Pulling the Trooth

A Summer Schauers Mystery

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Any similarities with persons living or dead, or even fictionalized is unintentional.
Except for certain dentists. They know who they are. Also, I am aware that the Tucson convention center doesn't look like I describe it. I used to be stationed at Fort Huachuca and enjoyed my visits to Tucson, so I wanted it in my story.

No animals were harmed in the writing of this book.
One Belgian Malinois was fed corn chips and hot dogs
but only because she is really good at sad, puppy eyes.

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ONE

"Schauers!" Eddie yelled from his office. "Schauers!"

Summer looked up from her keyboard. "Quit shouting, Eddie!"

"It's ten and we're putting…"

"The late edition to bed at ten thirty," Summer finished for Eddie, the editor in chief of the Tucson Herald Opinion. "Same as yesterday and the day before." She cocked her head to the side. "And the day before that. Hey; there's a pattern forming."

Eddie moved to the doorway of his glass-enclosed office. "Well it's after ten and we're all waiting on you." He smiled. "Same as yesterday and the day before." His smile got wider as he now cocked his head to the side. "And the day before that. Look at that; there's another pattern forming."

"Yeah, yeah." Summer finished the last sentence of her story, saved it and dragged it to the drop box folder on her desktop. "It's dropped; cool your jets, Eddie."

"And now it needs proofed." Eddie stalked to her desk. "Proofing, Schauers. And with you, that takes time."

"It's camera ready. As usual." Summer assured him.

The large man inhaled deeply through his nose.

"Puffing up?" Summer stifled a giggle.

"You need to take these stories seriously, Schauers. Seriously." He said as he approached her desk. "You're going to give me grey hair."

Summer waved a hand dismissively. "Yeah, because another restaurant opening in this sprawling city is big news. It won't last a year. Most restaurants don't."

"That's a myth." Eddie pointed a finger at her. "I hope you didn't tell the owner that."

"I tried my best to avoid Mister Groper."

"His name is Groper?" Eddie smiled wide. "Really?"

"No; his name is Hampton; g*roper* seemed to be more of a hobby with him." She said sourly.

"Well, you are in the market…"

Maxine, one of the paper's photographers and Summer's good friend walked over. "I don't think *Missus* Hampton would have been too keen on that sort of addition to their family."

"Summer Homewrecker Schauers, now there's a middle name. You should be ashamed of yourself," he tut-tutted.

"Homewrecker?" Summer stood quickly. "How about I show you why my middle name should be jab?" She bounced on the balls of her feet in front of him, throwing several quick jabs.

Eddie brought his hands up defensively. "You know I'm joking, Summer." He put his hand on her shoulder and pulled her to his side, hugging her close. "If that guy made you uncomfortable, you just say the word and I'll make sure his place doesn't even make it a *month*, much less a year," he said seriously. "Yeah?"

Summer patted the man's hand. "No, Eddie, it's fine." She smiled up at him- as a former college football linebacker, he towered over her. He had used his athletic full-ride scholarship to get a degree in Journalism, which when he didn't make it into the NFL, turned into a very good career.

Eddie scowled. "You sure? No one, but *no one* gives my reporters a hard time but me."

"Is that like the whole 'no one beats up my little sister but me' thing?" Maxine asked.

"Exactly." Eddie said. He let go of Summer and turned to face her. "Seriously; just let me know if you want me to go talk to him." He rubbed his meaty hands together. "I'll show him how I used to block."

Summer smiled. "It wasn't anything I couldn't handle, but thanks." She put her hands in her back pockets. "So what's next? Is there a Taco Tico opening up?"

"I love those places." Maxine said. "We'd finally get some real Mexican food around here."

"I believe you have offended pretty much every restaurant owner in Tucson."

"Not the Italian restaurants," Summer pointed out.

"Gads." Eddie started toward his computer. "Go redeem yourselves while I'm editing your piece..." He raised an eyebrow. "Looking for words that aren't real. Head out to the convention center. You're going to love your next assignment."

"Really?" Summer brightened.

"Nope. You're already a day late for it, in fact." Eddie jerked a thumb at Maxine. "Take Miss Michelin Stars with you." He pointed at Summer. "*Miss Summer Schauers*."

"Schauers and Stars; when you say it like that, we sound like a great team." Maxine said.

Eddie turned to her and opened his mouth to speak.

"Careful what you say next, boss."

Eddie closed his mouth, pursing his lips. "Hmmm." Was all he let come out.

"Uh huh." Maxine nodded at him. "That's better."

"Off with you two," Eddie said as he shoo'ed them with his hands. "If you make it back before eight, you can make the morning edition."

"Come on, Maxie, let's go see who's who in the zoo." Summer said.

"Convention center," corrected Maxine.

"It's probably the same thing." Summer said sourly.

TWO

Summer pivoted around in her seat, her well-worn cowboy boots dangling over two feet off the ground. "This is absurd."

"You mean having to jump to get out of your Jeep?" Maxine said. As she jumped to the ground. She turned and grabbed her camera bag from the floorboard. It was practically waist-high to her. "Why you have this thing jacked up is beyond me."

Summer stood on the doorsill of her Jeep, using the grab-bar by the windshield for balance. "It just has to be this high, Maxie." She stepped down both casually and gracefully.

Maxine walked around the front of the snow white Jeep Wrangler, stepping farther out because of the massive bumper and winch on the front. They were also white. "Why does it *have* to be so high you almost need a ladder to get in it?"

Summer gestured at a tire- it was over waist high to her. "If it weren't this high, I couldn't have these monster tires on it, of course."

"Well, that makes perfect sense." Maxine slung her camera back over her shoulder. "So, what's absurd?"

"This." Summer held her hands up in front of her, gesturing at the sprawling convention center. "This thing here. This whole convention thing that I'm supposed to cover."

"Conventions need covering too, Summer." Maxine pointed out. She let out a long sigh. "Well, we might as well get walking."

"We aren't that far out."

"It's like a mile away." Maxine pointed. They were near the back of the parking lot, well over two hundred yards away from the entrance. "There are closer spaces. Dozens of them."

Summer gestured at the two Wranglers she had parked next to. "Rules are rules. Jeeps off-road together, Jeeps park together." She patted her Jeep's hood, right on the large sticker of a cartoonish abominable snowman. "Play nice with your new friends, Miss Bumble. I know you're worried being around all these dentists but it will be okay."

"You worry me sometimes."

Summer pointed at the building. "Me? This should worry you. A *dentist* convention?" Summer dropped her hands to her sides. "Dentists conventioning right here in Tucson."

"I think it's convening." Maxine stepped quickly to catch up. "I'm pretty sure Eddie would not approve of 'conventioning'."

"You sure?"

"And the people who go to it are registrants or participants."

"I'm sticking with conventioneers. Eddie can do his editations when I get back."

"Now you're just doing it on purpose."

Summer smiled. "Maybe just a little."

"You're supposed to be on your best behavior, remember? Especially after that fiasco at the restaurant opening. You're lucky that police officer kept quiet and Eddie didn't find out."

Summer thought back. "That police officer was very understanding." She cocked her head to the side, "And he handled me professionally. Twice, I might add."

"I think the phrase is 'handled *the situation* professionally'."

"Yeah, he did that too. He was a full service police officer."

"Still," Maxine said. "Let's get a couple of nice quiet assignments knocked out before things go off the rails again."

"I write them like I see them."

"If you say so. I'll just take the photos." She glanced at her friend. "Of the conventionistas."

"Oooh, nice. I might use that."

The two women walked up to the main entrance of the Tucson convention center. There was a large banner welcoming dentists and their assistants across the entryway. There were also two eight-foot molars on either side.

"Absurd." Summer said again.

"Are you going to button another button around these respectable dentists and assistants from across the country?"

"Nope."

"Then here we go." Maxine fished a camera out of her pack as the pair walked into the center.

"Hello ladies!" A man just inside the entranceway said. "Welcome to the fifth annual meeting of dental professionals." He quickly approached the pair. "And where are you lovely ladies from?"

Summer held out her hand. "The Tucson Herald Opinion." With her other hand, she pulled a press pass from her khakis. "All the news that fits, we print."

"Nice. Very nice." The man beamed as he shook her hand. "I was hoping you'd have gotten here for the grand opening yesterday, but better late than never. My name's Ben Klugman, but everyone calls me Quincy." He let go of Summer's hand and shook Maxine's. "Pleased to meet you."

"Quincy?" Summers said.

"Sure. Because my name is Klugman."

"I have enough trouble with 'Dick' being short for 'Richard'. How do you get 'Quincy' from 'Klugman'?" Summer asked.

The man's smile faltered. "Well, you know... Quincy."

"Quincy who?"

The man's smile faded away. "Jack Klugman played a TV character named Quincy."

"Oh, so you're related?"

"No."

"I don't get it." Summer lied. Just for the fun of it.

Maxine gave a wink. "It's very clever, Quincy."

The man's smile returned. "Thanks!" He turned and pointed. "Since you missed yesterday's orientation, there are two symposiums going on downstairs in rooms 'A' and 'D'. Benefits of bartering, and the great whitening upsell. And upstairs..." He rubbed his hands together. "Oh, you're in for a treat. The extraction competition is scheduled to start in an hour. You don't want to miss that!"

"Extraction. Competition." Summer fished a digital recorder from the satchel at her hip. "Did you hear that? An actual competition dealing with pulling teeth."

"Sounds exciting?" Maxine offered.

When Summer looked back at Quincy he was staring at her ample cleavage. He quickly looked up. "Oh, it is; I suggest you don't miss it." He waggled a finger at her. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

"I can't imagine a universe where I would ever say that." Summer said. "Maybe we'll pop in early and talk to the… contestants?… Before it starts." She looked over again. "Sounds good Maxie?"

"Sure thing." Maxine held up her camera. "Say molar."

"Molar," Quincy said dutifully.

Maxine snapped several pictures of the man. "Nice."

Summer looked at her friend. "You going to be like this all weekend?"

"Oh yeah. Count on it."

When Summer looked back at Quincy, he was staring at her breasts again.

Summer had left the top three buttons of her camp shirt unbuttoned. Since it was tucked into her khakis, the shirt tended to flop open at the top. Her underwire, push up bra did the rest.

"See you, Quincy." Summer grabbed Maxine by the strap of her camera bag and pulled her away.

Maxine giggled. "Summer Klugman. How's that sound?"

"That man's not even in the running," Summer said flatly.

"So why are you not going to button one of those buttons?"

"One never knows when one may come across a handsome, successful, bachelor dentist." She smirked. "This place should be... lousy with them."

"Nicely done." Maxine said. "One with a nice last name, if my memory serves me."

"Oh yes. It definitely does."

Summer had gone through the past twenty-eight years of her life with a good bit of teasing because of her name. Thanks to having hippie parents, she had been named Summer. Which, in and of itself was bad enough, however her flower-child Serbian mother -Tammy Dordjevic- had married her free-spirit father Todd and taken his very-German family name: Schauers. For the woman formerly named Dordjevic, it was definitely a step up. For their youngest daughter Summer, it was not. This was also unfortunately true for her older sisters April and May. Since graduating college, she had been in the market for an at least moderately good-looking man with a fairly successful job and a definitely non-atmospheric last name.

Maxine stepped onto the escalator and turned around. "What's the game plan?"

"To get out of here as quickly as possible. Hopefully before happy hour ends." Summer deadpanned.

Maxine put her hands on her hips.

"Fine." Summer exhaled loudly. "How about we find a good human interest story? Orphan overcomes odds, becomes dentist."

"Nice."

"Or dentist overcomingly odd; extracts orphan's teeth."

Maxine laughed. "Not as heartwarming but the pictures would be more interesting." She turned around as she neared the top. "I have to say this is better than covering the entertainment section. I'll bet lunch will be provided."

"That would be nice." Summer followed her friend off the escalator. "Let's go see why anyone would come to a tooth pulling competition."

The pair walked into the large conference hall- there were hundreds of chairs set up in front of a large stage with a curtain running across it.

"That's a hell of a lot of chairs," Maxine said.

"Well, there's all sorts of things going on this weekend so they probably set up all the chairs for the first event so that way they don't have to go back and add more later to save time."

"Yeah; that makes sense."

When they got to the stage, they walked up a set of stairs set up off to the side onto it.

Summer spun around on the large stage to face where the audience would be. "Welcome to the show!" Summer said as she raised her hands up. "We're here to rock you, Tucson!"

She received scattered applause from the dozen or so people already sitting.

"Nice." Maxine said. She pointed at the curtain. "Let's see if anyone is here yet."

THREE

Maxine took yet another photo- this one of the third person sitting in the dental chair.

"And you're here because?" Summer began. She had spoken to the first two contestants- both were homeless men who were going to receive implants in a demonstration the following day. This man was well dressed and groomed- he could have easily been working in the business office of the convention center before coming down to sit in the chair.

"I'm getting a tooth pulled, of course."

"Well sure." Summer nodded at the man. "But why are you having it done here at a convention instead of at your regular dentist office?"

The man startled. "Oh, this is my regular dentist, of course."

"What?"

"Doctor Brushwood is my dentist." The man gestured to a side door where ostensibly the dentists were waiting.

"Well, that's convenient," Summer said, "that your dentist is from right here in Tucson."

"He's from Des Moines. Just like me."

"I don't understand... wait, are you telling me you flew down here so you could have your tooth pulled at the convention?"

The man nodded. "Yup."

"That seems kind of expensive."

"Doctor Brushwood flew me down with him. Put me up at the Ritz. I'm checking in this afternoon, in fact."

"The Ritz?" Summer looked at Maxine for help, who only shrugged in response. "Why would he do that? Does he have something against homeless people?"

"He said I've got easy teeth." The man winked. "And I'm not a bleeder."

"So you're..."

"A ringer." The man said with a smile. "I'm getting a filling tomorrow in that competition. Won't even need Novocain for it."

"Take his picture, Maxie." Summer moved beside the man, kneeled down and smiled toward her friend.

Maxine held her camera up to her face. "Say periodontal disease!" Then took the photo.

"Oh boy." Summer said instead.

"So... are you single?" Maxine asked with a wry smile, "Mister Volker?"

"What?" The man blushed. "No, not me." He held up his hands defensively, "And I know the kinds of things that happen at these conventions and I'm definitely not interested, sorry."

"All the good ones are taken, huh?" Maxine said as Summer made a face. "Well, on to the next contestant. Thanks again."

"You're welcome. See you tomorrow." The man seemed relieved they were leaving.

Summer put her arm around Maxine's as they moved off. "This is killing me." The pair walked away from the other people

sitting in dental chairs- there were ten in all. "So dentists bring their own ringer patients to competitions? These people are nuts."

"Maybe there's money involved. Or notoriety." Maxine shrugged. "I mean, if you can help yourself win a competition and can afford to bring your own playing field, why not?" She pointed at the other people. "You want to see if there's someone more interesting than the Bill 'No Bleeding' Volker, or do you want to talk to the dentists?"

"Let's hit up the dentists." Summer adjusted her press pass- she had extended her lanyard as far as it would go so that it hung just below her cleavage. "Anyone who can put up a patient for a competition can't be doing too badly, right?"

"Right."

The pair walked toward the door to the side of the large stage. There was a large man standing in front of the door. Under his crossed muscular arms, one could just make out the word 'security' in large yellow letters. His stern look ensured people knew he took his job seriously.

"Can I help you, ladies?" The man said in a deep voice.

"Hello," Maxine said- the large black man was definitely her taste in men. "We are here from the Tucson Herald Opinion, doing a piece on the convention."

"Why?" The man asked, genuinely perplexed.

"That's the same thing I said to our editor," Summer said. She swiveled around and stood beside the man, facing Maxine. "Yeah, why?"

"Because it pays the bills." Maxine said matter-of-factly. "A girl's got to eat."

Summer nudged the man with her shoulder- hers reached him at his armpit, "Well, there you have it. A gal's got to eat."

The man's terse tone returned. "So what can I do for you, ladies?"

"There's two answers to that question," Summer moved back beside her partner. "Mine is to let us in to do a quick interview or two."

"And the other?"

Now Summer nudged Maxine with her shoulder. "What can he do for you, Maxie? Inquiring minds want to know."

Maxine shot her friend a look. "Let me in to take photos of the interviewees, of course."

"I'm not sure I am allowed to do that." The man said.

"Listen..." Maxine's voice trailed off.

"Stephan." The man answered.

"Listen Stephan," Maxine continued. "We're just trying to do a cover story on the convention, nothing scandalous." Her eyebrows went up. "There isn't anything scandalous going on, is there?"

"Not during the day time." The man admitted. "The bar gets kind of rowdy at night though."

"Well then," Summer said. "How about we go in for a few minutes, take some photos and talk to the dentists real quick? Then we'll be on our way."

Maxine held up her press pass. "We'll behave, we promise."

"At least until night." Summer gave a wink. "Promise."

"You only have fifteen minutes until the competition starts." Stephan opened the door. "I hope you two are fast workers."

"Maxine is," Summer said as she walked through the door. "From what I've heard."

Maxine's already dark complexion got even darker as she blushed. "She's such a kidder." She moved into the doorway.

"Mmm-hmmm." Stephan said as he reached behind her to grasp the door handle, his face close to hers. "I'd love to tell you the real story about conventions if you're around later this evening."

"Oh?" Maxine said. The man was very handsome. "Later this evening?"

"Around seven o'clock. At the bar?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"You can bring your friend, if it makes you more comfortable," Stephan said. He smiled wide. "It's a wide open, nice and public bar that serves food too. I promise."

Maxine smiled. "Okay, I'll let you know by lunch time. Are you going to be here?"

Stephan shook his head. "No; we move around. But just go to any security guard and tell them you have a code ten-eighteen for Rover Three."

"What?"

"I'm Rover Three." He pointed at the big yellow 'Security' across his chest. "And a ten eighteen is the code for requesting a dinner break." He tapped his ear- there was an earpiece in it. "And

they'll pass the message over the network." He smiled again. "You better catch up to your friend. Just let me know so I know to hold off for my dinner break. I can give you the inside scoop on the convention."

"Okay, I'll let you know." Maxine smiled then entered the room. She looked around the large area- there were tables and chairs set up for the dentists to sit at. Over half of them were older men and women, with the rest in their mid-thirties. Several were leaning back in their chairs, relaxing. One fit and good looking man had his feet on the table, chair up on its back two legs. This was the dentist Summer was talking to, so Maxine headed that way.

"And that's when I learned I was lactose intolerant," the Dentist said.

"How interesting," Summer said. She looked at her friend and crossed her eyes. "Ahh, my associate Maxine is here. Can you snap a photo or two?"

The Dentist brought his arms up and laced his fingers behind his head. "Fire away, Max. I don't have a bad side." He smiled wide, showing off perfect white teeth.

"Oh, I can see that," Maxine said. She took a step back and took several photos. "So..." She gestured at the dentist. "You and Mister Volker looking at winning this competition?"

"Who?"

"Ahh, this is Scott Anderson." Summer pointed at a dentist two tables away. He was only a little older, but larger, and

definitely less good looking than Scott. "You mean Terrance Brushwood. He's with Volker."

Scott brought his hand from behind his head and offered it to Maxie. "Scott Anderson, D.D.S. I'm sure it's a pleasure."

"It is?" Maxine said as she shook his hand. "Golly, I've never met a real dentist before," she said in a child's voice.

"Damn straight." The man returned his hand behind his head. "Not one like me, you haven't."

"You don't say," Maxine said with mock skepticism. "Is that because you're a total..."

"Doctor Anderson, here," Summer interrupted quickly. "Is a *very* successful doctor from Nevada."

"My dental network covers from Pahrump to Needles to Kingman." Scott proudly said.

"That doesn't sound like a lot of people." Maxine remarked.

"That area, since you don't know, also includes *all* of Las Vegas, Fort Mohave, and Lake Havasu *and* all the little towns in between. That's almost three million people. That's a lot of braces, extractions, and fillings in the entire Tri-State area," Scott said matter-of-factly.

"Huh." Maxine said, not sounding convinced. "So you're part of that network?"

"Honey, I'm the *owner* of that network; Sammy's Smiles."

"Honey?" Maxine seethed. "You know..."

"So Sammy doesn't own his own teeth repair shop?" Summer said, cutting her off.

"Teeth repair shop?" Scott took his feet off the table, letting the chair clatter loudly back to all four legs. "Sammy's Smiles, since you don't seem to know, is *it* when it comes to franchise dentistry." He made little quote signs with is fingers when he said 'it'. "I have one hundred thirty-six offices spread across Nevada, Arizona, and Southern California, with five more offices opening next year." He spread his arms out wide. "If you see a dentist in the Tri-State, Lake Havasu, Las Vegas area, it's probably a Sammy's Smiles dentist. And I have plans to get bigger. Much bigger."

"Wow; I have to admit, that is impressive." Maxine said.

"Damn right it is," Scott's smile returned.

"So, why isn't it 'Scott's Teeth'?" Maxine asked. "Seems only fair, I think, with you running the whole show."

"Right?" Scott leaned toward her. "That's what I wanted, but after some market research and test audiences, 'Sammy's Smiles' sounded more family friendly. It really scored well with teen and pre-teen groups."

"That kind of sucks." Maxine observed.

"Completely!"

"You should have held out. Stuck to your guns about it."

"Right? That's what I..."

"So anyway," Summer interrupted, "Scott was telling me how these conventions have these competitions that really make or break a practice." She moved behind him and nodded slowly at Maxine. "That's why some less capable dentists try and make it easier on themselves by bringing their own patients."

"Oh," Maxine said. "Did you bring one from one of your hundred thirty offices?"

"One hundred thirty-*six* offices." Scott said testily. "No, of course not; I don't have to stoop to that kind of thing."

"So who are you working on?" Maxine asked. She snapped another picture of him.

"I am working on some homeless guy my advance team found yesterday."

"That's really nice of you, helping out homeless folks with free dental work." Maxine smiled at him, thinking the man was apparently just not good at first impressions.

"Sure, sure." Scott waved a hand dismissively. "Good press and all that. Besides with his poor diet and drug habit, his teeth are practically falling out on their own. Plus I don't even have to pay him anything. A sandwich and a box of milk afterwards and he's on his way."

"Oh." Maxine said, deciding that apparently his first impression was actually accurate after all. "Aren't you just a cup overflowing with human kindness. Or a milk box even."

"Damn right I am." Scott said. He put his hands on the table. "So you want to hear about my childhood? I was a great looking kid, too."

Summer moved around to the other side of the man. "To be fair to the other dentists, we need to talk to them as well. We can't show favorites."

"That makes sense; you can't have the less fortunate dentists actually realize they are."

"Ready Maxie?"

"Almost." She looked down at her camera and deleted all of Scott's images. "There we go."

"Got them saved for later?" Scott winked at Maxine.

"Damn right I do." Maxine looked at Summer. "Ready, Summer?"

Scott stifled a chuckle. "Summer? So you're named Summer Schauers?"

Summer frowned at the man. "At least I could name my business after myself if I wanted to, *Scott*."

"Oh, hey, listen," Scott said. "Sorry about that. I hope we can still get together later tonight for a drink."

Summer turned and walked off.

"Huh." Scott looked up at Maxine and practically leered. "So are you busy later on?"

"I'll make sure I am," Maxine said as she turned to follow her friend who had stopped at another table. This one had a woman dentist in her early forties sitting at it.

The dentist smiled at Maxine as she approached. "Hello, young lady," she said.

"Hello." Maxine smiled back. "Oh, I have to say; it's a real pleasure."

"Really?" The woman laughed. "And we've just met, too!"

"Sorry." Maxine jerked a thumb over her shoulder. "After Scott God's Gift to the World Anderson over there, the bar is pretty low."

The woman smiled. “Yes, Scott can be quite a handful.” She waggled at finger at him. “He’s a real dickens, that one.”

“Well, you’re half right,” Maxine said. She put out her hand, “Maxine.”

“Stephanie,” the woman said. “Stephanie Dixon. Glad to meet you.”

Summer leaned in. “So how do you think the competition is shaping up, Doc?”

Stephanie shrugged. “Same as always; everyone’ll do their quickest extraction, toss in a stitch or two if they need to, then the audience votes on who the winner is.”

“Okay, Doctor Dixon; I have to ask- how does one win at a tooth extraction competition?” Summer asked into her digital recorder. She held it out for Stephanie.

“Well,” Stephanie considered the question for a moment. “There’s patient comfort, bedside manner, expertise, timeliness, bleeding, and of course, style.”

“Wait, you said the audience decides the winner?” Maxine said.

Stephanie nodded. “Oh yes; we can’t just ask the patients since some of them are brought by the dentist, and sometimes they don’t even speak English.”

