snifter. It was shattered on the kitchen floor. One snifter from the matched set is missing. I think whoever killed him was drinking brandy with him, killed him suddenly, maybe impulsively, and took the glass away afterward."

"Was there a beer bottle in the trash?"

"Yes. I don't know if it has Dunlap's prints on it, but I don't think he would have said it did unless they're there. It doesn't prove anything, of course. He could have had a beer then had a brandy. Or even had a brandy and then afterward, opened a beer and poured it down the drain just to provide this alternate story. He's smart and he had plenty of time afterward. Assuming it was him. You know if any of his cellmates can tell us if he enjoyed a post-prandial brandy in the pen?" Rick raised a pinky as he imitated lifting a brandy snifter and smelling the bouquet.

Murphy uttered an expletive.

"Let's get back and see what this puzzle tells us," he said and started the engine.

## Chapter 12

When they arrived at the station, they were met with a hail of questions from Mags and Sally. Murphy tried unsuccessfully to keep the results of the interview and the crossword from them. Rick detailed the morning's events.

"Can I see the crossword?" Mags asked eagerly.

Murphy put her hand up in a "stop" motion, but Rick pulled the puzzle out immediately. "I was hoping you'd be willing to take it on," he said to Mags. After what you did with the Sudoku, I knew you were the right man for the job. So to speak. I have to log it into evidence first, then I'll make a copy for you."

While he was copying the puzzle and filling out the evidence label, Mags and Murphy eyed each other warily. Sally hovered over Rick, all abuzz with anticipation.

"It has some weird clues," Murphy said to Mags.

"How do you mean?"

"You'll see."

And she did. Rick returned with a copy of the puzzle, both sheets, and placed them in front of Mags.

"Like this one," Murphy said, pointing to two down. "What's the answer to that one?"

Mags read the clue. *Fast actress drives sharp instrument through Star Wars Princess.*

"Interesting," Mags said after a moment's reflection. "I've never seen one like this."

"Like what?" Rick asked.

"It's some kind of hybrid. Most of the clues are regular clues like in other crosswords, but the ones in italics are cryptic clues."

"What does that mean?" he asked.

"Can you solve it or not?" Murphy demanded. "I asked what that answer was."

Mags ignored Murphy and addressed Rick. “Cryptic crossword clues are a special type. They always have a valid definition or synonym like regular clues, but they also have other words that provide an alternate definition or way of identifying a word through wordplay. The clues are intended to mislead and often use misleading punctuation or words with double meanings. They’re intended to be entertaining in their own right.”

“You don’t know what two down is, do you?” Murphy said accusingly.

Mags finally turned to her. “Give me a chance. I don’t know what it is off the top of my head.” She read through several of the clues then replied, “Let’s look at the words going across. That will help us. Okay, one across is CARS, I think. That’s the only Pixar film I know that’s four letters. Fifteen is ALEE. That’s an old crossword standard. Thirty-two is OIL, another standard.” She put the letters into the puzzle grid. “One down must be CARGOS and three down is RESELL; that’s easy. Thirty-seven across, hmm ... another cryptic. *Crazy guys in the capital*. Starts with S. Right. SALEM. The word crazy is a hint that there’s a word or phrase immediately before or after is an anagram. So another word for guys is males and Salem is a state capital.”

“Incredible,” Rick muttered.

“So now we’re getting there. Two down starts A,L and ends I,A. We just need those middle letters. Hmm, Sally, can you look up to see if there’s an actress named Alexia? She’s probably either named Alexia Fast or was in a movie called Fast. Use IMDB.com.”

Sally did as told. “There is! Alexia Fast. She played in Jack Reacher. I saw that one.”

“You want to explain how you got that for us dimwits,” Rick said with a chuckle.

“Sure. First off, the actual definition is the beginning phrase ‘Fast actress.’ The real, or normal, definition is usually at the beginning or the end of the cryptic clue, although it’s not always obvious what part.”

“Okay, I see that,” he said nodding. “But ...”

“The Star Wars princess is obviously Leia. So I could see the L, I, A in order. That meant the third or fourth letter was E and somehow a sharp instrument using the letters A-something was ‘driven through’ that. AX was the only thing that made sense and Alexia sounded like a real name.”

“You actually can do this stuff. You are now the department’s official puzzle solver,” Rick said, moving his hand as though dubbing a knight with an invisible sword.

“That’s the best offer I’ve had in a long time. Getting paid to work a crossword.”

“I can’t pay extra, I’m afraid. Forget the tapes. Do this.”

“I’ve finished the last tape anyway.”

“So I’ll have our Bureau people work on this,” Murphy said. “Where do I find all the rules that apply to these?”

“There are no rules. No official rules like in a rulebook, anyway. Not that I’ve ever heard of. I’ve only been doing cryptics the last few weeks, so I’m not real good at them yet. They are usually fair, though, which means the clues do have the real definitions in them somewhere. Sometimes they’re even easier than regular ones because you have both the definition and some additional information. Other times you don’t really understand the clue until you’ve gotten the word. The fun comes when the light bulb goes off. Of course, there are other words crossing them, too, so you get additional letters

that way. You just have to work them for a while to get the unofficial rules, but really almost anything goes.”

“Rick, may I have my copy?” Murphy said, placing her hand on his forearm. “I want to get to work on it.”

“Oh, right. I should have made you a copy.” He returned to the copier and came back with a copy for the FBI.

“All right if I use this desk?” She asked, sitting at Bud’s desk, the one Mags had been using. Raisin was still leashed to the chair leg. He growled when she sat.

“You go ahead. I’d rather work on this by myself, anyway,” Mags said. “Rick, you don’t mind if I work at home, do you? I have dictionaries and my own computer and stuff there that can help with this.”

“Whatever you need.”

“Come on, Raisin,” she said, untying the leash, and left the station, puzzle in hand. On her way out, she whispered something to Sally. Two minutes later Rick met her in the parking lot.

“Sally said you needed to talk to me in private.”

“I, I, have a confession to make. I didn’t solve those sudokus by myself. I asked some of my friends to help me. I’m sorry if I violated the FBI guidelines. But they’re really good puzzle solvers and I needed help. I don’t want you to get in trouble with the FBI, but I think I can solve the crossword if I can get them to help me again.”

“I see. I don’t give a hoot about the FBI dissemination guidelines. That’s their internal thing; it has nothing to do with me. You should have asked my permission before showing those to others because I asked you to keep things confidential, but it doesn’t break the law or hurt the case legally. Time is of the essence in this case, so use whatever resources you need to if it will speed the solution. If that means your friends, so be it, but tell them



to keep it under their hats to the extent possible. Especially don't tell the press."

"Thank you, Rick. And I'm sorry."

"Thank you for solving the puzzles. And thank your friends for me, too."

\* \* \*

As soon as she got home Mags called Vivian and Elaine. Elaine couldn't break free from the gas station but Vivian said she could come over until it was time to open the library. Since it was almost lunchtime, Mags put together two ham sandwiches and cut them into bite-sized pieces. She knew they would need one hand free at all times if they were going to work on the puzzle. Vivian arrived within minutes.

"You got another puzzle?"

"Yes. Butcher left a puzzle for Dunlap with his lawyer. Butcher's lawyer, I mean. With his will. He wanted Dunlap to get this puzzle if he died."

"Did he say why?"

"No, but Dunlap did. At least he told Rick that Butcher knew he would appreciate the artistry of the puzzle being a fellow crossword enthusiast and personal friend."

"He must be communicating a secret message like with the Sudokus. What did Rick say about those, anyway?"

"He was all excited. Special Agent Murphy was all upset I looked at them. She spouted some baloney about FBI dissemination guidelines. Rick told her he'd swear me in as an officer so that wouldn't be a problem."

"You're going to be a cop!?" Vivian squealed and clapped her hands together.

“Well, not exactly. I think it’s just a formality. He hasn’t done it yet. Or maybe he just said that to mollify Murphy.”

“Speaking of molls, I heard he’s stopped wearing his wedding ring. Is she the reason?”

“How would I know? That’s his business. I couldn’t care less.”

“You’d be more convincing if your ears didn’t light up like Rudolph’s nose.”

“There’s nothing going on between Chief Moran and me.”

“Well whose fault is that? You’d better move fast or the wicked witch of the north will be in there before he has a chance to realize he has a choice.”

“Vivian! Really! His love life is his own concern. And Murphy is a good-looking woman ... if you like that type.”

“Which you obviously don’t.”

“Never mind that. Let’s do this puzzle. I made sandwiches so we could work on the puzzle while we eat.”

She spread out the sandwiches and two plates. Some finger fruit and diet sodas completed the meal picture. The plates were put to the side and the puzzle was laid out between them. The two women sat side-by-side so that they could both work the puzzle right side up. Vivian was as confused about the italicized clues as Murphy and Rick had been, so Mags explained cryptic clues to her. She claimed to understand the concept, but seemed to lack confidence she could do them.

“You work on the right side and I’ll work on the left,” Mags suggested. Soon they were both engrossed in the puzzle.

After several minutes, Vivian sighed, “I’m getting nowhere in the upper right corner. Thirteen down says state

with a saltwater shore, but it's only four letters. I'm good with geography. Utah, Iowa and Ohio are the only four-letter states. None of them are on the coast. I think it's Ohio since twelve across must be *boa*, but I can't make anything else fit. Lake Erie isn't saltwater, either."

"Utah has the Great Salt Lake."

Vivian groaned. "It's going to be like that, is it?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Okay, so if it's Utah, then the wrap could be fur. Fourteen down could be romps. Help me out with nineteen across, would you? Once I get started I think I can do this."

"*A tiny one mote*. Atom. See the first letters of the clue words are A-T-O-M. The whole phrase is the definition, too."

"An acronym? You didn't explain that kind."

"Anything goes."

"Cole Porter Song." Vivian hummed the tune.

"Let's Do It," Mags replied, tapping the puzzle with her finger and humming that tune in rebuttal.

"Okay, okay. But there's still this cryptogram thing. I'm stuck on that, too. You've got one over there in your corner."

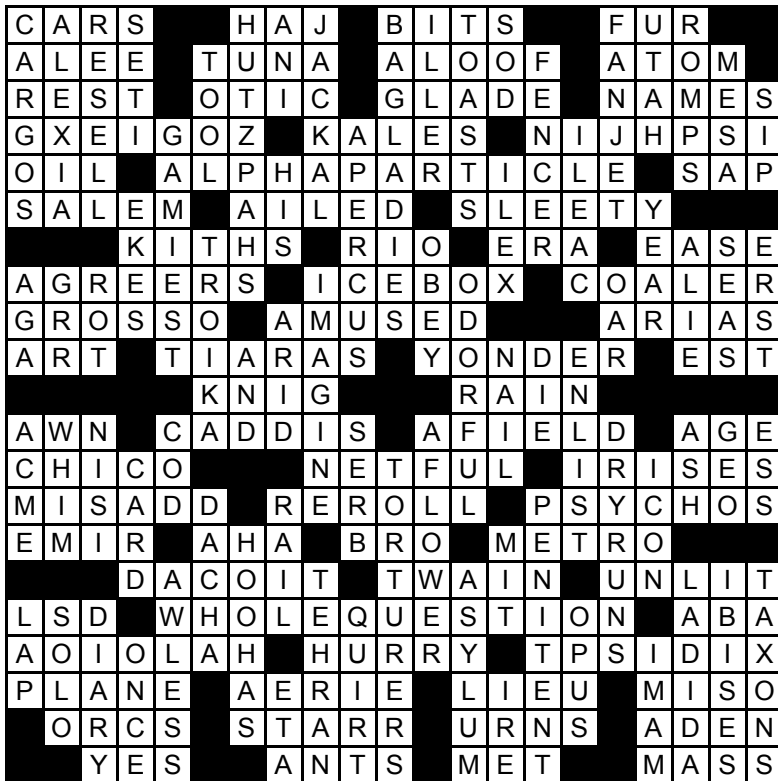
"I know. I'm getting a bad feeling about this. I think he's hidden a real cryptogram within the crossword. You just have to solve all the crossing words to get the letters. It starts GXEIG.... There's no word that starts like that. Even if we solve the crossword, we're going to have to solve that next."

"Well you're good at those."

"I've never done one without the punctuation or spaces. Anyway, let's worry about that later. When we finish the crossword we can see what we've got."

“Okay, I think I’ve got the hang of it. Thanks for the help.”

Vivian had to leave to open up the library. The puzzle wasn’t quite done, but it was getting close. She asked Mags to call her when she finished. Mags continued to work and by three o’clock had completed the puzzle. When she’d figured out ninety-eight down, *Confusing article published in Iranian capital*, she knew she’d be able to complete the crossword on her own. TEHRAN. TEH (an article, *the*, written in a confusing way) and RAN (published, as in they ran the story). The lower right section came together fast after that.



A feeling of satisfaction mingled with dread settled over her. The crossword was done, yes, but what about that cryptogram? She wrote it out separately on a clean sheet of paper.

GXEIGOZ      NIJHPSI      KNIG      AOIOLAH  
TPSIDIX

Did the breaks between the sections represent spaces in the original message? Or were they just artifacts of the crossword spacing? She spent an hour trying to find words that matched the patterns of these five cryptogram words. In particular, AOIOLAH had repeated A's and repeated O's, so there weren't that many words that matched that pattern. After having no luck on her own, she searched online for a website that matched pattern words. Eventually she found one that could match not just one, but two different words. When she entered NIJHPSI in one blank and AOIOLAH in the other, the search engine returned only a single pair of words that matched both patterns with the same letter substitutes: GLUTEAL SOLOIST. It didn't take a sworn in detective to realize this combination was not part of the intended message. She concluded that the message did not consist of these five separate words. The letters must be strung together and solved without word breaks.

GXEIGOZNIJHPSIKNIGAOIOLAHTPSIDIX

Mags realized she didn't know how to solve one like that. She'd solved a few cryptograms in her day, sure, but never one this short and without word divisions or punctuation. She knew she was out of her depth. She called

Vivian to let her know that she'd solved the crossword, but was stuck on the cryptogram.

"Are you going to take it back to the station?" Vivian asked.

"Of course. Rick's waiting for me to solve it. Now I have. I mean, we have. I told him I was getting help from friends, but I didn't tell him it was you and Elaine."

"Don't tell him. That'll just get you in trouble with Agent Murky."

"Murphy."

"You say it your way, I'll say it mine."

"I think it's time to bring in the pros anyway. I don't know how to solve something like this."

"Bring it by the library first. I'll make copies so we can all work on it. Victoria is good at these. When she gets back maybe we can solve it."

"All right. See you in a few."

\* \* \*

When Mags got back to the police station, Sally was the only one there.

"Where's Rick?" She asked.

"Out on calls. He's been so tied up with the murder case he hasn't been patrolling. Mrs. Khan called this morning to say that yesterday a package had been stolen from her porch. Rick went out to take a report and investigate. By the time he got there it turned out a neighbor had picked it up and held it for her because she didn't want it exposed on the porch. Then someone else complained about a construction crew on a remodel had parked blocking their driveway. Then there was a fender bender on the road out of town. Someone driving while

texting. As soon as they get out of the canyon everybody has to check their cell phone.”

“A regular crime wave.”

“For here it is. The real problem, though, is the budget. With Bud’s overtime and your wages, combined with Rick not being out writing tickets, we’re blowing through our funds like crazy. We’ll be broke in a couple of weeks. I was almost done with the department budget proposal but that’s all out the window.”

“Oh dear. I really don’t care about the pay. I just want to help.”

“You can’t work for free. I think it’s a state law or something. Augmenting the budget or whatever.”

“Where’s Murphy, by the way? Is she with Rick?”

“Uh, I don’t know. She left when he did. I thought she was going back to her room to make some calls or do paperwork, but I guess she could be with him. Why?” Sally gave her a “what do you care” look.

“I solved the crossword. I wanted to tell them.” This was true as far as it went. Mags didn’t admit to herself any other motivation for the question.

“That’s great, Mags. Is there a message in it?”

“I think so, but I can’t read it. It’s a cryptogram. A puzzle within a puzzle.”

“I’ll let him know.” Sally grabbed the radio mike and called to Rick. When he answered, she told him Mags had returned with her completed assignment. He said he’d be in as soon as he finished up at the accident scene.

An hour later Rick arrived at the station munching on a half-eaten sandwich and slurping coffee from a thermos. He tossed two tickets on Sally’s desk, one for blocking a driveway and one for driving while using a cell phone. The latter was issued to the wife of a town council member, which could raise problems for Rick with his

budget request, but he knew the Mayor and most of the other members didn't like that councilman, so it might actually put him in good stead overall. She'd caused an accident, so he couldn't very well let it go. At least the two tickets would put a few dollars in the town coffers. Technically the accident had occurred outside the town limits, but he'd written it up as taking place in town. That was a fib, but he'd done all the work, so why should the sheriff's office get the money. He went over this with Sally and she responded with the same complaints about the rapid budget depletion she'd been sharing with Mags.

"I've arranged for some help from the sheriff's office," he told Sally between bites. "While Bud is on vacation, they'll send a deputy up for a patrol two or three times during the night shift. Highway Patrol has agreed to respond to any late hour calls promptly, too, if the sheriff's office requests it. We'll still have Bud's vacation pay to handle, but he won't be making any overtime while he's gone." Finally, he turned to Mags. "Mags, I didn't mean to ignore you. I guess you solved the puzzle?"

"I did. But it's sort of a good news, bad news thing."

"Oh?" *Shurp.*

"Well, here, just look." She showed him the solved puzzle. He looked at it for a few seconds without catching on to what he should be looking at.

"There – 26 Across and 30 Across. See how they aren't words?"

"Uh, yeah, now I see."

"There's some more lower down. It's a cryptogram."

"A puzzle within a puzzle."

"Exactly."



"I take it the bad part is that you haven't solved the cryptogram?"

"Right again. Sorry."

"No, no, don't apologize. You've done a fantastic job solving the crossword. I'll bet the FBI can finish that part." He gave her hand a squeeze of gratitude and handed the puzzle back. "I'll call Lisa."

Mags hadn't had a man squeeze her hand like that since her husband died. She was surprised at how good it felt. "No, wait!" she said breathlessly. "I, that is, I think maybe I can still solve it. Can you give me a couple of days to work on it before you give it to her? I mean, to them."

"Well, I don't know. Time is important in a murder investigation. There's no shame in letting experts help. Besides, Dunlap has the puzzle, too, and might already have solved it."

"Please, Rick. We deserve ... *you* deserve credit for solving this case. It's Friday. No one's going to work on it there until Monday anyway. Can you just give me the weekend?" She put her hand on his forearm and squeezed hard hoping the importance of her entreaty would be clear. It was like squeezing a ship's hawser beneath his uniform shirt. Lisa Murphy walked in at that moment.

"What's up, you two?" Murphy said, eyeing the duo sharply.

"I was just telling Rick I'm not quite done with the puzzle," Mags said, but I think I can finish it in the next couple of days."

Rick said nothing.

"Yeah, I've been working on it, too," Murphy replied. "I got most of it but those cryptic clues are murder. No pun intended. I can get most of them from the crossing words, although I still don't get all the clues. But the ones that cross the cryptogram, like 2 Down and 102 Down, you

can't do that way." She pulled out a crumpled sheet of paper from her purse. It was the unfinished puzzle. Mags could see from a distance that the entire lower right block was still white. "I could send this off to the high tech squad as is, I suppose. They've got some wicked smart folks there who are into puzzles and cryptography. But I don't want them to take over the case or take credit for solving it. If I can finish the crossword, then maybe I can – or I should say, we can solve the cryptogram. I've had this case too many years to give it over to someone else." She sidled forward and subtly wedged herself between Rick and Mags, then placed her hand on Rick's arm exactly where Mags had been touching him. "Is that okay with you, Rick?"

Rick looked over at Mags and then back at Murphy. "So you don't want to send the puzzle to your experts yet?"

"Right."

Mags could see the indecision on Rick's face. She held her breath until he replied, "All right, if that's what you want. Let's gather together on Monday to see where we are. We can shoot the puzzle off to your people then."

"That's great, Rick," Murphy cooed. "And Mags, you'll let me know if you finish the crossword, won't you? Maybe we can share our thinking. I have to return to the San Francisco office this afternoon, but I'm available by phone. I'll be back on Monday if we haven't gotten the solution by then."