“Audience?” Summer said. “I never considered tooth extraction a spectator sport. At least it’s other dentists doing the judging, I suppose.”

“Oh, they’re not all dentists. Most of them aren’t, in fact,” Stephanie said.

"Dentist roadies?" Summer shook her head. "Now I've heard it all."

"Fans are fans." Stephanie shrugged.

"I'd like a photo, if I could," Maxine said.

Stephanie leaned back in her chair and tucked her hair behind her ears. "Fire away; this is as good as it gets."

"You look great," Maxine said as she took several photos of her. "And I'll get a couple during the competition as well if that's okay."

"Whatever you need," Stephanie said with a smile.

"Good luck," Summer said, "Break a leg even?"

Stephanie laughed. "That works." She looked at the clock. "You two better get to your seats; the competition is starting soon."

"Okay then." Maxine said. "Thanks again."

With a wave, Summer and Maxine left. A different security guard was at the door to let them out. The two stopped as they exited. Almost a hundred people were now seated in the audience.

"That's just too weird." Summer said. "But I guess we can stay and watch, then head downstairs."

"Right? I'm dying to hear about the great whitening upsell."

"Where's a Taco Tico when you need one?" Summer said with a headshake. She pointed. "Look, there's a bunch of seats in the front row; lucky us." They headed toward the seats.

"Maybe that's the 'splash zone'?"

"Eddie needs to send us to Hawaii or Vegas after this gig."

Maxine laughed as she turned and sat. She looked around. There was in fact, not a single person in the first row and hardly anyone in the second. “Weird.” She took several photos of the empty seats.

FOUR

Quincy stepped up onto the stage. "Hey, hey!" He shouted as he ran to the middle of the stage. "How is everyone doing?"

Cheers from the crowd greeted him as he raised his hands over his head and practically jogged back and forth across the stage like a rock star at the beginning of a show.

Maxine held her camera over her head and took a picture of the cheering people behind her. "You want to write a caption for that?"

"I'd rather not," Summer admitted.

Quincy jogged back to the middle of the stage. He pointed at Summer and Maxine and gave a wink, then went back to addressing the crowd.

"He's living the dream," Summer said as she waved to him.

"Welcome to the fifth annual ex--trac--tion com--pe--tition!" Quincy bellowed into his microphone. He stretched out 'extraction competition' to almost ten seconds as if it were the winning goal in the World Cup.

Maxine caught herself clapping as well.

"And we've got a great show in store for you today. We have nine dentists ready to show you they have what it takes to be named best puller!"

"Nine? It was ten when we were back there," Summer said. "I wonder who dropped out."

"So without further ado, let's get ready to pullll!" Quincy turned around and raised his hands over his head as he drew out the word 'pull'.

The curtain pulled back revealing the now-nine chairs. Even though the last chair had been removed, the others had not been rearranged, so there was more of a gap on the right side of the stage than the left.

Nine massive screens flickered to life above each chair.

"Oh no," Summer said as she craned her neck up to look at it.

Each of the screens went from black to a view of the back room where the dentists were seated. The images jumped and panned around as the dentists filed onto the stage, showed the cheering crowd. Several dentists panned across the audience creating min-waves as they did.

Maxine craned her neck to look up at the screens as well. "That's why no one's in the front rows." She nudged her partner. "Want to move back?"

"Yeah; back to Tampa."

"Are you kidding?" Maxine laughed. "This is where the action is." She looked over her shoulder. "There are a couple of seats two rows back. Let's go." Without waiting for Summer, she stood, folded her metal chair, laid it across the empty one beside her and stepped back a row. She repeated the action and then sat in the third row. "Come on!"

Summer exhaled loudly as she too stood. Thanks to her friend, there was a clear path to the third row. "Do we have to?"

Maxine raised her hands over her head. "Woooo!" She cheered along with everyone else.

With a headshake, Summer joined her friend. She did not cheer, however.

"Alright, alright," Quincy said, quieting the crowd. "We've got a lot of great events going on this weekend so let's get started."

"So who's missing?" Summer asked.

Maxine surveyed the group. "It's that first guy..." Maxine hesitated. "Brian? That dentist you talked to that was from Idaho or Iowa or something."

"No, that was Bill that patient from Des Moines." Summer said. "The doctor was from Nevada, I think he said."

"I need a chart." Maxine said. "Or maybe..."

"Everyone ready?" Quincy said as he raised his hands again.

"Yeah, he sure is missing." Summer said. "That's weird. I wonder what happened."

"After the show, we'll find out." Maxine said. "How does 'reputable dentist disappears in broad daylight' sound as a headline?"

"I think 'dentist suddenly develops self-respect, escapes' is probably more like it." Summer said.

"And here we go!" Quincy said. The empty tenth monitor switched to a stopwatch and began counting.

Thanks to the dentists wearing body cameras near their throats, the monitors gave a clear, high-definition view of the inside of the patients' mouths.

"Maybe we should move up a couple of rows so we can't see so well," Summer said. "This is just gross."

Within ten minutes, the entire competition was over- the quickest time being just under six minutes. It was Doctor Anderson and his meth-head patient.

FIVE

"So, a quick *quick* interview with the winner, then we go see what happened to the mysterious dentist number ten," Summer said.

"Well crud." Maxine remarked.

"What?" Summer walked behind the curtain. "What now?"

"I deleted jerk-boy's photos from earlier. Think we'll need them?"

"Crap." Summer shook her head. "I hope he's not the best story we get this weekend."

As they approached the security guard, Maxine moved slightly ahead of Summer. "Are we going to be working late, you think?"

"Why?"

"Well, I was thinking of talking to that other security guy..."

"Muscles?"

"Stephan."

"Now it's Stephan?"

"Yeah." Maxine said, "He asked me to meet him around seven at the sports bar."

"A date at the bar?"

"He said you were welcome as well. He could give us the inside scoop on the conference."

Summer nodded. “Well, that would be worthwhile. I just hope we’re not still here that late.” She gestured at the guard- this one was a lanky youth. “He was a real hunk. But if he doesn’t work out, this one might meet you... for a juice box and cookies.” The guard had his hands on his hips and was wearing mirrored sunglasses. He was looking back and forth across the stage as if he were expecting a presidential assassination attempt.

“Hello,” Maxine said with a smile to the young man. “I have a question for you.”

The youth gave a stern nod. “What is it Ma’am?” He said. “Ma’ams, that is.” He continued to pan his head back and forth surveying the room. But his head would dip slightly as he looked at Summer’s cleavage.

“Do you know Stephan?”

“Negative, Ma’am.” The youth said. “Move along, please.” He held his hand up to his earpiece and cocked his head to the side. Both women waited while he ostensibly listened to someone on the radio.

Summer figured he was staring at her breasts, since that’s where he was facing. “Incoming message?” She offered.

The youth didn’t answer but after a moment he nodded, then returned to scanning the room, seemingly oblivious to the two women standing in front of him.

“Oh, wait.” Maxine said. “Rover Three. Do you know Rover Three?”

The youth held his arms up high. “Big black guy.” He looked at Maxine- who was also black and startled. “Not that.... I mean...” He stammered as he lost his bearing.

“That’s him; tall, dark, and muscular.” Maxine smirked. “He’s really handsome, don’t you think.”

The youth regained his composure. “I’m not one to say, Ma’am.”

“You can take my word for it.” Maxine smiled. “Can you tell Rover Three... that’s Stephan... that I can meet him for his ten-eighteen?”

The youth gave a curt nod. He thumbed the mike on his radio. “Rover Three, this is Rover Six,” he snapped. He surveyed the room as he waited. “Rover Three, Rover Six,” he repeated.

“Maybe he’s on break?” Summer suggested.

“Three, I am relaying confirmation for your ten-eighteen.” He paused a moment. “Ten-four, Three. Six, out.” He looked at Maxine. “Rover Three...”

“Stephan,” Maxine interrupted with a giggle.

“Confirms the ten-eighteen.” Finished the youth.

“Thanks.”

“What does your mother call you?” Summer asked.

The youth looked left and right then leaned in, “Jimmy.” He said softly.

Summer stifled a laugh, turning it into a cough. “Thanks for that Rover Six.” She held up her press pass. “If we want to interview you about the inner workings of the convention, are you available later?” She asked.

"Sure!" Jimmy gave a wide grin. His chin dipped as he looked at her breasts again. "I'd be glad to!"

"Okay, we'll let you know." Summer said. She gestured at the door, "Now we need to interview the winner, if that's okay, Rover Six."

"Roger that, Ma'am," Jimmy said as his stern look returned. "Permission granted." He opened the door and stepped forward, scanning the room as if someone would charge the now-open door.

Maxine patted his shoulder as she walked past, "Thanks, Rover Six."

Jimmy gave a curt nod as he closed the door behind them. His hands went back to his hips and he returned to scanning the room for the potential trouble-makers he hoped were out there just waiting for an opportunity to act.

"I think you have a new friend." Maxine said.

"I have been gifted with keys that open doors." Summer said as she arched her back as they walked. "The power of the breasts is hard to deny."

"Oh, no doubt. If you give our young impressionable Jimmy a look at your boobs and a candy bar, I imagine he'd do whatever you wanted him to do. If you actually let him touch them, he'd kill someone for you. Maybe even two people. I'm talking cold blooded murder."

Summer laughed.

Maxine gestured at Scott. "There he is. The glorious winner."

Summer sighed. "Here we go."

"Back to talk to the winner?" Scott said to the approaching women. He was leaning back in his chair, feet on the table again. "What'd you think of that?"

"It was enlightening?" Summer tried. "And honestly, kind of gross."

"Well, it takes a special breed of person to work on someone else's teeth." Scott said. He smiled at her. "Listen, about earlier, I'm real sorry. I was a total jerk."

"Apology accepted," Summer said. "So." She pulled out her digital recorder. "How long have you been coming to competitions, Doctor Scott Anderson?"

He startled, "Oh, I mean... I said I was sorry."

Summer hit the pause button. "No, no. I need to make sure I get names at the beginning of interviews so I know where one stops and another begins. When I talk to the next person, I start with their title like that as well, so I don't mix people up."

"Oh." He smiled. "I get it. That's smart." He gestured at the recorder. "Let's roll."

Summer tapped the pause button again.

"This is Doctor of Dental Surgery Scott T. Anderson," Scott said formally. "I've been in practice for ten years." He smiled at her. "Yeah?"

"And how long have you been coming to competitions?" Summer asked again.

He pointed at her and winked. "Right. This is my third competition." He smiled again.

"It's okay if you expound on your answers, Scott." Summer said. "So what made you start going to them? As a competitor, I mean."

"Ahhh. Good question." He put his hands behind his head and interlaced his fingers. "I actually started going to conventions while still in medical school because as with most professional technical fields, networking is key to succeeding." He paused. When Summer nodded, he continued. "But about three years ago, my marketing director suggested I attend as a speaker. I gave several lectures at that first convention and while I was there, they had an opening in their filling competition and since I was there, I figured I'd give it a try." He shrugged. "I didn't win, but it got me started on them. Honestly, there really aren't too many ways a dentist can showcase their talents to more than just their patient."

"I see." Summer said. "And speaking of openings in competitions, what happened to the tenth dentist -Brian- that was supposed to be competing today." She gestured toward Brian's table. "He was here before it started."

Scott looked uncomfortable. "I... I'd rather not say. It would be unprofessional. Doctor privilege and all that."

"That's between doctors and patients," Summer pointed out.

"I can't say."

"Or won't?"

"Don't you want to hear more about me?" Scott asked.

"I hear you were a good looking kid," Maxine said as she took a picture of him.

Scott looked relieved the subject had changed. "Damn straight I was. In fact I won a baby competition when I was two!"

"And Brian?" Summer tried again.

"Oh, I have no idea if he was a cute baby," Scott said matter-of-factly. He scrunched up his face. "I can't imagine he was as cute as me."

Summer held her recorder up to her mouth. "Thank you, Doctor Anderson. I hope to speak with you later on in the conference." She hit the 'stop' button.

"Or maybe at dinner?" He raised his eyebrows.

Maxine took a photo of his wide-eyed expression. "That's a keeper."

"Let me think about it," Summer said. He was, after all quite good looking and, as he had pointed out earlier, very successful. *Summer Anderson* she thought. *Could be worse.* "I'll let you know by lunch time; we are supposed to be working, you know."

"Sure, sure. Oh, I'd love to give you an *in-depth* interview," Scott said. "When you have more time."

Maxine snorted.

"Okay, Scott. I'll keep you posted." Summer ignored the innuendo.

Maxine took Summer by the arm. "See you later, Doctor." She said to him as she pulled her friend away.

"He's rough around the edges, but I think the right woman could really smooth him out."

"You do realize that when he said he wanted to give you an 'in-depth interview', he really and truly meant he wanted you to sit there and listen to him talk about himself the entire night, right?"

Summer frowned. "You sure?"

"The entire *universe* revolves around that man and his career. He's not going to let anything or anyone get in the way of that." Maxine pointed at Summer's breasts. "I'm afraid to say he is immune to your magical breasts of compliance, Miss Summer Schauers."

Summer put her bottom lip out. "That hurts. Well, let's see Stephanie again. Maybe she'll talk about Brian."

The pair approached Stephanie- she was standing by her table. "Doctor Dixon," Summer said as she glanced at her table- there were papers strewn about on it and an upturned coffee mug. There was no coffee on the table however. "Can we have a quick post-competition interview?"

The woman looked at Summer. "No. No, I don't think so. I have someplace I need to be." It was obvious she was upset.

"You came in second, isn't that a good showing?" Summer asked. She surreptitiously turned on her digital recorder. "How did the competition shape up, in your opinion?"

"I really do not want to discuss it right now." She picked up her large purse and tucked it under her arm. "I really don't."

Summer tried a different approach and smiled wide. "Say, do you know what happened to that nice man, Doctor Brian Larson? He was supposed to be in that last chair, I thought."

Stephanie wheeled around. "Nice man? *Nice*?" She pointed a finger at her. "He's a pig, if you ask me! I could *kill* him!"

"Well, I..." Summer said, unsure what the other woman was talking about. "What happened to him?"

"No less than he deserved." She clutched her purse tighter. "He actually deserves worse. Far worse!" She gestured around the room. "So do these others!" She panned her hand around the room, pausing on Scott Anderson. "Pigs!" With that she barged out the door, slamming it behind her.

"Wow. That's one angry woman." Maxine said.

"Anyone else want to comment?" Summer held up her recorder and waved it around. "Anyone?"

None of the dentists -male or female- who were in the room would even make eye contact with her.

"Doctor Anderson, what do you have to say?" Summer called across the room.

"I have business to attend to," he said as he quickly stood and left.

"Wow, that was quick." Maxine said. "I didn't even get a picture of him running off. We should go find Brian, I smell a scandal brewing." Maxine said.

"Since apparently there is no chance of getting in-depthed," Summer poked her friend, "right?"

"Oh, I can guarantee it." Maxine affirmed. "Not by absurdly successful, cutest baby around, Doctor Anderson."

"We need to find out what Brian did." Her eyes got large. "You think he made a pass at Stephanie?"

"She is cute," Maxine said. "And you know how men who think they are powerful can be." She gestured at Scott. "He's so full of himself he needs to carry a backpack for the overflow."

"Oooh, mind if I use that?" Summer asked.

"Not at all. Maybe you can use it on heartbreaker Brian."

Summer nodded. "Oh yeah, let's go corner that guy." She reached for the door latch. "Wait, how are we going to find him?"

"The office should know where the ... conventionistas are staying. We can confront him at his hotel!"

"You're on a roll. Let's go." Summer put her digital recorder in her satchel. "How about 'the dentist's prying hands' as a headline?" Summer opened the door and gestured. "After you."

"Nah," Maxine shook her head. "That sounds like a Murder She Wrote episode."

"The dentist only fills twice?"

"Stop it." Maxine warned.

SIX

Summer knocked on the hotel door again. This time louder.

"Maybe he's not in." Maxine said. "He might have just gone into town to..."

The door opened slowly. Brian's face peeked out around the door with only his left eye showing. "What?" The eye got large when he saw who it was. "You! What do you want?" He said angrily.

Summer thumbed her digital recorder on. "Doctor Larson," she said. "We were just worried because you weren't in the competition."

"Yeah, we heard you were favored to win." Maxine lied.

"Did someone make you drop out?" Summer asked. "For some nefarious reason?" She leaned in. "Or did you do something that made you take *yourself* out of the competition?"

Brian stepped completely into view. "I..." He was shirtless and had a swollen right eye that was well on its way to turning black. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Oh my. Where's your shirt, Doctor Larson?"

"I don't want to talk about what happened!"

"Ahh, so something *did* happen!" Summer pointed at the man's eye. "Now I get it! You made an inappropriate advance on the lovely Doctor Dixon, and she tossed her coffee at you then

punched you in the eye." She shook her finger. "That's the least you deserve!"

"What?" Brian took a step back, letting go of the door. "Who told you that? That's... That's not what happened at all!"

Summer stepped into the doorway. "Then what's your side of the story? I suppose you're going with the old 'she was leading me on' routine?" She rolled her eyes. "Typical."

Maxine raised her camera over Summer's head and snapped a photo of the dentist. "Dental mis-procedures." She said. "Story on page three."

"What? No!" Brian said. "What are you two talking about?"

"We know what happened, Brian. We talked to Stephanie and she's really upset." Summer said.

"We just want you to admit it; you made a pass at Stephanie and she popped you one." Maxine said from behind her.

"No..." He hesitated. "That Scott Anderson slime ball caused this! And he's going to be sorry he did!" As soon as he said it, his eyes got large. "What I mean is..."

Summer took another step into the room. "Wait, what? Why would Scott punch you in the eye?"

Maxine took another picture.

"He's not the one who..." The flash made Brian blink. "Stop doing that! It's... none of your business!" He bellowed. He seemed to realize he had been backed up, allowing the reporter to enter his room. "Get out of my room!" He put his hands on Summer's chest and shoved her out the door.

"Hey!" Summer stumbled backwards as she was pushed out. "Watch the hands!"

Brian looked down, recognizing what he was doing, he jerked his hands back. "Just stay out!" He shouted as he slammed the door.

Summer turned to her friend and smiled wide.

"Wow, that guy got to first base with you." Maxine took a photo of Summer. "Reporter groped. Seemed pleased by it."

"Pleased isn't the word I'd use." Summer started down the hallway. "Let's get back to the convention center. I want to talk to Stephanie and Scott again."

"You think this is your story?"

"It's either this love triangle or the great whitening upsell. What do you think?" Summer said over her shoulder.

"Let's go find them." Maxine said as she caught up.

SEVEN

"Hello again, ladies," Quincy said as Summer and Maxine walked into the main foyer.

"Do you hang out here all day?" Summer asked.

"I'm..." Quincy looked nervous. "Dealing with an issue at the moment." He brought his hands up defensively. "Completely off the record, please."

Summer nodded. "Sure, sure." She smiled. "Does this have to do with that black eye the esteemed Doctor Larson is now sporting?"

"I really don't think I should be discussing that," Quincy said. "The convention center prides itself in..."

"Relax, Quincy." Summer put her arm around his shoulder and led him toward the escalators. "Oh, we've already talked to Brian. And Stephanie. Right Maxie?"

Maxie caught up with them. She sidled up to Summer and reached into her satchel. "We were just at his hotel room, in fact." She took out the recorder and turned it on. "He said that he was hit by Doctor Anderson of all people. He seemed pretty upset about it. He even said he was going to get even. We're thinking lover's triangle."

"That's a logical assumption," Summer said to Maxine,. "A very logical assumption."

"Thank you." Maxine gave a small curtsy. "I try my best."

"Well... I wouldn't jump to *that* conclusion." Quincy stammered. "Not at all..."

"So you're going with him getting punched in the eye for no reason, Quincy?"

"Those two have been having... friction since they arrived."

"Oh?" Maxine held the recorder behind Quincy's head so Summer could see it. "That's a shame. Two professionals not getting along. How unusual. Especially with a woman in the mix."

"Well, Doctor Anderson has those dental clinics..."

"They are 'it' in the Tri-State area, so I've been told." Summer said, making quotes with her fingers when she said 'it'.

Quincy rolled his eyes. "Everyone gets told that. Anyway, Doctor Larson has a similar business endeavor out west. Nevada and California, if I remember correctly. I don't think it's as big as Terrance; From Seattle to Eugene, I'm the orthodontic king of the I-5 corridor." He said as he now made quotes with his fingers. "Really, those three are the most successful of the dentists here by all accounts ."

"So what's the problem? Their offices are a thousand miles away from each other. What do they care about each other?" Maxine said- she was from Dallas, Oregon- just west of Salem and Interstate Five. "Family Ortho Specialists are all over the place. Hell, my parents took my little brother to one of them for braces a few years ago. What's the big deal?"

"It's... complicated." Quincy said. When they reached the escalators, he looked up and down. "Which way are you going?"

"So there is something going on between those three crazy kids!" Summer said.

"Up or down?" Quincy asked again tersely.

"We're going... down?" Summer guessed. "We're going to check on a lead before lunch, I think."

"Excellent." Quincy side-stepped to the 'up' escalator and stepped onto it. "I'll see you ladies later." He turned and looked forward, obviously not wanting to say anything else.

"You know, I have a feeling he was going to pick whichever way we didn't." Maxine said. "So what lead are we running down?"

"I want to talk to Scott again. Get his side of the story."

The pair got on the escalator going down.

"You know, I don't see how Scott could have hit him." Summer said.

"Why's that?"

"Because Brian's right eye was swollen."

"So?"

"Scott is right-handed."

"How do you know that?" Maxine asked.

"He was writing something when I walked up to him."

"What does that prove?"

"Well," Summer said, "Usually when you punch someone in the face, you swing with your dominant hand. And you end up hitting the side of the face that is on the same side as what you swung from, which is the opposite side in relation to the person

who was hit. So if Brian's right eye is swollen, then someone left-handed hit him."

"Is this something you learned in your Krav Maga classes?"

"That and being left-handed means I notice when other people are left-handed." Summer said. "So shirtless Brian was lying to us." She snapped her fingers. "He said Scott *caused* him to get hit in the eye, not that Scott actually hit him in the eye!"

"Why would he say that? And why are Scott and Stephanie so upset?"

"We shall see."

When they got to the bottom of the escalator, Stephan was standing with his back to them, surveying the massive room.

"Making sure folks don't go up the down escalator?" Maxine said as she stepped beside him.

"Maxine," Stephan said with a smile. "What are you two up to?"

"Just regular reporter stuff." Summer said, noncommittally.

"That's not what I hear." Stephan said with a raised eyebrow.

"What?"

"Harassing folks is regular reporter stuff?" Stephan said with a smirk. "Didn't know that."

"Who; us?" Summer feigned innocence.

"I heard over the radio that there was a complaint made about some reporters harassing someone in their hotel room."

"Who; us?" Maxine said as she fought not to smile.

"Caused a ruckus."

Summer laughed. "Ruckus? Must be some other reporters out causing ruckuses. Ruckusi? Is it like cactus?"

"Ruckuses." Maxine said.

"You two." Stephan shook his head.

Summer looked at Maxine. "I can't believe Brian complained after he groped me. Big old handfuls of *my* tits, and *he* complains. I should be offended."

"What?" Stephan startled. "He what?"

"Forget she even mentioned it." Maxine said.

"That's not right, Summer." Stephan said. "I can have a talk to him about it if you want."

"You and Eddie could take turns talking to him, I imagine."

"Who's Eddie?"

"Never mind." Summer smiled genuinely at the man. "I appreciate it, but it's fine."

"Okay then." Stephan waggled a finger at her. "So what are you harassing folks for?"

Summer looked away. "Lying to the press."

Stephan let out a loud, hearty laugh.

Summer and Maxine waited.

"Are you through, *Sir*?" Summer finally said.

"Wooo!" Stephan wiped his eyes. "Sorry, you really caught me off guard there. I can't believe that someone told a lie to you lovely lady reporters." He grinned. "You want me to bring him in? Rough him up?" He started laughing again. "Read him the Constitution?"

"Okay, okay," Maxine said. "We're going to go back to our story, you go back to standing still."

"See you at seven?" Stephan said hopefully.

"As long as we're not arrested, right Maxie?" Summer said.

"What?" Maxine did a double-take. "*Arrested*?"

"We'll be fine." Summer took her friend by the arm and pulled her away toward the large double doors leading to one of the conference rooms. "Let's see which is better." She pointed at the a-frame sign in front of the doors. "Crowns or indirect fillings."

"What? What's an indirect filling anyway?"

"Who cares?" Summer said. "All we need to do is find where the esteemed Doctor Scott Anderson is."

"And maybe even Doctor Dixon to see if she'll talk about why she was upset once we get her alone. The plot thickens!"

"I agree." Summer walked through the doors then stopped- the conference room was mainly empty. "Huh. I guess we'll never know what an indirect filling is."

"Well someone here might know where Scott is. Let's ask that guy over there." Maxine pointed at a man sitting at a table. He was bent over, writing in a notebook. "He seems studious."

"And left handed," Summer nudged her friend. "Did you notice?"

"No," confessed Maxie with a frown.

The women approached the man from behind- he never looked up from his writing. When they got closer, they walked in a

broad arc to approach him from the front so they wouldn't startle him.

"Excuse me," Summer said. She smiled when the man looked up. "Sorry to interrupt you, can we ask you a question?"

The man looked from Summer to Maxine and back to Summer. "Are you dentists?"

"No." Summer said. "We're reporters." She held up her press pass. "I was hoping you would have some idea where Doctor Scott Anderson might be. We were thinking he was here for the discussion. Were you in charge of the symposium by any chance?"

The man nodded then looked down at his notebook. "Doctor Anderson." He flipped several pages. "He won the extraction. And he's expected to place in fillings tomorrow. Tri-State practice."

"That's him."

The man held up the notebook. There was a large pencil sketch of Brian in the center of the page. The rest of the page was filled with writing- probably about the doctor. "Doctor Anderson."

Maxine leaned in close to her friend. "That doctor is naked. He sketched him naked."

Summer patted Maxine's shoulder. "Ahh, yeah." She said. "Are you... a dentist?"

The man stared at Summer for a long moment then flipped to a blank page in his notebook. "Who are you again?"

"Summer Schauers. I'm a reporter for the Tucson Herald Observer," Summer said nervously. "All the news that fits, we print?"

The man looked at her again. "Hmmm." He started sketching.

"Oh boy," Summer buttoned a button on her shirt. "You really don't have to do that."

"Is it S-h-o-w-e-r-s, or S-c-h-a-u-r-e-s?"

Summer cringed. "The second one?" She buttoned the next button up- only the top wasn't buttoned at this point and it would be a struggle to get it to.

Maxine stifled a laugh.

"Hmmm." The man said. He didn't look up from his sketching.

Summer fought the urge to move closer to see what he was drawing. "Do you know where he would be, by any chance?"

"Eating lunch. Doctor Anderson always eats his lunch early. He's always done eating before anyone else. He's a fast eater. And an early eater."

"Thanks." Summer said. She looked at Maxine. "Let's go."

"You want to see how it turns out?" Maxine smiled. "You know; just out of curiosity."

"I dragged you into this room, I can drag you out of it," warned Summer. "Let's get up to the café."

"Fine, fine." Maxine waved to the man. "See you."

"I really hope not," Summer said.

The man didn't look up from his notebook as the two women left.

When they got out of the room, Summer shuddered. "Eeesh; that was creepy." She rubbed her hands together. "I need a shower now."

Maxine laughed. "Hey, maybe now you have a groupie."

Summer cringed. "Or a stalker." She looked down at her chest. She unbuttoned the second button down. "I'm afraid what the sketch is going to look like."

"I'm glad to see you two are having a good time," Stephan said as the two approached the escalators.

"We just met the creepiest man ever," Summer said.

"No way." Stephan shook his head. "You think *Earl* is the creepiest one here?"

"Earl? You know his name?"

"He's... unusual but harmless." Stephan said. His eyes dipped to Summer's chest. "Uh oh."

"What?"

"I see you've buttoned a button." He winked. "I can't wait to see Earl's sketch of you." He cocked his head to the side. "He's actually really good. Some of the dentists have paid him for portraits. Course, he doesn't do clothes when it's for himself." He smirked. "Man, I can't wait to see his sketch."

Summer shuddered again. "Eeesh! Now I have the creeping jeebies, thanks for that."

Stephan laughed again. "So where're you two off to now?"

"The café." Maxine said. "That's on the main floor?"

"Right," Stephan said. He pointed to the far end of the room. "It's on that side of the building. Don't talk to strangers on your way and keep your top on."

"Thanks for the advice." Summer shoved Stephan. He didn't move. She did a double take at him. "Okay, I'm done with this floor."

"See you." Stephan said to Maxine. "Stay out of jail."

"So far, so good." Maxine waved as the pair walked up the escalator.

"Okay, we need to play it cool with Scott. Let him do the talking." Summer said. She unbuttoned the third button of her shirt again.

"Right." Maxine said. She held up the digital recorder. "I'll handle the recording." She clipped it to the strap of her camera where it could be mistaken for an accessory. "And I'll keep an eye out for left handers."

"Excellent."

The pair reached the top of the escalator quickly since they walked up the moving stairs.

Maxine pointed. "Hey, there he is!"

Summer turned to look. Scott Anderson was walking away from the café back toward the room where the tooth extraction competition took place. "Done already? He is a fast eater. Thanks Earl. Let's go, Maxie." Summer picked up a jog.

Maxine quickly caught up with Summer and grabbed her arm. "Whoa, whoa. Why don't we see where he's going first? See who he's going to meet, even."

Summer slowed to a walk. "Yeah; that's a great idea."

The pair walked quickly to stay in sight of the dentist as he marched toward the extraction competition room. When he got close to it, he stopped and took out his phone. He swiped his finger across it a couple of times, ostensibly checking his messages. He looked from the room he was heading toward and then the bathroom. After two iterations, he went to the men's room.

"Oh. Well." Summer said as she stopped. "That was weird."

Maxine laughed. "Yeah, what's up with that?"

The pair stood and watched the restroom for a while.

"Do you think someone texted him and told him to go to the bathroom?" Summer asked.

"Who does that? Texts someone to tell them to go to the bathroom? Is his mother still checking up on him?" She raised her voice an octave. "Did you go pee-pee yet today, Scotty?" She lowered her voice. "No, Mom." She raised it again. "You better go make pee-pee. Just in case."

"I'm dashed." Summer stared at her friend. "At him for going in there, and for you saying 'pee-pee' twice."

"Maybe it's his urologist?"

"You aren't helping."

Maxine held up a finger. "Or whoever he was going to meet said they were going to be late, so he decided to go to the bathroom first."

"Okay; that's better." Summer said. "Crud. So now we're waiting."

The pair stood and watched the bathroom door for almost ten minutes.

"How long is he going to stay in there? Think he saw us?" Maxine said.

"No, I don't think so." Summer shook her head. "Alright, I'm going in." She started for the door. "He's not getting off that easy."

"Summer, you can't do that." Maxine said. She looked around. "You're going to get us kicked out of here. Eddie will *kill* you if you don't come back with a story."

"That's what I'm doing." Summer said. "Wait for me and keep an eye out."

"For who? The police?"

Summer opened the door. "Here goes nothing." With that, she ducked into the bathroom.

Maxine walked a couple of steps from the door and leaned against the wall, trying to look unsuspicious.

EIGHT

Summer peeked around the privacy wall into the bathroom on the left side and saw no one. After seeing there was no one at the urinals on the right side of the room, she quickly moved past them to the stalls and ducked into the first one that was open- a large handicapped stall.

She turned and started to sit on the commode then decided to just stand in front of it in case anyone else came in. Then she decided that a man would only stand at the urinal so she turned and squatted down, holding onto the grab bars for balance in front of the commode. She listened closely but didn't hear anyone.

With a grimace, she got down on her hands and knees and peeked under the stalls- there was no one in any of them on that side.

"Damn." She said as she stood. She started to wipe her hands on the back of her pants but stopped. Holding her hands out in front of her, she opened the stall and went to the sink, quickly washing her hands with soap.

Emboldened, she dried her hands with a paper towel as she moved around the rear of the large bathroom to the mirror-image row of toilets and urinals on the opposite side. When she got to the edge of the wall, she put her paper towels on the floor and once again knelt down to look under the partitions. Half way

down, there was a pair of legs sticking out where someone was sitting on a toilet.

"Oh man," Summer said. She stood and moved down the stalls, ducking to look under the door. When she reached the door the feet were behind, she steadied herself and knocked.

"Hello?" She said in a deep voice.

When no one answered again, she pushed on the door. It opened slightly.

"Hello? Doctor Anderson?" She called tentatively. "Are you okay?" She pushed the door open a little more. "Please don't have your pants down."

She took a deep breath, steeled herself then pushed the door open.

Scott Anderson was sitting on the toilet. There was a large kitchen knife sticking out of his chest. "Oh dear." Summer absently noticed that the handle of the knife was angled from the left. "At least your pants are up."

NINE

On numb legs, Summer walked out of the bathroom. She looked left and right for her friend.

"Over here," Maxine said.

Summer stumbled to her. "Scott..."

"Scott. Good; he was in there."

Summer leaned against the wall. "He was."

"Did you talk to him?"

Summer shook her head. "He's..."

Maxine put her hand over her mouth. "Oh no, he was..."

Summer nodded.

"He was *going*? Gross!"

Summer shook her head. "He's... He's..."

"He's?" Maxine coaxed.

"Gone."

"He was done going? That's not as bad."

"He was *gone*, gone." She looked at her friend. "Dead gone."

"He's dead? On the toilet? You mean like Elvis?" She shook her head.

"Not unless Elvis had a knife sticking out of his chest to go along with his bad heart."

"What?" Maxine's mouth went back to her mouth. "How? Who?"

"I don't know." Summer pushed herself off the wall. "But it was someone who was left handed."

"How do you know that?"

Summer made a stabbing motion with her left hand. "The knife was angled from the left like someone did like a roundhouse stab on him." She kept stabbing as she leaned on the wall again. "Stabbed in the chest. Like this."

Maxine put her hand on Summer's arm, bringing it down. "Okay, okay. I get the picture. We need to do something."

"You're right."

"What do we do?" Maxine hissed.

"I'll guard the door and you go get Stephan. He's security after all."

Maxine nodded. "Okay. Are you okay?"

Summer nodded. "Yes. Go get him. I've got the door." She pushed herself off the wall again and walked to the door. When she got there, she leaned against it. She looked over. Maxine still hadn't moved. "Go!"

Maxine startled and ran to the escalators, camera bag banging on her hip as she went.

Summer rubbed her temples. "Brian Larson is punched in the face. By someone left-handed. Scott Anderson is angry with Brian. So is Stephanie. *He got what he deserved*." Summer looked out at the main floor of the convention center. Many people had left to eat lunch at local restaurants so it wasn't very crowded at the moment. "Brian said he would get Scott. Now Scott is dead.

Stabbed by a left hander." She rubbed her hands together. "Is Doctor Dixon next?" She frowned. "But who is left-handed?"

"Someone's left-handed?" Stephan asked. He put his hand on Summer's shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"I just saw a dead man." Summer said.

"Maxine told me." He keyed his mic. "Rover Three, requesting Q at main floor, male restroom. This is a code... one. Code one."

"What's a Q?" Summer asked.

"And a code one?" Maxine added.

"A code one is an unconscious or otherwise unresponsive person. That will get the paramedics moving this way."

"What's a Q?"

"It's not a what, it's a who." Stephan said. He pointed to Quincy who had been standing at the top of the escalators. He was now sprinting towards them.

Quincy skidded to a stop. "What is going on?" He hissed. "Who's unresponsive? Is anyone giving first aid?"

"It's Doctor Anderson," Summer said. "He's in here." She patted the door.

"Did he slip?" Quincy started to move her. "Why isn't anyone providing first aid?"

"He's actually a... Code Zero." Stephan said.

"No." Quincy froze. "No, come on. You're all pulling my leg. No one dies at the conference center."

"Well, that is still technically true," Summer said. "Doctor Anderson was murdered."

"What?" Quincy said loudly. He ducked is head. "What?" He whispered. "Are you sure?"

"The large knife sticking out of his chest was a pretty good indicator." Summer said.

"We need to secure the area," Stephan said. He keyed his mic. "This is Rover Three, main floor men's. I need two units at my location, immediate." He waited until two other security officers responded. "Okay. We can keep this quiet for a little bit, Mister Klugman, but we do need to let the police know."

"Fine, fine," Quincy said. He looked at the door. "This isn't going to look good."

"Hey!" Summer exclaimed. "Wait a minute."

"What?" Maxine said.

"You saw him go in. I saw him go in."

"Yes," Maxine said. "We did see him go in."

Summer put her hand on Stephan's shoulder. "And I just found him dead."

"That is unfortunate," Stephan said. "I'm real sorry about that."

"No. After I found him, I came out here and stood by the door while Maxie went to get you."

"Right. So?"

Summer brought her hands up plaintively. "So!"

"So," Stephan looked at the door. "That means the murderer is still in there."

Everyone turned to look at the door.

"I'm not going in there," Maxine said. She looked at her friend. "And you aren't either."

"Let's go Stephan. I'll watch your back," Summer said.

Stephan looked around. "Where the hell is that backup?"

"We can't wait. They might be destroying evidence as we speak!"

"I'll wait for security and have them keep everyone out." Quincy said.

"Let's go."

"Summer, you can't."

Summer pointed at the door. "We need to get in there, Stephan."

"Keep an eye on my back," Stephan said. "I don't want any trouble in there."

Summer nodded. "You got it. I don't take Krav Maga, Brazilian Jiu Jitzu, and Taekwondo for nothing."

"Yeah, how long?" Stephan pulled on the door handle. "Please tell me you didn't just start taking classes last week."

"About seven years. I'm a brown belt in B-J-J and a Second Dan black belt in Taekwondo."

"I don't know what that means," Stephan admitted.

"I could kick your ass." Summer said matter-of-factly.

"Nice. How about you?" Stephan asked Maxine.

"Oh, I go to the classes too."

"Only to flirt with Sensei Jack," noted Summer.

"That's not... okay, that's true."

"Great." Stephan smirked. "Let's go." He opened the door and stepped in.

Summer entered right behind him. "If it gets down to it, just stay out of the way so you don't get hurt."

Stephan looked over his shoulder at Summer- at six feet two, and very close to two hundred-thirty pounds; most of which was muscle- he towered over her. "What do you weigh?"

"Almost a hundred thirty pounds." Summer balled up her fists. "And it's all attitude."

"Almost huh? Okay then." Stephan sidestepped to look into the left side of the bathroom.

"That's the side I saw him in."

Stephan crouched down and turned his head upside down to look under the stalls. "I see one pair of feet, half way down."

"That's him. I did the same thing on the other side first but didn't see anyone."

Stephan stood. "So they had to have been standing on the toilet seat. Stay close." He moved into the open area between the stalls and the urinals. He edged closer to the stalls and as he walked, he pushed the doors open, making sure they were empty as he made his way cautiously toward the stall that held the dead doctor. Summer was close behind him.

Half way there, he stopped and looked at Summer. "Are you watching our backs?"

"Oh!" Summer turned sideways so she could see behind them. "Okay, let's go."

"I don't have a good feeling about this." He started walking again.

Summer walked sideways, looking forward and back as she did. "I can't believe they don't have partitions between the urinals," she remarked.

"It happens in a lot of places."

"That's weird. I mean... you just.... weird."

"Some ball parks just have a long tile wall with water running down it that we just pee on."

"That's gross."

"While I was in the Army, sometimes there weren't even partitions on the stalls in some of the older buildings."

"That's gross *and* weird. You would think...."

"You know, we're potentially sneaking up on a murderer, not discussing the aesthetics of male restrooms." Stephan pushed another stall door open.

"Sorry."

"Two more to go."

"Okay."

When they got to the door that Doctor Anderson was behind, Stephan paused. "Ready?"

"There was no one in there but Scott."

Stephan pushed the door open slowly.

Doctor Anderson was slumped back sitting on the toilet.

"At least he's wearing pants. I thought you said he was stabbed."

Summer peeked around the large man. "He was. Hey! Someone took the knife!" She exclaimed. "They must still be in here," she whispered.

"I think they know we're already here by now."

"Check the other stalls."

"Whoever it was, is now armed." Stephan pointed out. "So make sure you're keeping an eye out."

"Got it." She patted his shoulder. "I got your back."

Stephan made his way down the remaining row of stalls, pushing doors open as he went. When they got to the end, he turned to face Summer. "Okay, now this is getting real. That means they have to be between us and the exit on that side." He pointed to the other side of the bathroom. "And they have a knife, *and* they have no problem sticking it into people's chests."

"Okay." Summer said nervously. "Let's..." Her eyes fell on the door behind Stephan.

"What?"

"Where's that go?" She pointed.

Stephan looked at the door. "That's a janitor's closet. Mops, brooms, cleaning supplies. That main door is the only way in or out of here, of course." He reached for the knob.

Summer took a step back. "They might be in there!" She hissed. She brought her hands up and placed her feet a little farther than shoulder-width apart as she took a fighting stance. "Knife first."

"What?"

"You always deal with the deadliest weapon first. Ignore the open hand, get rid of the knife." She flexed her fingers. "Oh yeah. Open it." She took a couple of hops on the balls of her feet. "Do it."

"You're a little bit crazy, you know that?"

"Would you want meek and cowering right about now?"

"Point taken." Stephan glanced at her. "You want point?"

"No; if they stab you, I'll take care of them. Just make sure you get stabbed in the arm and not some place lethal."

"Hell, now I don't want to open it." He smiled. "I hope Maxie isn't as crazy as you are."

"She's the sane one; you'll be fine." Summer cocked her head. "She skydives though. And hand glides." She shook her hands then made fists again. "Come on, open it."

Stephan opened the door.

Both stared at the hallway that disappeared into the darkness.

"Where the hell does *that* go?" Summer said. "And why is there a hallway in a janitor's closet? Did old woman Winchester design this place?"

"I truly have no idea." Stephan said.

"How have you never seen this?" She gestured into the darkness.

"This is my first week here," Stephan said. He looked at the side of the bathroom they hadn't gone down yet. "Just a sec."

"What?"

Stephan took off at a jog, punching the stall doors open as he went. When he got to the end, he jogged back to Summer. "It's

clear that way." He pointed. "They had to have gone down there. Wherever 'there' goes."

"See if those other security guards have gotten here yet. I'll keep an eye out."

Stephan pointed a finger at her. "You are not to go down that hallway."

"Who said I was going down that dark hallway?"

"I'm just saying..."

"Why would I do that before my muscle-bound knife catching partner comes back?"

"I'm serious, Summer. You seem like a nice woman and I'd really hate to see you get hurt."

"Don't you worry." Summer said.

"I'll be right back," Stephan said. He turned and ran for the bathroom entrance.

As soon as Summer heard him push it open, she bolted into the darkness.

TEN

Stephan pushed the door open and stepped out. There were two security guards standing with their backs to the door.

"Well?" Quincy asked as he crowded the man. "Is he dead?" He whispered.

Stephan nodded. "Yes, Sir. Doctor Anderson is really most sincerely dead."

"Where's Summer?" Maxine asked.

"And the murderer?" Quincy looked at the door. "Did you find him?"

Stephan shook his head. "Apparently there is a back door to the bathroom. And a hallway. You know about that?"

Quincy nodded. "Of course."

"What? Why in the world is that there?"

"That's so supplies can be brought in without rolling carts of toilet paper, soap, paper towels, cleaning supplies, whatever, through the convention center." He shuddered. "Or plumbing equipment."

"But..."

"We have appearances to maintain, you know. People who come to events here are here for that event, and not be distracted by all the work that goes on behind the scenes. There are corridors that lead to each of the restrooms, concession stands

and conference rooms that don't have an exit that leads directly outside."

"So that's where that hallway leads." Stephan frowned. "Just great."

"Hallway?"

"The one that you just described."

"But how did you see into that? Those doors are always locked and the keys are strictly controlled."

"Where is Summer?" Maxine asked.

"That door was open, Sir," Stephan said. "The murderer not only got out that way, they took the murder weapon with them."

Maxine stepped up right next to Stephan. "Where is Summer?"

"She's guarding that back door."

"Guarding the back door." Maxine said. "Oh hah-hah. You honestly think she is just standing there patiently waiting for you to come back?"

Stephen looked at Maxine for a moment. "Oh hell."

Maxine pushed past Stephan, "I have to go find her!"

Stephan grabbed Maxine by the arm. "It's too dangerous for you to go in there. There's a murderer on the loose. An armed murderer."

"And my friend is running after them as we speak." She struggled against his hold on her. "Come along if you want, but I'm going!"

Stephan exhaled. "Fine, let's go." He looked at Quincy. "Mister Klugman, I'll keep you posted on what we find."

Quincy looked from Stephan to Maxine and back. "Okay, I suppose."

"You need to be here to meet the police. You have called them, haven't you?"

"I..." Quincy started. "Wanted to get an official statement from the paramedics first."

"She said there was a knife sticking out of his chest," Stephan said.

Two paramedics came jogging over, pushing a gurney.

"Where's the patient?" One asked.

"Let's go!" Maxine pleaded.

"That will get the ball rolling," Stephan said. He tapped his ear piece and pointed at Quincy. "Switch to channel ten. It'll be just you and me. I'll keep you posted." He let go of Maxine and pulled the door open. "He's on the left side, about half way down, Gents," he said over his shoulder as he reentered the bathroom, Maxine close behind.

"I can't believe you just let her go by herself," Maxine said as they moved quickly to the back of the bathroom.

"I told her not to go," Stephan said. "She promised she wouldn't go."

"Oh? Did she promise, or just repeat back what you said to her?"

Stephan thought back to their conversation. "That woman." He stopped at the doorway. "Okay, you stay behind me at all times, you got it?"

"Sure thing."

Stephan picked up a broom and handed it to her. "Did you join in on any of those combative classes?"

Maxine shook her head. "I didn't even get a date out of them." She smiled, "Are we still on for dinner?"

"If we make it through this, sure." He started down the corridor. As he went, the lights in the ceiling came on. "That's something at least."

"Look behind us," Maxine said as they went.

Stephan turned to look. Thanks to what seemed to be a mere ten-second timer, the lights just inside the corridor had already turned off. "Wow. This is like the absolute perfect place for a horror movie." He started walking again. The lights ahead of them flickering on as the ones behind went off- they walked in a 15-foot bubble of light. Stephan tried door knobs as they passed them but they were all locked. "At least no one can sneak up on us. Just keep an eye out behind us for lights coming on."

"If this is a horror movie, we need to make sure we don't split up." Maxine said. "That's a sure way to get yourself killed."

"Or have sex." As soon as he had said it, he regretted it. "I mean..."

"What do you mean, exactly?" Maxine asked innocently.

"All of a sudden I want to run into that knife-wielding murderer."

"I'll change the subject instead."

"Thanks."

"Do you think you should...?" Her voice trailed off as they came to an intersection. The hallway now ran off to their left and right as well as straight ahead.

"Oh man." Stephan looked in all three directions. "Which way do you think we should go?"

"There's no telling which way Summer went."

"Or the killer."

As they looked, the lights around them went out.

Panicking, Maxine swung the broom at the ceiling in a broad arc trying to get the sensors to turn the lights back on. As she finished her swing, she hit Stephan squarely in the face. Just as the florescent lights flickered back on.

"Oh!" Maxine dropped the broom and moved to the man. "I was trying to get the lights back on."

"It worked; I'm seeing white and blue spots." Stephan said. He rubbed his face. "I knew I should have stayed with that armored car company."

Maxine put her hands on Stephan's chest. "Are you okay? I'm so sorry!"

"I'm fine." Stephan rubbed his face again. "Just take it easy with that broom." He looked down at Maxine and smiled.

Maxine smiled back up at him, her hands moving up to his shoulders. She stretched up, standing on her toes. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"With you guarding my back, I think I am." He bent his head down toward hers.

The lights went off around them.

"Just a sec." Stephan said huskily. He waved a hand over his head. Dutifully, the lights flickered on again.

Maxine was still on her toes. Now however, her eyes were closed and her lips were puckered.

Stephan laughed again. "You trying to get us killed?"

Maxine opened her eyes and took her hands off his shoulders. "Oh!" She said embarrassed. Then it was more angry than embarrassed: "Oh!"

Stephan smiled at her. "Afraid of the dark, are we?"

Maxine snatched the broom off the floor. "Let's try that way. Mister..." She realized she did not know his last name. "Stephan." She pointed the broom down the corridor to the right. The lights flickered on in that direction.

"Yes, Ma'am." Stephan said. He started down the hallway but after just a few steps he skidded to a stop.

Maxine bumped into his back, hitting him in the head with the broom because she was looking the other direction to make sure other lights didn't come on behind them.

"I'm going to take that thing away from you."

"Sorry! Why did you stop?"