Mags folded that paper shut behind her back so that the completed puzzle grid was not showing. "Sure, I'll let you know as soon as I've completed the puzzle." She quickly turned and waved goodbye as she scurried out the door. *I didn't tell a lie. I've only completed the crossword. I haven't completed the puzzle yet. The cryptogram is part of the puzzle.*

## Chapter 13

Mags returned home to do some necessary garden chores, and check the mail. She also wanted to research cryptograms to see if she could get any hints on how to solve the one from the crossword. Butcher's computers, both a desktop and laptop, had been seized so she couldn't use one of those. There was a wi-fi modem there, but she didn't know the logon information and wasn't sure whether it would mess up any forensic examination for her to use it anyway, so she preferred to do her online work at home. After a couple of hours of research, she didn't find any short cuts. She'd tried a couple of online automatic solvers, but they failed to find a solution. It looked like she would just have to get out the paper and pencil and a good eraser and have at it.

Since she could do that at Butcher's place, she gathered up the necessary materials and headed over there, bringing along some leftovers to heat in the microwave for her dinner and the ingredients for her favorite peanut butter cookies. When she arrived, Raisin wanted to go out in the backyard but she was still wary about the mountain lion in the area and didn't want to leave him alone out there. Instead she took him out for a walk along the trail while it was still light. Mountain lions rarely hunt during the day and they are usually afraid of people.

She returned to the house and reset the alarm. Raisin went to sleep in the living room. She made the cookies and put them in the oven to bake. Finally she could work undisturbed on the cryptogram. When she'd solved other cryptograms they'd always had all the spaces and punctuation, so she had looked for pattern words like THAT or PEOPLE or EVER. But she was convinced this cryptogram's sections did not represent word lengths. She

had to treat it as one long string with all the spaces removed. Without knowing where the words began or ended she couldn't look for patterns of those common words, but if she could guess a word in the message, maybe she could find a place where it fit. She'd need one with a pattern. She decided to try DIAMONDS. She checked the cryptogram letter by letter to see if there was a sequence eight letters long with the first and seventh letter the same and no other repeated letters. There wasn't one. Then she tried JEWELS. That didn't fit, but the singular, JEWEL, could fit at the end where SIDIX was. When she tried that it didn't look promising to her. First of all, it seemed unlikely for a message to end with that word. That also meant the cryptogram letters SI represented JE. There was another SI in the cryptogram, so that meant another word with a JE in it would have to be in the message, which was also unlikely. JEWEL could also fit over the AOIOL, but that was even worse, with the I representing the W scattered throughout the message.

The timer on the stove buzzed insistently. She'd completely forgotten about the cookies. She retreated to the kitchen and removed the cookies and set them on a cooling rack. She couldn't resist trying one, although she had to blow on it until it was cool enough to eat. Refreshed, she returned to the table.

She tried to think of other likely pattern words. *Maybe names!* She quickly eliminated OLLIE and MORRIS since there were no doubled letters. Next she tried BUTCHER, but it had no repeated letters. That meant it fit in several places. She painstakingly substituted all the letters for each placement, but every time had to go back and erase them because they didn't help. She repeated this process with DUNLAP, but after hours of work, all she had to show for her effort was a piece of paper nearly shredded from all the writing and erasing.

When she stopped, exhausted from the tedium, she realized it was dark and she was starved. She retreated to the kitchen and put her leftovers in the microwave. While her meal was heating she made a quick patrol through the house to verify that all the doors and windows were locked and the alarm was set. They were. She returned to the kitchen and ate her meal. She didn't usually drink coffee in the evening but this time she made an exception. She was determined to keep working on the cryptogram, so she wanted to be sharp. She finished cleaning up and had just sat down to resume her solving when Raisin began barking at the window that looked out at the back yard. She got up to see what it was.

She turned on the outside light, slid open the glass door, and peeked out. Raisin ran outside through the narrow gap.

"Raisin! Come back here," she yelled. Raisin ran around the corner of the house yapping wildly. There was a loud rustling sound, something moving, but then silence. Raisin stopped barking as the rustling sound faded. It sounded like an animal – or a person – moving away from the house. Mags wasn't about to turn the corner and confront it. It was probably a deer or a raccoon, she knew. Raisin had reacted that way to both at her own house many times. But if it was a mountain lion or a prowler, she had no business taking it on. Raisin trotted back to her. She scooped him up with one hand and went back inside.

*Better safe than sorry*, she thought. She didn't want to bother Rick. It was probably nothing, and he was so overworked already. She knew Bud was still working that night. His vacation started tomorrow, but she had no way to call him directly since cell phones didn't work in town. Instead, she dialed the non-emergency 24-hour number for the county sheriff's office. She identified herself as being with the Buck's Gap police and asked for the dispatcher to

put in a radio call to officer Porter to come by to check for a possible mountain lion sighting. She gave the address. The dispatcher reached him quickly and he said he'd be there right away. He was good to his word. Three minutes later he pulled up in front. Mags stood at the front door and opened it as he approached the house, but he called to her that he was going to walk around the house and check the yards first. He had his handgun drawn in one hand and a flashlight in the other.

She yelled to him, "It might be a prowler, Bud." She wasn't sure he'd heard her as he disappeared around the side of the house and she wished she'd described it as a prowler instead of a mountain lion to the dispatcher.

Seconds later there was a commotion around the side of the house followed by the crack of a gunshot. She was still standing in the doorway when a figure in dark clothing, a mere silhouette, barged out and dashed away through the lush foliage of the front yard. Mags let out a short scream. She stood paralyzed for a moment, wondering whether to run around to check on Bud. There could be someone else there. But then she threw caution to the winds, unable to withhold help from this public servant who had come to protect her. When she got to him, he was on his hands and knees and staggered to his feet.

"Bud! Are you okay? Are you shot?"

"No. I mean, no, I'm not shot. My gun went off when someone hit me from behind. I fell and smacked my head on the wall, but I'm okay."

A woman called out of a window of the house next door. "What's happening? I heard a shot. Should I call the police?"

"No, ma'am. I am the police. Everything's okay," Bud yelled back. The woman closed her window. Then to Mags he said, "Did you get a look at him?"

"I saw a man running away, but it was dark and his back was to me. He dodged through the bushes."

The sound of a car starting up came from several houses away. The noise receded as the car left going the opposite direction. "That's probably him, now," Bud said. "Did you get a description? See a car?"

"No and no. I'm sorry. It all happened so fast. Do you need to see a doctor? What did he hit you with?"

"I'm okay. He just hit my forearm with his fist, I think, trying to make me drop the gun. The adrenaline hit me and I squeezed the trigger unintentionally. The gun went off and then he shoved me into the wall. I dropped my gun as I fell forward. It all happened in a second or two."

"You should get that bump on your head looked at."

"No way. I'd have to go all the way to Monterey this time of night and I'd be there all night. We have an early flight tomorrow. I'm not missing this vacation because of a bump on the head."

"How many fingers am I holding up?" Mags held up two fingers in front of Bud.

"You're playing doctor now? Dr. Mags? More like Doctor Magoo."

"How many?"

"Two. And I can count backward from a hundred by threes, too. One hundred, ninety-seven, ninety-four, ni..."

"Okay, okay, you seem fine," she interrupted as she bent close to look at his pupils, which were normal.

"Thank you, doctor. Are you going to ask me for my health insurance card now?"

"I just wanted to make sure you're okay."

"I'm fine. But that was a prowler. It could have been Dunlap. I need to put something out over the radio. And we should tell Rick." He left before Mags could reply.

She watched as he sat in his patrol car and began speaking into the microphone, but she couldn't hear what he was saying. Raisin ran out of the house at that moment and she had to chase him down again before he disappeared into the neighborhood. She caught up with him as he peed in the neighbor's yard, and carried him back. Bud was back at the front door by that time.

"Let's go inside," he said. "I told dispatch I'd been assaulted by a prowler who was still on the loose. I told them Dunlap was a possible suspect and to look for a Ford Fiesta heading back to the highway from here. They're dispatching a unit. They should be able to intercept him before he gets to Highway 1. That's the only way out of here."

"You wanted to call Rick?"

"Yeah, let me use the house phone." She showed him where it was. He dialed Rick's home number, reached him, and related the events of the preceding minutes. After a brief conversation with Rick, he hung up and told Mags, "He's coming over. He told me to stay here for now. Is it okay if I use your bathroom?" He touched the bump on his head and looked at his hand, obviously checking to see if it was bleeding.

"Of course." Bud headed for the bathroom.

Just before he got there, Mags, in a moment of spontaneous frivolity, called to him in her best French accent, "Zat's not *my* bathroom."

Surprised, he turned, then smiled. In a dead on Inspector Clouseau impersonation he replied, "Does your dog bite?" Then he disappeared into the bathroom.

Mags was impressed. She had gotten an impression of Bud as something of a lightweight, mentally at least, perhaps because of his portliness and the Porker nickname she'd heard the kids use for him. But he had caught the Pink Panther reference immediately, responded wittily, and



earlier had taken swift action to try to catch the prowler. She realized he was a good officer and the town was lucky to have him.

Bud emerged looking none the worse for wear. Minutes later Rick arrived and was let in. He was holding a handy-talky with the county comm feed emanating from the speaker in a steady drone. Mags and Bud went over the events again for him. Rick questioned them some more for a description but they got nowhere beyond a male, probably large, of unknown race.

Rick looked at his watch. "If he had headed out of town they should have intercepted him by now. The sheriff's unit is more than halfway here and they've seen no one on the road."

"You think he's still in town?" Bud asked.

"He has to be, unless he's holed up somewhere nearby. I'm going to stay here. Mags, I don't want you here anymore. You should go back home. Whoever it was wasn't looking for you, so you should be safe there. They were probably either casing this place to burglarize it, or it's the killer come back for whatever it was he was looking for. I'll stay here tonight. I can't imagine he's gone into the wilderness, but, Bud, I want you to inspect the road up to the trailhead to be sure. More than half the town's vacation homes and almost all of those are empty now. He could easily have found an empty one where he could park behind out of sight. That's assuming he's driving. That car you heard may or may not have been him."

"Right, boss," Bud said.

"Fine by me," Mags agreed.

"I called the sheriff's watch commander before I came over. Since we now have an assault on a police officer, he said they're going to have two units patrolling the town all night. They'll stop here and coordinate with me first. Listen for them on the radio and check in with

them when they arrive. Finish your shift normally, but don't stay late. I know you have your vacation coming up. Just go enjoy yourself."

"Thanks, Rick. I plan to."

"Give me a minute to gather up my stuff," Mags said, "then I'm out of here."

"I'll walk you out to your car," Rick said. "You working on the puzzle?"

"Yes." She folded up the papers she'd been working on and then took her coffee cup back to the kitchen.

"Any progress?"

"Nothing more than what you saw. Come on, Raisin." Raisin's ears perked up and he trotted over from the sofa. The three of them walked out to her car. "I'll let you know as soon as I get anything useful."

She drove off, waving her thanks to Rick, who stood watching her go. Bud's patrol car soon slipped in behind her and followed her all the way to her cottage. He waited in his car right outside until she was safe inside, then he headed off to check the trailhead.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Saturday, nothing had changed. No Fiesta or other suspicious car had been seen all night, nor were there any reports of prowlers or other incidents. The sheriff's units were pulled off. Sally was off for the weekend, so Rick was it. He went into the office despite it being the weekend, although this was normal for him. Mags called him to tell him that she'd be working on the puzzle at home, but was pretty discouraged at her lack of progress. He told her not to worry about it and asked if she was okay after the incident the previous night. She assured him she was.

When she had completed her morning routine, she sat down with the puzzle again. It didn't take long for her to become stalemated once again. She was almost ready to give up when her phone rang. It was Victoria.

"Mags, I'm back!" she said with a melodramatic air. "The whole Sierra was totally snowed in. The road was blocked and the resort was closed due to high winds. We heard the report on the radio and decided to go to wine country instead. We were lucky to get a reservation at a nice spot in Napa."

"You didn't get to ski at all?"

"No, but we had fun for two days. We decided we'd seen enough wineries to last a lifetime and came on back. Alek doesn't even like wine. Hey, I talked to Elaine and she said you guys had some kind of an adventure while I was gone. Chief Moran questioned me about Morris's death the night before we left, but I haven't heard any more. Elaine says you're working for him on solving it. Is that true?"

"Yes. But she and Vivian have helped too. Morris left a puzzle behind for this man he knew. It turns out the man was in prison for a jewel theft. It's a long story. Are you free now?"

"For you I am. I want to hear this."

"I need your help. Come on over to my place and I'll tell you the whole story if you'll help me with this part I'm working on."

"I'll be right over."

Ten minutes later Victoria strode up Mags's front walk looking like she'd just stepped from an ad in a fitness magazine, decked out in designer jogging togs.. Mags invited her in and they sat at the kitchen table, there being no other suitable place.

“Victoria, you have to promise me you won’t tell anyone about this. It’s strictly police business. The FBI agent got all over Rick for letting me have access to it and I was officially a department employee.”

“I heard she got all over him, all right. She was practically doing a lap dance on him at the tavern the other night. That’s the scuttlebutt, anyway.”

“I’d like to scuttle her butt.”

“Why, Mags, I’ve never heard you talk like that before. What’s going on?” Victoria’s smile suggested she had a pretty good idea already.

“Never mind that. Just promise me that you won’t tell anyone, and that includes Alek.”

“Okay, fine.”

Mags laid out the whole story for Victoria. When she was done, she brought out her copy of the crossword and the worksheet with the cryptogram on it. Victoria studied it for several minutes before saying anything.

“You’re right that these different segments can’t be separate words. Have you tried the word ‘jewels’ as a crib?”

“Crib?”

“That’s a word or phrase you know, or think, is in the plaintext. A probable word. Jewels has two E’s separated by one letter. It looks like it would fit in a couple of places.”

“Oh, well, I didn’t know it was called a crib, but I did try that. Jewels, jewel, they fit here and here.” She pointed. “But those are clearly not right. All those W’s.”

“Okay, I see. But what if the cryptogram is backward? I could see that as a little trick they had arranged between them. Then jewels would fit right at the beginning.” Victoria wrote out the cryptogram in reverse order and then penciled in ‘jewels’ over the new beginning,

XIDISP. She filled in an E over all the I's and then the other substitutes over the XDSP letters. After staring at this for several minutes and trying various things, she gave up. "I'm not getting anything."

"We think we've gotten all the messages Butcher sent to Dunlap in prison. They didn't have any way to communicate beyond that that we know of. So I don't think Morris had a chance to give him instructions. I think this puzzle is supposed to stand on its own. And he certainly didn't know when he was going to die. He must have thought Dunlap could solve it even if it was decades later. So it may be hard, but I think it's a straightforward cryptogram, not backward or anything like that."

"Well, let's do this the right way. Make a frequency count of the letters in the cryptogram. You count the second half of the alphabet, N through Z, and I'll do the first half. Do you have some notepaper for me and a pencil?"

Mags supplied the materials and placed the worksheet between them. They both began counting letters and then combined their totals.

"Seven I's, three G's and O's and everything else only one or two appearances."

"Or zero. There's only sixteen different letters here."

"Wow, that's tough. They're usually longer with a lot more letters used. Morris must have figured this Dunlap guy was really expert with these, or maybe he knew the key or a long crib."

"I'm stumped, but Elaine says you're good at these."

"We'll see about that. These are called undivideds, the ones without spaces. I don't do many of these. The next thing to do is to look for repeated sequences. I see PSI

twice. That's good. The I is the most common letter and THE is the most common three-letter word. Let's work on that theory. PSI equals THE."

Victoria filled in her worksheet.

e       e   the   e   e       the e  
**GXEIGOZNIJHPSIKNIGAOIOLAHTPSIDIX**

Below that she wrote out the alphabet.

e           t   h  
**ABCDEFGHIJKLMNPOQRSTUVWXYZ**

"Sometimes you can see a pattern in the way the letters are substituted. It's always a good idea to write out the alphabet like this," She explained.

"So what are the other frequent letters? We can try those for the O and the G."

"That's good thinking. The next most frequent letters are vowels, but I don't think the O stands for a vowel. See how those two O's surround the I. That would make a sequence AEA or IEI or something like that in the message. I don't think that's likely. The most frequent consonants after the T are N, S, H, R, L. Let's work on that. Start making some guesses."

Mags and Victoria both worked for an uninterrupted half hour trying different letter substitutes. Finally Mags put down her pencil and announced she was going to make a fresh pot of coffee.

"Let's see what you got," Victoria said. She looked at Mags's worksheet.

**riverscleanthe-lerusesoundthe-ei  
GXEIGOZNIJHPSIKNIGAOIOLAHTPSIDIX**

The paper was nearly shredded from all the erasures. She compared it to her own worksheet. The best she'd been able to come up with was:

**so esd reanthepresidedwingtheleo  
GXEIGOZNIJHPSIKNIGAOIOLAHTPSIDIX**

Mags returned with the coffee. "I'm sorry I don't have any cookies for you. I baked some yesterday, but I left them cooling on the rack at Butcher's place. I forgot all about them when I was hurried out of there."

"Oh, don't worry. The coffee is what we need. My brain is about fried. Maybe this will reset my circuits. It looks like we're both striking out."

"It's so frustrating. It looks like it almost makes sense and then you get something that makes it no good. What we need is a good crib. What's that last word, over the DIX? A three-letter word with E in the middle. There aren't all that many of those. If we could get that, I think we could break this thing."

"Really. I can't believe there's no mention of jewels or diamonds. Morris already mentioned them in that Sudoku message you showed me, the JULZ. Maybe he spelled it the same way here. Have you tried that?"

They both got to work on that theory. After another twenty minutes they compared notes again. Both of them ended up with gibberish.

"I don't get it," Victoria exclaimed in disgust. "Still nothing. If he's going to send a message, it had to be something about the jewelry. What else could it be?"

"I don't think it was actually jewelry, just gemstones. Cut diamonds, according to the FBI."

“-T-C-H.”

“What’s that?” Mags said, confused.

“Just completing your thought for you. Wait, what did you just say?”

“What? You mean about the jewelry? It was just diamonds. They hadn’t been set in rings or anything.”

“No, you said *gemstones*. GEM – a three-letter word with E in the middle and it means jewel. Maybe it ends with that.”

They launched another assault on the cryptogram with that idea, but got nothing any better than before. They’d worked almost an hour this time. Raisin’s whining at the front door broke their concentration.

“He needs to go out, and I need a break,” Mags said. “Why don’t we call it a day for now. You can work on it at home if you want. I’m going to take him for a walk.”

“Good idea. I’m tapped out, too. I need to get some groceries for tonight’s dinner and run some other errands. If I get up the courage, I’ll try it again at home later. Thanks for letting me help. This is kind of exciting, isn’t it?”

“Remember, don’t say anything to anyone.”

“Mum’s the word.” Victoria left, waving bye-bye with her fingertips.

Mags decided she’d walk into town for a change of pace. She didn’t want to go out in public in her sweatshirt and baggy jeans, although she’d done so often enough in the past, so she put on some leggings, a plaid wool skirt, a decent blouse and a sweater vest that matched her skirt. She checked herself in the mirror and, with a tsk, tsk, decided to put on a touch of makeup and combed her hair. No point in scaring off the tourists, after all. By the time she was ready, Raisin was nearly frantic. She grabbed his leash, hooked it on, and left the house. Raisin did his business as soon as they got out the door. Mags cleaned it up, a bit ashamed of



herself for making him wait while she gussied up, then went back inside to wash up again. *Well, Raisin's taken care of, but as long as I've gotten myself dressed, I might as well take that walk anyway.*

She set off for town with Raisin trotting gaily beside her. When she got to Town Hall, she decided to stop by the station.

"Well, don't you look nice," Rick said when she walked in.

Mags blushed. "Oh, well, thank you. You look nice, too." Rick was wearing the same uniform he always wore and hadn't shaved that morning. An awkward silence followed. "I, uh, I just wanted to let you know I've been working on the cryptogram, but I haven't gotten anywhere."

"Oh, okay. Well, keep at it."

"Any new developments here?"

"Sort of. I've been going over Butcher's financial records. He did a lot of international travel. Two trips to Europe every year."

"Where in Europe?"

"Belgium. Specifically, Antwerp."

"Did he have relatives there?"

"Not that I know of. He'd only stay a day or two and he always stayed in a hotel."

"Do you know why?"

"I just got off the phone with Lisa. Antwerp is the diamond center of the world, it turns out. There are major dealers there."

"You think he was fencing the jewels?"