"There's the knife." Stephan gestured at a large bloody knife. "That's a chef's knife. A ceramic, as seen on TV chef's knife, in fact."

Maxine peered around the large man. "Do you know if it's from here?"

"It shouldn't be."

"But there are restaurants in the convention center."

"We do have a couple of pretty exclusive restaurants in here, but good chefs always carry their own knives to and from work. The ones in the sports bar aren't anywhere this fancy." He waved his hand to keep the light on and keyed his mike with the other. "I hope he remembered to switch to channel ten. Q, this is Rover Six."

After Quincy responded, he continued: "We found the murder weapon. Go down the main corridor to the first intersection, then to the right about fifteen, twenty feet." He paused again. "Not yet; we'll keep looking." He nodded after Quincy spoke. "No trouble at all."

"Oh!" Maxine said. She pulled out her camera and took several pictures of the knife.

"What was that for?" He waved his hand again.

"You never know." Maxine pointed. "Let's go that way; there's no way Summer didn't see that thing."

"I agree." He stepped in front of Maxine and continued down the hallway. After another two dozen paces of trying doors, Stephan found a door that was slightly ajar- as if it had been opened then closed gently so that it didn't latch. "Here we go. They had to have gone this way." He looked at Maxine. "Stay close. If we surprise anyone, you get back in here and run all the way back to the bathroom where the paramedics and police are."

"But."

"No discussions. Back to the bathroom. Got it?"

"Fine."

Stephan pushed down on the latch and eased the door open. He peeked in. "Conference room two." He said as he stepped in.

"Where?" Maxine looked into the room. They were in the back room of where the extraction competition was. "That's weird." She let go of the door as she stepped in.

"Don't let that..."

The door latched shut behind Maxine. "Uh oh." She tried the door but it was now locked. "Uh oh."

"Close behind you." He finished. "There's no way Summer came this way or she'd have circled back around to us."

"Let's go back to the bathroom and take a different hallway." Maxine said.

Stephan shook his head. "No way. If the police are there now, they will never let us just go wandering around their crime scene." He tapped his silver security badge. "I'm just a pathetic Class-D agent to them."

"But." Maxine looked at the door. "We need to find Summer." She turned to look at Stephan. "What if because of me..." Tears welled up in her eyes. "My stupidity..."

Stephan moved to Maxine and put his arms on her shoulders. "Don't say that. She can take care of herself." He wiped a tear from her cheek. "Let's go find another way in." He looked around. "Now that I know about these service corridors, I can get us in."

"Really?" Maxine smiled.

Stephan nodded. "Really." He put both hands on her cheeks, cupping her face.

"Really." Maxine repeated softly. She stood on her tip toes again.

Stephan bent down slightly. When his face was close to hers he whispered: "Yup." He then took her by the hand and started out of the room, pulling Maxine with him. He didn't look back because he didn't want her to see his big grin.

"Oh, you're playing with fire, mister." Maxine said. "Mister..."

"Rains," Stephan said. "Stephan Rains."

"Wait, your last name is Rains? Like water falling from the sky?"

"Like that old monster movie actor, Claude Rains." He looked back at her. "No relation."

Maxine laughed at the irony. "Wow."

The pair ran down the stairs of the stage. There were several people sitting in the room chatting. "Has anyone come in here, in the past twenty, thirty minutes?" Stephan asked.

"I just came in," a man said.

Stephan shook his head. "No, sorry. I mean has anyone come from back stage?" He jerked a thumb behind himself. "From back there."

"I was the first one here," Stephanie Dixon said. "No one has come that way."

"Are you... okay?" Maxine asked.

Stephanie waved a hand dismissively. "I'm fine. Brian and I talked. It was... a silly misunderstanding is all." She smiled. "Everything is fine now."

"Do you know about..."

Stephan grabbed Maxine's arm. When she looked at him, he shook his head.

"So what are you sitting here for?"

"There's a roundtable discussion about franchise ownership starting up soon."

"Okay, thanks." Stephan started walking away.

A thought occurred to Maxine. She planted her feet so Stephan couldn't pull her out. "Franchise dentist offices?"

"Yes." The man said.

"Who was leading the discussion?" Stephan asked, picking up on Maxine's train of thought.

"It was Doctors Brushwood and Anderson." Stephanie said. "They should be getting here soon, I think."

"Really? Both of them?" Maxine asked. "Both of them are on their way?"

The man nodded. "Yeah, I think the roundtable was an excuse to recruit for their networks." He smiled. "Or at least I hope it will be, anyway."

The others nodded in agreement.

"That's why we're waiting," Stephanie snapped. "Unless you know something I don't." A smile played on her face. "Do you?"

"Nope. Not at all." Stephan took Maxine by the hand and pulled her away.

"So Terrance and Brian were going to give their business pitches together." Maxine whispered. "Interesting."

"Outside," Stephan whispered back as he picked up his pace.

Maxine snapped a photo of the people before she was dragged off. "Is this going to become a habit for you?"

"Just want to keep an eye on you is all." Stephan said. When they got to the door, he stopped, pulling Maxine alongside him. He brought his arm up over her shoulder, resting his forearm on it.

She looked up at him, shoulder nestled against his chest near his armpit. "What'd we stop for?" She smirked. "Not that I'm complaining."

"Shhh. Look." He pointed with the hand that was on her shoulder as he brought his head lower, near hers. "Look; the police are here. They're going to tape the whole area off, talk to all the witnesses for as long as that takes, and basically bring our search to a standstill because their priority is finding the killer."

"Were you a cop?"

"I was an MP in the Army." He looked down at her. "We're going to go out this door and into the next conference room on the right. And we're not going to draw any attention to ourselves."

"How are we going to do that?"

He pulled Maxine closer to him and slid his arm down to her waist. "We're just going to amble over there like a nice couple out for a walk. Don't even look in that direction." He started out the door. "Just act like you're paying attention to me."

"If you insist." Maxine purred. She moved her hand around his waist as she fell in step with him.

The pair exited the room and turned toward the other door.

Maxine stole a glance toward the bathroom. There was a group of people there, many of them looking around, but no one seemed to notice them.

"Stop looking that way."

"Oh." Maxine rested her head against his shoulder as they continued to walk along. It felt very comfortable. And natural. "Yes, dear." She said as her hip bumped against his thigh.

"Yeah, that works for me." Stephan confessed.

"We're in," Stephan said when they turned the corner into the room.

"Like Flynn." Maxine coo'ed as she swiveled in front of him, their bodies were practically touching.

"We need to find Summer." Stephan said.

"Summer who?" Maxine smiled hungrily.

"Maxine!"

"I'm kidding," Maxine said as she let go of him. "Okay, how do we get back into the secret corridors of the Tucson Convention Center?" She smirked. "That sounds like a Nancy Drew game."

Stephan reached behind his back and switched the channel on his radio. "If they are used by housekeeping, then housekeeping can let us in."

"Will they?"

"Sure, to them I'm an all-powerful Class-D agent." Now he smirked. "My level of power all depends on the audience." He keyed his mike. "Housekeeping office, this is security Rover

Three. I need a key assist, please." He let go of the button. "Politeness is absolutely free."

Maxine smiled at the man.

Stephan nodded. "I am in conference room one, main floor. I need into the access corridors. We have a... Signal Forty that found their way in from the main floor men's room." He cringed as he waited for a reply. His grimace turned to a smile. "Appreciate that. We'll be standing by the door." He let go of the button. "Let's go." Once again he took her hand and led her to the back of the room.

When they got there, someone was pounding on the door from the inside.

"What the?" Stephan said. "Who is in there?" He said into the crack along the doorjamb. He put his ear to it. His eyes got wide. "Stay put, we have a key coming!"

"What's a signal forty? And who is in there?"

"A signal forty is a lost child." He pointed at the door. "That's Summer."

"Summer!" Maxine moved to the door. "We'll get you out, just stay put!" She pressed her ear to the door. She looked toward the entrance. "Where is housekeeping?"

Stephan put his ear to the door. His eyes got large.

"What is it?" Maxine said.

"She said someone's coming."

Maxine's hands went to her mouth. "Oh no!"

Stephan cupped his hands and shouted into the crack of the door. "Run, Summer, just run and make all left hand turns so we can follow you!"

The banging continued on the door only twice more then stopped.

Both Stephan and Maxine put their ears to the door.

It was quiet in the hallway.

"Summer!" Maxine pounded on the door.

It was a long ten minutes before an elderly man walked in. He was holding a key with a long yellow ribbon tied to the ring. As he walked, he twirled the ribbon around. "Lots of places to hide in there, Mon," he said in a heavy Jamaican accent. "Hope da kid don' run off too much."

"Open the door, please." Maxine said.

"Yeah, Mon," the man said. "I jus doin' in." He smiled at the pair. "You two must be having good looking kids, no?"

Stephan pointed at his badge. "I'm the one that called it in," he said with a smile. "I'm helping the lady out."

"Yes, I." The man laughed as he finally opened the door. "No offense, meant by it." He gave a short bow. "Dere ya go."

Maxine pulled open the door. The hallway was dark and empty. "No! Summer!"

"Dat me sister's name." The man said. "Need any-ting else?"

"Can I keep the key so we can get back out?"

"Sure ting." He handed over the key. "Jus get it back to the housekeepin' office, Mon."

"You got it, Sir; thanks. I'll let you know when we find her," Stephan said. "Let's go, Maxine. To the left." As he entered, he kicked something with her foot. Thanks to the lights coming on, he was able to see what he had kicked to the far wall - It was Summer's digital recorder. Stephan bent to pick it up. "Let's keep moving and I'll see if she recorded anything that can help us."

ELEVEN

Summer craned her neck, listening for the bathroom door to open. As soon as Stephan pushed on the door, Summer bolted into the dark hallway even before the door shut.

She was relieved that the lights seemed to turn on as she went. Unfortunately, she was able to run faster than them flickering on so she had to slow to a walk.

As she often did, she took out her digital recorder to gather her thoughts: "So... something is going on between Doctor Stephanie and Brian. Or was going on. And Scott is involved somehow. Then Brian gets a black eye and I'm pretty sure it wasn't Stephanie because she's not left handed." She considered that. "Unless something was in her dominant hand. Like Brian's shirt!" She pantomimed holding someone's shirt with her right hand and punching with her left.

Summer tried doors as she went- none were open. "She grabbed his shirt then punched him. Did she rip it? But there's no way Brian went from that waiting room with all those other dentists all the way back to his hotel without his shirt. So why was his..." She came to the intersection and looked in all directions- there were no lights on. However, with the lights turning off so quickly, the odds of actually seeing where someone ran was nonexistent. "Unless Brian's shirt was covered with Scott's blood

instead of coffee!" As she stood, the lights around her went off. She stood in the darkness gathering her thoughts. "No, that's not possible because they were all alive when we saw them, then later we saw Brian in his room, then Scott later on. There's no way he could have gotten back before us, found Scott and killed him." She frowned as she tried to figure out what happened. A thought from her own past popped into her head. "Coffee! She tossed her drink on him and because the cup was in her hand, she punched him left handed. He didn't duck because he was dealing with coffee in his face! Hah!" She turned off the recorder then started down the hallway to the right.

After several steps, she saw the knife. "So there you are." She bent down and looked at the knife. "How did you get here? And why?" She turned on her recorder. "So the knife was tossed in the secret hallways." She looked at the blood on the knife. "Huh." The blood seemed to lead back to her as if the knife had slid on the floor leaving a trail of blood.

"Tricky, tricky." She stood and looked over her shoulder. "So you tossed the knife this way and ran." She turned off her recorder and started down the left hallway, trying doors as she went. After about a hundred yards, she reached the end of the hallway- none of the doors were open. She turned and looked the way she had come. The hallway was completely dark. "Oh man; this is like a horror movie." A terrible thought occurred to her. "And I'm in a dead end!" Panicked, she started walking towards the intersection she knew was ahead of her. "Stay off lights, stay off," she said to the lights at the far end of the hallway.

With great relief, she reached the intersection. Summer leaned against the wall and turned her recorder on again. "So Stephanie and Brian have a falling out. Probably over sex." The lights went off around her. "And the triangle includes... correction, *included* Scott somehow. Stephanie and Scott and Brian? Or just Brian and Scott?" The intersection got a little less dark. "Huh?" The lights at the far end of the hallway ahead of her turned on as someone ostensibly entered it. "No." She whispered. "No, no, no." The next set of lights turned on as whoever it was approached slowly. She cringed as she tried to slip into the hallway where the knife was without the light turning on.

The lights seemed to blast on around her. She looked at whoever was approaching. She couldn't make out who it was more than it looked like a tall man walking slowly toward her. It was definitely not Stephan. Or Maxine.

Summer started down the hallway, trying doors as she went- they all seemed locked. "Come on!" Thirty yards ahead, in the still dark hallway, she saw lights shining under a doorway. "Please, please, please!" She sprinted to the door and tried it.

It was also locked.

Summer pounded on the door. "Hello? Help! Someone open the door!" She looked toward the intersection- it was a good sixty or seventy yards away- as she banged on the door. The lights there were now off but a brightening in the hallway let her know whoever it was, was still moving her way. "Help!" She shouted at the door again.

She looked toward the intersection- it was definitely brighter.

"Who is in there?" She heard a voice say on the other side of the door.

"It's Summer Schauers; I'm a reporter from the Tucson Herald Opinion! I'm stuck in here!" She put her ear to the door to listen. She could hear a man and a woman speaking to each other but couldn't make out what they were saying. "Someone's coming!" Summer shouted. She looked at the intersection. It wasn't lit up yet, but the lights were definitely coming closer.

She banged on the door again then heard Maxine yell her name, then 'We'll get you out, just stay put!'

Summer banged on the door again. "Stay put? For how long?" She looked at the intersection again as she hit the door. "Open up, someone's coming!" She hit the door with both hands, dropping her digital recorder. She put her ear to the door.

She heard Stephan yell 'Run, Summer, just run and make all left hand turns so we can follow you'. She looked left- toward the intersection. It was so bright whoever it was had to be almost there. "Oh man." She turned and sprinted farther down the hallway, almost hitting a door where the corridor turned right after only a dozen yards. "Oh man!" She said again as she wheeled around to look the way she had come.

The light in the intersection came on.

Summer turned and sprinted down the hallway. After a mere fifteen paces, she came to a dead end. "Trapped." She spun around. "Okay. Okay." She took several deep breaths as she tried to calm her nerves. "Deliberate strikes, weapon first." She said as she thought back to her years of fight training. "Overwhelming

force." She hopped as she took several jabs. "Head and neck strikes." She took several deep breaths to put more oxygen in her bloodstream to better prepare for any grappling with her attacker. "Okay, okay." She lowered her hands, hoping to look defenseless to whoever was approaching to gain an element of surprise.

The light at the corner came on.

"Okay, okay." Summer shifted to put her dominant side toward her attacker. "Here we go." She shook her hands but kept them at her sides.

Earl stepped around the corner. His hand was behind his back. "Oh, hello, Summer. Summer Schauers, the reporter."

Summer focused on the man's hidden hand, preparing for his inevitable charge. "That's me. You're Earl, right?"

"I'm Earl."

"Hello again, Earl." Summer said.

"What are you doing in here? This is private back here." He shook his head. "It's private."

"I got lost." Summer said. He still had not moved his hand from behind his back. "I'm trying to find the way out."

Earl took a step toward her. "I can help you with that."

"Earl." Summer said sternly. "I want you to listen to me, okay?"

"Okay."

"If you get any closer to me, I'm going to hurt you. I mean, really really hurt you." Summer raised her hands into a fighting stance. "But I don't want to, so you need to stop walking towards me."

"Why are you going to do that?" Earl said. He took another step toward her.

"Because I am trapped in this hallway and I'm scared, and you are blocking the way out."

"Oh. Okay."

The pair looked at each other for a long moment.

Then the lights in the hallway went out.

TWELVE

Stephan looked left and right- the hallway was dark in both directions.

Maxine sidled up to him. "Which way do you want to go?"

"I told her to go left, to go left every time and we would follow her." Stephan pointed left. "Let's go."

"Right behind you, Mister Rains." Maxine bumped him with her shoulder.

"Do we need to get you another broom?" Stephan said as he started down the hallway. "Hey, can I call you Witchy Poo?"

"You. May. Not." Maxine said flatly. Secretly, she was elated that Stephan had come up with a pet name for her. She just wasn't sure of his choice.

Stephan laughed. "Okay, I won't."

"Good."

"Until I confirm it with Summer."

"So Miss *Schauers* and Mister *Rains* get to decide *my* nickname?"

Stephan laughed again. "Sounds about right to me."

The pair did not notice the light going on behind them.

"As long as I get to tell her why before you get to say anything," Stephan said. He pointed at the floor. "You'd think they would have gotten the knife by now."

"Yeah." Maxine said. She walked to the left. "Left again. That's going to take us back to the bathroom, right?"

"And that means Summer ran straight into the police officers." He put his arm around Maxine. "And she's safe and sound."

Maxine let out a long sigh. "I thought a dentist convention would be boring." She held her camera out and took a selfie with Stephan. "This thing is going to give me grey hair."

"How about hashtag grannyhair?" Stephan said.

"And the subject changes now." Maxine said as they continued toward the bathroom.

THIRTEEN

Summer crouched down, now planning on grappling with Earl instead of dealing with a frontal attack. As she squatted, the lights came back on.

Earl had not moved. "Did you fall down?"

"What's behind your back, Earl?" Summer asked, deciding on a straightforward approach.

Earl brought his notebook into view. "Do you want to see your sketch? I finished it. If you don't like it, please don't hit me." He looked worried.

Summer self-consciously stood. "I'm not going to hit you, Earl. I'm sorry. I was just scared. You scared me is all."

"I'm sorry." Earl said. He held up his notebook. "Do you want to see your sketch? I finished it, you know."

"I heard that, yeah." The last thing Summer wanted to do was look at what was potentially a nude sketch of herself drawn by the strange man. Even so, she nodded. "Sure, Earl. I'd be glad to look at the sketch."

Earl smiled wide and leafed through the notebook as he approached. When he got to her, he turned two more pages then smiled again. "Here you are." He shifted to her side so they could both look at it together. Even so, he did not get so close that they actually touched.

Summer looked at the sketch. "Wow." She said. It was an almost-photo perfect pencil sketch of her face, and shoulders. "Oh." She said when she noticed the sketch continued down to include her breasts to just the very top of her nipples. "Oh." She said again. "You don't... show these to people, do you?"

"These are private." Earl said. He smiled. "Do you want me to do a drawing of you? I charge twenty dollars for a drawing. It's a very fair price, twenty dollars."

"It sure is." Summer said. She read what Earl had written about her. "So I'm a reporter for the Tucson Herald Opinion and I'm pushy and smart. And I'm a good friend."

"That's what you are." Earl said. "When I learn more, I'll write it in." He brought the notebook back in front of himself and pulled a sharpened pencil out of the spine. "You are tough." He said as he wrote. "You are afraid of the dark." He looked at her. "That's okay; I don't like the dark either."

"Thanks." Summer cringed, not wanting to ask the question even though she had to. "Why don't I have clothes on, Earl?"

"Because you change your clothes. If I drew the clothes you are wearing today, they would be wrong later on." He brought the notebook back around so they could both see it. "See? Now it's always right." He smiled. "See?"

Summer exhaled slowly. She was preparing herself to ask why the tops of her nipples were required in the sketch, and then changed her mind. "So do you have a sketch of Doctor Stephanie Dixon?"

"Oh sure. I have sketches of all the doctors. Doctor Dixon even bought a portrait from me. It was twenty dollars. Twenty dollars is a very fair price."

"It is." Summer agreed.

"It's private." Earl said.

"Well, we are friends, Stephanie and I," Summer lied. "So I think it will be okay for me to see it."

"If you're friends." Earl flipped four pages deeper into the notebook. A strikingly accurate sketch of Stephanie was centered on the page. The tops of her breasts were also visible. Nipples seemed to be required in his sketches.

"Oh, poor Stephanie."

"What is wrong with Doctor Dixon?" Earl asked. "Does she feel ill?"

"No," Summer smiled. "It's nothing." She looked at Earl. "So Doctor Dixon and Doctor Larson..."

Earl flipped to the next page where his sketch was. "Doctor Brian Larson." He shook his head as he tut-tutted. "He and Doctor Dixon would meet each other a lot."

"They would meet?" She fought to contain her smile- his sketch also went to his nipples. "At least you're consistent."

"What?"

"They would meet?" Summer repeated, deciding to keep the conversation away from body parts.

"Yes." Earl said. "They would meet in his room. Or they would meet in her room." He looked at Summer. "A lot."

"But, now they don't?"

Earl shook his head. “Not yesterday and not today. At the last conference, they met all the time. Not this time.”

“Do you know why?”

Earl leaned in close. “Maybe they remembered they were married to different people!” He whispered.

Summer tried not to smile. “Yes, that is probably it.” She gestured at the sketch of Brian. It was once again, an exact likeness. “You are a very talented artist, Earl.”

Earl smiled. “Do you want a portrait? A portrait is twenty dollars...”

“Twenty dollars is a very fair price,” Summer finished for him. She laughed. “Yes, please Earl; I would love a portrait.” She decided that with his obvious social issues, he supported himself by selling sketches. And they were, after all, excellent. “I will send it to my mother for Christmas.” She leaned over and nudged him with her shoulder. “So *with* clothes, please.”

Earl stepped back quickly away from her touch. “No, no, no.” He moved to where the hallway turned. “No, don’t do that.”

“I’m sorry, Earl. I was just...” Summer frowned. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“Promise?”

“I promise you, Earl.” She smiled. “I won’t ever do that again. Okay?”

“Okay.” He didn’t move back to her. “Okay.”

She put her hands in her pockets- something her Sensei would have scolded her for, but she felt that Earl was as far from

a threat as possible. “Hey, what do you think of Doctor Scott Anderson?”

“Doctor Anderson is mean.” Earl said.

“Huh.” Summer noticed he didn’t refer to the dead dentist in the past tense. “Why do you say that?” She pointed. “Say, can we walk out as we talk?”

“Sure, Miss Summer Schauers....”

“Just Summer is fine.” She started for the corner.

“Summer.” Earl repeated. He waited until she was beside him, then he started down the hallway.

“How is he mean?”

“He yells at the other dentists. He pushes me. He grabbed Doctor Dixon this morning. *Grabbed* her.” He looked at Summer. “He grabbed her at nine twenty five AM. She told him ‘no’. That’s what you are supposed to say.”

“I see. Yes, that’s exactly what you are supposed to say. So he pushes you?”

Earl nodded. “I tell him ‘no’. A lot. But he still does it. Then he laughs.”

“That is mean.” Summer said. “What a jerk.”

She reached into her back pocket for her digital recorder and realized it wasn’t there. “Oh, crud.” She frowned. “So Brian and Stephanie would meet until this conference.” A thought occurred to her. “Earl, how long have they been meeting?”

“Oh, I don’t know that.”

“How long have you known they have been meeting?”

"Four years, four months, two weeks, one day," Earl said without missing a beat. "I went to drop off a portrait at the hotel room of Doctor Joe Sorenson and I saw him go into her room. It was Saturday. Eight thirty PM."

"Wow." Summer did a double take at the man. "That's amazing."

Earl didn't know what she was talking about so he just continued to walk.

Summer missed not having her recorder to gather her thoughts and just decided to say them out loud to help remember them. "But not now. So there's friction there." She looked at Earl. "Who else is Doctor Anderson mean to?"

"Oh, he yells at the people he works on. He yells at the people other dentists bring. He yells at everyone, I think."

"Even Bill Volker?"

Earl opened the notebook and flipped to a sketch of Bill. "Bill Volker," he said.

"Yes, that's him. How long as he been yelling at him? I mean, how long have you known he has yelled at him?"

"Only since the convention in Seattle." Earl said. "Six months one week and three days ago. He yelled at him after putting in a filling. It was a gold filling. Definitely gold."

"He didn't yell at him before that?" The pair walked past the intersection. There was a police officer putting tape up around the knife. "Hello, officer," Summer said with a smile. "Any trouble?"

"No ma'am," the police officer lied. "Nothing to see here."

"We'll just move along then," Summer said. "Let's go Earl." She pointed down the hallway as she picked up her pace. "He didn't yell at him before that?"

Earl caught up with her quickly. "Before that there was another man he yelled at. Derek Gilson."

Summer waited for him to flip to another page in his notebook, but he didn't. "You don't have a sketch of Derek?"

"Not in this book. Each conference has its own book."

"That makes sense. So he yells at Bill." She frowned again because she had dropped her recorder at some point. "Remember to talk to Bill Volker."

"I don't want to talk to Bill Volker," Earl said. "He doesn't want a sketch. I already asked."

"No, not you; I was making a mental note. I've dropped my recorder somewhere in here."

"I have not seen it." Earl gestured at a door. "So someone has picked it up."

"That's our exit?"

Earl nodded. "That door opens to the main lobby by the escalators. I don't like the escalators so I take the stairs. But that's where this door opens."

"I understand completely." Summer said. When they got to the door, Summer moved to the side. "And you have a key for this door?"

Earl nodded. He flipped to near the front of his notebook to a sketch of Quincy. "Mister Klugman said I could use his key to go into the hallways because the convention gets crowded." He

held up a finger. "But I'm supposed to make sure every door I use is locked behind me and I'm not supposed to loan the key to anyone. Ever."

"He lets you use the hallways to avoid the crowds?"

"People bump into me; I don't like that."

"That is very nice of Mister Klugman." Summer said as Earl opened the door. "What do you do for him in payment?" Summer thought of nefarious things Quincy could have asked for.

"I gave him a sketch of his wife and him together. Last time it was one of his two children together."

"For free?"

"He lets me use the key so that I don't get bumped in to. The time before that was a sketch of his Harley Davidson Softail." Earl stepped out into the foyer, Summer right behind. "That is a very fair price to not get bumped."

Summer stepped in front of the man. "That is a really fair price, Earl." Summer started to reach out to shake his hand then just waved instead. "I'm going to go find my friend, Maxine, Earl."

Earl opened his notebook and flipped through it quickly. He held it up to show the sketch of Maxine. "I don't know Maxine's last name. What is her last name? She is very nice and smart." True enough- he had written Maxine and 'very nice' and 'smart' below her sketch.

"Her last name is Bryant. She is a photographer for the paper."

"B-R-Y-A-N-T?" Earl spelled.

"Yes. You are a good speller, Earl."

Earl took his pencil from his notebook and wrote Maxine's last name. Then without another word, turned and walked toward the stairs.

"Huh. Guy draws your nipples and you don't even get a good bye." She turned and looked towards the men's room. There were two security guards standing a bit off from the entrance, keeping people from standing and watching too long. Several police officers were also there. Maxine and Stephan were standing with their backs toward her. "Ahh, here we go." She started to jog in their direction.

FOURTEEN

Summer jostled between Maxine and Stephan. "What'd I miss?" She said as she put her arms over their shoulders, making them both jump.

"Summer!" Maxine turned and hugged her friend. "We had no idea where you got off to."

Stephan took a step back. "We were both worried."

"Aww." Summer picked Maxine up. "Look at that." She put her friend down. "The worried couple."

Stephan cleared his throat. "So... who was chasing you in the hallway?"

"Excuse me," one of the police officers said.

"Yes?" Summer answered.

"Are you a witness?"

"No." Summer lied. "You see... what happened was..."

"Then kindly go have your reunion someplace else." The office interrupted. "This is an open investigation."

"Yes, Officer," Stephan said. He took Maxine and Summer's hands and led them away.

Summer looked down. "You're just going to pull me around?"

"He does that," Maxine said.

When they got to the escalators, he stopped and let go of their hands. "Who was chasing you?"

"We were so worried."

Summer put her hands on her hips. "Relax you two. It was all a misunderstanding, really. It was only Earl."

Stephan chuckled. "Did you see his sketch of you?"

"We are not going to discuss Earl's sketches of myself or Maxine."

"Wait; he sketched me too?" Maxine crossed her arms. "Like he did Doctor Anderson?"

Stephan laughed again. "Ooh, I need to find Earl."

"Later." Summer said. "My conversation with Earl was very enlightening."

"His sketches usually are."

"Focus!" Summer shot Stephan a look. "Apparently Stephanie Dixon and Brian Larson are having an affair!"

"What?" Maxine said.

"Happens all the time at these conventions." Stephan nodded. "Told you it gets wild at night around here."

"But, their affair ended at *this* conference." Summer held up a finger. "And apparently Scott had a part in it." She pointed at the bathroom. "That's what I call a suspect!"

"But Scott's dead. He can't be the suspect." Maxine said.

"The lady has a point."

"No!" Summer shook her fists at them. "If they were having an affair and Scott interfered, then Stephanie is a suspect. Her and her big purse. Big enough to hide a knife in."

"Well, Brian could be upset that he ended his fun time," Maxine said. "He could have done it too, you know."

"Right!" Summer said. "Of course, Earl told me that there was friction between Scott and Bill, so he's a suspect too."

"Who's Bill?" Stephan asked.

"That's the ringer Doctor Brushwood brought to work on." Summer answered. "And Scott was mean to Earl also, now that I think about it." She frowned. "Hmmm."

"Your list of suspects is getting kind of long." Stephan said.

"Well, I think we should talk to Bill and see how he pans out."

"He's at the Ritz," Maxine said.

"Two things," Stephan said. "First off, I can't go wandering around questioning people as just a Class-D agent. I don't even have detention authority. Besides, they pay me to provide security here in the convention center."

"That's kind of sad," Summer said. She caught herself. "I mean... what's number two?"

"He's staying at the Ritz?" He snorted.

"That's what she said. Why?" Maxine said.

"You'll see. Oh." Stephan held up a third finger. "Dinner is at seven, so don't you two go wandering around town too late."

"I'll make sure I have her back by then." Summer assured him.

Stephan held up a fourth finger. "And..."

"You need to work on your counting." Summer remarked.

Stephan reached into his back pocket and pulled out Summer's digital recorder. "You dropped this."

"Oh, baby!" Summer cooed. "How I have missed you." She reached for it.

Stephan moved it to keep it out of her reach. "I only have half an hour for dinner. Forty-five minutes, tops, so don't be late."

Summer snatched for the recorder and he moved it again.

"I'd hate to miss dinner with Witchie Poo."

"What?" Summer gave Maxine a double take. "Witchie Poo?"

"I thought we agreed to discuss that first." Maxine said sourly.

"Oh, now I'll definitely make sure we're back in time; I got to hear this story."

Stephan held out the digital recorder. "Deal. I need to get back to my rounds. See you both at seven."

"Tell Earl I said hello," Summer said with a smirk as she took the recorder. She gave it a smooch then put it in her satchel.

"I will... I mean, I probably won't see him."

Maxine frowned. "You two."

"Let's go, Maxie." Summer held out her hand. "Want me to pull you to the taxi stand?"

"I've been pulled around quite enough today, thank you very much." Maxine started down the escalators toward the exit.

"See you." Summer pointed at Stephan. "Seven o'clock sharp."

"Right." Stephan turned and walked off.

FIFTEEN

Summer stood by the curb and raised her hand toward the small lot where the taxis were parked a few dozen yards from the main entrance.

Within moments, one of the taxis pulled in front of the convention center. Summer opened the door and gestured for Maxine. "After you, Miss Witchie Poo."

Maxine shook her head. "That man." She slid across the seat.

Summer sat beside her. "Why is he calling you that?"

"I may have hit him in the head with a broom while we were in the hallways of doom."

"You hit him with a broom?" Summer laughed.

"Twice, actually."

"That's great." Summer continued to laugh.

The old man behind the wheel pivoted around. "Ladies, I'm glad you're enjoying your time but the meter is running so you should tell me where you want to go." He turned around, preparing to drive.

"Oh, sorry." Summer patted the back of the driver's seat. "Please take us to the Ritz."

The man turned back around. "You're staying at the Ritz?"

"No." Maxine said. "We're going to meet someone there." She shrugged. "I don't think our editor would ever put us up in the Ritz."

"That's good to hear." The man nodded as he turned back around. "Keep the doors locked until we get there."

"Okay?" Summer said, confused. She locked her door.

"We're off." The driver pulled away from the curb and into traffic with a squeal of his tires. "So where are you ladies visiting our fine town from?"

"Oh, we're locals," Summer said. She held her press pass so the driver could see it in the mirror. "We work for the Tucson Herald Opinion. We're covering the convention."

"You don't own a car?"

"Nope." Summer said.

"Huh."

"She owns a Jeep, Sir." Maxine said. "She won't refer to it as 'a car'."

"They'd kick me out of the Jeep Club if I did."

"So why aren't you driving your Jeep?"

"Because our editor will reimburse us for taxi receipts, but he refuses to put gas in my poor little Wrangler."

Maxine leaned forward. "That's because it gets thirteen miles to the gallon on a good day."

The driver laughed. "That's about what my old Jeep used to get."

"You owned a Jeep?" Now Summer leaned forward.

The man shook his head. "Nope." He raised his head and smiled into the mirror.

"Oh."

"The Army owned the Jeep; they just let me drive it," the man explained.

"Nice; an old Willys. They are classics." Summer said. "I'd love one to run around town in. They make it hard to put the windshields down in the new ones."

"I see."

"So you were in the Army?" Maxine said.

"Yup. Vietnam, Desert Storm, Kosovo. Retired a Command Sergeant Major. Ran the Signal school as my last position. Thirty one years in all."

"Wow." Maxine said. "That's a long time."

"Not long enough, it seems."

"How so?"

"I retired in August... of 2001." The man said.

"Holy cow! That was close." Summer said.

The taxi stopped at a red light. The man turned around to look at them. "It was the worst day of my life; everyone I knew was going to war and I was at home. It was tough."

"Thanks for your service," Summer said. "My dad served eight years in the Army."

"Good for him." The man looked forward. "Does a person good to serve others in one manner or another."

"So you retired and now you drive a cab?" Summer said.

"Something like that." The man said. He looked out his side window. "Something like that."

"Oh, you can't just say that to a reporter." Summer said. "Sounds like there's more to the story."

The man nodded. "Heard of Agent Orange? Gulf War Syndrome?"

"Sure." Summer said. "Oh no; are you sick?"

"Nope. Not one bit. Not a scratch. Jungles of Vietnam, three tours. Desert Storm on the ground setting up antennas breathing burning oil fields for a month, Kosovo monitoring the border with burning trash everywhere. Nothing."

"That's great," Summer said.

"Then I retire and Maggie gets lymphoma." He turned around after stopping at another red light. "Lymphoma. Six months later, she's gone."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Summer said. "That's terrible."

"Yeah, I was in a bad place. A real bad place." He shrugged. "Son took all my guns out of the house. Took my car keys too." He chuckled as he turned back around. "Thought I'd just drive out into the desert and die."

"Oh no."

"So a few months later, instead of calling him to get to a VA appointment, I called a cab." He smiled. "Another vet was driving. We talked the whole way. Said I needed to get out of the house, talk to somebody. Anybody." He patted the dashboard. "So I started driving this cab. It gets me out of the house and lets me talk to folks." He smiled.

The car behind him honked when the light changed. "And it lets me yell at people without anyone thinking a second thought about it."

The car honked again.

He leaned out the window. "I'LL GO WHEN I'M GOOD AND READY!" He bellowed, then he smiled into the rearview mirror. "See? It's practically expected from a cabbie."

As the car honked again, he hit the gas, squealing the tires as he left. "Driving a cab is great stress management."

Summer laughed as she was pushed back against the seat. "I see."

"The Ritz is sure far away from the convention center," Maxine said. "We've passed a dozen hotels that would be closer places to stay."

"The Ritz motel? Yeah, it's in… pretty far ways off."

"Ritz *motel*? Not hotel?"

"Honey, it's not even close to a hotel. Even twenty years ago, it wasn't a hotel."

"I wonder how Bill feels about that." Summer said.

"Who's Bill?"

"He's the person we're going to see, Sir."

"Alright, you're going to have to call me Benny or Benjamin or Ben. No self-respecting Command Sergeant Major, retired or not, can allow themselves to be called 'sir'."

"Okay, Benny," Summer said. She looked out the window. "I don't think I've been to this part of town ever."

"That's because there are no mud pits or piles of rocks for your Jeep." Maxine said.

"There's plenty of mud during the monsoons," Benny said. "If you come back, just remember to keep your doors locked."

"Even in the daytime?"

Benny looked at Maxine in the mirror. "Young lady..."

"Maxine," Maxine interrupted.

"Maxine," Benny continued without missing a beat, "let me put it to you this way; even at this time of day, I'm going to wait for you two because it would be wrong to just leave you out here."

"Eeesh," Summer said. "Bill is going to be pissed."

"Well you can find out for yourself." Benny turned right into a parking lot. There was a large dingy sign above the lobby with 'The Ritz' in pink letters. None of the neon around the letters worked. "Welcome to the Ritz." He pulled into a parking spot in front of the dilapidated lobby. He turned around in his seat. "That'll be twenty-one dollars and eighty-three cents."

"Wow. Eddie isn't going to be pleased if this story doesn't pan out." Summer handed her business credit card to Benny. "Please add fifteen percent to it."

Benny turned around and inputted the amount into his meter. "That makes it twenty-eight, twenty-seven."

"Ooh, Eddie's going to be upset." Maxine said. "Make sure I'm around when you give him this receipt."

Benny turned around and handed Summer her credit card. "You're going to spend a buck a minute with me waiting for you. Tell you what, I just finished my sandwich. I'll go off duty while

you're here and go across the street to have a piece of pie and a coffee. That way you can take your time." He pointed at the diner across the street. "Just walk over when you're done. How does that sound?"

"That sounds good, Benny." Summer unzipped her satchel and handed him a five dollar bill. "For the pie and coffee."

"That's not necessary," Benny said. "At all."

"I insist. It's really nice of you to wait."

"I would just sit and wait here but if I'm on duty, they'll get upset if I'm just sitting in town." He tapped the meter. "And they always know where I'm sitting." He sighed then took the bill. "See you next door."

"Thanks." Summer got out of the cab. "Let's go Maxie."

Maxine looked out the window at the dingy street. "I haven't had a tetanus shot lately; maybe I'll just stay here."

"Come on, don't be a baby." Summer closed her door.

Maxine got out of the cab. "Don't abandon us, Benny. I've got a date later on tonight."

Benny waved out of the window as he backed out. "Never leave a troop behind."

The pair watched Benny back out, drive across the street, and park beside the diner.

"That's comforting." Summer said.

"Yeah, and if we want a nap," Maxine pointed at the motel's sign. "We can rent a room *by the hour*, day, or week." She perked up. "Oh look, they have *color* televisions."

"Oh, Bill is really going to be pissed."

Maxine smiled wide. “Right? Let’s go see him!” She grabbed Summer’s hand and pulled her toward the lobby door. There was chain link fencing attached over the glass on the door. “How quaint. I love post-apocalyptic décor.”

“So this is what this is like,” Summer said, looking at her hand.

The pair barged into the lobby. The grungy lobby.

The young man behind the counter continued to look down at his phone, engrossed in whatever game he was playing.

“Ah-hem,” Summer said, clearing her throat.

The man looked up at them with a bored expression. “Ladies.” He looked at their hands- which were still together. “Room by the hour? That’s twenty dollars.”

“Twenty dollars?” Summer said. “What if we want it for the night?”

“That’s thirty two.”

“We don’t need...” Maxine started.

“That seems like a pretty slow climb from one hour to twenty four.”

The man stared at Summer for a long moment. “It’s not really twenty four hours, if you think about it. You two are here at one in the afternoon. If you get the room now, check out is nine tomorrow morning, so that’s...” He paused as he did the math. “Twenty hours. If you stay even an hour past checkout that’s another thirty two dollars.”

“Huh, I never thought of it that way.” Summer said.

"And, no matter what, the sheets need swapped and the room serviced, so that's where most of the cost goes."

"See?" Summer nudged Maxine with her shoulder. "They change the sheets with each guest."

"Listen," Maxine said. "We're just looking for a man staying here. Bill Volker."

"Pimp?" The man asked.

Summer smiled. "No, no; we're freelancers."

"Summer, be serious!" Maxine let go of her hand. "This is bad enough..."

"Summer? Is that your stage name?" The man asked with a smirk. "You sure look like a warm summer breeze..."

"What?"

Now Maxine smiled. "Oh okay, now this is getting good."

"What room is Mister Bill Volker in?" Summer asked testily.

The man leaned forward and looked at the dog-eared paper registration book. "He is in suite one twenty one."

"Suite?"

The man nodded at Summer. "We're a classy joint, you know."

"Oh, I know." Summer said. "Let's go, Maxie." She turned and left, Maxine right behind.

The man leaned forward to watch the two very pretty women leave. "Nice view. Good for you, Mister Volker." He said as he leaned back and went back to playing games on his phone.

The pair walked around the corner of the lobby to where the first floor rooms started.

"Do you have a plan?" Maxine asked.

"We knock on his door, ask him about why he and Scott don't get along."

"Ahh, the accusatory approach. That's always fun." Maxine said.

The pair started down the covered walkway toward the man's room. When they got there, Summer turned on her digital recorder, dropped it in her shirt pocket then knocked on the door.

"But the only person who said that he and Scott didn't get along was Earl. What if Earl is the one who killed Scott and he's just throwing us off track?"

"I don't think Earl is capable of killing anyone. I mean, I just bumped him joking around and he completely freaked out." Summer knocked on the door again. "Stabbing someone is up close and personal." She banged on the door with her fist. "Hello! You in there? Housekeeping!"

Bill flung the door open. "What? What!"

Summer stepped back. "Sorry to bother you, Mister Volker. But we..."

"Oh, it's you two!" He said as he recognized them. He let out a long sigh. "So are you here to do a story on the sucker that was duped yet again?"

"What? No." Summer said. She smiled. "Can we come in?"

Bill looked into his room and let out a sigh. “I guess so.” He stepped to the side to let the two women in. “Come on in, I suppose.”

SIXTEEN

Summer looked around the room- it was at least marginally a suite because it had not only a tiny kitchenette, but a small sitting area next to it as well as the bed on the far end of the room. There was even a half-wall partition between the sleeping area and the sitting area. "Huh."

"Huh, what?" Bill said.

"Huh; this is indeed technically a suite."

"Oh, hah hah." Bill folded his arms. "So funny."

"I'm sorry, Bill." Summer said. "We just wanted to do a quick interview if that's okay."

"Is it about how I want to kill Terrance?" He curled his fingers like he was strangling someone, "I'd love to just squeeze the life out of that skinflint, mister king of the I-five corridor." He tightened his fingers. "Just to watch his eyes bug out of his head."

"Uhhh." Summer said. She looked at Maxine and grimaced as she sat at the little kitchen table.

"Mind if I take a picture?" Maxine asked.

"I suppose not." Bill put his hands on his knees. "Go ahead." He looked at Maxine with a large fake smile on his face.

"Say gingivitis." Maxine said as she took the picture.

"She always like this?"

"Only since... No, never mind; yeah she's always like this." Summer smiled at the man. "I'm sorry you were tricked into a bad room. That's a terrible thing to do with how you're helping out Terrance."

Maxine sat. "And he's done it before?"

Bill still had the wide grin on his face. "In Seattle."

"Are you okay?" Summer asked.

"Huh? Yeah, sure." The smile faded. "Better?"

"Actually..." Maxine started.

"Seattle?" Summer interrupted. "That's when Scott Anderson first yelled at you."

"How..." Bill's hands came up as he started to throttle a notional Scott Anderson. "Him too. Choke the life out of him. Oh yeah. Eyes bulging out of his pompous head."

"That's a pretty personal way to kill someone," Maxine said. "I mean..."

"I don't own a gun," Bill said. "Can't." He looked at the kitchenette. "Hey, stabbing would be satisfying as well. Oh yeah." He smiled again as he closed his eyes and made repeated stabbing motions with his hand. "No, no!" He said. "Oh yes!" He said again. He opened his eyes and smiled at Maxine. "Yeah, that was nice."

"Was?" Maxine said softly to Summer. "Was nice?"

"Why did Scott yell at you in Seattle?"

"How do you even know that?"

"What's Scott Anderson got against you?" Summer pressed on, not wanting Earl to have to deal with the wrath of the

obviously disturbed man. "I mean, you work for Terrance and his dental clinics are a thousand miles from Scott in Vegas. You two shouldn't even know each other."

Bill patted the tops of his knees nervously. "Off the record?"

"Sure," Maxine said. "That's fine for me, of course."

Summer kept quiet. To her relief, Brian began to speak:

"Doctor Brushwood convinced me to come to a convention..."

"In Seattle?" Summer interjected.

"No, no; this was before that. In Des Moines, ironically. Six months earlier. I needed a filling and he told me that if I came to the convention, he'd do it for free." He shrugged. "I figured a free filling and a couple of days in a hotel would be like a mini-vacation, right? So why not?"

"Sounds reasonable." Summer gestured around the room. "And... was it like this?"

"No, it was a nice room. A real nice room; a Holiday Inn Express." He frowned. "Nothing like this." He sighed. "So I went to the convention and... you know, things happen and I..." He smiled sheepishly. "I kind of hooked up with this gal who was staying in the hotel."

"It happens," Summer said. "Oh!" She leaned forward. "It wasn't Scotts' *wife*, was it?"

"Nothing like that," Bill said. "It was his patient he had brought from Las Vegas."

Summer stifled a chuckle. "Hah, figure the odds. So you and her..."

"It was a whirlwind romance." He smiled as he thought back. "She was a dancer. On the strip. I mean, a legitimate Vegas showgirl. Me and an actual show girl!" He sighed. "Man, we had a really good time. She wasn't like any of the other girls I had ever dated."

"Good for you," Summer said. "But why would Doctor Anderson care?"

"We had a *really* good time." Bill blushed. "And Heather missed the filling competition."

"Ooh. You both missed your appointments? I can see why he would be upset. And Terrance."

"No, no; I made it there; *Heather* wasn't there. She was too hung over. She couldn't even leave her room."

"Ohhh."

"And by the time Doctor Anderson realized Heather wasn't going to make it, it was too late for him to find a replacement. And to make matters worse, we won the competition."

"Uh oh!"

"And then we kind of had it out in the convention center afterwards"

"You and Doctor Brushwood? Why; he won?"

"Sure," Bill nodded. "But he said I tainted his legitimate win." He leaned back. "Then Doctor Anderson found us and he blamed Terrance and me. He said he was going to file a complaint with the convention center to get us blacklisted from all conventions."

"That's terrible."

"Then, I guess he found Heather and had her kicked out of her room because when I got back there, she had checked out. Gone. I don't even know what he told her because she's never talked to me since." He put his head in his hands. "The love of my life and she's gone."

"And he's given you a hard time ever since?"

"Well, yeah. Since I punched him in the mouth that same day."

"You punched him in the mouth?"

"I wanted to knock out mister perfect dentist's teeth. Have him choke on them." Bill seethed. He clenched up his fists. "I *hate* that man. He ruined it between me and Heather."

"Well, I mean, she lives in Vegas and you live in Seattle."

He smirked. "I live in Des Moines, actually."

"Wait, you live in Iowa? Now I'm confused."

Bill shook his head. "I live in Des Moines, Washington. It's south of Seattle, on the I-5 corridor. That's the irony; I left Des Moines, Washington and went to Des Moines, Iowa and met the love of my life."

"I see. That *is* ironic," Summer said. "Still, Vegas and Des Moines are a long way..."

Bill teared up. "I would have moved for Heather. In a heartbeat. I... run a software games management company. I can do that from anywhere."

"And she was a showgirl?" Maxine said.

He gestured at the two women. "You two are good looking, sure, but Heather was a complete knockout." He brought his

hands up as fists, "And Scott Anderson is the reason she's not in my life anymore. A bus needs to run over him!" He put his hands like he was holding a steering wheel. "With me driving!"

"I..." Summer looked at Maxine. "I see. Well, this has been enlightening... our talk." Summer stood. "Maxie, ready?"

"You bet." She stood as well.

"Thanks for your time, Bill." Summer said. "And I'm sorry about Heather. Really, I am."

"Yeah, sure." Bill leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling. "Sure."

"Okay then." Summer jerked her thumb at the door. "See you later on at the convention center, Bill."

Maxine hurried to the door and opened it. "Thanks for your time," she said as she stepped outside. She snapped another photo of Bill on the small couch looking sad and forlorn.

Summer closed the door without another word.

"That man is the mur-der-er!" Maxine hissed. "We just did an interview of a murderer." She pointed at the door. "Right in there." She took a picture of the door. "Murderer's door. Oh man, I've got the heebie jeebies!"

"Let's go talk to Terrance and see what he has to say about all this. Get his side of the story."

Maxine nodded. "Yeah, let's go talk to a non-homicidal person. That would be a refreshing change."

"Sounds good to me. Let's go find Benny."

As the two walked across the parking lot, Maxine stopped to take a picture of the motel's sign. "Murderer's motel," she said to Summer when she caught up.