"I'm sure of it. I found receipts for large numbers of cubic zirconia rings. It looks like he would remove the zirconia from the settings here in his workshop and replace

them with diamonds, then travel to Antwerp where he would sell them to jewelers. He has the tools here to put them in the settings. That's not hard."

"Wouldn't the dealers recognize them? I thought they were gemologically 'fingerprinted' somehow."

"By selling rings he avoided the gem dealers themselves, who would recognize the stolen diamonds if presented in bulk as loose stones. Lisa will send leads to the Legal Attaché in Brussels to verify it, but she suspects that he would sell only two or three rings per trip, and only one to any given jeweler. He probably had a story that it was his grandmother's ring, or something like that. The jewelers themselves either didn't bother to check the diamonds against the photos of the stolen ones, or turned a blind eye to the possibility. If ever discovered, they had deniability because they were presented with a ring, not a loose stone. They'd discard the cheap settings and sell the diamonds directly to the dealers or just reset them and sell them as jewelry."

"I see. That's a lot smarter than what Dunlap did."

"Indeed it is. Butcher was a smart cookie. Speaking of cookies, thank you for the ones you left me. They were delicious. I love peanut butter cookies."

Mags had not intentionally left the cookies for Rick, of course, but she declined to correct him. "Of course. You've been working so hard."

"Smart, good-looking, and a good cook, too. That's quite the all-around package."

At this remark Mags turned crimson. "Chief Moran! My word! Someone could get the impression you were flirting."

At that moment the phone rang. Rick looked at the display screen. "Oh, that's Lisa. I have to take this." He picked up the receiver and spoke into it. "Hi, Lisa. Any

progress on the puzzle? ... No? Mags is still working on it, too. ... Yes, she's right here.... Uh huh." He put his hand over the receiver and looked at Mags. "This may take a while. Thanks for stopping by."

Her crimson shade returned, but this time it wasn't because of the flattery. She had gone from exhilaration to humiliation. One moment Rick was complimenting her and the next he cut her off to talk to Lisa and then dismissed her. She turned and stormed out, not looking back to see if he had noticed her anger. She could hear him laughing on the phone as she left.

\* \* \*

Mags was so mad she refused to work on the puzzle when she got home. After lunch she changed back into her grubs and did some gardening. At four o'clock her phone rang. She almost didn't answer it since her shoes and gloves were muddy, but she slipped them off and managed to pick up the phone on the sixth ring, just as the answering machine kicked in.

"Mags?" It was Rick's voice, but the machine was reciting her recorded message over him. She pushed the button to stop the message from playing.

"Yes. Sorry. I was in the garden."

"I called to apologize. I didn't mean to dismiss you earlier today. It's that damn Lisa. She's still hot about those FBI dissemination rules. She didn't want me talking with you present. She got some information from Interpol. Strict guidelines and all that. We really do need her for this case."

"I see." She may have seen but her voice didn't convey that she understood exactly.

"Don't be mad. Look, I know you didn't leave those cookies for me, but it would have been a shame to let them

go to waste. They were delicious, but I only had two. I found a cookie jar there at Butcher's and put the rest in the jar. You can go by and get them if you want. Better yet, let me make it up to you. Why don't we grab dinner and afterward I'll drive you by to pick up the cookies. I still don't want you there alone."

"By 'grab dinner' you mean ..."

"Um, I'm sorry. I should have said that better. Mags, will you give me the honor of letting me take you to dinner tonight?"

"That sounds an awful lot like you're asking me on a date."

"As it should."

"You're still a married man."

"Technically, yes, but the divorce is real, Mags, and should be quick. She makes more money than I do and isn't asking for alimony. She's already seeing someone."

"Well, as long as it's just dinner, I suppose it would be okay."

"Just dinner."

"Should we meet at the café?"

"No, no. I'm taking you to the Spyglass." The Spyglass was an elegant restaurant overlooking the Big Sur coast.

"The Spyglass! It's Saturday. You'll never get a reservation there on this short notice."

"I already have one. I couldn't get one earlier than 8:30, though, I'm afraid."

The significance of this took a few moments to sink in. To get a reservation for Saturday night he would have had to have called yesterday, or maybe even two days ago. Had he been intending to ask her out since then, maybe working up the courage to ask her? Or had he intended the

reservation for Lisa Murphy until she decided to return to San Francisco and she was Plan B. She was both excited at the first possibility and upset at the possibility of the second.

Her long silence brought Rick to say, “Mags? I’m sorry if I seem to be pushing. I haven’t done this in decades. Maybe I was clumsy, and I’d understand if you don’t ...”

“I’d love to go to dinner with you. It’s a long drive to the coast. Pick me up at eight.”

Mags was elated when the call was over. Of course now she looked like a mess. Well, that was easily taken care of. She gathered up the gardening tools and put everything away and took another shower, taking care to get all the dirt out from under her nails. When she got out of the shower, she thought about what to wear and decided the outfit she’d had on earlier seemed to work well. Rick had complimented her. Don’t argue with success. She laid out the clothes, but didn’t put them on. She still had to walk Raisin one more time before going out. She slipped into a pair of jeans, Nikes, and a T-shirt. It was getting nippy out, so she put on a coat and hooked Raisin up to his leash. It wasn’t that late, but Buck’s Gap was in a canyon and it got dark early there. She didn’t like to take him out after dark because there were no sidewalks in her neighborhood, just narrow country roads, and no streetlights either.

She strolled at a leisurely pace around her neighborhood. She didn’t want to work up a sweat after the shower. She stopped to chat with a neighbor, Mr. Bindley, who was in his yard. He was a propane system installer and repairman. Nearly all the homes in Buck’s Gap used propane for heat to supplement firewood heating since there was no natural gas line and electricity was too expensive to use for space heating. When Raisin had completed his assigned duties, she returned home and went

into the kitchen. She wasn't going to be eating dinner until at least nine so she'd need a snack. She didn't want her stomach to be growling the whole way there. She felt like a giddy schoolgirl doing so much planning for a simple dinner date but it was a good feeling. She put together a plate of cheese, crackers, and fruit and finished it. Then she got dressed.

It was still almost two hours until Rick would pick her up. She felt foolish for getting ready so early, but knew she would have worried about not being ready on time if she left it. She turned on the evening news, but there was nothing interesting there. Her mind kept going back to her date and to the case. She decided she had to do something she could concentrate on to keep her mind occupied. She turned off the TV and sat down at the cryptogram material again. Soon she was engrossed in it.

They had left off trying gem as the final word. It still seemed like a good guess to her for a crib. But what if it wasn't gem, but gems, plural. That would make more sense. It wouldn't fit at the end, of course, but maybe it could fit somewhere else. She decided to keep the word 'the' where it was and to try gems wherever an I in the cryptogram equaled the E. She erased her previous work and wrote 'gems' over the EIG near the beginning. Then she filled in the g, m, and s over the E, G, and O. She immediately realized that it could start with the word MY. She filled in the Y over the two X's.

**mygems e the em e the ey**  
**GXEIGOZNIJHPSIKNIGAOIOLAHTPSIDIX**

*Yes! This must be it she thought. The last word must be 'key'.* She filled in the k. She began frantically trying to complete the sentence. The paper got so ripped from all the erasures she had to get out another piece of paper and copy

her work onto that. She figured it probably ended with an instruction as to where the key to his house was. She knew the spare key was hidden under a large flowerpot in the back yard. Logical phrases like “is the key” or “hides the key” didn’t work. “Flowerpot” and “backyard” didn’t fit.

After thirty minutes she was getting frustrated again. She told herself to calm down and be methodical like Victoria had told her. She looked at the most frequent letters again. There was a cluster of A’s and O’s after the “em” in the middle. The O probably stood for a consonant like Victoria had said. So the A’s were probably a vowel. She began writing and within a few minutes the solution was staring her in the eyes.

**mygemsareonthepremisesfindthekey  
GXEIGOZNIJHPSIKNIGAOIOLAHTPSIDIX**

The thrill of solution was exquisite, but it quickly faded. It didn’t really tell her where the gems were. She already had the key and she hadn’t found the gems inside. The murderer had already searched the place thoroughly. Maybe he’d already found the gems. But then why come back? The police had already searched the place with a trained forensic team and they hadn’t found the diamonds. At least she didn’t think they had. Maybe it was some other premises? And why would Butcher tell Dunlap to find the key? He could have just told him where it was or instructed the lawyer to tell him. She’d have to run that by Rick.

Right on cue the doorbell rang. She opened the door and smiled. Rick was wearing a dark blue suit, a dress shirt and cufflinks, and sported a colorful tie held in place by a tie tack in the shape of an FBI badge. The momentary reminder of Lisa Murphy made her drop the smile, but she forced it back.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Just give me a few minutes. I lost track of time.” She had meant to make a last trip to the bathroom before he came, but had become so engrossed in her solving she had neglected that duty. She picked up her cryptogram worksheet and handed it to him as he stepped inside, then she disappeared into the back of the cottage.

She re-emerged five minutes later with her coat on and a purse in hand. Rick rushed to her and gave her a bear hug. “You’ve solved it! I knew you could. This is wonderful.”

The hug took her totally by surprise. It wasn’t a romantic hug at all. Still, it was the first time in years since a man had held her in his arms, and it felt good – very good. She hugged back tentatively.

“I surprised myself,” she said shyly.

“You didn’t surprise me.”

“I’m not sure it helps much. We’ve had the house key for days now and the sheriff’s office went over the whole place. Nobody’s found the gems. Do you think the murderer got them?”

“I doubt it. I still think it’s Dunlap and he’s still hanging around the area. He would have been gone by now if he had. The sheriff’s team wasn’t looking for diamonds. We didn’t know anything about them then. They were looking for evidence about the murder.”

“Maybe another location? Premises is pretty vague.”

“Maybe. Let’s talk about it on the way. We don’t want to be late.”

Rick held the car door open for her and offered a hand as she stepped in.

“Ooh, I get to ride in 101, not 102. You spare no expense for a lady.”



“You can ride in the back behind the cage separator if you want to be chauffeured.”

“No thank you.”

Twenty-five minutes later they were in the restaurant bar, waiting for their table to be ready. Mags felt like an imposter. She was an over-the-hill widow lady pretending to be a young single woman. She hadn't worn that much makeup since her nephew's wedding two years ago. But why not? She was enjoying herself. The sky was uncharacteristically clear and there was a full moon. The thundering waves crashed on the huge rocks a few feet below the picture windows of the restaurant. Soon the hostess called them for their table. They were seated with a great view of the natural spectacle below.

They hadn't made any real progress on the meaning of the message during the drive or their talk in the bar. It was all speculation. Mags shook her head as she spoke. “I still don't see why he didn't just leave a key with the lawyer, or have him tell Dunlap where the key was. Why use a cryptogram?”

“I think I can see why. Butcher didn't want anyone else to get the gems. I don't think he trusted the lawyer one hundred per cent. He was obviously a lot more careful than Dunlap. If he had left a message of any kind in plain text, the lawyer, or even a secretary in his office, could read it. If Butcher ever came under suspicion of the jewel heist, they could act on it. Or the police. He hid the message in a way that he thought only Dunlap could decipher. He didn't count on a small-town police force having a Mags McPherson.”

Mags blushed again. “You're embarrassing me. I just solved a crossword, like millions of other people do every day.”

“Don't be modest.”

“Well, we still aren’t much closer to the gems, now are we?”

“I suppose not. We’ll have to tell Lisa, you know.”

“I know.”

Their food came, interrupting the conversation. It smelled delicious. Mags had sautéed scallops on a bed of rice with a spring salad made with fresh ingredients grown in the restaurant’s own garden. Rick had a tri-tip steak. They exchanged bites. Both dishes were exquisite. Mags had a glass of sauvignon blanc while Rick had a hearty red from a local winery. The bread was a sourdough still warm from the oven. Mags smeared hers thick with butter. It was all she could do not to lick the plate clean when she was done. Rick stifled a belch as he sipped down the last of his wine.

The waitress entreated them to have more wine, but they both declined. Rick was driving his police car and one glass was his limit. He insisted they order dessert. He claimed he needed to soak up the alcohol and that a cup of coffee was a good idea this late at night, so he’d be sharp driving up the mountain. The full moon wouldn’t penetrate into the canyon and it would be dark on the narrow, winding road. She agreed to split a chocolate mousse. It, too, turned out to be scrumptious. Even the coffee was delicious.

They sat for another hour talking, learning about each other. Rick heard Mags tell of losing the baby and his eyes filled with tears of sympathy. He told her about the early days in the FBI and how it had not turned out the way he’d expected, how he’d hated New York. They talked about their childhood and related some funny moments in their careers. Before they knew it, the waitress came by and told them the restaurant closed at midnight, but they could move to the bar, which stayed open until two.

Neither of them had realized how late it had become. Rick paid the check and when the waitress returned with the card and the receipt, they rose to go. It was after midnight. They got into his department squad car. It was a perquisite of the job and he was available to the town seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day, so he needed to be able to respond. There were no rules against using it for personal matters since he made the rules. Mags was even a department employee, if only part-time, so there was no rule against her being in the car, either. Mags had never ridden in a police car before, and the novelty of it was yet another treat this evening had brought.

By the time they got halfway up the mountain to the town, they saw a sheriff's squad car pass them on the way down.

"Mags, take that microphone," Rick directed, pointing to the police radio.

She lifted the microphone as though it would bite her. Rick turned a switch on the body of the radio. "Okay now press the red button on the mike, hold it down and say, 'BG1 to Unit 37'. Then let the button up."

She did as instructed, speaking with what she hoped was a firm voice.

A crackly voice came back through the car speakers. "This is 37. Go ahead BG1."

"Ask him if he just did a patrol through the town."

Again, Mags did as instructed.

"10-4. I'll be back a couple more times before the night is over. Are you the chief now Sally? You sound different."

Rick laughed and took the mike from Mags. "No, Hector, it's me, Rick. That was our police analyst with me. We just saw you coming down the mountain. We're headed

back to town. I just wanted to thank you guys for helping with the night patrols.”

“No problem. I wrote a couple of parking tickets on those TV station vans. They probably won’t find them until the morning. I could write ‘em up again the next time through if you want.”

“Be my guest. We could use the revenue. Maybe it’ll drive them out of town.”

“The stations just write off the cost. The reporters don’t care.”

“I’m sure you’re right. Anyway, thanks again.”

“10-4. Going back to Channel 1.”

“10-4. Out.”

Rick turned the switch back to its previous position. “That’s the county car-to-car channel,” he explained.

“I’ve never talked on a police radio before,” Mags said, knowing she sounded like a ten-year-old who was allowed for the first time to sit behind the wheel of daddy’s car and pretend to drive.

“Was it fun?”

“Kind of,” she admitted.

“It becomes about as exciting as pencil sharpening after a while.”

“I guess it would. Hey, Rick, I’ve been thinking.”

“I know. I’m glad someone on our force can.”

“No, I mean right now. I was thinking that maybe we can take another look at the house now that we know the gems are there. Or think they are.”

“You mean right now?”

“Why not? You’re going to have to tell the FBI about the solved cryptogram tomorrow, aren’t you?”

“I suppose so.”

“Why don’t we give it one more old college try before they horn in and tear the place apart.”

“Sure, why not. I promised to drive you by there to get your cookies anyway.”

Mags didn’t care about the cookies, but she was happy enough to use that as an excuse to make him take her there. They drove on into town and pulled into Butcher’s driveway. Before they got out of the car the radio crackled again. It was nearly one A.M.

“Any unit in the vicinity of Buck’s Gap please respond. We have an emergency.”

Rick grabbed the mike and replied. “This is BG1. What’s the location of the emergency.”

“BG1, it’s a house fire at 17 Pinewood Drive. The BG Fire Department has been notified and is responding. They request police assistance.”

“10-4. I’m on my way. Send any available unit to assist.”

“10-4.”

“Unit 37 responding. ETA 15 minutes.”

Rick took the house key from his pocket and handed it to Mags. “You shouldn’t be at the fire. It could be dangerous. You remember the alarm code?”

“Yes.”

“Wait here for me. I’ll be back as soon as I can. Sorry.”

“It’s okay, I’ll be fine. You do your job. Don’t worry about me. I’ll reset the alarm after I go in.”

“Thanks, Mags.” He paused a moment. “It’s been a wonderful evening. I’m sorry about this.”

“No, it’s been better than wonderful. It’s been a marvelous evening. Thank you.” She squeezed his hand and stepped out of the car.

An instant later the car was gone. She walked to the front door and used her key, then turned off the alarm before it began to shriek. After closing the door, she reset it. The lights were already on, a precaution Rick had taken to make the house look occupied. She went up the steps to the main level. There were some dirty dishes in the sink. Rick had obviously eaten a meal or two here since the previous evening.

She thought about beginning to search, but she felt it would be better if Rick was present. If they found the gems, they'd need to prove chain of custody and all that. She wasn't sure whether she'd mess that up if she found them on her own. Instead she started cleaning up the kitchen.

Within a minute the house alarm went off. She dropped what she was doing and rushed down to the entryway to see if she had left the front door ajar. She hadn't. At least it didn't look like it. She gave the door a hard shove to be sure then she reset the alarm; it went quiet. She knew that the alarm worked on a one minute delay. If you enter the reset code, it will go quiet, but in one minute, if there is still a door or window ajar, it will go off again unless it is turned off completely. She assumed that was what had happened. The door must not have made good contact when she closed it the first time. Still, she should probably check the other doors and windows to make sure.

She walked down the hallway to the rec room that looked out onto the back yard. The door looked secure. There was no sign of a problem. She tested the knob with her hand and it was locked. She walked into the laundry room. At first it looked normal enough, but then she noticed the broken glass on the floor. She bent down to examine a shard that looked like it might have a bit of blood on one point.

The hand that clamped over her mouth was gloved. She bit down hard on the fleshy part of the thumb. The hand jerked away but instantly a stunning blow landed on her back, flattening her against the floor. The pain was excruciating. She lay there helpless.

## Chapter 14

Rick arrived at the scene of the fire. The man in charge was Bindley, the propane guy. The fire department was strictly a volunteer force. There was no money in the budget for a professional force. The town contracted with the county fire department for coverage, but the nearest county station was too far away, so local volunteers had been trained and certified.

The fire was already out by the time he got there. The only structure that had burned was a wooden deck built around a hot tub. There was a propane heater built inside the structure. Rick assumed it had malfunctioned.

“What’s up, Bindley?” he asked. “You asked for police assistance.”

“I did. You need to see this.” He led Rick over to the smoldering structure and opened the small door in the side. “Put your head in.”

It was pitch black inside, so he turned on his flashlight. “What am I looking for?” Then it hit him. The smell of gasoline. He withdrew his head. “Gas? Gasoline, I mean.”

“That’s right. This is not a propane or electrical fire. Somebody set this.”

“Have you alerted County Fire?”

“Yes, they’re sending an arson investigator, but I knew you’d want to know, too.”

“This seems like an odd place for arson.”

“I thought so, too. Whoever it was splashed the gas on the wood right next to the propane tank, trying to make it look like the propane started it.”

“But why? Whose house is this anyway?”



“The neighbors say it’s owned by a Korean family that lives in Burlingame. It’s a vacation home. They only come here in the summer. No one’s lived here all winter.”

“Did anyone see anybody lurking around, or watching the response from you guys?”

“No. The next door neighbor used his hose on the fire after he called us. He actually had it pretty much out by the time we arrived. I don’t think the fire had been going more than a minute or two when he noticed it through his window. The arsonist probably didn’t anticipate that.”

“Is there some reason this particular spot was chosen that you can think of?”

“It doesn’t make much sense to me. Maybe he’s a pyromaniac. This is way on the far side of town, a couple of miles from Town Hall. Maybe he thought that it would take a long time for us to gather up and respond. Then it would be a big blaze he could watch from the woods over there. If so, he must have been disappointed when the neighbor put it out so fast.”

“Maybe it was just a prank. I mean, a hot tub? How big a fire could it be? It couldn’t be an insurance fraud either.”

“Why conceal it then? Why make it look like an accidental propane fire?”

“Well, arson is in the County Fire Department’s jurisdiction. I’ll leave the investigation to them.”

“The funny thing is, Chief, the neighbor says he heard a loud car horn honking just before he looked out on the fire. That’s what drew his attention to it. He was looking out the window to see who was honking and saw the fire.”

“A good Samaritan who saw the flames and wanted him to call 911, maybe?”

“Maybe. I don’t buy it. I think whoever set it wanted the neighbor to call it in.”

“Why?”

“Beats me. The only thing it accomplishes is getting us all out of bed.”