SEVENTEEN

"Murderer!" Maxine said as she sat down across from Benny. "We just met a murderer."

Several patrons turned to look at her.

"Please stop saying that," Summer said a she sat beside her. "Or at least say it quieter."

"This Bill guy seemed pretty upset with both Doctors Anderson and Brushwood."

"Alright now, who is who?" Benny said. He ate a piece of his pie.

Maxine placed her hands on the table on either side of Benny's pie. "Okay, so Doctor Scott Anderson is dead." She lowered her voice. "Mur-dered." She smiled. "Doctor Terrance Brushwood is some dentist from up in Washington State. And Bill Volker is the mur-der-er."

"I see." Benny took a sip of his coffee. "Pie?" He gestured. "It's really good."

"Sure?" Maxine said.

Benny looked at the counter and made eye contact with the waitress. He held up two fingers and pointed to his pie. "Coffee?"

"Why not?" Summer said.

Benny gestured at his coffee and held up two fingers again.

"What else did you learn?"

"Hmmm." Maxine sat up. "Apparently, we aren't pretty enough to be Vegas showgirls." She stuck out her lower lip. "That kind of hurt."

Benny shook his head. "Nah, you two could easily be showgirls," he said around the piece of pie in his mouth. "Although..." He smirked. "Can you high kick?"

"I can," Summer said. "Full round house kicks to the head if I need to."

"I used to play soccer," Maxine said.

"Then you two are showgirl material. Easy."

"Thanks Benny." Maxine said. "That's nice."

"Sure thing, Maxine." Benny took another sip of coffee. "So why did Bill kill this Anderson guy?"

"If Bill had his way, he would have choked the life out of him barehanded."

"That's up-close and personal. And takes a good bit of time. Four, five minutes to be sure."

Maxine leaned back even more. "It sounds like you have personal experience."

"I heard that in a first aid class back in the Army." He leaned back as the waitress slid two pieces of pie onto the table as well as two empty cups. "Anything else for you folks?" She put a carafe of coffee down.

"Plenty of cream and sugar," Summer said.

The waitress nodded and walked off.

"If you just choke someone until they pass out, they just start breathing again once you let go of them. I mean, the brain is all

for keeping oxygen flowing. So you have to keep their throat closed until the heart stops beating. And even then, there's still a bit of oxygen in the old blood steam." He cut his last piece of pie in half. "It's like those kids that fall into a frozen lake for thirty minutes that come out okay."

"Well, apparently Bill stabbed Scott in the chest with a huge kitchen knife," Maxine said as the waitress put a small container of cream and a little box full of various kinds of sweeteners on the table. "Errr, at least that's what happened in the movie," she said as the waitress looked at her with large eyes.

The waitress slid the check onto the table so she didn't have to come back. "Pay at the register." She said as she walked off quickly.

"Smooth, Maxie." Summer said as she poured a good bit of cream in her coffee. "You're making it hard for us to become regulars here."

"You want to come back here?"

"Listen, this pie is excellent." Benny freshened up his coffee. "Don't burn your bridges is all I'm saying."

"See?" Summer said. She took a bite of her pie. She looked down at it. "Wow, this is good pie."

"If you don't finish it, I will," Benny said. He pointed his fork at Maxine. His last piece of pie was on it. "Okay, so you're sold that this Bill character across the street killed that dentist?"

Maxine nodded "Oh yeah, he practically confessed while we were over there, right Summer?"

Summer shrugged. “I think we need to talk to the other suspects first.”

“I thought you two were reporters,” Benny said. He put his last piece of pie in his mouth. “Not cops.”

“It’s a story... a great story,” Summer said. “We’re going to have the scoop on the murder if we can figure it out.”

Maxine pointed across the street “Bill’s the murderer. We’ve solved it.”

“Why would Bill kill that doctor? Doesn’t he work with that other Washington state one?” Benny sipped his coffee.

“True love,” Maxine said. She took a bite of her pie. Her eyebrows went up. “Wow.”

“True love?” Benny put his cup down. “Listen lady, true love is the greatest thing in the world- except for a nice MLT. A mutton, lettuce and tomato sandwich, where the mutton is nice and lean and the tomatoes...” Benny deadpanned.

Maxine reached across the table and hit Benny on the shoulder. “That’s enough out of you Miracle Max.”

Benny laughed. “Okay, okay. So what’s this true love deal?”

“Well, it seems dentists bring their own patients to these conventions for the dental competitions and demonstrations. That way they know who they’re working on. And when Doctor Brushwood brought Bill to a convention, he hooked up with Doctor Anderson’s patient.”

“And that’s who Bill fell in love with? What’s his name?”

“It’s a her; she was... is a Vegas showgirl.”

Benny pointed at them. "Ahh, that's where the 'you don't look as good as a showgirl' comes from."

"Right. And when their partying resulted in her not showing up for Doctor Anderson, he took it out on the two of them and Bill never saw her again."

"I can understand why Bill's upset about that. I mean... a Vegas showgirl." He grinned. "Especially if she's better looking than you two." He whistled. "She must be amazing."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Summer said. "But we should still talk to Stephanie... And Brian." She winked at Benny. "Those two are sleeping together."

"Were." Maxine said. "Until Doctor Anderson got involved, it seems. Now they're not."

"Wow, this Anderson sounds like a real popular guy. You sure he was only stabbed once? It might have been a Murder on the Orient Express kind of deal."

"Actually, we haven't talked to the police so we aren't sure how many times he was stabbed." Maxine shuddered. "Summer found the body. *There was a knife sticking out of him*."

"Sounds like he was asking for it." Benny said. He sipped his coffee. "Bill does sound suspicious. Losing a knock out gal is devastating, take it from me. But having your affair broken up also sounds like motive. You should talk to those other two just to cover your bases."

"Right after I finish my pie," Maxine said. "I mean, it would be rude to leave it." She took a large bite. "If we're going to be regulars and all."

Benny laughed. "Well said." He got serious. "Now listen, you two need to be careful. Someone who is willing to stick a knife into someone else's chest, for any reason, isn't someone who you should take lightly. You get them cornered, and you could end up on the business end of a sharp knife."

"We'll be careful." Summer said. "Thanks, though."

Benny reached into his pocket. "Here." He pulled out a business card. "If you run into trouble, or need to get someplace quick, just give me a call. My cell is on there." He slid the card across the table to Summer. "I mean it."

"Thanks, Benny." Summer took the card. "Really, thanks." She slipped it into the outermost pocket in her satchel. "I hope we don't need it and can just meet later for pie."

"I hope so too." Benny said. "I might be old, but I'm still up for hanging out with a couple of good looking gals." He smirked. "And I'll still put up a good fight if I need to."

"Let's stick to pie." Summer gestured at Maxine- she had a mouthful of the last of her pie. "It has Maxie's stamp of approval."

"Damn good pie," Maxine said with a full mouth.

Summer snorted. "See?"

"Then it's a date." Benny said. "You can tell me how you solved the case." He reached for the bill. "Ready?"

"I'll get it." Summer grabbed it first.

"You're going to turn in a receipt for three pieces of pie and coffee to your editor?" Benny raised an eyebrow.

"I'll say it was an interview." Summer slid out of the booth. "Sounds plausible, right? Oh!" She pulled out her digital recorder. "Interviewing Benny the cab driver," she said into it, then put it away. "There; it's official. Eddie'll have to accept the receipt."

"Especially since we solved the murder," Maxine said as she also stood. "The dental murders? Damn; it still sounds like a Nancy Drew game."

"We'll think of something." Summer assured her. "Benny?"

"I'll sign back on duty while you pay the bill. I still don't feel right about you getting the tab. Especially after you gave me five bucks to cover it."

Summer shrugged. "Leave it as a big tip. Since we're regulars and all."

"Good idea." Benny said. "We'll try the rhubarb pie next time. I'm buying." He smacked his lips. "It should be perky."

"Deal." Summer moved toward the register. "Meet you outside."

"Okay." Maxine said as she offered her arm to Benny. "Let's go."

"This way to the great egress, Ma'am," Benny said as he hooked his arm through hers and led her off.

Summer stepped up to the register. Their waitress was at it. She looked at Summer with wide eyes. "Stabbed with a kitchen knife?"

Summer laughed. “Oh, we were just joking around is all.” She held up her press pass. “We’re reporters you see. And... we were joking around?” She finished meekly.

“Sure, sure.” She said as she took the receipt. “Eight thirty five. Do you want to add a tip?”

Summer handed over her business credit card. “The exact amount please; your tip is on the table.”

She raised a skeptical eyebrow.

“It’s a good one too; we’re going to be regulars.” Summer smiled at her.

“Really?” The waitress rang up the order and swiped the credit card.

“Probably not.” Summer admitted. “The pie was excellent, though.”

“Thanks.” She handed the card back. “Have a nice day, you and your murders.”

Summer leaned forward. “There actually was one over at the convention center!” She whispered.

“It wasn’t me. I’ve been here all day.”

“That’s good to hear.” Summer slid the card into one of the inner pockets of her satchel and zipped it up as she walked out. She looked to the right toward the cab then caught a movement out of the corner of her eye in the other direction.

Bill was jogging across the street toward her.

“Oh no.” She looked again at the cab. Maxine was sitting in the front seat having a conversation with Benny. She took a step toward the cab.

"Summer!"

She took another step.

"Stop!" Bill shouted. "Hold on a sec."

Summer steeled herself as she turned.

Bill skidded to a stop in front of her.

"Hey pal," Benny said as he stepped out of the cab. "Hey!" He called again.

Bill ignored him and continued to look at Summer. "I just want you to know..."

"HEY!" Benny barked.

"Listen," Bill turned to look at him. "We're talking..." His voice trailed off as he looked at the very large gun.

Benny raised a pistol- a pearl handled Colt .45. "No, *I'm* talking." He pointed it at Bill. "*You're* listening."

Bill gawked at the pistol. "You can't do that!"

"Yeah?" Benny laughed. "Welcome to Arizona pal; open carry is a way of life and Stand Your Ground has been on the law books since the 1800's." He stepped around the back of the cab. "In case you don't know..." He waggled the gun but kept it trained on him. "This is a Colt .45, affectionately called 'The Peace Maker'." He raised it up to eye level, aiming at Bill. "The good news is you won't feel hitting the pavement because you'll already be dead before it knocks you on your ass."

Bill raised his hands. "Easy, old man. I just wanted to tell her something." He pointed at Summer with one of his fingers while still holding them above his head.

"Then say it."

"I realized how it sounded back in there, but I wouldn't kill anyone. I swear! I mean... I'm angry at him, sure, but I'd never kill anyone. I don't want you to think of me that way."

"Okay, Bill," Summer said. "Okay. Thanks." She nodded at him. "Maybe you should go back across the street."

Bill looked at Benny again. "I'm leaving old..."

"Don't you say it."

"Sir," Bill finished.

"Ahh," Benny scrunched up his face. "That's just as bad." He gestured across the street with his pistol. "You've said your piece, now get going, pal."

The man looked from Summer to Bill then back to Summer. "I swear to you I'm not a murderer!" With that, he turned and jogged across the street- right into the path of a car. It screeched its tires and honked at him as he jumped back, hands on its hood. After making sure the rest of the way was clear, he ran to the hotel.

"That boy has got issues."

Summer looked at Benny. "That's a nice looking hand cannon you've got there." She smirked as she walked to the cab. "Didn't they have the twelve inch barrel in stock?"

"Ten inches is as long as it can be and still let me get it out the window easily." Benny got into his cab and stuck the pistol in the seam between the two front seats. Only the very end of the butt stuck out. "But I think it still manages to get the point across."

Summer slid into the back seat. "Oh, he got the point all right. I thought your son took away your guns."

"I'm better now. Being a cabbie turned me around," Benny said matter-of-factly.

"What did he say to you?" Maxine asked.

"He said he wasn't a murderer." Summer leaned forward, hooking her elbows over the back of the seat so her head was between the pair.

"He sure sounded like one back in his room."

"In my experience, wanting to do something and willing to do something are sometimes very different things," Benny pointed out. "Back to the convention center?" He reached for the meter.

"I suppose so," Summer said. "We can talk to Brian again and Stephanie too."

"And Terrance," Maxine said. "Wow, we have a lot of suspects and only until tomorrow before the conference ends."

"If you're going to try and solve this," Benny said as he pulled out. "You really should also chat with the detective on the case to see what they have." He shrugged. "Hell, they might already have the perp in custody."

"That's true," Summer frowned. "I didn't think about that. Okay, first the detective, then the potential murderers."

Benny held up a finger. "Unless the *detective* did it and it's all a set up."

"Oh! I didn't think of that." Maxine said.

"Or..." Benny said as he pointed his finger back and forth between the two women. "*YOU* two did it!" He looked left then

right at the passing cars, waiting for a gap big enough to pull into traffic. "Couple of good-looking psychopaths."

"You're not helping, Benny." Summer sat back as the cab pulled into traffic to gather her thoughts and decide how she was going to question the others, leaving Maxine and Benny to chat.

"At least we're good looking psychopaths." Maxine said. "Thanks for that."

"Sure thing. Just remember I said that when you're looking for your next kill. Deal?"

"Deal."

Summer looked out the window, working on her line of questioning when she met the detective as the pair continued their banter in the front seat.

EIGHTEEN

"See you two later," Benny said as he started to pull away. "Make sure you give me a call if you need anything."

Summer patted her satchel where she had his card. "You got it, Benny. Thanks."

Summer and Maxine watched as Benny drove off, squealing his tires, then they stood there for a moment longer.

"So you've worked out what you're going to ask the detective?"

Summer nodded at Maxine. "Yeah, let's go see if we can find him. Or her."

The pair walked into the convention center- To their surprise, Quincy was not at the entrance. Or anywhere else near there either.

"Huh. Wonder where Quincy got off to." Summer pointed toward the bathroom. "It's still taped off; let's go check it out."

"I'm interested in seeing the inside."

"You've never seen the inside of a men's room?" Summer smiled at her friend.

"Oh sure, plenty of times." Maxine shrugged. "There's never a line for the men's room so I'll just go in if I need to."

"That's true; why don't they ever get lines? Annoying." Summer pointed at the two policemen at the entrance to the

bathroom. "Guess the convention security is off the case. You'll have to ask Stephan about that at dinner tonight."

"Oh! I had forgotten. Okay." Maxine said as they approached the two officers.

"This is an active investigation, ladies," one of them said.

"Yeah, the ladies' room is over there," the other pointed across the room.

"We were hoping to talk to the detective in charge." Summer gestured at her press pass.

The officer looked at her press pass, then continued to look at her cleavage. "Nice."

"I hope you're saying it's nice I'm a reporter." Summer said with a smirk.

"Yeah, that's it." The officer said. He slapped his partner's shoulder. "Get Thorndyke."

The other nodded and ducked into the bathroom.

"Thorndyke?" Summer guffawed. "What's his first name; Alistair?" She picked up an English accent. "What say you, my good lady? Wot, wot?"

Maxine laughed. "I'm well and good, Alistair." She curtsied. "More well than good, I should say," she said in her own English accent.

The policeman came back out of the bathroom, followed closely by a very fat man.

"Ahh, Detective Thorndyke," Summer said. "Pleasure to meet you, governor."

Thorndyke looked Summer up and down. Then did the same to Maxine. “I thought you said there were two reporters out here, Simmons.”

Officer Simmons pointed at Summer and Maxine. “Right there, Sir.”

“I never would have guessed.” He said. He did indeed have a British accent. “So what is it you...” He looked around the open area, boredom seemed to creep onto his face. “Want.”

“We’re from the Tucson Herald Opinion, Detective Thorndyke, covering the convention.” Summer said. “We’d like to know what you’ve found. Did you get any prints off the murder weapon?” A thought occurred to her. “Say...”

The detective yawned wide. He didn’t even try to cover his mouth.

“... did you check Doctor Anderson’s phone? Who was the last person to call him? Because that should be...”

The detective started picking at his nails.

“...a really good lead for the...” Summer narrowed her eyes at the man. “police. Are you even listening to me?”

“Unfortunately.” Thorndyke said.

Summer put her hands on her hips. “So we’d like a statement.” She reached into her satchel and pulled out her digital recorder. “Statement from Detective Thorndyke regarding the murder of Doctor Scott Anderson.” She held it out to the man.

“If you insist.” Thorndyke leaned forward like he was going to speak into it then snatched it from her hand.

“Hey!”

"I. Hate. Reporters." Thorndyke said into the recorder. "They meddle in affairs they shouldn't. They warp statements to satisfy their bloodthirsty readers. The truth is the farthest thing from their minds. They blabber private details of a crime, compromising investigations." He said as he stared at Summer's eyes. "And I shan't waste another moment of my time with a couple of trollops." He dropped the digital recorder and walked back into the bathroom without another word.

Officer Simmons snapped his fingers. "Oh, I should warn you that Detective Thorndyke doesn't like the press." He smiled. "He's been burned by them one too many times."

"You don't say," Summer bent down and picked up her recorder. She thumbed it off.

"You want to interview me?" Simmons said. He pointed between himself and his partner. "We love the press. Don't we Jerry?"

"Huh?" Jerry startled. "Oh yeah. Love them." He smiled. "Hey, we should discuss the details of the case..."

"Over drinks," Simmons finished.

"Oh. Sure." Jerry said. "Compare notes and stuff."

"Do you have any details concerning suspects or motive?" Summer held up her recorder, ready to turn it on.

"Nope. But we'd be glad to buy the first couple of rounds for you ladies." Simmons smiled. "Right, partner?"

"I guess." Jerry said. "Wait, you mean over dinner?"

Simmons gave him a double take. "Burgers. Yeah, burgers and beers." He looked at Maxine.

Maxine raised an eyebrow. "How's a girl going to refuse an offer like that?" She said feeding Summer the straight line.

"Like this." Summer snapped her fingers in front of Simmons' face then walked off.

"Well, that about does it." Maxine smiled at the two men. "If we need anything else, we'll let you know." She snapped her fingers and went after Summer. When she caught her, she elbowed her. "They were kind cute you sure you don't want to do drinks and burgers with them?"

"Maybe once we solve this murder," Summer said. "Oooh! We're going to show that stinking detective!" She picked up a British accent again. "Meddlers with bloodthirsty readers, blabbing details... Huh!"

Maxine smiled. "He did use 'shan't'. That's kind of endearing, right?"

"And trollops." Summer seethed. "It will be endearing alright when I solve this murder before he does." Summer pointed at Maxine. "Remember what Bill said to me in the parking lot?"

"He said he wasn't the murderer." She pointed back. "But he is."

"He knew about the murder already. How did he find out?"

"Because he did it!" Maxine raised her hand above her head, finger pointed at the ceiling. "Because he's the mur-der-er."

"Let's go talk to Brian again. Find out who punched him. Then see why Stephanie was upset with him. And maybe find out who else was upset with Scott."

"Besides Bill. He seemed pretty upset. Losing the love of his life." Maxine observed.

"But Brian and Stephanie are broken up too. So the two of them should be angry. Remember how upset she was back stage?"

"She said that all those men deserved to get it," Maxine said. "Do you think she's angry at all men or just the ones in that room?"

"There's only one way to find out; we need to find them before that annoying detective." Summer frowned. "Where the hell should we look first?"

"Oh!" Maxine smiled. "Stephanie is in the conference room! She's listening to a franchise pitch there."

"Who's giving that?" Summer started toward the conference room.

Maxine caught up with her. "Doctor Brushwood and... well, it was going to be Doctor Anderson too, but..."

"Nice. We can hit up Stephanie and Terrance at the same time."

"And maybe even pick up a franchise dental office." Maxine said. "They seem to be *it*."

NINETEEN

Summer and Maxine quietly slipped into the back of the conference room. Doctor Brushwood was standing on a table, addressing the audience.

"And, with the buying power of the entire chain of offices working to your advantage, you will see higher profits while still matching the prices of individually owned practices." He slapped his hands together. "There really is no downside, I tell you."

Stephanie raised her hand.

Doctor Brushwood ignored her and continued to speak: "Plus, the initial costs of opening a new practice are subsidized by the corporation, reducing your initial investment to a more manageable level." He panned his hand around the room. "Who wants to pay full price for a fully equipped dental practice? I sure don't."

"Ah hem," Stephanie said loudly.

Doctor Brushwood turned and carefully stepped down from the table, using a chair for help. When he was down, he turned and looked at the group. "Please take the pamphlets and crunch the numbers yourselves."

Stephanie stood. "I have just one question."

Doctor Brushwood took a handful of pamphlets from a box and banged them on the table, straightening them. "I think that

about does it." He put the pamphlets on the far side of the table in three piles so they could be reached easily.

"What's your question?" A man seated at the end of Stephanie's table said.

"Thanks Donald," She said. She gave him a short bow then turned to face Doctor Brushwood. He just stared at her. "Tell me, Terrance, if someone gets in your way, will you just kill them like you did Scott?"

"Wow." Maxine said. She leaned in close to Summer. "Now there's an accusation. So Terrance Brushwood killed Anderson?"

"Shh!" Summer said. She held out her recorder.

"Why don't you ask Brian," Terrance snapped at her. "Seems to me *he* killed Scott because he messed up your extra-marital, decade-long affair! And maybe you helped."

Stephanie took a step towards him. "How dare you!"

"Or maybe it was one of the other men you were sleeping with," Terrance said. He walked around the table toward Stephanie. "With *your* morals, he's probably not the only one."

"What?! You can't say things like that! I should... I should..."

"You should what? Stick a knife in my chest?"

"It's the least you deserve!" Stephanie clenched her purse to her chest. "You pig!"

"Whatever." Terrance said as he approached her.

"Don't you dare touch me," Stephanie shouted. She started to open her purse.

Terrance kept walking right past her and continued toward the door. He winked at Summer as he left the room.

"Wow," Maxine said again. "Who do you want to talk to first?"

Summer looked at the exiting Terrance, wondering what his wink meant, then to Stephanie. She decided she could catch up with the other dentist later. "Let's talk to Stephanie first if she'll let us." Summer put her recorder in her top pocket. She weaved through the people who were trying to leave the conference room as quickly as possible. "I wonder what she carrying in that purse of hers? Let's go see."

Maxine raised her camera and snapped a photo of the room before it emptied. "Right behind you."

"Stephanie," Summer said as she approached the woman. She had sat back down and was crying. "Are you okay?"

"No." Stephanie looked up at Summer, "No. I'm not okay."

Summer pulled a chair over and sat beside her. "Terrance is a jerk." She looked at Maxine. "Right?"

"A jerk and a pig," Maxine said as she also sat.

"But why would he kill Scott?" Summer said. "That doesn't make sense." She gestured at the table with the pamphlets. "Were they competing?"

Stephanie snorted. "Those two competing? That's a laugh."

"What?"

Stephanie put her hands on her knees. "They were working together. They were partners." She pointed at the table again. "It

was a big secret. The Coors brothers they used to call themselves."

"Coors? I don't understand." Summer looked at Maxine who only shrugged.

"They wanted to be like Coors."

"Like the beer?"

Stephanie exhaled. "Coors beer used to only be sold west of the Mississippi. It was a big deal that once you crossed the river, you could get Coors. People used to drive over the border just to get it."

"What does that have to do with dentistry?"

"They wanted to be the biggest dental practice west of the Mississippi." Stephanie snorted again. "Greedy idiots. Brian told me all about it. They were pressuring him to join."

"They wanted Doctor Larson to buy a franchise?"

"They wanted Brian to organize all his offices under *their* corporation. They... Terrance and Scott were furious that Brian dared to turn them down." She finally lowered her purse to her lap.

Summer sat back. "So Terrance and Scott were rich then." She considered that. "I mean, more than just doctor rich."

"Oh yeah." Stephanie nodded. "But it was never enough for those two. They wanted more and more practices. Brian just..." Tears ran down her face.

Summer put her hand on Stephanie's back. "So Brian..." She coaxed.

"Brian was going to leave his wife for me. Finally."

"I see." Summer looked at Maxine for help.

"And Scott got in the way?"

Summer started to cry again. "Scott told Brian that if he didn't join them, he would tell his wife about us." She put her hands over her face. "So... so...so" She sobbed.

"So Brian told them off?"

"No! He broke it off between us!"

"But you said everything was fine between you two. That it was a misunderstanding." Maxine said.

Stephanie wheeled around in her seat to face her. "What was I supposed to say? That I meant less to him than his practice? That he was only using me?" She screamed. "What?!"

"Well, I..." Maxine started.

"I'm glad he's dead. Dead! Stabbing was too good for the likes of him!" She clutched her purse tightly.

"What's in your purse, Stephanie?" Summer asked.

"None of your business is what's in my purse!" Stephanie stood. "*That's what's in my purse*!" She was practically screaming.

"I'm sorry." Maxine now stood as well. "Okay then." She looked down at Summer. "Maybe we need to talk to Bill again."

"Bill?" Stephanie said. "Not Bill Volker. You need to stay away from that idiot."

"What?" Summer said. "Why?"

"He's insane. If you show him any sort of attention, he decides you are his perfect woman and won't leave you alone."

"Really?"

"It's happened before. In fact, he was following me around here every time Brian wasn't around," She laughed. "Brian confronted him about it. He told Bill to stay away from me and Bill punched him in the eye."

"So Bill punched Brian." Summer said.

"Yeah; isn't that a joke. He fights for me and dumps me in the same day!" She slung her purse over her shoulder. "Huh!"

Maxine gestured toward the door with her head. "I just remembered we need to meet with our editor, remember Summer? We need to get going, Stephanie."

Summer stood as well. "I'm sorry, Stephanie. I really am," she lied.

The two women walked off leaving Stephanie in the room.

"That woman is N-U-T-S nuts," Maxine said when they left the room. "She's a filbert with walnut dusting."

Summer stuck out her tongue. "Ewww; filberts are gross. Walnuts aren't bad though."

"She's both of them, I think."

"Nuts but not murderer nuts." Summer said.

"Did you hear what she said? Bill attacked Brian. I still think Bill's the killer, if you ask me."

"Yeah? Not Miss hiding stuff in her oversized purse who was also jilted because of our recently murdered dentist?"

"When you put it that way," Maxine said. "She makes the list as well. But Bill...he's..."

"But why would Bill kill Scott?" Summer interrupted. "I can understand maybe attacking Brian after they fought and killing him accidentally, but Scott?" Summer shook her head. "I don't know. Brian is moving up on my list. The old 'blackmailed for having an affair' motive seems pretty strong to me. Better than Bill gets puppy-dog eyes for girls that pay attention to him."

"But she said Brian broke it off with her." Maxine said.

"Right. But that doesn't mean that Scott and Terrance weren't still leaning on him to join their business." She snapped her fingers. "And if they had any real incriminating evidence on him about his decades long affair, that would be even more reason for Brian to try and get rid of them! We need to find out who called Scott before he went into the bathroom."

"Inspector Thorndyke isn't going to give us anything."

"No, but there are a couple of officers that might." Summer took her recorder out of her pocket and turned it off. After she put it in her satchel, she pulled up on her collar, straightening her shirt, exposing even more cleavage. "We should see what we can get out of those two officers."

"Burgers and beer." Maxine said. "And probably some high school-style groping in the back of their squad car." She scrunched up her face. "I'm sticking with Stephan, thanks."

Summer nodded. "Tell you what, I'll go see what I can get out of those two if you go talk to Brian."

"Talk to Brian? About what?" Maxine smirked. "Don't you believe Stephanie?"

"Are you kidding me? Not on your life. Go see if his story matches hers and we'll meet back here..." Summer looked at her watch. "At six. That gives us an hour to compare notes before your date."

"Compare notes and freshen up, you mean."

"You look gorgeous no matter what," Summer assured her friend.

"Thanks. But what if Shirtless-Brian doesn't want to talk to me?"

"Who wouldn't want to talk to you?" Summer smiled wide.

"Brian, for starters." Maxine said.

"Just give it a try. See if you can get him to talk about his dealings with Scott and Terrance. And Stephanie." Summer smiled. "And Bill too."

"Anything else?"

"That's probably it. Meet you back here at six, okay?"

"All right." Maxine said. "I just hope he's got a shirt on by the time I get to his hotel. Dad-bod just doesn't do it for me."

Summer laughed. "I'll get Stephan to take his shirt off to counter-act Brian's dad-bod. One look and I'm sure you'll forget all about that dentist."

Maxine sighed. "I'll bet." She closed her eyes. "When I ran my hands up his belly to his chest, it was like a steel washboard. Oh man."

"Focus!" Summer shoved her friend. "Now get going! Meet you back here!"

"Fine, fine. First the soft dentist, then rugged security guard." With that she walked toward the entrance of the convention center, heading toward Brian's hotel.

TWENTY

Summer watched her friend leave, then walked toward the men's room. The two officers were still standing there, guarding the entrance. As she approached she saw Officer Simmons nudge the other -Officer Mattis- and point her way. Mattis fought to keep a smile off his face as she approached.

"Change your mind?" He asked.

"I'm still on the fence Officer Mattis," Summer said.

"Call me Jerry."

"I'm still on the fence, Jerry," Summer smiled. "Figured I'd come back over and see if there have been any developments."

Jerry nodded. "Actually yeah, things have developed, now that you mention it."

"Oh? Did my suggestion of checking the phone give the detective a lead?"

Officer Simmons shook his head. "Haven't seen the detective yet to ask him."

"Oh. Oh! So whoever it was that took the knife out of him forgot the phone!"

"How did you know the knife wasn't in him?" Simmons narrowed his eyes.

"Yeah, how did you know that?" Jerry repeated. "You been in there?" He jerked a thumb at the bathroom. "It's still a crime scene, you know."

Summer shuddered. "The body is still in there?"

Jerry shook his head. "No, the coroner took him away, but it's still a crime scene."

"Until the murder is solved." His partner pointed out. "Until then, they don't know if they need to go back in there to look at something."

"And the knife from the hallway has been picked up too." Summer said.

"Hallways?" Jerry asked. "It sure seems to me like you've been in there. Oliver?" He turned to his partner.

"Yeah, seems that way to me too. Maybe you should talk to Detective Thorndyke."

"Yeah," Summer crossed her arms because it pushed her breasts up even more. "Because that went so well last time. I'm full up on insults for the day, thanks."

Jerry tried to keep eye contact with Summer but failed miserably.

Oliver didn't do much better.

"I'm just trying to do my job is all. I mean, doesn't freedom of the press mean anything anymore?"

"Huh?" Jerry said as he looked up.

Summer moved to her toes and peeked over his shoulder. "Is... Detective Thorndyke still in there?"

"No; he left to do his detective thing."

"What if you escorted me in there, Jerry?" Summer asked. She dropped back down on her heels. "Just so I can get enough for a story."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Oliver said. "If Thorndyke found out we were cooperating with you..."

Summer winked at him. "That's why we have these things called anonymous sources. No one will ever know." She looked over her shoulder. " You keep an eye out and we'll just run in there real quick like."

Oliver looked at his partner. "I don't know."

Summer smiled sweetly at Jerry. "Come on, Jerry. What do you say?"

Jerry looked from Summer to his partner and back again. "Okay, but just for a sec."

"Did you say just for sex?" Summer teased.

"What?" Jerry gave her a double-take. "What? No! I said sec. Right Oliver?"

Oliver looked at Jerry wide-eyed. "What did you say?"

"I heard sex." Summer said.

"I said sec! As in second!" Now he wasn't sure what he had said. "Oh man."

Summer poked the man. "Okay, okay. Just for a *sec*." She emphasized the last word.

Jerry nodded at his partner. "We'll be right back."

"Okay."

"Thanks, Oliver." Summer said. "I'll let Maxie know how cool you were about this."

"Yeah?"

Summer nodded solemnly. "Oh yeah. She can't resist a man in uniform."

Oliver beamed.

"After you, sir," Summer gestured at the door. She casually looked around to make sure no one was watching.

Jerry opened the door and slipped in. "Follow me."

Summer followed close behind him.

When the door closed, Jerry turned to face Summer. "Now that we're alone..."

Inwardly Summer cringed, expecting a full-on pass from the man. "Yeah?"

His eyebrows went up. "What's your name?"

"Summer."

"Summer, that's nice." Jerry started again. "Listen Summer, I want to make a career in law enforcement. I think I'm good at it, but Thorndyke doesn't care." He jerked a thumb toward the stall where the body was. "I asked if I could side-seat with him on this investigation, get some experience, and he just shot me down."

"Oh," Summer said, relieved.

He took a step forward, closing the distance between them. "And so I was thinking..."

"Oh?" Summer said again, back to expecting a pass.

"If we work together, maybe we can figure out who the murderer is and Thorndyke will give me a chance. Right now he just thinks I'm just a stupid Trooper. But I can test for Sergeant in

three months and I know I can make it." He smiled. "Honest, that's all I'm asking for. I've got a girlfriend. It's pretty serious."

"Oh." Summer said, relieved.

"You've got to give me more than 'oh'." Jerry said. "Well? I know it's not your job but if you're trying to write a story about the murderer, knowing who did it would really help, right?"

Summer put her finger to her lip. "So you're saying I help you out and you'll give me an exclusive?"

Jerry nodded. "Yeah." He narrowed his eyes. "I know you've been poking around talking to people so maybe by accident you found something out that might help with the investigation. If we work together, and I can solve it, then yeah, you get the exclusive. That would be good for your career too, right?"

"It wouldn't hurt," Summer said. "So what do you have so far?"

Jerry put his hands on his hips. "We are sharing information both ways, right?"

"Right." Summer said. She started around the wall to the left. "We share what we know. You solve the murder and I get the exclusive. What could be better?"

Jerry put his hand on her elbow since she was still walking away from him. "Summer." He pulled her around. "I'm being serious here. Thorndyke acts like he does towards the press because they have completely let him down one time too many. He'll never let it happen again. If you want someone on your side on this, then you need to be honest with me. Otherwise..."

Summer put out her hand. "You have a deal, Officer Jerry Mattis. Let's solve this murder and give both our careers a boost."

Jerry shook her hand. "Okay then." He let go of her hand and pointed. "To the stall."

The pair walked around the privacy wall to the open area and toward the stall.

"It's got to be weird being in a guy's bathroom," Jerry said. "First time?"

Summer shook her head. "Not even close."

Jerry laughed. "You sneak in to men's rooms a lot?"

"Sneak? No. I covered a cheerleading competition at the arena. Nationals. And because it was pretty much all girls, they had turned all but a couple of the men's into women's bathrooms." She thought back. "They put tarps over the urinals and changed the signs."

"Then they brought in the couches and the bars?"

"What?"

"Since we're being honest, you can tell me," Jerry said. "I know that's why women all go to the bathroom at the same time and take forever; the couches and free bars."

"I'm not allowed to say," Summer said. "Rules of the Sisterhood." She pulled the stall door open. "So Scott was found here with a knife in him then."

"Summer." Jerry said. "If we're going to have any sort of relationship with this case, you need to stop lying to me."

"What?"

"You found the body, didn't you." Jerry said flatly. "Right?"

Summer exhaled. "Fine yes. I found the body." She leaned on the side of the stall. "We... Maxine and I were following Scott because we thought the story here was a scandalous affair between two dentists. We wanted to talk to him about it and while we were catching up to him, he came in here." She looked into the stall. There was blood on the floor in front of the toilet. "And he never came out."

"I see." Jerry pulled the door open completely so they could both look in. "The deceased was fully clothed," he said, taking an official tone, "which means he was not actually using the toilet when he was killed. In fact," He pointed at the floor. "The initial blood drops are a little farther out from the toilet so he was probably standing in the doorway when he was stabbed." He turned and faced out from the stall, still holding onto the door. "Like this. Standing in the doorway, facing his attacker." He looked at Summer. "Stab me in the chest." He pantomimed stabbing himself in the chest. "Like this."

Summer started to stab him with her right hand then switched to her left. "Like this?"

"You don't know what hand to use?"

"The stab came from the left to the right, so whoever did it was left handed." Summer said.

Jerry smiled at her. "Oh yeah, I think this is going to work out nicely for both of us. Okay." Jerry grabbed her fist, holding it to his chest. "And he gets stabbed and pushed back by the force." He staggered back and sat on the toilet, pulling her with him.

Summer shifted her feet to keep her balance as she leaned over him, her face very close to his.

"The stab killed him almost instantly; it penetrated his heart, I heard the coroner say."

Summer pulled her hand out of Jerry's. "Then they let go but left the knife."

As Summer pulled her hand out of his grasp, Jerry leaned forward. "Pulling him forward."

"No; instead of falling forward off the seat, he was leaned back." Dutifully Summer pushed him backward against the wall. "Like this."

Jerry stayed leaning back "Because when they pulled the knife out, it pulled him forward. They pushed him back because whoever stabbed him..." He opened his eyes wide. "Wanted to look him in the face!"

"No, that's not it."

Jerry looked around the stall. "It has to be. The knife was found in the hallway. The attacker stabbed him, pulled it out, and pushed him back."

Summer grimaced. "No. When I first saw Scott, the knife was sticking out of his chest still and he was slumped forward."

"Really? But why..."

"I'll tell you if you'll stop sitting on the toilet while we talk." Summer interrupted him. "It's creeping me out."

Jerry stood, making sure he didn't step in the blood. "Yeah, I guess so." He walked out of the tall to the sinks, turned and leaned against them. "You moved the murder weapon?"

"No. When I first saw him, it was when I followed him in here to confront him. That's when I found him with the knife sticking out of his chest. He had only been dead a few minutes at that point. Less than ten. Then I freaked out and left. A few minutes after that, when I came back in with the security guy, that's when the knife was missing. And that's when we discovered the access hallways and found the knife."

"So whoever stabbed him left the knife, then came back for it."

"Why would they do that? I mean, that's pretty risky coming back to the scene of the crime, right?"

"Right." Jerry snapped his fingers. "Because they weren't wearing gloves! Whoever killed him wasn't planning on killing him. A crime of passion? So they stabbed him and ran off, shocked at what they had done. Then realizing they had left their prints on the knife, they came back and took it."

"But they dropped it in the hallway." Summer said.

"Sure, sure. Once they wiped it off." Jerry pantomimed wiping a knife handle off then dropping it. He looked down at the floor. "Then it didn't matter if it was found or not. They were scott-free." He pointed at the automatic paper towel holder. "Grab the knife, grab a paper towel, wipe it down as you run off. Drop the print-free knife and you're scott free." He waggled his eyebrows. "See what I did there?"

"Nicely done." Summer said. "But that does sound exactly right."

"But who wanted him dead?" Jerry looked up at Summer. "You said he was having an affair? That's your prime suspect; whoever he was sleeping with. The spouses and significant others are usually the perpetrators."

"He wasn't the one having the affair." Summer said. "Stephanie Dixon and Brian Larson were having an affair. It had been going on for years." She smirked. "They had a standing hook up at conventions. But apparently Scott was trying to blackmail Brian to join his," Summer made little quotes with her fingers, "dental franchise kingdom by saying he would tell his wife about the affair."

"Wow, that really makes him the suspect."

Now Summer held up a finger. "But Stephanie was terribly upset about it as well. And she carries a really big purse."

"A big purse?"

"A purse big enough for a kitchen knife." Summer said.

"That makes her another suspect. Hey; they may have even done it together." He turned and pointed at an invisible person. "Did you kill him? Yes. Where's the knife? I left it behind. You fool, it has your prints on it, you need to get it back!" He said as he pointed back and forth. "Never mind, I'll go clean it off. Okay, meet you later." He held his hands up. "Just like that."

"But Scott had also cost Terrance Brushwood's ringer the love of his life. He was pretty upset too."

"What? Who?" Jerry said. "Who is Terrance Brushwood? And he had a ringer?"

"The dentists sometimes bring their own patients with them for the competitions. Bill Volker is the one Terrance Brushwood brought."

"Huh. I see. Well, sort of. Who cares?"

"A few conventions ago, Bill met the love of his life who also happened to be Scott Anderson's ringer patient and it cost Scott the competition, so he broke them up."

"Did I just walk into a soap opera?" Jerry shook his head. "Who'd have thought a simple dentist convention would be so seedy under the surface?"

"Right? And you haven't even met Earl." Summer shuddered.

"Earl?"

"He's not important," Summer said. "Anyway, Bill was upset with not only Scott for running off the love of his life, but also Doctor Brushwood because..." She smiled. "He put him up at the Ritz Motel for this convention."

Jerry grimaced. "The Ritz? Wow. I guess he wants Bill to quit, huh?"

"You'd think he would just fire him."

Jerry shrugged. "Unless Bill has something on Doctor Brushwood." He tilted his head to the side. "The same dentist who was working with Scott Anderson, right ? In this franchise thing. So maybe he blamed both of them."

"Maxine thinks he's the murderer. Even though Bill told me he wasn't."

"Of course he told you that. Prison is chock *full* of innocent people. Just ask them." Jerry pushed himself off the sinks. "Hey, why were you asking about the deceased's cell phone?"

"Oh!" Summer said. "While we were following Scott, he looked like he was going into the conference room, then he got a message and he came into the bathroom instead."

"So you're thinking whoever sent him a text was setting him up? That makes sense."

"So we need to check his phone."

"Hmmm." Jerry thought for a moment. "Some sneakery is in order, methinks."

"Sneakery?" Summer put her hands on her hips.

Jerry tilted his head toward his radio which was attached at his shoulder. "Dispatch, Unit Twenty-Three." When the dispatcher responded he continued: "Dispatch, can you ten-five the unit for the convention center four-five-one with a ten seventy-nine to ten twenty-one me?" He cringed as he waited for a response.

"What was all that?" Summer whispered.

"You don't have to whisper; they can't hear you," Jerry said. "I was trying to get a message to the unit that transported the evidence from here without Detective Thorndyke hearing. He doesn't use call-codes because he doesn't bother to remember them. He keeps a cheat card in his pocket..."

"Wait one, Unit Twenty-three; your code nine hundred in process." the dispatcher said.

"Ten-four, Dispatch. Thanks." He smiled. "Nice. Anyway, I asked the dispatcher to ten-five *telephone* the unit handling the code four-five-one *murder* here with a ten seventy-nine *emergency message* to twenty-one *telephone* me."

"Wow."

"And she just responded that she was going to have them make a code nine hundred *wellness check* on me, so they're going to call."

"And the detective wouldn't catch any of that?"

Jerry shook his head. "Not unless some other officer told him, and the odds are they won't because he treats everyone the same."

"Serves him right." Summer said. "Trollop indeed." She snapped her fingers.

Jerry's phone rang.

"Look at that!" Summer clapped.

"Mattis," Jerry said when he answered his phone. "Hey, Tom. Listen, I'm tracking down a lead here and I was wondering if you took a phone into evidence from the deceased." He nodded at Summer.

"Nice!" Summer moved beside Jerry and put her head next to his to listen in on the call.

He obliged by tilting the phone out so they both could hear. "Can you give me the last three calls he made and received?"

"Text messages." Summer whispered.

When Tom repeated that, Jerry held his finger to his lips. "Got another trooper here. We're just running down a lead, you

know. So we can pass it to Thorndyke." He nodded. "Sure, call me back." He swiped his phone to end the call.

"He's going to do it?" Summer clapped again. "How long will it take?"

"He's got to open the evidence bag which means he needs someone to witness the opening and checking of the phone, then the resealing of the bag, so it's going to take a little time." He pointed at the door. "We should leave before someone finds us in here."

"Right!" Summer took Jerry by the arm. "Let's go wait outside!"

"It might be a half hour, forty-five minutes before he calls back you know."

"What? I thought you said he just had to open the bag." Summer pulled the door open.

"Sure, once he gets down to the Evidence Department. He's not sitting down there doing nothing all day." Jerry walked out of the men's room. "He wasn't even in the station or he'd have called me on his office phone. He needs to drive back to the station, park, walk in, find someone willing to help him, take them over to the Evidence cage, sign the bag out, turn on the phone..."

"Okay, okay. So it's going to be a while." Summer frowned. "Fine. I'll run down some other leads while we wait."

"What are you two talking about?" Oliver asked.

"Where are you going to be?" Jerry said.

Summer took a card from her satchel. "Call me when you get something, okay?"

"What?" Oliver said.

"Okay." Jerry answered. "Be careful out there, we still have a murderer on the loose."

Summer turned and squeezed both of Jerry's shoulders. "Oooh! I'd kiss you if you didn't have a serious girlfriend!"

"I don't have one of those," Oliver pointed out. "Just... you know... in case."

Summer let go of Jerry and blew a kiss to Oliver as she turned and walked off.

"That's one strange, hot gal." Oliver said. "Who were you talking to?"

"Tom." Jerry said. "We're going to solve the murder."

"You and Tom?" Oliver smirked, "Tom and Jerry on the case?"

"Me and Summer." He pointed at Summer as she ran up the escalators to the second floor. "And you, *partner*."

"Still bucking for Sergeant, huh?"

"You know it." Jerry said.

"So what did she tell you?"

"Drama is what we've got going on here, partner. Loads of drama." Jerry said as he started to recount what Summer had told him.

TWENTY-ONE

Summer ran up the stairs two at a time. When she reached the top, she looked left and right at the conference rooms where people were going in and out. Even with a murder on the premises- and a dentist at that- the convention was still going on.

With a sigh, she moved to the closest one, hoping to find Terrance Brushwood. Thanks to speaking to Stephanie, she had lost track of him when he had just wandered off. She not only wanted to get his side of the story, but also was intrigued by his wink.

She looked in the large conference room. There now seemed to be dental appliances set up on several tables. Large placards explained what each table displayed.

Summer made a quick circuit of the room, looking for Terrance. She ran into Quincy instead.

"Quincy!" She said.

"What?" The man turned and looked. "Oh, Summer." He frowned. "What's happened now?"

Summer moved to the man and whispered. "I don't know; you tell me."

"Don't make light of the situation, Summer." He held his hands out. "This is more than just a job, running conventions. It's what I do as a career."

Summer put her hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry Quincy, really." She leaned in again. "Has the detective told you anything about the murder?"

He shook his head. "No, not a word. The man is...difficult."

"He's an ass is what he is." Summer said. "Do you want me to fill you in on what's happening?"

"Is he close to arresting the... one who did *it*?"

"I'm not sure," Summer admitted. "But I'm making progress."

"At solving..." He looked around. "It?"

"There are several suspects." She leaned in close again. "Do you know about the affair?"

Quincy shrugged. "That happens at every conference. It's not anything new. Is that all you've found?"

Summer considered that. "Well, it seems that two dentists were blackmailing another one to join their conglomeration."

"Huh; that's different." Quincy replied.

"Really?"

"Yeah; usually they throw money at people to get them on board, or hold a free fishing trip in Cancun, or skiing in Tahoe as a way to get them. And hookers, of course. Lots of hookers."

"Classy. This time they were threatening to tell the man's wife about his affair."

"That's pretty heavy handed."

"And one of the blackmailers is the d-e-a-d one."

"I'm pretty sure that the people who come to a dentist convention can spell, Summer." Quincy smirked.

Summer pursed her lips. "*Mister Klugman*, do you want to hear what I have to say or not?"

Quincy shook his head. "To be honest, no. I honestly do not care about the skullduggery that goes on. I just want all the events to start on time, all the exhibits to be set up properly, and all the presentations to stay on schedule. That, my dear woman, is what makes a successful conference."

Now Summer chuckled. "I see. Well, I will leave you to it then." A thought occurred to her. "In your travels, have you seen Doctor Brushwood?"

Quincy thought for a moment. "He was in conference room three when I left there. He was talking to a small group of people about franchise ownership."

"Still at work, it seems." Summer said. She smiled at the man. "Thanks Quincy."

"Sure, sure. Go get your story." He shoo'ed her off.

Summer smiled again then walked out, heading toward conference room three. As she went her phone buzzed in her back pocket. She took it out and read the text from Maxine- 'Crazy Bill looking for you. FYI.'. "There's some disturbing news," she said to no one in particular.

When she entered the conference room, she was surprised that once again, Terrance was standing -this time on a chair- addressing a small crowd.

"And the added buying power of being part of a franchise is also translated into advertising," he was saying. "Being able to afford commercials on radio, *or television* is very often beyond the

means of all but a few dental practices. However, with several dozen offices in a general area sharing the costs, that is no longer the case."

A man raised his hand.

"Yes?"

"How does a generalized commercial help my particular practice?" The man asked Terrance.

"Name recognition, first of all helps your particular practice," Terrance answered. "And the commercial, which I admit is generic, does end with just over five seconds of 'offices near you'." He held up a finger. "Just like the advertisements on public busses drive business to not only you but your fellow dental practices." He hopped off the chair and sat in it. "Remember that you are part of a family. The success of one office aids the other offices, a failure of one office also affects the other offices." He leaned forward in his chair and looked to his left. "Well, Miss Laurel, we're sorry you have to move, but the good news is we have a sister office near your new home. We can transfer all your records and future appointments for you if you would like." He looked to the right. "That would be great thanks. At least we don't have to add finding a new dentist to our list of things to do." He looked back to his left. "We're glad to help. All the insurance transfers right over, and if you have any questions or issues, you can always call us here." He now looked at the man. "And those other offices do the same thing for you." He brought his hands together and clasped them. "That's the power of a franchise."