Then it hit him. *Out of bed!* Rick had stayed in Butcher’s house the previous night. The prowler would have known that and assumed he was sleeping there again tonight. His police cruiser wasn’t in the driveway, but it could have been in the garage. Maybe he wanted to draw Rick to this part of town to get him out of the house and tie him up for a few hours. And Mags was there all alone. He had sent her in *for her safety!* What an idiot!

“Bindley, I’ve got to go. Give all this information to County Fire when they get here. I think this is all a distraction.”

He took off, lights and siren going full blast.

\* \* \*

“Who are you?” the voice growled. Mags’s face was shoved into a pile of towels. She could see nothing and could barely breathe. She felt like a rhinoceros was sitting on her back. Jolts of fire shot through her back.

“I’m a police officer, Dunlap,” she gasped. “My chief knows I’m here and he knows about you. If you kill me, you’re in for the death penalty for sure.”

“You’re no police officer. What are you doing here?”

“Looking for the jewels, just like you. We’ve solved the cryptogram, too.”

The man uttered an expletive, then after a moment said, “I don’t know who that person is. You said Dunlap?”

I've never heard of him. I was just walking by and heard the alarm. I came up to the patio door and saw it was unlocked. Then I saw you prowling around. I thought you were a burglar. I know this house belongs to that man who was killed. I thought you were a looter. I just entered and grabbed you for the police."

"I'm no looter. Let me up and I'll prove it to you."

There was a long silence. Mags knew her life hung in the balance. Then gradually a sound emerged, one both of them recognized – a police siren. And it was growing louder.

Another expletive escaped the man's lips, but he continued to hold Mags down. "I don't believe you. I think you're a looter. I'm going to call the police. Don't move and you won't get hurt."

The weight came off her back and she heard the man's footsteps exiting the laundry room. Mags remained motionless for twenty seconds and then lifted her head. The door to the hall was closed. Then she heard a loud clunk against that door. She thought that was foolish, since she could still get out to the side yard through the other door. It was designed as a mud room, too. Then she understood. More noise came from the outside, something hitting against that door, too. She could see a dark form through the broken window of that door, a large man wearing a balaclava. Then the sound of retreating footsteps told her the man was running away.

She looked around, but there was no telephone in the laundry room. She tried to open the door to the hallway, but she couldn't budge it more than a fraction of an inch. Something very heavy was on the other side. She went to the outside door and turned the knob. It, too, was blocked, but seemed to have some give in it, especially at the top. Whatever was blocking it was at the bottom. She didn't dare try to put her hand or her head through the broken

window, with glass shards protruding from the molding. She sat on the floor with her back to the door and pushed with her legs against the floor. The door moved a few inches. She tried again and got another few inches. She could then reach through the opening. When she did so, she could feel something flat, hard, and cold against the door; she recognized it as a paving stone, the top one of a pile of three. The intruder had apparently found some spares on that side of the house and stacked them against the door. She was able to shove on the corner of the top stone and make it move. She worked it until it slipped off the top of the stack, but it still leaned its weight against the other two. She stood and put her shoulder into it and the door moved some more. Being slight of build, she was able to squeeze through the opening. Now she was outside. She didn't know where the man was, but she assumed he had fled. The sirens were only a block or two away now.

She ran around the house to the front, but realized the front door key was in her purse, which was still in the house. She saw no sign of the intruder, and she didn't want to wake a neighbor, not if she didn't have to, so she just sat down on the step leading to the door. Within a few seconds, Rick's patrol car came flying into the driveway and shuddered to a halt.

"Mags! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. A little shaken up, but I'm not hurt."

"What happened?"

"I was inside when the alarm went off. I thought I had left the door ajar so I went down to check it. I went into the rec room and laundry room to see if a door there was ajar. A window in the laundry room door was broken. That's when a man jumped me from behind. He just shoved me down. He didn't hit me."

"Did you get a good look at him?"

“No. He was big. I saw him through the window for a second. He was wearing a ski mask. It had to be Dunlap.”

“I’m going to put out a radio call. Just stay put for a minute.” Rick returned to the patrol car and made a call. When he returned, Mags was shivering, whether from the cold or the ordeal he couldn’t be sure. “Let’s get you inside. Do you have the key?”

“It’s inside. We’ll have to go back through the laundry or break in.”

He led her around to the laundry room. He moved the paving stones aside and opened the door. When he tried to open the door into the hallway it wouldn’t move at first. He thumped on the door a few times and determined that there was a heavy weight at the bottom, just like the other door. He sat against the door just as Mags had with the other door and shoved. There was a metallic crash and the door moved several inches. He repeated the action and got it open enough to step through. The intruder had piled several of the heaviest weights from Butcher’s barbell set against the door, perhaps two hundred pounds worth. He pushed them aside and let Mags come through to the hall, then they both went upstairs to the main level.

“Did he say anything? Threaten you?”

“He didn’t threaten me exactly, but he said if I didn’t move I wouldn’t be hurt. I reckon that meant if I did move ...”

“Hmm. Probably not good enough to prosecute. Anything else?”

“He asked who I was. I told him I was a police officer and he’d be facing the death penalty if he killed me. I’m sure he didn’t believe me, but it seemed to make him think. He said he thought I was a looter and he was just being a hero and rushing in to arrest me.”

“Clever to think of that on the fly. It’s total BS, of course.”

“He said he was going to call the police. Did he?”

“I doubt it. I need to get to a police radio again to find out what’s going on. I don’t want to leave you alone inside again. Why don’t you grab your coat and purse and come sit in the car with me for a bit and then I’ll drive you home. I’ll stay here again tonight. We’re not going to do any searching the house tonight.”

“Okay.”

“Is there anything else you can think of that would identify whoever it was? Clothing? Accent?”

“My face was in the towel most of the time. I only got a glimpse of a dark form outside through the broken window. Oh, wait! I bit him. He was wearing a glove, but when he put his hand over my mouth, I bit hard right about here.” She pointed to the fleshy part of her right hand just below the thumb. “I might have broken the skin. There’ll be a bruise and my DNA on the glove.”

“That’s good.” He led her out to the car and started the engine so the heater would run. He put the additional information on the air to the dispatcher and other units and added that Dunlap was the chief suspect.

No sooner had he put this out when Unit 37 came on the air. “Unit 37 in pursuit of a light-colored Ford Fiesta on Buckmill Road heading toward the coast. Request assistance.”

Two other sheriff’s units responded that they were on the way.

“Did you want to join them?” Mags asked.

“No, not with you in the car. The sheriff’s office can handle it. I’m getting you home.” He put the car in gear and backed out, then turned toward her cottage. A few minutes later they pulled up in front.

“Well, you certainly know how to show a girl an exciting time,” she said as she unbuckled her seat belt.

“Mags, I’m so sorry about that. I should have realized ...”

“Don’t be silly. I’m fine. I had a wonderful time, I really did.”

“So did I.” He started to unbuckle, too, presumably to walk her to her door, which was only thirty feet away.

“No, don’t get out. Go catch up with the chase. They’re going to need you there when they catch him. I can get into my own house.” She reached over and squeezed his hand, then opened her door.

Rick sat conflicted for a moment, but gave her hand a squeeze in reciprocation as she pulled it away. He watched as she entered through the front door and when the lights came on inside he could hear Raisin barking in joy. Mags peeked out the front window and saw him still sitting there, motor running, so she waved at him to shoo. Then, seeing that she was safe, he took off to join the pursuit.

## Chapter 15

Sunday morning Mags woke with a start. It was nine thirty, almost three hours later than she usually slept. The adrenaline had kept her awake until two, so it was understandable, but she was already dying to know what had happened the night before. She showered and dressed quickly and scarfed down some toast and instant coffee. As soon as she'd made her way through that, she called the station, but got only the recorded message. Then she called Rick's home number, something she acquired during the course of the previous evening. She got an answering machine there, too. Frustrated and curious, she forced herself to calm down and take care of Raisin. She fed him and took him for a short walk. When that was done, she tried again to reach Rick but got the same results.

Unable to stay put, she drove into town and went by every place that she thought might be a logical gathering place. There were three churches, two Protestant and one Catholic. She cruised by all three but didn't see his patrol car in any of them. Same with Town Hall. There were, however, several camera crews in front of that building. Mags pulled into the lot and got out.

She walked up to the gaggle of reporters milling about and spied the one who had talked to Lisa Murphy in the station days earlier. She tapped him on the shoulder and he turned around.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Hey, you're one of the police investigators. I recognize you. You haven't heard?"

"I'm just a typist. What happened?"

"They made an arrest in the murder case. There was a shooting."

"A shooting! Who got shot?"



“No one knows. The sheriff hasn’t made a press statement yet. We just heard it over the police radio. ‘Shots fired,’ ‘suspect wanted in connection with a 187,’ that sort of thing. Several hours ago. It happened on Buckmill Road so we figure it must be connected to the Morris Butcher case. What do you know about it?”

By this time other reporters were gathered around. One of them asked her her name. There was no way she was going to say anything to the reporters. She backed away as she realized that several cameras had already started rolling, taking video of her talking to the first reporter. She turned and fled to her car. The only thing she could think to do was to go see Victoria. She needed to tell someone.

She pulled up in front of Victoria’s house and was gratified to see smoke rising from the chimney. That meant they were home and up and around. She knocked. Moments later Alek answered. Alek’s dark, good looks skewered the unflattering stereotype of the computer geek. He’d founded a software company based on his own code, something about big data that Victoria could never explain and Mags wouldn’t have understood even if she had. He was half Indian, the Asian kind, and half Danish by heritage giving him a skin tone that might have been described as somewhere between taupe and ecru if he’d been a carpet. He was wearing sweat pants, a T-shirt and a bathrobe.

“Oh, hello, Mags,” he said, surprised, and looked down at his own apparel. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t expecting company.”

“Alek, I’m sorry for showing up unannounced on a Sunday morning. I just had to tell someone. Is Victoria here.”

“Come in. Yes, she’s here.” Then calling loudly over his shoulder, “Victoria, it’s Mags.”

Mags stepped inside. As Victoria hurried in, also in her bathrobe, Mags said, "He's been in a shooting!"

"A shooting! Who?" Victoria and Alek said almost in unison.

"Rick. I mean Chief Moran. I think. They aren't sure."

"Wait. Start over," Victoria said. "You aren't making sense."

"He and I were out late last night talking about the case and we went to Butcher's house to ... check on something." She gave a significant look to Victoria, shifting her eyes toward Alek, hoping to convey that she couldn't speak freely with him present. "Anyway, while we were there, the Chief had to go to a fire at the other end of town. I was waiting in the house for him to come back when a prowler grabbed me. He ran off and Rick came back, but the sheriff's people were in pursuit of a suspect. Rick took me home, but then said he was going to join the chase. I thought the man would be in the custody of the deputies long before Rick, uh, the Chief, got there. This morning I was in town and saw a bunch of reporters gathered around Town Hall. They said there'd been a shooting on Buckmill Road. They'd heard it on the police radio. That's all I know."

"That doesn't mean Chief Moran was in the shooting," Victoria pointed out. Alek nodded his agreement.

"I know, but I'm worried."

"Come inside and sit down," Victoria said, leading her to the living room. "Alek, could you get Mags a cup of coffee?"

"Sure. Cream or sugar?"

“Black is fine.” As soon as Alek was out of the room, she whispered to Victoria, “I solved the cryptogram.”

“That’s fabulous,” Victoria whispered back. “What’s it say?”

“‘My gems are on the premises. Find the key.’ You were right about the word gem. That’s why we went back to Butcher’s, to try to find them.”

“And did you?”

“No.” At that moment Alek returned with a steaming mug of coffee and handed it to Mags.

“When did this fire happen?” he asked. “I thought I heard sirens about twelve thirty last night. They woke me up.”

“That was probably it.”

“You were out working with Chief Moran that late on a Saturday night?” Alek said, confused. Victoria made eye contact with him and scowled in a way every husband recognizes as a warning. The light dawned. “Oh, I see.”

“Honey, I think we’re going to need to do some girl talk, if you don’t mind,” Victoria said.

“Oh, okay. Sure.” He smiled at Mags. “I’m sure he’s okay, Mags. I’ll be in my den watching the tennis tournament if you need me.” He trotted out of the room.

“Okay, dish,” commanded Victoria with a waggle of her eyebrows.

“He took me to The Spyglass. It was wonderful. We talked and talked. He was the perfect gentleman. I told him about the cryptogram, of course. He said we’d have to tell the FBI and I suggested we try to find them ourselves. Then before we even got inside the house he got called away to that fire. I told you the rest.”

“What happened when he took you home? Did you ...?”

"I just told you he was a perfect gentleman."

"Hmm, not so perfect, if you ask me, but he is still married, I guess."

Mags wasn't comfortable with this line of inquiry. "Victoria, you have to help me with this thing. We can't figure out what the cryptogram means. 'Find the key.' We have the key. It was kept under a flowerpot in the back yard."

"Have you searched the flowerpot, or the area around it?"

"No actually, I haven't. I don't think anyone has. The police just did the inside of the house when the body was discovered."

"Are you sure 'the premises' means the house?"

"No, not really."

"This letter, and the puzzle, where were they given to Dunlap?"

"At the lawyer's office. Oh, I see what you're getting at. Butcher would have known that when he made the puzzle. Why would he give a clue like that and not give Dunlap a way to get into the house, if that's where it was."

"Yeah, that's what I'm thinking, but maybe he hadn't thought that out when he made the puzzle. I don't think it's that easy to redo a puzzle like that. He might have planned to leave it at the house and then later left it with the lawyer. Does he have any other 'premises' that we know of?"

"Rick says no. He stayed in hotels when he traveled. He didn't have a second home or an outside office. The only keys they found were his house key and car keys."

"Wait! I have an idea. What if he didn't mean a physical key? What if he meant the key to the cryptogram?"

## Chapter 16

The table looked like it might be flotsam from the sinking of a garbage scow. On one side of it sat Rick Moran and Detective Martinez. On the other side, Dunlap and a weasel-faced defense attorney appropriately named Springer conferred. The walls of the windowless room were covered in acoustic tiles, large chunks of the surface of which were peeling away to reveal the brown cork underneath.

“My client was doing nothing wrong. Your deputies pulled over an innocent motorist and began shooting at him.”

“Your client refused to pull over and when finally cornered made a sudden furtive move,” Martinez retorted.

“He was looking for a safe place to pull over on a narrow winding road. The ‘furtive move’ you mentioned was reaching for his wallet to show the deputy his driver’s license as he was instructed to do. For that he gets shot.”

“He didn’t get shot.”

“Only because your deputy is as incompetent at firearms as he is at recognizing a cooperative motorist.”

“Let’s cut the crap and talk about the assault,” Rick broke in. “Dunlap here broke into a house, the house where I was staying, in fact, in a ski mask and grabbed my guest and threw her to the floor where he threatened her.”

“What evidence do you have for that outrageous claim?” Springer said. “Did you find a ski mask on him when you arrested him?”

“No, but we’re scouring the roadside all the way from Buck’s Gap.”

“Look at the bruise on his right hand. Below the thumb. That’s where she bit him,” Rick said.

“He hurt it when he slammed the car door on his hand. Did you find any saliva or other DNA on his hand from this woman?”

“It would be on the glove.”

“Oh, so now there’s an imaginary glove to go with the imaginary ski mask.”

“We’ll probably find them together. If he’s so innocent, what was he doing in Buck’s Gap last night at midnight?”

Springer leaned over so Dunlap could whisper in his ear.

“He had a drink in the tavern. It’s a nice tourist spot. You can check there. He wasn’t hiding anything. Since when is that a crime? His BAC was under the legal limit.”

“We’re processing his jacket for hairs and fibers now, and obtaining the clothing of the victim for that same purpose,” Martinez said. “I expect we’ll find his hair and fibers on her clothes and vice versa. You really want to stick with that story? We know he was there to look for the stolen diamonds that Butcher had.”

Dunlap and Springer conferred again, then the lawyer spoke.

“Hypothetically speaking, if he was at that house last night, he could have seen someone he thought was an intruder. He knew Morris Butcher personally and was aggrieved at his death. He might have thought she was a looter. Hypothetically.”

“Not so hypothetically, he might also have committed arson when he set fire to some spa decking on the other side of town to get me out of the house. We found a can of gasoline in his car.”

“Gasoline in a car! Incredible! What next – ashes in his car ashtray? Lock him up!”

“Don’t be so flip,” Rick barked. “We’re looking at him for the murder of Morris Butcher. He had the motive, the means, and the opportunity. If he wants to cooperate, he can still avoid a long prison sentence, or even the death penalty. Now is the time. We understand how it might have been second degree, a spur of the moment thing. He was drunk, Butcher probably provoked him. Just tell us how it happened and we’ll put in the good word with the district attorney.”

“You’re quite the comedian, officer Moran,” Springer scoffed. “Rumor has it a prostitute did that murder. Have you looked into that?”

Martinez tapped Rick on the shoulder and signaled for him to join him outside. As they left, he told the other two men not to leave, he’d be right back. Outside he told Rick, “That’s a problem on the murder case. The preliminary results of the prints just came back. We did find a set in the house from a prostitute at that Asian massage place he frequented. Not only that, she has an arrest record for stabbing another customer. That case was dismissed because it looked like the customer was rough with her and it was legitimate self defense, but that’s going to make it very difficult to prove the murder case on Dunlap.”

“Does she have an alibi? Maybe we can prove it can’t be her? What’s her name? I can go talk to her.”

“Her name’s Mei-mei. Unfortunately she’s left town, probably back in Hong Kong by now. Even if we find her, it could be made to look like she fled.”

“Mamie? Like Mamie Eisenhower? What a name for a prostitute. I’m visualizing it now. I would think that name would be ... counterproductive.” He dangled one finger limply.

“Not Mamie. Mei-mei. It means beautiful, I understand.”

“Oh. That’s a bad break. Maybe the hair and fiber evidence you mentioned in there will connect him to the murder.”

“Don’t count on it. Even if we found some, it would only prove that he was in the house, which we already know and he’s admitted. We haven’t found any blood on the clothing. We checked that right away with Luminol. Butcher didn’t spurt blood when he was stabbed, unfortunately. The bleeding was seepage. I’m sure Dunlap has discarded any clothing he was wearing that night, assuming he was the killer.”

“He’s the killer. I know it in my bones.”

“I think you’re right, but proving it is another matter. So I haven’t been in the loop with you and the FBI. I had to do the return to the judge on the search warrant, so I know you recovered a crossword puzzle from the lawyer. Have you made anything of it yet?”

“Yes. Mags, uh, Margaret McPherson, my analyst, has solved the crossword. There’s a cryptogram in the crossword. She solved that, too. It says the gems are in the house, or actually ‘on the premises,’ which we think means the house. That confirms that Butcher was his partner in that crime.”

“That’s good. That strengthens the case. Do you know if Dunlap has solved the puzzle yet?”

“Not for sure, but we have to assume he has. That’s probably why he went back despite it being the scene of the murder.”

“Makes sense. But that’s a big house and the property is huge, too. Premises could mean outside. That would make more sense. Dunlap could get access to the outside at any time.”

“The message said to find the key.”

“Did he have a key hidden outside?”



“He did. That’s a good point. We only searched the inside. But if the gems were hidden where the key was, Mags would have found them when she retrieved the key.”

“Mags. That’s McPherson, the victim in this assault and battery case?”

“Right. My analyst.”

“How do you know?”

“How do I know what?”

“How do you know she didn’t find the jewels?”

“Oh, now come on. You think she found them and didn’t tell me?”

“I’m just asking. They could be worth millions.”

“No way. I trust her. She’s an honest person. Besides, if she’d found the diamonds when she retrieved the key she wouldn’t have solved the cryptogram. It could point to her just like you thought. And what about the housekeeper and repairmen? Or the lawyer? Or his son. They must all have had access to the key over the years. He’d never keep the jewels with the key, at least not obviously visible.”

“If you say so. Look, Rick, neither of us is investigating the jewel theft. That’s the FBI’s job. Let them go back in there and shred the place if they have to. We have this assault to work and you have the murder. Let’s go back in there and see what we can get. Even a simple burglary and assault would get him some substantial prison time with his prior for the federal rap. I think that’s our best bet for a conviction at least for now.”

\* \* \*

Victoria pulled out her cryptogram worksheet. Mags could see that she been working on it and made a lot

of erasures, too. Victoria started by rewriting the cryptogram and writing Mags' solution over it.

**mygemsareonthepremisesfindthekey  
GXEIGOZNIJHPSIKNIGAOIOLAHTPSIDIX**

"Call out each cryptogram letter followed by the message letter, one by one, and I'll write them in as you dictate."

Mags began reciting, "G stands for M, X stands for Y, E stands for G ...". When she was done with the cryptogram, this is what Victoria had written.

**i kg mneopf r t hd y a  
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ**

Victoria let out a snort of disgust when she finished. "Shoot! I thought there might be a pattern to how the letters are assigned. Like a key to how he made the cryptogram."

"Is that how they make them? With a key?"

"I think so, but I don't know. I've never made one. I think maybe they choose which letter stands for which randomly."

"They sort of look alphabetical. Look how the m, n, o, p, r, and t are all in order. Even the i and k."

"I don't think that means anything. There are other letters in between and some are out of order. The h, d, and a, for example."

"What if it's the other way?" Mags said, pointing to the paper.

"What do you mean?" Victoria picked up the paper and started looking at it from different angles.

"No, no, put it down. I mean the alphabets are reversed."

“From Z to A? F-p-o-e-n-m doesn’t spell anything either.”

“No, I mean what if the message letters are in alphabetical order and the cryptogram letters are the key. Put the cryptogram letters under the message letters instead of putting the message letters over the cryptogram letters.”

“That’s the same thing.”

“No, it isn’t. Like this.” She took the pencil from Victoria. “You call out the letters for me the same way I did for you.”

Victoria began the same recitation, “G stand for M, X stands for Y ....” A minute later the worksheet looked like this:

```

i  kg mneopf r t  hd  y a
ABCDEF GHIJ KLMNOPQRSTU VWXYZ
z  tilesa d ghjk n p    x

```

“Mags! I think you’ve done it. Look at that. It’s in alphabetical order except for the word ‘tiles’ at the beginning. It looks like he used tiles as the key word and then filled out the rest of alphabet with the rest of the letters. Are there tiles in the house?”

“Yes, in the upstairs bathrooms. Some outside, too, large paving tiles make up the patio.”

“Come on, let’s go. I’ll bet we can find a loose tile and the diamonds will be under it. I’ll get dressed.”

Something seemed wrong to Mags, but she couldn’t put her finger on just what it was. When Victoria reappeared, she called to Alek, “Honey, we’re going out for a walk. We’ll be back in a bit.” Alek replied with a noise of acknowledgment.

They walked up the street and stood in front of Butcher’s house. “You have the key?” Victoria asked.

“No, Rick has it, but I know how to get in.” She led Victoria around to the mud room door. The window was still broken; Mags pointed to it. Victoria took a rock and knocked out the remaining glass shards, then reached around and unlocked the door. They entered.

Mags led her upstairs to the first bathroom, the master bath off the master bedroom. “You search this one,” she directed. “I’ll start on the other ones.”

“How many are there?”

“Besides this one there are four more bedrooms and two more baths upstairs. There’s a guest bath downstairs, but it doesn’t have tile. It has granite counters and floor.”

For the next fifteen minutes the two women poked and prodded and tapped and pulled on every tile in all three bathrooms. Nothing was loose and no secret doors opened. They could detect no hollow spaces behind the tiles. Then they went outside and spent at least that long tapping and stomping and shoving all the paving tiles with no more luck. They searched the flowerpot where the spare key had been for good measure, but it yielded nothing.

“I think we misinterpreted the key,” Mags finally said, tired of looking.

“Like how?”

“Where was the Z?”

The Z?”

“In the alphabet, the key alphabet. The Z was under the A. Then there were two spaces before the ‘tiles.’ Something would have to go there. If tiles was the key, then the Z should have been right before the T. I think there must have been a longer word for the key, but some of the letters weren’t used.”

“You mean like ‘reptiles’ or something?”

“Yeah, like that. Let’s go back and look again. Maybe we can fill in the whole alphabet.”

They returned to Victoria's house. The worksheet was still lying on the living room coffee table.

"I see what you mean," Victoria said. "The key alphabet must end XYZ. Then there are two more letters that go before the 'tiles.'" She paused. "But it can't be reptiles. There would be two e's."

"And the P is already used," Mags added. "It stands for T."

"Right. But we can fill in some more letters. Look, there has to be an F between the D and the G. The E is already used so that's the only letter that fits."

"Yes. And the M must go between the K and the N because the L is already used. Fill those in. And the O before the P."

Victoria did so. They looked at the result.

```
ABCDEFGHIJKLMN OPQRSTUVWXYZ
z..tilesa.dfghjkmnop....xy
```

"Progress," Victoria said. "But what's the word that goes there at the beginning? I can't think of any other word that ends -tiles, not any short ones, anyway."

"Percentiles, ductile, stiles ..." Mags, said, frowning. "Those don't work. "What letter goes between the A and the D? It could be a B or a C. Whichever one goes there, the other one must be in the keyword."

"And the other one must come from between the P and the X. There are five letters in the alphabet between them, but only four spaces. That means one of those letters is used up front before the T."

Mags heaved a sigh. "We may have to go through the entire dictionary. The missing letters are at the beginning of the keyword. I don't even know where to begin. This could take us days, or weeks. I think we're going to have to let the FBI handle it from here. They've

got computer experts who could probably go through the whole dictionary in an hour.”

“So do we.” She stood and motioned for Mags to follow her. They went back to Alek’s den. He was still in his bathrobe watching tennis. “Alek, can you help us with something?”

“Sure, what do you need?”

“Mags and I were just trying to figure out this word puzzle. We solved a cryptogram and got part of the key but we can’t quite figure out the whole thing.” She handed him the worksheet, stood behind him, and pointed out how the key alphabet had some gaps.

“I see,” he said. “So you think there’s a word here at the beginning and the unused letters follow it in alphabetical order?”

“I knew you’d get it.” She kissed him on the crown of his head.

“It seems simple enough.”

“We can’t think of any word that ends in –TILES with only two letters in front of it,” Mags added.

“Maybe there isn’t one. If this is a keyword like you say, it might have repeated letters in it. Repeated letters would have to be removed from the key alphabet so that there are exactly twenty-six. Like TOMORROW would have to be condensed to TOMRW followed by the rest of the alphabet.”

Mags got it immediately. “So you’re saying that if we only saw the end of that word, MRW, and couldn’t find any word that ended MRW, it doesn’t mean there isn’t one. So there could be some letters missing from TILES.”

“Yes, exactly.”

Victoria looked crestfallen. “Rats!, I was going to ask you if you had a way to search the dictionary for a

word ending TILES, maybe an obscure one we couldn't think of, but that won't work."

"Oh, that's no problem. I can still find the word. Here, I'll show you. That'll be a fun little exercise."

He got up and moved to the computer in the corner of the room, one of seven in the house. He launched a compiler and began typing in code. The women watched.

"See, here I've written a function that condenses a word by removing the repeated letters, then tacks on all the unused letters, then rotates the whole thing until the Z is at the beginning like in your problem . So TOMORROW becomes ZTOMRWABCDEFGHIJKLN PQSUVXY. Now I just have to find a dictionary to use."

He opened the web browser and searched "English word lists." The search engine returned millions of hits. He picked one on the first page that he thought was suitably comprehensive and downloaded it. He opened it to be sure he knew what format it was in and then started typing in some more code.

"Okay. That should do it. When I run the program now, it will read every word in the list, condense it like I just said, and then see if the letters match the same positions as your key there. Any word that matches will display here in this window."

It had taken him twenty-two minutes for the whole operation. Mags and Victoria looked at each other as though witnessing magic. With a click of the mouse the program was running. Almost instantly letters appeared on the screen:

'CUTICLE: ZCUTILEABDFGHJKMNOPQRSVWXY'

Then the word DONE appeared. Alek beamed. "There's your keyword – cuticle."

Mags and Victoria exchanged uneasy looks. "Cuticle? Really?" Victoria said.

“Yes, why? You sound disappointed. Isn’t this what you asked for?” Alek said, clearly feeling put upon.

Mags smiled brightly and replied, “Yes it is. It’s just what we wanted, Alek. Our puzzle is solved. Thank you so much. Come on, Victoria. Let’s take a walk.” She took Victoria by the elbow and almost hauled her from the room.

As soon as they were out of the room, Victoria whispered, “What’s going on, Mags? Where are we going. Do you know what that means? Cuticle?”

“I’m not sure, but I have an idea.”

\* \* \*

As Rick and Martinez were conferring in the hall a uniformed deputy walked up to them. “Detective, you asked to be notified if the search team found anything. I just got a call. They think they have the gloves and ski mask.”

“Where?” Martinez demanded.

“By the side of the road, just outside Buck’s Gap. It looks like he just threw them out the window as he left town. If he’d been going the other direction he could have tossed them over the edge into the canyon, but he was driving on the side with the mountain.”

“Get them tested for DNA and hairs and fiber. The tech needs to check for Dunlap’s DNA on the inside, and for the victim’s DNA on the outside of the right glove, in the thumb area. She bit him there.”

“Yes sir, I’ll rush them over to the lab as soon as they come in, but you won’t get results for several days.”

“I know that.” The deputy headed off. “Let’s go back in.”



They sat down opposite Dunlap and the lawyer. Rick said, "It's not so hypothetical now. That was the search team reporting they found the ski mask and gloves. Just outside of Buck's Gap on the side of the road. They're bringing them back for DNA testing now."

The lawyer whispered something to his client. "Okay, let's suppose those are his. It doesn't prove anything. Like I said, he saw an intruder in his friend's house and rushed in to make a citizen's arrest. Even if you're right, he's just a good Samaritan, not a burglar. Whoever it was let her go when she identified herself. That's not an assault."

"It's felony battery, resisting arrest, and breaking and entering," Martinez retorted. "And that's just for starters. We're still working on the homicide. With his record, he's looking at years for the battery alone. If he were to give us a statement and tell us how it happened, I'm sure we could get the battery down to a misdemeanor once we got the D.A. on board."

"I just told you how it happened," Springer replied.

"Cut the crap," Martinez went on. "We need a statement from Dunlap, not you. You know that."

"This is getting us nowhere. If you're willing to quit pursuing him on the trumped up homicide accusation, maybe we can reach agreement on this current misunderstanding. Maybe we won't even have to sue you for shooting at an innocent man, but I'll want to see any body cam footage before I make any promises. Let me know. I'm instructing my client not to talk to you. Do not question him without me being present. Are you going to hold him?"

"He'll be here overnight," Martinez said. "He'll be brought before a judge tomorrow morning and can get bail set then."

Springer stood up and the others followed. As they streamed out of the room, Martinez directed a deputy to take Dunlap back to holding. The lawyer left. “So what’s next?” Martinez said. “We don’t have enough to charge him with murder. Let’s hope the DNA evidence on the glove comes in like we expect. We’ll need your analyst to testify if we’re to go forward on that. The D.A. probably won’t file charges if it doesn’t. I doubt we’re going to get anything on the arson, either. Those are really hard to prove without an eyewitness or being caught in the act.”

“I’ll let her know. I haven’t written my police report on that. I’ll do that today so the D.A. can have it Monday. Will he need me in court?”

“Not for the initial appearance. He – or she – will for the preliminary hearing if it gets that far.”

“I’m going to have to let the FBI know we arrested Dunlap. She’s supposed to come back down tomorrow, but I’d better call her now.”

“Okay, do that. I’m interested in what she has to say. Maybe the Bureau has some lab genius who can help us on this case.” They moved to Martinez’s desk and sat.

Rick dialed the cell number Murphy had given him. Rick put his cell phone on speakerphone and laid it on the desk. She answered on the fourth ring.

“Oh, Rick, it’s you. I’m glad. This case is driving me nuts. Good news. I just finished filling in the crossword puzzle. Now all we have to do is solve the cryptogram. I just sat down with a glass of wine to celebrate. I wish you were here to share one with me.” Her flirtatious tone was unmistakable.

Martinez looked at Rick with a grin. Rick, in turn, blushed and refused to make eye contact. “Lisa, I’m at the sheriff’s station. We arrested Dunlap. He ...”

“You what?! Arrested him on the murder?”

“No, on breaking and entering, assault and battery, resisting arrest. He broke into Butcher’s house and grabbed Mags when she went down to investigate the noise.”

“Is she okay? What was she doing in his house, anyway?”

“She’s fine. She was ... housesitting until Butcher’s son arrives tomorrow. He let her go and fled, but the sheriff’s patrol caught him leaving town. He’s going to be charged on Monday if we can get some forensic evidence to confirm it was him. They recovered a ski mask and gloves. They’re testing for DNA.”

“Maybe we can use this to get him to tell us where the diamonds are. I’ll bet he’s solved the cryptogram by now and knows exactly where they are. In fact, yeah, that’s exactly what we should do. I tell you what. Does Dunlap have an attorney?”

“Yes. A guy named Springer, if you can believe that.”

“That’s rich. Look, that’s good. I’m going to contact the Assistant U.S. Attorney today. I’ll have to get him at home, but for forty million bucks worth of diamonds, he’ll jump through hoops. I’ll bet this Springer guy is angling to make a deal on your current charges in exchange for skating on the murder. Am I right?”

“Yes, but, ...”

“So I’ll have the AUSA file federal charges for conspiracy to transport the stolen jewels interstate or some such – it doesn’t really matter what – and then consolidate the local charges, including the murder, into the federal case. Then we get Dunlap to tell us where the diamonds are in exchange for dropping the murder charge and him doing six months in a federal country club.”

“Lisa! It’s a murder case. You can’t drop that in exchange for recovering some stolen property.”

“Rick, Rick Rick. Don’t go all local on me. You’re still part of the FBI family. Once an agent always an agent. You know a federal case takes precedence over a local one.”

“But recovering the diamonds won’t accomplish anything. The insurance claim was paid off years ago. The insurance company will be entitled to them. It will just be a few million dollars back in the coffers of some multi-billion-dollar corporation. Butcher’s son is coming into town. He’s going to want his father’s murderer brought to justice.”

Rick’s face burned with embarrassment. He stole a glance at Martinez. That detective had an expression that could only be called a menacing glower. He sat back with his arms crossed tightly, his eyes boring in on Rick.

“Pfft. One crook kills another. Good riddance,” Murphy replied. “Think of the headlines if we recover the diamonds. ‘FBI and small town police chief solve biggest jewel heist in California history’! I could get you an award from the insurance people. Then we could come back to my place to celebrate properly.”

“Lisa, there’s no way I’m going to give up a murder case. Butcher may have been a thief, but he was a citizen of my town. His son is wholly innocent and will be grieving. I can’t tell him good riddance.”

Murphy remained quiet for a few seconds. “I see. You have a point.” Her voice was now an unconvincing mollifying tone. “I should have realized that it’s your job at stake, too. You take your responsibilities seriously, I know. You’re a man of integrity. That’s one of the things I like about you. One of the *many* things I like about you.” The flirtatious tone was back.

“Does that mean you won’t try to federalize the case?”

“Well, those decisions are made by the prosecutor. I’ll have to meet with him. Let me think about it. I’ll talk to him Monday morning and come down there after. Maybe we’ll get lucky and solve the cryptogram between now and then and we won’t need Dunlap if it tells us how to recover the diamonds. I’ll give the cryptogram to the cyber squad first thing Monday if I don’t solve it tonight. Has Mags solved the puzzle yet?”

“She’s still working on it, I think,” Rick said, shading the truth only a little.

“Okay, well, I’d better get cracking. I’ll see you Monday afternoon.”

“All right. See you Monday.”

“Good bye, Special Agent Murphy,” Martinez added, speaking for the first time.

“Wait. Am I on speaker? Rick?”

“Gotta go. Bye, Lisa,” Rick said and hung up. Then to Martinez, “Frank, you gotta believe me, I had no idea she was going to pull something like that.”

“Once a fed, always a fed. Is that it? It sounds like you two have a thing going.”

“We don’t. I swear. It’s the murder case I care about. Recovering millions in stolen property is a legitimate goal, too, but that’s not my jurisdiction. Look, I was in the FBI for three years and left as soon as I could. I’m a local boy at heart. I’ve been on the force in Buck’s Gap for over twenty years.”

“I saw her on TV. She’s a good-looking gal. That’s your business, but, ...”

“You’re right about that, but my only priority is the murder case and the assault on Margaret McPherson.”

“I’ll take your word for it, but let’s be clear. It’s your case, and I’m willing to help you with it because it’s a homicide in my county. And the assault on a police

employee is always a priority with us, too. We do crimes against the person. But I'm not here for you to get some award from an insurance company and some headlines on an FBI case. You really think they'd bargain away a murder case in exchange for recovering some diamonds?"

"I have no idea."

## Chapter 17

Mags and Victoria stood in the mud room of Butcher's house.

"This is where I was standing when he grabbed me. I'd already looked in the rec room so he wasn't there. He had to come from the garage, across the hall."

"You think the jewels are in there?"

"I think that's what Dunlap thought. That's where the worst destruction was the night of the murder. And that's where he went last night. We have to assume he solved the cryptogram and found the key and that led him here. That's the only reason he'd take a chance on breaking in again. He had to know that the place wouldn't be vacant long. He must have thought he could go right to the place and find the jewels."

"Okay, so why cuticles? I'd think that would mean in the bathroom or wherever he keeps his nail file."

"Follow me."

They walked into the garage. The cars looked undisturbed. Mags led Victoria to the workshop area. The place was not as much of a shambles as it had been the night of the murder, but on the workbench several coffee cans lay on their sides, their contents dumped all over the surface.

"Nails! Mags, you're so smart. He figured the key referred to something under the nails."

There were four coffee cans, each previously holding a different size and style of nail. Next to them were four neat piles where the cans had been carefully turned over and emptied.

"I spent the better part of an hour here the first night I was here," Mags said. He must not have known where the

gems were then. Most of the destruction was of the puzzle boxes. They were smashed to smithereens all over the floor. He didn't have the puzzle then and probably figured Butcher would hide the gems in a puzzle box."

Victoria was poking through the piles of nails with a screwdriver. "There's nothing here but nails, Mags. You think he found them and took them?"

"No. If they'd been in the nails, he would have found them the first night. He came back, so that means he didn't. And if they weren't in with the nails the first night, they weren't going to be there when he came back. He must have thought he missed something, a can with a false bottom, maybe, or some clue etched on the inside of can. I don't know. Something."

"How were these arranged originally? All these cans of nails?"

"We can't be sure. They were scattered all over until I cleaned them up. We don't have a picture of how or where they were before the killer dumped them."

They looked at the workbench. It was a handcrafted piece of furniture nicer than any custom woodwork in Mags's cottage. The workbench itself, actually a tabletop, was eight feet long and four feet high, designed for a tall man. At one end was a table saw; at the other was a metal cabinet with a series of small drawers filled with very small items like screws, hooks, picture hanging wire, and tacks. The pedestal holding up the tabletop was a set of drawers which held relatively small tools, glues, polishes and stains, a soldering set, and a myriad of things neither woman could identify. Directly above the surface and forming the back of the workbench was a pegboard with various tools hung on it, a hammer, tinsnips, three kinds of pliers, screwdrivers, wrenches, a level, a variety of hand saws, and many more. The markings on the board in the form of outlines of the tools made it easy to tell where each tool went. That section



rose about eighteen inches from the surface. Above that were two shelves about a foot apart. The first shelf held coffee cans of screws, nuts, and bolts. The gap between them showed where the cans of nails had been. The shelves, like the pedestal, were stained and polished hardwood, not plywood as one might expect. Elaborate wooden brackets supported them.

“This is where I put them when I cleaned up,” Mags said. There’s enough space for the cans so I thought that was probably where they had been. Within easy reach if you’re working here. They might have been on the top shelf, but I put the bigger items up there because there was more room on top.” She pointed to a chain saw, an electric circular saw, and a coiled heavy-duty extension cord on the top shelf. “I could barely lift some of those things. I’m sure Morris could have just reached up there and grabbed them down, but I had to get a step stool and hoist them up with two hands.” On either side of the larger tools an extension lamp was clamped.

“Let’s take a close look at those shelves,” Victoria said. The light wasn’t good since there were no windows in the garage, but she found a light switch on the wall next to the workbench and switched it on. The extension lamps blazed to life. They were much brighter than either had expected. There was plenty of light for detailed work.

Mags pulled a folding stepstool over from the corner and unfolded it. This gave her an extra two feet of height. The workbench kept her out away from the shelves about three feet, but now she could look down at the top of the shelves, something she hadn’t been able to do before because the lower shelf was just above her eye level. As soon as she viewed them from this vantage point, she could see the markings.

“Right here. He’s got the shelves marked just like the pegboard.” There were neat circles drawn on the lower

shelf and labels for each. *4" Nails. 2" Nails. Galvanized. Finishing. Screws. Nuts. Bolts.* The cans that had stood there were now lying on the workbench with their contents in piles. "This is where he kept the nails. This narrows it down."

"So what do you see? Are there any clues?"

"Not that I can see." She leaned forward and ran her hand over the surface of the lower shelf. "Smooth as glass. No markings other than the circles and labels."

She switched her attention to the upper shelf. It, too, had markings. There were no circles, but there were areas designated for the various tools. She hadn't seen them before when she had hauled the tools up there during the initial cleanup. She realized she had not replaced them in their correct spots, but she didn't care about that now. Butcher's son could rearrange them however he wanted. She shoved the tools left and right, looking under them for some sort of clue, but there was nothing there.

"This has to be it, Vic. It has to be. Dunlap thought so, too. Cuticles, nails. The connection is obvious." As she turned to face Victoria, something caught her eye. Sitting on top of the metal box that had all the small drawers in it were several rolls of paper – colored construction paper, shelf lining paper, a roll of paper towels. Small cans of specialty paints and lacquers held them in place so they didn't roll off. In the cardboard tube of one of the rolls of shelf liner she had seen a glint of something reflective. She stepped down from the stool and reached over to lift it off the box. She tilted it and out slid a tiny device that could be nothing other than a spy cam. It was cylindrical and about the size of a salt shaker. The lens in front is what had caught her eye. "Oh my lord," she exclaimed and held it up for Victoria to see.

"Is that a camera?" Victoria asked.

“It must be. And it was pointed right at the workbench.”

“Is it running now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Look for an on/off switch. Turn it off. If it has a limited memory it probably records over the oldest video. It might still have footage of the murderer.”

“That was days ago. It wouldn’t have anything that old, would it?”

“It might. Those things may be triggered by movement or by bright light and go dormant the rest of the time. There hasn’t been much activity down here in the last few days, has there?”

“Good point.” She examined the device carefully and on the back found a single button with the familiar circle and line signifying the power switch. She pressed it. A tiny LED on the back of the unit flashed three times and then went dark again. “Well, I either just turned it on or just turned it off.”

“Either way, that’s the right move.”

“I’m supposed to be a police employee, but I don’t know anything about chain of custody. This could be evidence.”

“Well, just hang onto it and ask Rick what to do with it.”

Mags put it in her pants pocket. It made an uncomfortable lump, but there wasn’t any other place to put it. She didn’t want to carry it in her hand, and she was afraid to put it down and possibly forget it later when they left. She picked up one of the coffee cans that had held nails. It was an ordinary coffee can made of thin metal. No secret compartments, no switches or buttons.

“I’ve looked at all those, Mags. There’s nothing there. Just cans and nails.”

“Let’s think about this. What are cuticles, really?”

“Skin cells?”

“Yes, I think so. But where are they exactly?”

“Finger and toes. Nails.”

“Yes ... *over* the nails. They’re flat surfaces *over* the nails.”

They both looked at the upper shelf.

“See anything unusual?” Mags said. “Something just seems out of place to me.”

“What? It just looks like a set of shelves. It’s nice wood. Probably something he made himself.”

“I don’t know anything about construction but why those brackets?”

“To hold up the shelves?”

“Well, yes, of course, but why such big wooden ones? He uses old coffee cans for the nails and screws. That metal cabinet with those tiny drawers looks like it came from a dollar store, or even a junkyard. Why go so fancy for the brackets? He could have picked up a set of nice decorative metal brackets at the hardware store that would have done the job.”

Mags leaned forward to examine the brackets more carefully. They were almost a foot tall and had been cut into a double curve with a scroll saw. Spiral grooves cut by a router on either side followed the curves of the outer edge. Each bracket was about two inches wide. They were the same dark-stained hardwood as the shelves. Mags examined the two supporting the left side of the lower shelf while Victoria did the same for the two on the right. They found nothing.

Mags mounted the stepstool again and began doing the same to the brackets supporting the top shelf. Since there was only about a foot of clearance between the two shelves, the brackets reached almost to the surface of the

lower shelf. This struck Mags as odd now that she was attuned to them. These thick brackets took away shelf space from the lower shelf. She moved the stepstool left and right to get a close look at every one of the four brackets but still could see nothing but the exquisite woodwork. She stepped down. Then she had another idea and stepped back up. She reached a finger under the bottom of the rightmost bracket. She could barely squeeze it in the half inch gap. She felt nothing but smooth, polished wood. She moved left and repeated the exercise on the next one. Again, nothing. Then the third. Nothing. Moving to the leftmost bracket she was ready to accept defeat when her finger touched something different. Under that bracket she felt a recess, a circular hole about a half inch in diameter. In the hole she could feel the end of a small dowel. She pressed upward and heard a soft click.

“Did you hear that?!” she said breathlessly.

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“There’s some kind of button under this bracket. I think I triggered something. I heard a click when I pressed it.”

With that, Victoria climbed up onto the workbench and began searching with her fingers for a gap or loose piece of wood. Mags examined the bracket again, feeling all around for something that was sprung loose. Neither found anything until Mags noticed that the end piece of the upper shelf, a thin strip of wood that had appeared glued solidly to the shelf, was now separated by about a sixteenth of an inch. She moved it and found that it slid forward about an inch. That left one inch of raw end of the shelf, the end against the wall, exposed. She looked at it and saw a small hole. There was no dowel in this one. Nothing to push that she could see, just a black hole.

“Give me a nail,” she said. Victoria handed her one. She pushed it into the hole as far as it would go, but it hit

nothing. The nail head kept it from going in any further. "It's not long enough."

"That's the longest one. Four inches."

Mags stepped down from the stool and examined the tools hanging on the pegboard. "There must be something here. He would leave the necessary tools in easy reach."

She found nothing that would fit in the hole other than the nails. Next she opened the drawers of the pedestal. There was a set of computer tools in a large leatherette pouch. She unzipped it. Inside among the implements were several long thin, screwdrivers. She selected the longest one she could find. It had a tiny Phillips head and was about seven inches long altogether, although about two inches of that length was the plastic handle, which was too thick to fit in the hole. The metal shaft and tip took up the other five inches. She moved back to the stool, stepped up and inserted the screwdriver in the hole. It hit a solid surface. She could hear and feel the thunk as she shoved it in, but nothing happened that she could tell.

"It's hitting something."

"Did you hear another click?"

"No."

Victoria was still standing on top of the workbench. She began feeling and manipulating the shelf and the brackets but could feel nothing.

"Did you push it all the way?"

"I think so."

"Let me try."

Mags climbed down off the stool and Victoria took her place. Victoria grasped the end of the screwdriver and jammed it hard into the hole. A loud pop echoed through the garage as the end bracket fell loose from the wall, held at the bottom by a delicate hinge that had been concealed

when the bracket was in its normal position. The upper surface of the bracket, the surface that had been flush against the upper shelf, was now facing outward. It had been hollowed out exposing a small compartment. Mags reached inside and pulled out a cloth bag tucked in the recess. She tugged open the drawstring and emptied the contents into the palm of her hand. Seventeen large, beautifully cut diamonds sparkled in the intense light.

“Omigod, Omigod. You did it!” Victoria squealed.

“No, you did it.”

“No, Mags, you figured it out. I just provided the muscle. What are you going to do now?”

“We’ve got to get these over to the police station. Rick has a safe there for evidence.”

“Do you want to push the pieces back the way they were?”

“No, let’s leave them open so Rick can see how the jewels were concealed.”

“Now it’s beginning to creep me out. Knowing millions of dollars of stolen diamonds were right here and a murderer was this close to them. Let’s get out of here.”

They turned off the lights and hurried out the front door. They walked down the block to Victoria’s house. Mags’s car was parked out front.

“Do you want me to come with you?” Victoria asked.

“No, that’s all right. You go back to Alek. I know you don’t get that much alone time with him. Give him a big hug for me. He’s the one who really solved the cryptogram. Just don’t tell him what we were really doing.”

“It was a team effort. We’ll talk tomorrow. I won’t say anything to Alek.”

“Okay, bye.” Mags got in her car and waved as she drove off.

When she got to the police station, the reporters were still out front milling around. One of them noticed her and pointed. She kept driving. She didn't have a key to the police station, or even to the front door to Town Hall. Unless Rick or Sally was there to let her in, she had no way in. Seeing the reporters, the mention of a shootout now leapt to the forefront of her mind. She still didn't know if Rick was okay. She kicked herself mentally for not calling him from Butcher's house. There was no way she was going to run the gauntlet of reporters again, not with a pocket full of stolen diamonds. She turned on the car radio and kept driving. The canyon blocked nearly all the local radio stations. The only one she got clearly was a San Francisco AM news station. In the ten minutes it took to get home all that was covered by the announcer was traffic and weather and then five solid minutes of ads. Nothing about a shootout in Buck's Gap. At least there was no mention of a fatality.

She was shaking by the time she entered her cottage. Raisin came running to her, as he always did after she'd been gone. He started jumping up on her legs. She scolded him but then picked him up and cuddled him, adhering to the mixed-message school of pet training. First she had to calm herself. That meant getting those diamonds and the camera put away safe. But where? She pulled them from her pocket and put them on the kitchen counter. That was no good, out in plain view. She opened her silverware drawer and put them in there. That would have to do for the moment.

Then she grabbed her house phone and dialed Rick's cell phone. There was no answer. She left a message for him to call her. She thought about saying she'd recovered the diamonds, but wasn't sure who might hear the message. Especially if Rick was out of commission for awhile. Someone else might take over. Bud? Sally? Martinez?



All she could do was wait. She turned on her television, hoping to catch some local news. It was a Sunday and all the local stations were covering the same tennis tournament Alek had been watching, or a big golf tourney at Pebble Beach. She could tune to a cable news station, but they would be unlikely to cover a shooting in a remote burg like Buck's Gap. After a bit of thought, she decided to try that anyway. The connection to the diamond heist and Butcher's murder might make it big enough to go national.

\* \* \*

Rick left the sheriff's office in Salinas just before noon. After dropping Mags off the previous evening he'd joined the chase of Dunlap's car. By the time he'd caught up with them, the car had been stopped and Dunlap was in custody. The smell of gunpowder was still evident in the air. He'd asked what happened and the two deputies gave him divergent stories. Dunlap had not pulled over for several miles so when he finally did, their tempers had been running hot. Dunlap had been ordered to exit the car but he had not complied immediately. A deputy had approached the car, gun drawn while the other one approached on the passenger side, hand on gun. It got unclear after that. The driver's side deputy had fired one round into the ground. There was some talk about the car door hitting his hand and something about Dunlap reaching into the console area of the car. Rick couldn't tell if the deputies were telling the truth or trying to justify the shot. The upshot was that no one got hurt and Dunlap was arrested. No gun was found in his car.

Rick had followed them all the way to Salinas where he'd sat through an extensive interview primarily about the shooting, but also about the incident at Butcher's

house. Then he had sat down to write out his own police report. It had been four a.m. by the time he was done. The desk sergeant had told him they didn't have the staff to do a prisoner interview on that shift, and besides, Dunlap had asked for a lawyer. They said that they'd call Frank Martinez at home when the day shift came in at seven, and Dunlap could call his lawyer then, too. He wasn't about to drive back to Buck's Gap and then return at seven, and it was too late to get a motel room. The sergeant told him he had a spare cell they could let him crash in until morning. He'd managed about two hours of sleep before activity had started.

Martinez came in at seven thirty ready to chew nails and spit tacks, but he grudgingly arranged for an interview room. Dunlap had made a call and gotten a lawyer to show up. The questioning had taken place, but that had led nowhere. The only good news was that the ski mask and gloves had been found. Now, it was noon time and Rick had had no food since dinner the previous evening and only two hours sleep. He drove to a drive-thru fast food place, ordered a burger, fries, and a milkshake and took the bag to a nearby motel where he checked in, turned off his phone, inhaled the food, and fell asleep two minutes after guzzling the last of the shake.

He woke to the overloud scream of the motel's cheap alarm clock. Those things actually work sometimes. He could have used his phone's alarm, but he didn't want to leave the phone on since he knew there would be calls. It was almost four o'clock. He turned on his phone. He had two messages waiting: one from Mags and one from Lisa Murphy. He returned Murphy's call first.

"Rick, I have some fantastic news," she gushed when he reached her. "I've got the cryptogram partially solved. I think it has the phrase 'on the premises' in it. I can't be sure because I don't have the whole thing

decrypted, but I think it means the diamonds are at the house.”

“That’s terrific, Lisa. So what’s your next step?”

“I’m going to get a search warrant for the house if I can. I’ll probably have to get the cryptogram fully decrypted to provide the probable cause I need, but when I talk to the prosecutor tomorrow we’ll see what he says.”

“And are you still planning to take over the murder case to bargain for the jewels?”

“About that. Why the hell didn’t you tell me I was on speaker and Martinez was listening? Now he must think I’m some kind of overbearing fed bent on screwing the locals for my own glory.”

*He’s not wrong*, Rick thought, but said, “I told you I was at the sheriff’s station. I thought you could tell, with all the background noise. Look, I’m a local, too. I work with these people every day.”

“I know that. I’m sorry if I embarrassed you there. But this is the biggest case of my career. Millions of dollars, over a decade of work. Anyway, this is good news. If we can get the warrant and find the diamonds without Dunlap, we don’t need his cooperation. You can go after him for the murder. Believe me, I’d like to see his ass back in jail. What’s the status of that case, anyway? Any progress after talking to Dunlap?”

“Not really. He never said a word. It was all his lawyer talking. We can probably make a case for the breaking and entering and assaulting Mags, but the murder is still the same. The prostitute has fled the area. We’ll never make a case against Dunlap with her a prime suspect, too.”

“Well, if that’s the case, it wouldn’t hurt to give him a plea deal dropping that charge. Only if we had to, I mean.”

“We don’t have to. I’m going to make that case. It’s the biggest case of my career, too, Lisa.”

“Sure. I understand.”

“I gotta go. I’m heading back to Buck’s Gap. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow. I’ll be there at one.”

He next called Mags. The phone rang six times and went to voice mail. He left a message that he’d returned her call, then grabbed his keys, checked out and headed home.

\* \* \*

Mags stepped out of the shower and heard the message machine beeping at her. *Drat!* She must have missed Rick’s return call. She dressed hurriedly and listened to the message. *Oh, well, he’s on his way back. I’ll see him in an hour or so.* She knew he wouldn’t answer his phone while he was driving, so there was nothing to do but wait. She was so nervous with the jewels in her house she was ready to bite her fingernails – cuticles and all – to the quick if she didn’t find something to occupy her mind. At least she knew Rick hadn’t been shot.

She sat down at the computer and logged onto her favorite crossword site and chose the cryptic one. That would keep her mind busy until Rick got back. She began filling some of the words.

*Prospector steals our dough and escapes with the bread* [9 letters]. Easy one – SOURDOUGH, both a prospector and a bread, and the word is hidden in the clue. After thirty minutes or so she was deeply involved in the puzzle, but was broken from the spell by the ringing of the phone. It was Rick.

“Mags, I’m finally back home. Sorry I missed your call. I was up most of the night and had to grab a few Z’s before I could safely drive back.”

“Don’t apologize. I’m just glad you’re okay. The reporters were saying there’d been a shootout. I thought you might have been shot.”

“No, no. Nothing like that. I pulled up on the scene after they’d already arrested him. One of the deputies had gotten excited and cranked off a round, but that all took place before I even got there. Fortunately no one was hurt, but it could complicate the prosecution.”

“They’re going to prosecute him?”

“For assaulting you, sure. Not the murder. We don’t have enough evidence for that. You’ll have to testify, though. He could make bail when he goes to court tomorrow morning. His lawyer already has a copy of the police report with your home address on it. I don’t think you should stay there. You’re the only witness against him. With his record he could be looking at another long stretch in jail, so he has an incentive to eliminate the witness. Do you have a friend you could stay with? You’re okay for tonight, but for tomorrow?”

“That might not be necessary.”

“Why’s that?”

“We might just have the evidence.”

“What are you not telling me?”

“I am telling you. I recovered the jewels. Seventeen diamonds.”

“No! You didn’t.”

“I did.”

“Where?”

“Butcher’s workshop. The cryptogram key was the word CUTICLES. I figured it meant over the nails. He had

a secret compartment in one of the brackets holding up the shelf.”

“Why you, you, ... genius. Where are they now?”

“I took them home. I didn’t know whether he might still be loose and coming back. That’s why I called you. I want to get them into the safe in the office.”

“Definitely. You did the right thing. I’ll meet you there in ... no, I don’t want you driving alone with those. I’ll be by to pick you up in ten minutes.”

He made it in nine. He practically plunged into the cottage when she opened the door. Without warning he grabbed her at the waist and lifted her up in the air like a father playing with a young child.

“Mags, you’re incredible!” A huge grin split his face.

Startled by the move, Mags instinctively grabbed his arms at the biceps as he lifted her. *Whoa! Is he hiding subcutaneous shot puts in there?*

“Put me down!” The words were scolding, but the face was that of the owner of a puppy who’d just chewed up the morning newspaper. She had faux anger written all over it.

He did. His hands remained on her waist; hers remained on his biceps. They stood like that for several seconds. She broke the spell. “Do you want to see them or not?”

“I’m enjoying the moment.” Neither of them let go.

“I want to get rid them. I’m going nuts just having them in my house.” She let go, which was the signal for him to do the same. He followed her to the kitchen where she pulled out the pouch with the jewels. She pulled open the drawstring, then took Rick’s right hand with her left and turned it palm up. With her right hand, she poured the gems into his.

Rick made a surprisingly loud wolf whistle in response, then put the diamonds back in the pouch.

“That’s not all,” she said. She reached into the drawer again and pulled out the camera. She handed it to him.

“What’s this?”

“A camera. He had it concealed in the workshop area, directed at the workbench.”

“A camera? Seriously? And the crime scene team missed it?”

“It really wasn’t visible until I turned on the extension lamps and stood on a ladder. That’s when I saw the reflection off the lens. You could pick up that roll and not even realize that it was a tad heavy. The camera weighs next to nothing.”

“Have you looked at what’s on it?”

“No. I didn’t want to mess anything up.”

He put the camera down and picked Mags up again. Her hands returned to his biceps. This time he whirled her around. Her prior scolding was replaced with a giggle of joy. When he stopped and put her down, her hands went to his waist. A moment later their bodies were pressed together. His head bent to meet her upturned mouth. The kiss was long and delicious.

“You solve the puzzle, find the jewels, and bring me a video of the killer. What’s next? Are you planning to arrest him and try the case, too?”

“Not so fast. We don’t know what’s on that thing.”

“Well, let’s find out. I need to make a copy. And I need to get these diamonds in my safe. Let’s go to the office.”

“Okay if I bring Raisin?”

“Sure.”

She retrieved Raisin and followed Rick to his car. They pulled up in front of Town Hall to see a small gaggle of reporters. Most of the ones who'd been there that morning were gone, lacking any action or anyone to pump for information. As Rick and Mags walked into the police station, though, the small crew followed them to the front door peppering them with questions, mostly about who got shot. The sheriff's department still hadn't released a statement.

"No one's been shot," Rick said. "One person was taken into custody. I expect to have a lot more for you tomorrow, so stick around another night. That's all for now."

"Who was arrested?" One reporter asked.

"What was the charge?" another one called out. "The murder of Morris Butcher?"

Rick started to respond, but then decided to take himself literally and say nothing more. He and Mags entered the station door and closed it behind them. The reporters could not see inside with the door closed.

He stepped over to the safe and opened it. He took out a plastic bag and placed the diamonds and the pouch into that bag, which he then sealed with evidence tape. He filled in a label carefully and pressed it against the plastic. The bag went into the safe. The camera was handled differently. First he examined it carefully. He found a tiny crack in the casing that delineated where the battery compartment was. Some prodding and poking got that compartment open. Inside he saw the edge of an SD memory card. He pressed on it and it popped out. He took that to his computer and put it in the SD slot. He placed a brand new, clean, USB memory stick into another port and copied the contents of the SD card onto the memory stick. When that was done he put the camera and the SD card in separate evidence bags.



“I can’t examine the card itself,” he explained. “A defense lawyer can claim I altered the evidence. I just made a copy without writing anything on the card itself. Now we can play what’s on it using the copy.”

He opened up the file folder on the USB stick. There was a series of video files. From the time and date signatures he could tell that the camera had recorded at irregular intervals, no doubt triggered by something environmental like movement or light. If the times were accurate, the earliest one was the morning Mags had discovered the body. That file was also the largest. He opened it with the media player. Soon the screen filled with activity, the sheriff’s crime scene team bustling about.

Rick’s face fell. “I don’t think this goes back far enough. It must have recorded over the night of the murder.”

“Darn. I thought it would help.”

“It might. I’ll have to check all the files on here. Besides, I’d like to see the look on your face when you discover the diamonds. Did you find the diamonds before you retrieved the camera?”

“No, it was the camera first. Rick, really, you don’t need to do that. I wish you wouldn’t, I ...”

But before she could stop him, he’d double clicked on the most recent video file. The first face he saw wasn’t Mags’s. It was Victoria’s.

“Hold on. You weren’t alone?”

“I’m sorry, Rick. I should have told you earlier.” The whole story came out in a torrent, how Elaine and Vivian had helped with the crossword and Victoria had helped with the cryptogram and the search. “I know I shouldn’t have told them, but I needed help with the puzzles and I didn’t want you to just have it all turned over

to the FBI. I'm sorry if I violated some FBI dissemination guidelines."

Rick scowled, then brightened. "I don't give a rat's ass about the FBI's guidelines. They won't even care. They can claim they recovered the diamonds. Lisa doesn't even have to know about the video. It's not relevant to her investigation. There's no one left to prosecute on that case. Dunlap has already been convicted and done his time. In fact, she'll get even more credit if Dunlap gets convicted of the murder. The FBI can claim the information they provided to the locals, me, led to the solution of the murder case. She'll get an incentive award and pats on the back. I know the FBI."

"Well, we wouldn't have solved it if it hadn't been for her bringing us those letters from Butcher to Dunlap with the Sudoku codes, or for that matter, the whole story of the jewelry robbery."

"True. It was joint effort between us and the Bureau. You're being awfully altruistic today. I got the impression you didn't like her very much."

"Oh, I'm just in a good mood. Something – or someone – put me in that mood, I guess." She gave him a peck on the cheek.

"You call that a kiss?" He pulled her onto his lap and kissed her hard, luxuriantly.

She came up for air with eyes like ostrich eggs. She hopped off his lap. "All right, mister. That's enough."

"You're right. We need to get this all down on paper. You're going to have to go back to the beginning while I take notes. That means my typist will have a lot of dictation to handle tomorrow." He pointed at her.

"Hmmpf."

It took them the rest of the afternoon to watch the video files and complete Rick's interview of her. He drove

her home and returned to the office to write up the notes in a formal police report.

## Chapter 18

Monday morning before opening the office Rick and Mags went over to Butcher's house so he could photograph the workshop area. The location, even the existence, of the jewels was clearly relevant to the murder case. He needed Mags there to re-enact the process of opening the secret compartment. He videoed her with his cell phone as she closed it up and then re-opened it. She also pointed out on camera just where the spycam had been hidden. Even if they didn't have video of the right time frame, they might still make a good circumstantial case that it was Dunlap. It was implausible that Butcher would have stood by and let Dunlap tear apart his workshop, his whole house even. He must have been dead by that point. And the prostitute would not have had any reason to tear it apart. She'd been there many times, it was clear from the credit card records and fingerprints, and had never attacked him. They still had no evidence she was there that night; they just didn't have the evidence to prove she wasn't. How would she know anything about the jewels? Butcher had summoned Dunlap to Buck's Gap specifically with mention of the gems. He must have intended to make some arrangement with him about them and something must have gone wrong.

When they returned to the police station reporters were crowded en masse on the sidewalk in front of the building, but Rick refused to say anything beyond "Press conference later." The first thing Rick did was update Sally on the discovery of the diamonds and the camera, then swear her to secrecy. She told him that Zirelli had just called him to let him know that Will Butcher was arriving that afternoon. Rick returned the call and gave him a summary of the investigation, omitting most of the critical details.

“His son has a right to a heads up on this,” Rick said. “By the end of the day the world is going to know Morris Butcher was a jewel thief, probably the mastermind of the largest diamond theft in California history. The press is going to swarm all over him. I’ll need to talk to him, too. He was just a kid when the robbery occurred, so I know he wasn’t involved, but he might have learned about it later and kept quiet.”

“I’m not a criminal defense attorney, but he’s still my client. I can’t let you question him without warning him. I can get a competent counsel for him.”

“You’ve been straight up with me, so I owe you, but I can’t let you tip him off. Is he coming direct to your office?”

“No. He said he’d rent a car at the airport and drive straight to your station. He wants to talk to you about the case and get the house keys. His father’s set is still being held in evidence, so the one you used from the back yard is the only one he’ll have. I don’t even have a way to reach him before that. He said his cell phone is on a different system than the U.S. uses.”

“I tell you what. I promise not to question him without you present. If he won’t talk without criminal counsel, that’s up to him, but I’m really not trying to hang something on him. I seriously doubt he had any knowledge. I just have to be thorough.”

“Fair enough. Just give me a few minutes alone with him before you start.”

“Deal. What time is he arriving?”

“Twelve oh five in San Francisco. He should be in Buck’s Gap by one-thirty or two if his plane’s on time. He might call me from an airport phone.”

The rest of the morning was spent updating the mayor, Detective Martinez, and the assistant district

attorney. All were told there would be a press conference that afternoon once the FBI got there or soon thereafter, which would be about one. He went outside and told the reporters the same thing. Most of them drifted away, eager to get lunch or coffee, or use a restroom, while they had the chance. They knew it would be a scramble to get on the air first once the press conference started. Martinez had said he wouldn't be there. He had enough to do and since the murder case wasn't really solved yet, it was going to be about the diamond heist, but he'd send a uniformed deputy to be there for crowd control. The mayor was expected to show up.

\* \* \*

Will Butcher's plane, as it happened, was forty minutes early, aided by an exceptionally strong jet stream across the Pacific. By twelve forty-five he was in the police station, accompanied by Zirelli. Introductions were made all around.

"I've already briefed him," Zirelli said. "He called me from the airport."

"Ask me anything, officer," Butcher said. "I knew nothing about this diamond heist, I assure you. I knew my father was wealthy, but I always thought it was from sound investments. I just want you to find the murderer."

Rick's questions were perfunctory, but he covered the necessary ground. There really wasn't much to ask him once he was told that Will knew nothing about the robbery, had never heard of Oliver Dunlap, and had no knowledge of any secret compartments in the workshop. He'd known his father traveled to Belgium regularly, but he thought it was because of investments he had there.

As the questioning was going on, Lisa Murphy arrived, dressed to the nines. Her dark gray suit was a fine wool, harboring a barely visible plaid of subtle shades of red and orange. The silk blouse was whiter than a pitchman's teeth and featured a plunging neckline bordered by small ruffles directing the eye toward her cleavage. Her hoop earrings matched the bracelets on each wrist. Her heels added four inches to her already imposing height while her expertly applied makeup subtracted ten years from her age.

"What's going on?" she asked, waving one hand at the pressing crowd of reporters.

"We're going to hold a press conference. I wanted to wait for you."

"And this is..." looking at Zirelli and Butcher.

"Will Butcher and his attorney, Lucas Zirelli. This is Special Agent Lisa Murphy, FBI." They shook hands. "I was just questioning Mr. Butcher about his father, but I think we're pretty much done here."

"You could have waited until I got here for that. I'd like to speak to you, too, Mr. Butcher."

"My client just flew from Perth, Australia. He's exhausted and needs to get home."

"Jesus, Rick, what is all this anyway? You could have given me some warning. Why the press conference? Just because Dunlap was arrested for the breaking and entering and grabbing Mags? No offense, but Mags isn't exactly newsworthy."

All eyes turned uncomfortably toward Mags, who'd been sitting at her desk away from the cluster of bodies around Rick's desk, although it was hard to get very far away in the one-room police station.

"None taken," Mags replied, unflustered.

When Murphy turned back to Rick he was holding an evidence bag up at eye level. "What's that?" she asked.

"Seventeen diamonds, the biggest ones I've ever seen in my life," Rick replied.

A blue streak escaped Murphy's lips. "Pardon my language, but where did you find these?"

"Mags did. At Butcher's house, yesterday."

All eyes turned back toward Mags. She smiled shyly and looked down. "It was a joint investigation," she said. "I couldn't have done it without your help. The FBI's help. I owe you a big thanks."

The implication that she was second banana to Mags stuck in Murphy's throat like a puffer fish, but she managed to force out a few words. "Good work." She turned to Rick. "What are you going to say to the press?"

"That we recovered from Butcher's residence diamonds believed to be missing from the great San Francisco diamond heist. But I was expecting you to lead the press conference. That's what I expect you to say. As Mags just said, it was a joint investigation."

Murphy's face lighted up momentarily and then darkened. "The Special Agent in Charge would want to make the announcement this big, Rick. I at least have to let him know ..."

"These reporters are driving us all crazy, Lisa. I promised them a press conference when you got here. If you don't want to do it, I'll do it myself. I'm not waiting for him. If you don't want to be a part of it, that's okay." He walked over to the sink and pulled a knife from the drawer. He slit the evidence tape on the top of the bag, then opened it. He pulled a chipped plastic saucer from the cupboard and laid the bag on it. Then he opened the pouch, dumped the diamonds into his hand, placed the leatherette



pouch on the saucer, and laid the diamonds carefully on the pouch. He started walking toward the door.

“Okay, okay. Jesus, be careful with those.,” Murphy said. “You could lose a diamond or two.”

Rick continued out the door, Murphy trailing behind. There were some reporters in the lobby just outside the police station door. Camera lights came on and a cacophony of voices met them. Rick kept walking out to the sidewalk in front of Town Hall. The mayor was there. He’d arranged for a microphone to be set up. Rick walked to it, still holding the diamonds in the saucer. Zirelli and Butcher came trailing out behind Murphy.

“What you got there, Chief?” one louder-than-others voice called out.

“I’m Chief Rick Moran of the Buck’s Gap Police Department. My staff and I have been working jointly with the FBI on an important matter. This is Special Agent Lisa Murphy. She will explain why we’re here today.” He stepped aside.

Murphy stepped forward. “Thank you, Chief Moran. My colleagues and I have been able to achieve a remarkable feat. As many of you know, the FBI was able to solve the great San Francisco diamond heist years ago. Oliver Dunlap was arrested and convicted of that crime, but only about half of the diamonds were recovered.”

A loud murmur ran through the crowd. The connection between Butcher’s murder and the diamond heist was unknown to the reporters until now.

“With the help of Chief Moran and his staff, we have found additional diamonds, believed to be from that robbery, at the home of the late Morris Butcher. This discovery was just made yesterday and we have yet to confirm that these are the diamonds from that crime, but we are confident that is just a formality. The number of diamonds recovered only accounts for a portion of the

missing diamonds. Additional investigation will have to be made to try to determine what happened to the rest of them, but it is likely they have been sold into the stream of commerce and will not be recovered.”

“Was Morris Butcher involved in the heist, Lisa?” a reporter asked.

“That hasn’t been positively proven, but we have established that he communicated with Dunlap through codes hidden in puzzles while Dunlap was in prison.”

“Where’s Dunlap now? Is he being charged with murder?” another voice asked.

“I’m going to leave that to Chief Moran to answer. The FBI’s primary involvement is the diamond robbery.”

Rick stepped to the mike again. “The murder investigation is still ongoing. I can’t comment on it. If you want a picture of the diamonds, now is the time. Absolutely no touching, and no jostling.” He held the saucer low. The photographers surged forward, but the uniformed deputy anticipated the problem and stepped in front, aided by the mayor, a man of substantial girth himself. The crowd stopped. “One at a time and stay three feet back,” Rick ordered. The crowd settled and formed a semblance of a line. The deputy and mayor eased out of the way. Several minutes went by as the photographers got their images. When they were done, Rick said, “That will be all. We’re taking no more questions. The press conference is over.” He nodded at Lisa and they turned and went back into the police station. The TV reporters all began finding a spot to do their standups while the radio reporters were already on the air.

In the station Butcher asked to get a close look at the diamonds. Rick showed them to him. “To think those were in the house when I visited Dad. I had no idea. Where exactly did you find them?” Mags stepped forward and,

after Rick nodded an okay, gave him a detailed description of how she found them.

"I'm going to want those diamonds," Murphy said after she'd heard Mags's account.

"When we're done with the murder case, you and the insurance company can get them. We need them for evidence until then. They're Dunlap's motive."

"Finders keepers. Let me know when you're ready to release them. My phone is piling up messages. The SAC is calling me. I'm going to have to get back up there and explain the whole thing to him. I'm going to tell him I didn't know anything about this press conference until I got here and didn't even have time to call him. Please don't throw me to the wolves, Rick."

"Don't worry. That's the truth. I'll back you up. It's still a big win for the FBI. He'll be happy. How many diamonds are still missing?"

"Seventeen here? Hm, that means at least three dozen still missing, but like I said out front, they've probably been sold in Antwerp. These look like they're among the biggest ones, probably because they're the hardest to fence. In terms of retail value, well, if my memory serves me right, these would be more than half Butcher's share, maybe around twenty-five million dollars worth. Wholesale would be maybe half. That one there, it looks like it's way more than ten carats. Maybe even twenty. This one, too, at least ten."

"That much?" Rick said. "Sally can you get the deputy in here. I'm going to get an armed escort and take these to Salinas myself. Let the sheriff's evidence room there have the responsibility."

"I'll get him, boss." She scurried out and returned a minute later signaling a thumbs up.

Rick counted the diamonds again, placed them back in the pouch, pulled the drawstring shut, and then put it back in the plastic bag. He resealed the bag with evidence tape and wrote the date and his initials on the tape. He pulled out his evidence log book from the safe and wrote the relevant data there, then locked the safe.

“Well, I’m taking off. We’ll be in touch soon,” Murphy said and started to step toward Rick, possibly to shake his hand.

Mags stepped between them in an almost exact duplication of the way Murphy had stepped between her and Rick days earlier. “Thanks for coming by, Lisa,” she said. “Good work. Did you ever solve the cryptogram, by the way?”

Murphy’s brow darkened and she suddenly looked five years older. “The cyber squad is still working on it,” she said icily and walked out without looking back.

“Oh, I just remembered,” Rick said to Butcher. “Do you recognize this?” He held up the spycam from the workshop.

“Ah, yes. Dad bought that last year, but he didn’t know how to set it up. I helped him when I was here. He was almost paranoid about his puzzle boxes. Why he thought anyone would steal ... oh, of course. He wasn’t worried about the boxes. It was really the gems. I’d forgotten about this. Did you get a video of the murderer?” His voice was tinged with excitement.

“Unfortunately, no. We didn’t discover this in time. It recorded over that night. We lost that recording.”

“Recorded over? It shouldn’t do that. It was supposed to keep everything until manually deleted or the disk is full?”

“Disk? It just has a memory chip. There’s no room for ...”

“No, no, no. On the computer. It has wi-fi. Whenever the chip fills up to ninety percent, it logs onto the wi-fi and dumps all the video onto the hard drive. Then it purges the oldest videos from the camera and logs off the wi-fi to conserve battery power. As long as the computer is left on, which Dad always did, it should be there.”

“You mean we may have had a video of the murderer sitting in my safe the whole time? The sheriff’s crime scene team made a clone of his hard drive for me, but I haven’t had the time or expertise to examine it closely.” He hurriedly removed the external solid state drive from his safe. It was about the size of a paperback book and had a USB cable dangling from it. He plugged it into his own computer. “Help me find it.”

Rick brought up the file directory for the drive. There were thousands of files scattered throughout dozens of directories and libraries. For chain of custody purposes, Rick stayed at the keyboard, but Butcher directed him. It took the two of them several minutes to find the right directory and files, but then there they were. There were two files dated the night of the murder. Rick double clicked the first one and the video player launched. Everyone in the room crowded around the computer monitor.

The video opened showing the back of a man’s head. Then he moved and Morris Butcher’s face became recognizable. He was holding up a puzzle box in one hand. The box went in and out of the frame. Then another man leaned into the picture, examining the box. It was Dunlap. The two men appeared to be conversing in a friendly manner, Butcher proudly displaying his handiwork, opening and closing the puzzle box repeatedly. There was no audio. The shelves were undisturbed, all the cans of nails in place. The video lasted fourteen minutes, then ended.

“That supports Dunlap’s story,” Mags said. “They were friends.”

“We’ll see,” Rick replied.

He launched the next video. It was dated an hour later than the first one. Dunlap’s face and arm soon came into view. At first it was Dunlap opening the same puzzle box Butcher had shown him earlier. Then he did the same to another one.

“Where’s my dad? Why isn’t he there?” Will Butcher said.

“Be patient.”

The video continued with Dunlap picking up a third box. He tried for two or three minutes to open it, but failed. In frustration he threw the box down hard. The impact was out of the frame, but it was clear Dunlap was becoming more impatient and more violent. He moved out of the frame two or three times, appearing to be bending down. A few minutes later he could be seen reaching up and removing the cans from the shelf and dumping the contents on the workbench surface.

“Wait, go back,” Mags cried out. “I saw something.”

Rick stopped the video and hit reverse.

“There. Stop! No, you went past it. Go forward again, slowly.”

Rick clicked forward one second at a time until Mags yelled stop again.

“There,” she said, pointing at the screen.

The frame showed Dunlap’s right arm reaching for one of the coffee cans on the shelf. A dark red spot the size of a dime could be seen on the side of his hand. She didn’t have to explain its significance. Will turned away from the screen and covered his face with his hands for a moment. When he withdrew them, tears glistened.

“There’s your proof,” Zirelli said.

“We still have to watch the rest, to show that there was no prostitute or anyone else there.” He made a note of the file name and time signature so he could find the spot again. Then he hit play again.

The video continued to the end and it showed only Dunlap. The blood spot had been visible only in that one frame. The next video in sequence was the sheriff’s office crime scene team. As Rick closed that one, the phone rang. Sally answered it.

“Rick, Detective Martinez for you. Line one.”

“Frank, perfect timing. We got him.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“Dunlap. We have proof. There’s a video of him searching the workbench area the night of the murder. He even has a blood spot on his hand.”

“I thought you told me the video didn’t go back far enough to catch the night of the murder.”

“The memory card in the camera didn’t, but it was connected to the wi-fi. The video files were on the hard drive.”

“Was that in the press conference?”

“No. It was all about the jewels. We didn’t find out about it until just now. Butcher’s son knew how the video system worked. We just finished watching it a few minutes ago. The FBI had already left. Murphy knows about the diamonds, but that’s all. I’ve got them here. They’re worth millions, more than I thought. I was going to call you. I don’t want them here. If it’s okay, I’m going to have your uniformed deputy accompany me to Salinas and put them in your evidence room.”

“That’s fine, but there’s a problem. I came from court an hour ago. Dunlap was released on bail. With this new evidence, we’re going to have to arrest him again, this

time for murder. Once he hears about the press conference, he may flee.”

“There was no mention of the video evidence at the press conference. It was only about recovery of the diamonds. I don’t think he’ll flee. He has a court date and would go back to jail if he misses that, unless he wants to be on the run for the rest of his life. He’s only facing assault charges so far as he knows, not murder. I’ll do an affidavit when I come in with the diamonds. We can get an arrest warrant on the murder and have him back in jail.”

“All right, see you soon.”

Rick hung up. “Mr. Butcher, I have to go now. Thank you for your help with the video. Here’s your house key.” He reached in his pocket and handed the key over.

“Thank you, Chief, for your work on this case. I’ll feel a lot better when this guy Dunlap is behind bars.”

“You may not want to go to your father’s house,” Sally said. “I’m getting calls from neighbors who are complaining about all the reporters there taking pictures and trying to get interviews.”

“You can stay with me for a day or two,” Zirelli said. “They’ll be gone soon.”

“Thank you. I think I’ll take you up on that.” Butcher and Zirelli shook hands with everyone and left.

The deputy who had been waiting in the lobby poked his head in and asked how much longer it would be.

“Give me a minute,” Rick answered. He opened the safe again and took out the diamonds. “Sally, you’re going to have to hold down the fort until I get back. Mags, there’s no point in you staying around. Find some place to stay tonight like I told you, just in case, but we’ll probably have Dunlap in custody by the end of the day. I want you to be safe.” He gave her hand a squeeze.

“Okay,” Sally and Mags replied almost in unison.



Rick turned and joined the officer in the lobby. The two of them headed out to the parking lot. The swarm of reporters was smaller now, many of them having gone to Butcher's house or sought out local residents who would submit to interview. Even so, they peppered Rick with questions as he headed to his squad car. He could hear one reporter holding a mike saying something about the police chief carrying the diamonds to his squad car now. As they drove off, most of the remaining reporters began to filter away.

The phone lines were jammed with calls, so Mags stayed behind for about twenty minutes to help out. When the deluge seemed to be reduced to a level Sally could handle, Mags grabbed her purse and left with Raisin. One reporter tried to get a comment from her, but she kept on walking to the parking lot. When she got there, she suddenly realized she didn't have her car there. She had ridden with Rick in the squad car. She thought about returning to the station and calling to one of her friends for a ride, but decided against it. It was only two miles or so to her house and Raisin needed a walk.

She walked around the back side of Town Hall to avoid the reporters and headed home. The route was steep and uneven and there were no sidewalks for most of the way, so by the time she reached her cottage she was tired. So was Raisin. She put the teakettle on to boil and flopped down on her sofa. She was curious about how the case was being reported, so she turned on the television. The local stations had game shows and soap operas running, not news programs, but during an ad break there was a teaser about the breaking news on the great San Francisco Diamond Heist. There was a ten-second video of Lisa Murphy standing before reporters as the announcer read the come-on. She flipped to CNN. It was showing a segment on the Middle East but a banner running at the bottom read "Millions in stolen diamonds recovered after secret codes

broken. Live report in 10.” They’d made the national news. She decided to stick with CNN.

She removed her shoes, put her feet up on the ottoman, and started to watch the news. She’d been clock-watching for about four minutes when she heard a car cruising by out front. That was unusual. Her cottage was nearly at the end of the road and the two houses farther up weren’t occupied except in summer. She got up and peeked through the front curtain. It was a Ford Fiesta! Dunlap must already be out of jail. He must know by now the diamonds had been recovered. What did he want with her? Did he want to apologize? To persuade her not to testify against him? To threaten? To eliminate her? According to Rick, Dunlap was still facing a long prison sentence for the assault and she was the only witness.

As she stood there worrying, she heard the crunch of dried leaves as the Fiesta made a U-turn on the shoulder and pulled into her driveway, blocking her car in. She needed to get out of there. She made a beeline for the back door. She reached it and opened it quietly. A knock on the front door told her Dunlap was there. The teakettle began to shriek an ear-piercing whistle and the TV was still on. He had to know she was in. She stepped into the back yard and gently let the rear door close. Just before it closed all the way, Raisin rushed out into the back yard and began to bark.

*Dang!* She didn’t have time to put him back in. She rushed to the back of her yard. The fenced portion was small, cut from the hillside and leveled, but she owned two acres of undeveloped forest beyond that. All the lots in the immediate area were like that. At the far corner of her lot was an old Flexible Flyer wagon she used to haul mulch, gravel, and other heavy or bulky garden items. She stepped up on it to help her climb over the back fence. The fence on that side backed up against a tall retaining wall for most of

its length, but in that corner the hillside fell back and she had room to drop onto the ground. When her feet hit the ground she realized she was still shoeless. Her socks, white cotton athletic socks, snagged a gnarly shrub that was growing by the fence. She tried to pull her foot free, but the sock came off her foot, preferring the shrub. She could see the socks would just prove a hindrance to her movement. The entire area was heavily overgrown due to the heavier-than-normal winter rains. She'd have to bushwhack barefoot no matter what direction she moved.

She heard the crack of glass breaking. Dunlap must be forcing his way into her cottage. She forced herself to push through the shrubbery parallel with the road, keeping low. A thorn stabbed her left foot, but she was able to stifle the cry of pain. She stopped and plucked it from her sole. A drop of blood formed where the thorn had been. She had no time to tend to it. She pushed on as Raisin's barking grew louder. He had followed her to the corner of the yard and was frantic to get out with her. Having seen his mistress use the wagon, he emulated her, running from across the yard, jumping up on the wagon and using his momentum to leap over the fence. He'd escaped under the fence before, but that had led into the driveway and out onto the street. Now as he looked around, the high growth obscured his view. He was in forest and had no idea which way to go.

\* \* \*

Dunlap had knocked three times and waited patiently, but no one had come to the door. When he heard the kettle screaming, he knew she was there. Margaret McPherson had been the name on the police report. It was convenient that her address had also been there. It was her word against his. If he could just persuade her not to testify against him, it would all be over. It was rotten luck that

she'd turned out to be a police employee. He still wasn't clear whether she was a police officer or not. A judge would throw the book at him if he was convicted of attacking a police officer, especially with his record. He couldn't take going back to prison.

She'd said they'd solved the cryptogram and Butcher's diamonds had been all over the news. That meant she knew what was going on. What she didn't know is that they hadn't found all the remaining missing diamonds. From the news conference he knew that all of Butcher's remaining diamonds had been recovered. Morris had told him that he had seventeen left, seventeen of the most valuable ones. But Dunlap still had a few that the FBI had never found. He could offer one to McPherson to keep quiet, to say that it had just been a mistake, not an attack. If she refused, well, he had other ways to persuade her not to testify.

He broke the window next to the door and reached in to unlock the door. Once inside he hurried through the rooms and quickly determined she had run out the back. Her dog was barking at the back fence; then he watched as it jumped over, using the wagon as a launch platform. He strode to the corner and looked over the fence. The dog had already disappeared, but a pair of white cotton socks snagged on a bush told him McPherson had come this way. It also meant she was barefoot. He had an advantage there.

He couldn't go to the left. The steep canyon wall pushed right up against the back fence, leaving no room that way. So it was either straight or to the right. He decided on right, the shortest route to the street. The tangle of low California bay laurel and coast oak branches tugged at his clothes as he bulled his way through the growth. A tall poison oak shrub brushed against his face but he couldn't worry about that now. Twigs and rotten branches snapped loudly under his footsteps. Stealth mode was

impossible in this environment. By the time he reached the street, his face was scratched raw and leaves clung to his jacket. He looked around but there was no McPherson. He could hear that ratty dog of hers yapping in the distance, running down the street. The pooch was probably following her scent. Dunlap took off after the dog.

\* \* \*

When Mags had heard Dunlap slam the back door to her cottage she had sought a hiding place. A huge oak tree provided refuge. She knew any movement would give away her location, so she crouched behind the tree and hoped Dunlap would go the wrong way. She had heard him head toward the street, away from her, fortunately. When his disappearing footsteps became faint enough, she pushed further into the forest. The going was rough, however, and within minutes she was exhausted. Every step required her to lift or bend a branch or trunk, or duck and squeeze between the bushes and trees. Evergreens had carpeted the ground with needles, but twigs, cones, and other forest debris made the surface of the ground, which was naturally steeply sloping, irregular underfoot. Her feet were cut and leaving traces of blood. She had picked her way only forty or fifty yards when she heard Dunlap's lumbering footsteps again. He must have realized his error and reversed course.

Although she had been moving parallel to the road, she knew that the road made a sharp turn just uphill from her home. If she continued straight she would hit the road. From there she could run up the driveway on the far side to the neighbor's house. She'd met them a couple of times, but they were summer people, a family that only came up for a month or two in July and August. She could break in there and use the phone. Despite her exhaustion, she continued her push forward, fear stabbing at her gut.

She emerged onto the road and looked around in a semi-crazed state. She was just a few feet uphill from the turn, around the bend literally and figuratively. The driveway was another thirty yards uphill to her left. She took two steps that direction and then stopped. She could hear Dunlap crashing through the forest that direction. She couldn't see him, he couldn't see her – yet. He sounded too close. If he were to break out into the open as she was running toward that driveway, she would be easy prey. She changed her mind and started running downhill, back toward her own cottage. She made the turn. Her house was only fifty yards away. She tried to sprint and began to pick up speed – too much speed. She tripped and went sprawling on the roadway, scraping her knees and shredding the palms of both hands on the pavement. The impact knocked the wind out of her.

She lay there helpless for long seconds that turned into minutes. She watched in tears as the big man loped over to her. Dunlap stood over her, a grapefruit-sized rock in one hand.

“We need to talk,” he said. He tossed the rock up and down casually like it was a rubber ball.

“Drop the rock and turn around,” a man's voice commanded.

Dunlap turned around, rock still in hand. Facing him was a rotund, grizzled figure wearing coveralls and holding Raisin in the crook of one arm and a shotgun in the other. Raisin was straining to lick the man's neck.

Mags sat up. “Oh, Mr. Carson. I've never been so glad to see anybody in my life.”

“I said drop the rock.” Carson raised the shotgun to point directly at Dunlap's chest as Mags scooted out of the way and stood up.

## Chapter 19

One month later

Mags and Raisin walked into the police station. Sally, on the phone, greeted her with a cheery wave. Rick was at his desk poring over some documents.

“Mags, thanks for coming in.”

“Sure, Rick. I got your call. How can I help?”

“I don’t need help. I thought you’d want to know. The lawyers have all worked out a plea deal. Dunlap is going to plead guilty to federal charges of possession of stolen property, tampering with a witness (that’s you), and obstruction of justice. He’s turned over all the remaining jewels in his possession, about three million dollars worth. The murder charges are going to be dropped. He’s going to get fifteen years in a federal pen, about the same as what he would have gotten for the second degree murder state charge, which is nicer for him than the state pen, which is what’s in it for him. He’ll be an old man when he gets out. There’s no parole in the federal system. You won’t have to testify.”

“Thank heavens. Did he ever tell you the whole story?”

“Yes, that’s part of it, too. His lawyer has helped him craft a statement that he’s going to read when he pleads guilty. It seems that Butcher invited him to Buck’s Gap to tell him about the arrangements he’d made for Dunlap with Zirelli. Butcher and Dunlap had split the jewels fifty-fifty right after the robbery. Dunlap, of course, had gone to prison and lost most of his, but Butcher still felt that any loot left should go to Dunlap. When he – Butcher – died, Dunlap would get all the remaining jewels.

Butcher even told him that they were in the house and the key to finding them was in a puzzle he knew Dunlap could solve. Butcher thought Dunlap would be happy to hear it. Instead, he was enraged. He thought that since he'd been in prison for all those years while Butcher had been living the high life, Butcher should give him all the remaining diamonds or else split his fortune with him. Of course Morris didn't see it that way. They argued and Dunlap, who'd been drinking, grabbed a knife and stabbed him. It hadn't been premeditated."

"I see. What about the puzzles in prison?"

"That's something they'd prearranged before the robbery, in case either one of them were to be caught. It took a while for Butcher to find out where Dunlap was incarcerated, and then he had to find out what newspapers he had access to. Once he did, it wasn't hard. Butcher didn't have to make the puzzles. He just had to buy the right newspaper, solve the Sudoku, encode his message using the numbers in the middle row, and then mail the alphabet key along with the date of the puzzle."

"Fascinating. That's great to have it all solved. I hate an unsolved puzzle."

"Me too. How about you? Is Carson angry with you? He can be cantankerous."

"Not at all. Raisin had gone running there yapping in his yard, scaring his chickens again, and he had grabbed Raisin and come with his shotgun planning to tell me he'd shoot him if he caught him again. But he ended up saving me instead. I made him a big lemon meringue pie as a thank you and he was so grateful, a week later he dropped off a dozen lemons from his tree and a half dozen fresh eggs right from his coop. So I made him another one. I think it's going to be a regular thing. I moved the wagon so Raisin can't get out now and there's been no further



problems. He's actually a sweetie once you get to know him."

"Do I have some competition now?" He took her hand in his.

"Well, I don't know. He does have a very nice lemon tree." She laughed and kissed him on the cheek. "So is the department deep in the red now?"

"There's good news on that front, too. Early spring is usually a slow period, but all the reporters have been spending network money here like crazy. The hotel taxes, sales taxes, and even the parking tickets have been filling the city coffers nicely. Once this plea deal is made public, that'll dry up."

"Aren't you sorry you didn't get a murder conviction under your belt?"

"Not at all. Justice is being done. That's all I care about. The mayor is delighted with the department. In fact, why don't you walk with me over to his office so I can give him the good news on the plea deal, too."

"Sure."

They walked across the lobby of Town Hall, past the clerk's office, and around the corner to the mayor's office. When Mags walked in, her jaw dropped. Lining the walls of the spacious lobby stood at least a score of people. She looked around and recognized Lisa Murphy, Bud Porter, Vivian, Elaine, Victoria, the mayor, Mr. Carson, Mr. Bindley, Will Butcher, Clarence and Beryl Jackson, and a few other local citizens she knew. Standing next to Lisa Murphy were a man and woman in conservative business suits.

The mayor stepped forward. "Margaret, I asked the chief to bring you here so the town could express its appreciation for what you did."

“She goes by Mags, Mr. Mayor,” Sally scolded as she walked in.

“Mags, of course. The town, and all its citizens, are grateful for what you have done, not just for helping our police force solve the first, and I hope only, murder this town has ever had, but as a wonderful contributor to the town’s civic life.”

“Enough speechifying, mayor,” Bud Porter called out. “Get to the good stuff.”

“I always obey a police officer. All right then. Mags, I want to introduce you to Gary Wetzal, the Special Agent in Charge of the San Francisco Division of the FBI.”

The male suit next to Murphy stepped forward, something in his hand.

“Mags,” he said with emphasis, then paused with a nod to the mayor, indicating, he wasn’t going to make that same mistake. A chuckle made its way through the crowd. “Special Agent Murphy has been singing your praises on this case. She tells me you single-handedly solved this murder case and recovered the missing diamonds, millions of dollars of stolen property. She says your solution of the crossword puzzle and several other puzzles I don’t begin to understand, was absolutely brilliant.”

Mags, now red as an Irishman’s nose, was shaking her head no as he spoke. She knew it had been anything but single-handed. Her mouth was still agape from astonishment and she was too dumbfounded to interrupt. Murphy was beaming a huge smile at her.

“As a result,” Wetzal continued, “A criminal has been brought to justice and stolen property has been recovered. I have this plaque I would like to present to you as a token of our appreciation.

Rick pushed her forward. She held her hand out and accepted the plaque, too dazed to read it. As the shock

started to wear off, she regretted wearing her old jeans and wished she'd put on some makeup before leaving the house. The FBI man continued talking.

"Now I'd like to introduce Florence Hart, the regional manager for Trans-Global Risk, Inc." He stepped back and the woman suit stepped forward.

"Mags, my company was the insurer of the stolen diamonds. When we paid off the claim of the diamond importers, we became entitled to the diamonds if they were ever recovered. You and your department have just saved us tens of millions of dollars. As you may know, we have offered a standing reward of twenty percent of the value of any recovered diamonds to anyone who provides information leading to their return to us. Special Agent Murphy has told us that person who deserves the reward is you. The original owners have bought back the entire lot of diamonds for twelve million dollars. As a result, I am here to offer you this check for two point four million dollars." She held up a certified check, holding it by the corners with both hands and turning left and right so the crowd could see it. She continued, "Our lawyers told me that California law prohibits an employee of a law enforcement department from accepting rewards offered for solution of crimes, including recovery of stolen property. In such cases we have always donated the reward to charities designated by the head of the department. But Special Agent Murphy was insistent that you were acting as a private citizen when you entered the Butcher home and recovered the diamonds. She lobbied very hard for you and convinced our lawyers that you were indeed deserving of the reward. Please, take the check."

Mags took the check in her hand and looked at it as the crowd broke into applause.

"I, I," she stammered. "I don't deserve this." She turned to Lisa Murphy. "Lisa, I can't tell you how touched

I am by your actions on my behalf, but I didn't do what I did by myself." She looked at Vivian, Elaine, and Victoria then over to the Jacksons. "The whole town helped the department. I may have been overstepping my authority when I went into Butcher's house, but everything I did, I did as a typ... an analyst ... for the police department. The money should go to the whole town. With the permission of the chief of police, I will designate the charity to receive this reward as the Buck's Gap Women's Auxiliary."

All eyes turned to Rick.

"Well, I haven't looked into ..." he said, unprepared for this turn of events.

"I said," Mags repeated with the volume of an opera diva, "*with the permission of the chief of police ...*" She poked him in the ribs hard.

"Right, right. The police department names the Women's Auxiliary as the recipient," he said.

"So it shall be, then," Hart announced and pointed out to Mags where she should endorse the check over to the auxiliary.

The crowd roared.

"Cake and coffee in the lobby," the mayor announced and the assembly moved through the door.

On the way, Lisa Murphy caught up to Mags and they gave each other a big hug. This was followed by Victoria, Elaine and Vivian doing the same. When the women had given way, Rick took Mags by the hand and led her out to the lobby. Someone handed him a long knife. He handed it to Mags and cleared his throat.

"Cut the cake, dear."

## Appendix

The Sudoku and crossword in the story can be accessed online at [www.ackgame.com/Cryptic/TCCC.html](http://www.ackgame.com/Cryptic/TCCC.html). The username is Mags and the password is Raisin. The URL and password/username are case sensitive. The crossword can be worked interactively online or both can be printed out from a pdf file link on that page.

### Explanation of all the Cryptic Clues

#### Across

19 *A tiny one mote* = ATOM (A Tiny One Mote – an acronym and definition combined)

33 *Kind of male with a piece of a helium nucleus* = ALPHAPARTICLE. A helium nucleus is an alpha particle. Alpha is a kind of male and particle is a piece.

37 *Crazy guys in the capital* = SALEM. Salem is “males” written “crazy” and Salem is a state capital.

40 *Fancy Eton style to wear in the frozen rain* = SLEETY. The E from Eton and “style” combined and rearranged (i.e., “fancy”) form SLEETY. Frozen rain is sleety. Capitalized words often stand for the single capital letter alone.

54 *A nice boxer doesn't end up in the cooler* = ICEBOX. An icebox is a cooler and the word icebox is concealed across “nICE BOXer”.

74 *Golfing assistants with an open fly?* = CADDIS. Caddis is a fly and a near homonym of caddies.

76 *Failed and went off course* = AFIELD. An anagram of “failed” meaning far or off course.

91 *Ruler's perverse verse in reverse* = EMIR. An emir is a ruler. Rime, its reverse spelling, is an archaic (perverse) spelling of rhyme, meaning verse, as in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Coleridge.

96 *I do act like a robber* = DACOIT. “I do act” is an anagram of dacoit, which means robber.

101 *Until now it was dark* = UNLIT. Until is an anagram of unlit, which can mean dark.

108 *Who is eloquent? That is the entire inquiry* = WHOLEQUESTION. “Who is eloquent” is an anagram; “entire inquiry” is the definition.

117 *Flat panel* = PLANE. A flat panel is a plane and plane is an anagram of panel.

126 *Deadened gulf* = ADEN. Aden is a gulf; deADENed conceals the whole word.

128 *Hill dwellers without pee in their trousers* = ANTS. Hill dwellers is the definition. “Pants” (trousers) without the P.

### Down

2 *Fast actress drives sharp instrument through Star Wars Princess* = ALEXIA. Alexia Fast is an actress. Drive an AX into LEIA to make Alexia.

8 *Biased gal hates homeless women* = BAGLADIES. Biased gal is the anagram.

29 *Outlines on paper customarily are short* = APERCUS. Outlines is the definition; the word is hidden in “pAPER CUSomarily.”

43 *Horse-drawn vehicle crashed into AK trio* = TROIKA. AK trio is the anagram.

55 *Smelly, foul rod* = ODORFUL. Foul rod is the anagram.

74 *Backward MD wore a cape* = COD. Doc backward; Cape Cod.

82 *Paper club* = CARD. Double definition. Card can mean a piece of stiff paper or a playing card.

84 *Oppressors wrong those awful repenters* = TORTURERS. Oppressors is the definition. TORT is a civil wrong and RUERS (repenters) can be written “awful” as URSERS.

98 *Confusing article published in Iranian capital* = TEHRAN. “The” (an article) and “ran” (published).

102 *Pretentious boy chased by muckraker* = LADIDA. La-di-da means pretentious. LAD followed by Ida (Tarbell, a famous muckraker).

104 *Eliot has nerve, he tells his classes* = TAXONS. T.S. (Eliot) holds axon, a nerve. Classes is the definition of Taxons.

109 *Whip that headless shrimp* = QUIRT. Whip is the definition, then squirt (shrimp) headless (no S).

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As is obvious to everyone, I am sure, this book is a work of fiction. It does not represent the views of the FBI nor does it depict any real characters.