The man nodded. "Yeah, I suppose I see that."

Terrance looked at Summer. "Ahh. It seems it's time for my interview." He stood. "I believe the local paper is writing an article about the practice."

"Something like that, Doctor Brushwood." Summer said. She smirked. "You know, my photographer's little brother had his braces done at one of those franchise places."

He pointed at Summer. "Ahh, see that? That's exactly what I'm talking about!"

Several of the people sitting in front of him clapped.

"Just grab a pamphlet and if you have any questions either contact me directly or call the number on it." Terrance gestured at the stack of pamphlets on the table. "Miss Schauers, if you're ready?" He smiled and gestured to a far end of the room.

"You bet." Summer moved to where the man had gestured.

"Please," Terrance pointed at a chair. "After you."

"What a charmer." Summer sat. "Mind if I record you?" She pulled out her digital recorder.

Terrance shook his head. "Not at all; hate to be mis-quoted."

Summer thumbed it on. "Interviewing Doctor Terrance Brushwood."

Terrance leaned forward, toward the recorder. "Hello lovely readers!" He sat back and smiled. "So..."

Summer hesitated. "I'm..."

"You're not asking about buying a franchise?"

"Wouldn't I need to be a dentist to do that?"

"Not at all. In fact, a lot of times, if we can't get one of the dentists to act as the office manager, we have to hire one. Having

a business management degree is actually more important to running a successful clinic than anything else." He shrugged. "You can hire the best dentists around, but if the front office is a disaster area, folks will stop coming to you pretty quick."

"Huh, I never thought of it that way." Summer said. "Still..." She pointed at herself. "Journalism degree, not business marketing."

"You're still doing pretty well, I'd imagine." He winked. "You seem pretty sharp." He got serious. "So what are you interested in, Miss Flowers."

Summer smirked. "It's Schauers, actually."

"Oh! I'm sorry. Honest mistake, really. Summer Schauers, of course." He gestured at her.

"Okay, Doc," Summer said. "The deal is..." She stopped. "You do know that Scott is dead, right?"

Terrance nodded. "Yes. I heard."

Summer expected him to tell her who had informed him. When he didn't, she pressed on. "And the two of you were partners, right?"

"We were, yes. Very successful partners. We have signed up eight more dentists at this conference."

"Eight? Wow, that's a lot of new offices."

"I wish." Terrance laughed. "No, that's not how it works. Out of the eight, only two or three will actually pass the financial checks, and have the collateral to put up. And we have positions to fill in established clinics as well as opening new ones. These two or three might mean just one more clinic, if any at all."

"And these eight dentists are all willing participants?"

"Why wouldn't they be?"

Summer steeled herself. "Because the word on the street is that you were blackmailing Brian to join your franchise conglomerate."

"Just franchise. A conglomerate is a business made up of other businesses working in different fields." He smiled. "All we do is dentistry. And we do it right."

She nodded, catching that he didn't actually address the question about blackmailing Brian, she asked again: "And Brian was not interested in joining your *franchise* even after you threatened him?"

"I didn't threaten anyone," Terrance said curtly. "Ever."

"So are you saying that Scott threatened Brian?"

"If he did," he leaned forward, "and that's not an admission, I didn't know about it."

"Who actually runs your company?"

"I do." Terrance smirked. "Now."

Summer stared at the man. "And your business dealings with Stephanie Dixon?"

"I don't have any dealings with her. She's not... a good fit for our business model."

"Oh?"

"I'm not sure there's more to say about that." He shrugged. "Square hole, round peg. It just wouldn't work."

"So did you and Scott operate the franchise equally?" Summer took a different approach. "As partners, that is?"

"We were more like a board of directors."

"That doesn't sound right." Summer said.

Terrance smiled. "Well, it's not, really. I'm the C-E-O, Brian is... was the C-F-O..."

"Chief Financial Officer," Summer said.

"See? You have some business sense after all. There is hope." Terrance said. "And we had a board of directors," he held up three fingers. "Three that were elected from the office managers of the various clinics." He shrugged. "I wasn't trying to mislead you earlier, I didn't think you would understand how businesses worked."

Summer seethed. "I'm really not interested in that, Doctor. I am just trying to figure out who would want Brian dead." Summer said flatly. "And I think it's you."

Terrance was taken aback. "What? Me? Be serious."

Summer stood. "I think that's what I'll tell Detective Thorndyke. He and I have been working closely on this case. I'm getting a front page spread on the whole thing. An exclusive. Above the fold, even." She smirked. "I don't think you know how news print works so that means I'm the lead story for what will probably be the entire week."

Terrance gestured at the seat. "No, please. The publicity would be horrible. I'm sorry."

Summer hesitated. "I don't see why I should listen to you anymore."

Terrance looked up at her, obviously worried.

"But I suppose I have a few more questions."

"Excellent." Terrance stood and gestured at the chair. "Have a seat then."

Summer sat. "So does the death of Scott negatively affect your bottom line?"

"Wow, right back at it, huh?" Terrance leaned back in his seat. "Actually it does."

"Really?"

"Significantly." Terrance said. "Scott was a hot head, that's true but he was excellent at marketing and managing the franchise operations to keep them profitable." He frowned. "He's going to be hard to replace."

"Who will replace him?"

"Honestly?" Terrance shrugged. "I've no idea. We'll have a board meeting, maybe pull in all the office managers and see if anyone in-house fits the bill. I am great at getting people on board, opening clinics, sure, but it was Scott that made them successful. We were a perfect match."

"Huh." Summers decided to change her line of questioning. "So who do you think would want Scott dead?"

Terrance shrugged. "Well, I'm sure that Stephanie doesn't like him. And Brian, of course."

"Because you and... I mean, *Scott* was pressuring Brian to join the practice by threatening to reveal their affair?"

"I don't have any direct knowledge of that, but it sounds plausible."

"But you just said Scott ran the finances and you did the recruiting. So why was he recruiting Brian?" She held up her recorder. "Do you want me to play that back for you?"

The man just stared at Summer.

Summer waved a hand dismissively. "In any case..."

"Do you have any questions or just accusations?" Terrance interrupted.

"It is kind of tough since after all, what you were doing to Brian and Theresa were also the same thing you did to Bill and Heather."

Terrance stare turned into wide eyes. "Who the hell are they?"

"Bill." Summer said. "And Heather." She frowned. "I don't know her last name."

"I have no idea who you're talking about."

"The Vegas showgirl!"

Now Terrance smiled. He crossed his legs and leaned forward. "Okay, this is getting good. Who's the showgirl?"

"Heather! She and Bill had a fling at a conference. A *dentist* conference."

"Good for them." He raised his eyebrows. "Good for Bill, actually since she was a Vegas showgirl, I suppose."

"I'm being serious."

"Me too. I honestly don't know who you're talking about."

Summer raised her voice. "Stop lying, Doctor Brushwood! Bill Volker works for you!"

Terrance looked around. "Keep it down."

"Well then stop lying. You have Bill come to your conferences so you can do dental work on him. He's your ringer."

"Willie? Sure, I put him up and give him free dental procedures. I've never heard him go by Bill." Terrance held up his hand. "Honest. He's always been Willie to me."

"Well, *Willie* is staying at the Ritz and he's pretty upset by it."

Terrance fought to keep a smile from his face. "Well, you know..."

"Oh, I know, Terrance. You want Bill to go away because you ruined his life."

"What?" Terrance pointed at himself. "Me? I'm making his life better. What has he told you?"

"He said that at a conference in Des Moines, he met the love of his life and you and Scott broke them up."

"Hah! Willie and a Vegas showgirl? Come on. I mean; have you *seen* him?"

Summer considered that. Bill was, when all was said and done, definitely not very attractive- pasty and a bit pudgy was more like it. "Well, sure, but... love is weird sometimes."

"So is insanity. Ask Stephanie about him. Ask any of the other women dentists about him. If you give him the time of day, you are suddenly the target of his obsession." He looked Summer up and down. "Uh oh. Did you... talk to him one-on-one? Show him any sympathy?"

"Well... I... Maxine and I did talk to him in that horrible hotel you put him up in." She pointed at him. "Because you want him to quit."

"Damn right I do! Practically every woman at the convention has asked me to not bring him around anymore. And if you're trying to recruit people into your business, you sure as Hell don't start by making them uncomfortable."

"But he and Heather..."

"Come on, Summer; there is no he and Heather. Sure she might have said good morning to him at one point and the rest was in his crazy head."

"So who was Scott's ringer..."

"I wish you'd stop calling them that."

"Who did Scott bring to the conference in Des Moines?" Summer said.

"Des Moines?" Terrance thought for a moment. "Oh, that's right; it was actually Brian's wife." He smirked. "She needed a filling and we were using her as way to get Brian on board. We had no idea he didn't care about her or even about the affair with Stephanie at that point. Seemed like a good plan you know; get the wife on board, and the husband would follow."

"Oh."

"Hey, she's Vegas showgirl material, now that I think about it." He snapped his fingers. "And she didn't make it to the filling competition either." His eyes got large. "She told us afterwards that she had stayed in their hotel room because she said there was a weird guy sitting in the hallway! So he must have somehow got it in his mind that she liked him and he started stalking her."

"Come on, that's not what Bill..."

"But her name isn't Heather; it's Ann."

"I see," Summer said, let down.

"What other fantasies did he tell you?"

"He's from Des Moines, Washington?"

"Okay, that's true." Terrance grinned. "I've got to give him that."

"He works online?" Summer cringed.

"Yeah, that's true too." Terrance snorted. "Pretty glamorous; he's a Game Master for this popular online game."

"He said he ran a software development company."

"He monitors several of their hundreds of servers and when people get into an argument in the game, he pops into the game and settles the dispute. Or if he catches someone breaking the game's rules of conduct, or taking advantage of a glitch, he jumps in and stops them. He's a Dungeon Master or Arbitrator or something like that."

"Come on..."

"Honest; he makes about twenty five grand a year doing it. Settling fights between people who live in their parent's basement and fourteen year old kids. It's a job, I guess, but it has no dental plan so that's why he comes to us for procedures."

"Oh man." Summer slouched in her chair.

"If you want my advice, don't go near that guy; he's delusional. You'll have a Grade-A stalker if you're not careful." He smirked. "And if he thinks Scott broke up the love of his life, maybe you even have a murderer on your hands."

"He blames you just as much as Scott, just so you know." Summer said.

"Geeze. Thanks for the warning." He put his hands on his knees and pushed himself up. "Anything else?"

Summer stood as well. "No, I suppose not." She frowned. "Thanks for your time, Doctor."

Terrance hesitated for a moment. "How about I buy you a drink to make up for being rude earlier?"

"I need to meet my photographer in a little bit," Summer said.

"Then a drink until you do." He smiled. "No strings attached, honest. I was pretty rude and it was uncalled for."

"Okay then." Summer said with a smile of her own. "I'm supposed to meet her at six, so I've got some time anyway." She took out her phone and swiped at her message application. "At the bar with Terrance." She said then sent the message. She then looked at Terrance, "Letting Maxine know where I'll be. This is a big place, you know."

"Oh, I know. Lots of space around here." Terrance looked at his watch. "Okay then, we've got plenty of time to make amends." He gestured toward the door, "After you."

"Thanks." Summer said as she walked toward the door. As Terrance followed close behind, he took out his phone and sent a quick text of his own as he tried to convince who he thought the murder was to commit just one... or two more.

TWENTY-TWO

Maxine walked to the escalators, heading to the first floor and the concourse that led to the hotel where Brian was staying, next door. When she got to the bottom of it, she went to the main concourse.

Bill ran up to her. "Maxine!" He said as he skidded to a stop. "I'm glad I found you!"

Maxine jumped. "What?" She looked around, relieved the area was crowded.

"How are you?"

"Okay, I suppose."

"Can we talk?" Bill wrung his hands.

"Well, I have a meeting... an interview I have to get to, so it has to be quick. Otherwise, we can talk later on, if that's okay."

Bill shook his head. "I don't think later on will work." He moved very close to Maxine. "There's been a murder!" He whispered.

Maxine stepped backward, away from him. "That's terrible."

Bill looked left and right. He stepped close again and whispered: "And I'm probably next!"

"Oh." Maxine took another step back. "Wait, what? How are you next?"

"I need to talk to Summer about it!"

"Can you tell me?"

"You said you were in a hurry."

Maxine frowned. "Yeah, I did." Without thinking she jerked a thumb toward the convention center behind her. "She's in there."

"Thanks!" Bill ran toward the entrance.

"N-u-t-s, nuts." Maxine said. She took out her phone and typed a quick text to Summer: 'FYI- Crazy Bill looking for you.'

With a shrug, she walked toward the hotel, hoping Brian was still in his room.

TWENTY-THREE

Maxine knocked on Brian's door in what she hoped was a friendly knock.

After several seconds, she heard the lock click then the door opened a crack.

"What do you want now? You want another photo? You're kind of demanding, you know that?"

"Demanding?" Maxine shook her head. "No, Brian, no. I'm just running down something for Summer is all." She smiled. "Can I come in? Just for a little bit?"

"Inside?" Brian snorted. "That's all I need with everything else going on; someone seeing a beautiful woman coming into my room." He still didn't open the door further. "I don't think so."

"I know you're being blackmailed by Terrance and Scott, Brian." Maxine grinned. "Beautiful, huh? Thanks."

"Oh man." Brian closed the door a little more. "How about we do our talking in the lobby?" Brian asked. "In a nice public place."

Maxine nodded. "Sure, sure; that works just fine for me." She gestured. "Let's go there now."

"Let me get dressed first."

"Oh, uhm...okay."

"Don't jump to conclusions; I took a shower is all. I'll meet you downstairs in ten minutes at the fireplace." Without waiting for a response, he closed the door.

Maxine pointed toward the elevators. "Okay then, I'll just meet you there." She said to the closed door before she turned and walked to the elevator. "Look at me, all beautiful and demanding."

True to Brian's word, less than ten minutes after she sat in front of the large gas fireplace, Brian walked over.

Brian looked around suspiciously. "Okay then."

Maxine gestured at the other overstuffed leather chair in front of the fireplace. "If you want, we can both just look at the flames and pretend to be on our phones so no one suspects anything." She held up her phone.

Brian laughed. "That's pretty cloak and dagger, Maxine."

"Well..." She said. "There has been a murder."

"Yeah, that's terrible. Stabbed through the heart like that." Brian said.

"Do you mind if I take notes?" Maxine asked. She took out a small pad.

"No recorder?"

"Summer's the one who usually does the interview. I take the pictures." She patted her pocket. "Oh." startled. "Crud. Do you... have a pen? Or a pencil? I should have stolen one from the front desk."

Brian laughed. "I've got a pen; most doctors carry one." He reached into his coat pocket and took out a pen. "It's a Pilot Custom so I'm going to want that back." He held it out for her.

Maxine took the pen. It was in Brian's left hand- he had taken it from his right breast pocket. "Oh, wow." She said as she pulled the cap off the fountain pen.

Brian smiled. “What? You don’t like fountain pens?”

Maxine smiled. “It surprised me is all; I have never actually used a fountain pen.” She looked at it. “These are usually expensive, right?”

Brian nodded. “You can get a cheap one for four or five bucks at a regular store.” He gestured at the pen. “That one has a Waverly Nib which is best for left handers because it has a slight upturn on the end so it doesn’t jump or snag on the paper. But anyone can use it. It does cost several hundred dollars.”

“Several hundred?” Now she stared at the pen.

“They can cost into the thousands. But that’s just being flashy. I think that model just writes really well.”

“I see.” Maxine put the cap on the end of the pen. “So...”

Brian stared at her. “So.” He repeated.

Maxine took a deep breath. “So Terrance and Scott were blackmailing you.”

“How do you know?”

“We talked to Stephanie.” Maxine looked down at her pad. “She told us they were going to tell your wife about the affair if you didn’t join into their.” She looked at him. “What would you call it?”

“A cage.” Brian said flatly.

Maxine nodded as she wrote ‘cage’. “Wow, this does write smoothly. But seriously, a cage?”

“That’s exactly what it is; with my practices...” He spread his arms out wide, “I don’t have near as many as they do, by the way. But with my practices, I’m in charge. I hire people to provide

excellent service and fire the ones that don't. And I like that. I am not going to be someone's lackey."

"Lackey?"

"L-a-c-k-e-y," Brian spelled.

"Yeah, I know." Maxine wrote. 'Not a lackey', then because she was enjoying writing with the fountain pen, she added 'likes to be the boss'. "I see. So you didn't want to be just a rank and file dentist again."

Brian brought his hands down to his knees. "Who would? I mean, why go from being in charge to being told what to do? I've got plenty of money, enough to do what I want when I want. What do I need more for?" He frowned. "Greedy bastards is what they are."

"They want to be the Coors of the dentist world."

Brian laughed. "That's a good way of putting it. But I still told them no."

"Who hit you in the eye?"

There was a long pause before Brian answered. "Stephanie did." He exhaled slowly. "She said I betrayed her." His exhale became a laugh. "Isn't that a riot? A mistress saying she was betrayed!"

"How did you betray her?"

"When they told me they would tell my wife if I didn't join them, Stephanie was sure I would keep our affair secret and join their practice."

"And you didn't?"

"I told those two to tell my wife because I cared as much about her as I did Stephanie."

"Ouch. Did she hear you say that?"

"I don't see how she couldn't; she was in the room when I said it. It was in the back room before the extraction demonstration."

Maxine decided not to confront him on the difference between a demonstration and a competition and instead asked: "So where were you later that day? When Scott was busy being killed?"

"I was here." Brian said. "Talking to my wife on the phone. I was telling her how the conference was going." Brian's phone played a tune.

"Do you need to get that?" Maxine said.

Brian shook his head. "It'll keep. Probably a reminder of where I'm supposed to be next. The show must go on." He leaned back in his chair. "Listen, I told Stephanie that I was lying to Scott and Terrance about not caring; I was just doing it to get them off my... our backs."

"And you think they believed your bluff?"

Brian shrugged. "Yeah, sure. Why wouldn't they?"

"Because soon after those two threatened to tell your wife and you said you didn't care if they did, one of them ended up dead."

"I didn't stab him in the bathroom, I can tell you that."

Maxine made a show of writing 'SAYS HE IS INNOCENT' in all capital letters. She added a flourish to the top of the 'T'.

"That's a fancy 't' you got there. But I'm glad you got that down nicely." He held his hand out. "My pen, if you please."

"Oh. Okay." Maxine looked from her pad to the pen, then to Brian. "Sure, I suppose." She recapped the pen and handed it back. "Thanks for your time," she said as she stood. "I really need to get going."

As Brian stood, he took out his phone and glanced at the message.

'Telling the reporter about U. LOL', the text from Terrance said simply.

Maxine waved. "Okay then. Bye."

Brian smiled at her. "Listen, I hope I wasn't out of line back at the room."

"What?" Maxine asked.

"When I said you were beautiful. I meant it you know."

"Thanks." Maxine said.

"You heading back to the convention center to meet your friend?"

Maxine nodded. "Yeah."

"If you give me just five minutes to run back up to my room, I'll walk over with you."

"Okay, I suppose." Maxine pointed to the exit that led back towards the convention center. "Meet you there?"

"Sure thing." With that, Brian turned and jogged to the door that led to the stairwell.

"Weird." Maxine took out her phone and sent a text to Summer: 'Done W Brian. Walking back 2U'. She walked toward

the exit, detouring by the front desk to take a pen. When she got there, she looked down at her pad and thought back on her discussion with Brian. After just a few minutes, a thought occurred to her. "Oh no." She wrote 'bathroom' and 'knife to the heart' under 'INNOCENT'. She looked down at the ball point pen- it was in her right hand. "Oh no!"

Brian dashed up the stairs two at a time. He looked out of shape but actually ran half marathons- not quickly, but he did complete them at a very respectable ten to eleven minute pace. Taking the stairs two at a time, he reached the third floor quickly. He pulled his key card from his back pocket as he slid to a stop at his door. Swiping it through the slot, he pushed it open as soon as the little light turned green. "Damned reporters," he cursed as he stepped to the dresser. He opened the bottom drawer and pulled out a long kitchen knife, using a pair of underwear to keep from getting finger prints on it. He had bought two kitchen knives from a store when he arrived in town. They were his completely untraceable method of dealing with Terrance and Scott for trying to take over his practices and not only breaking up his marriage but his affair as well. Unfortunately it now it seemed he would have to use it on the reporter and her photographer. He had been carrying the first knife hoping to catch one of the dentists alone when he lured Scott into the bathroom with a simple 'I'm ready to deal. I'm in the bathroom on the first floor' text he had sent. Then, in a panic, he had forgotten to put on gloves before stabbing him.

Brian slid the knife into a sheath at the small of his back then covered it with his sport coat. With a scolding headshake, he took a pair of leather driving gloves off the dresser before turning and running out of the room. He tucked the gloves in his back pocket as he once again ran down the stairs.

Brian burst out of the stairwell, breathing hard. He looked left and right, hoping Maxine hadn't left without him. He spotted her just as she stepped away from where she was leaning against the wall and looking at her notepad.

"You didn't have to run; I said I'd wait," Maxine lied as she closed her notepad.

"Nice pen." Brian said.

"Thanks."

"Ready?"

"What did you get from your room?" Maxine asked.

Brian took several deep breaths to slow his heart. "My reading glasses. I can't even read a menu without them," he lied.

"Happens to the best of us," Maxine said. She gestured at the exit. "So what're you going back to the conference for?" She pointed at his coat pocket. "That reminder?"

"Huh?"

"The text you got."

"Oh, right. Yeah, I'm supposed to meet a fellow dentist about a new procedure he's developing." He stepped toward the double glass doors and they promptly opened. "Gross dentist stuff you

probably don't want to know about; post insertion procedures for replacement teeth."

"Yuck. Definitely not," Maxine grimaced as she stepped through the doors, Brian right behind her. She tried to think of a way to get away from him. "How about if I meet you there? I need to go to the bathroom first."

"Where you meeting Summer?" Brian asked coolly.

"Back at the convention center." Maxine said. She looked at the front desk of the hotel- the young man she had asked for a pen from was still there.

"Divide and conquer."

"What?"

"You talk to me, she talks to Terrance," Brian said. "Dividing and conquering, it's called."

Maxine's insides tightened- she realized she hadn't mentioned who Summer was talking to- confirming her suspicions. "Right," She said as she turned and started back toward the front desk.

Brian caught her by the arm. "You're going the wrong way, *dear*."

"I got turned around...." Maxine's mind went blank with terror. "I... uh... wanted to thank the nice man for the pen?" She tried.

"Of course you did" Brian spun her around toward the exit. The glass double doors opened as he shoved her toward them. He quickly took the gloves from his back pocket and slipped them on then put his arm around Maxine, pulling her close. With his other hand, he pulled the knife from behind his back.

"Can we just..."

"Just stay calm and you won't get hurt." Brian brought the knife around and pushed it against her side. "Got it?"

"Like Scott didn't get hurt?"

"Yeah, just like that," Brian pushed the knife in a little harder, the point just breaking the skin, making Maxine gasp. He quickly pulled the knife away then raised his hand, letting it slide into his coat sleeve. "If you make any sudden moves, I'll kill you."

"Out here in broad daylight?" Maxine said. "You'll never get away with it."

"Sure, probably not out in the open, but you'd be surprised how many quiet spots there are in a busy convention center. There's more sex going on here than at a high school prom." He tightened his grip on her waist. "So where are you meeting Summer?"

"She didn't tell me; we'll just need to search for her. Or ask someone."

He pulled her closer. "How about I just stab you through the liver so you bleed out in a couple of minutes then I go find her all on my own? How's that sound, *Maxine*?"

"We are supposed to meet at the bar." Maxine said. "You'll never get away with it." She looked at him. "What if I promise never to tell?"

"Shut up and walk. We're going to have a talk, the three of us. A nice private talk. Until then, shut up like your life depends on it."

The pair walked in silence to the convention center.

TWENTY-FOUR

"Listen, Terrance," Summer said again. "I'm not interested in you. At all."

Terrance took a drink. "So you're on the fence." He smiled at her. "You got the boobs for it."

"What?!"

Terrance smirked. "I said *boots*." He looked down at her chest. "Not that I didn't notice those."

"What?!" Summer seethed. "I can't believe someone supposedly as smart as you is too stupid to understand 'no' for an answer. Maybe this will help." She stood. "I'm leaving." She picked up her drink.

Terrance leaned back.

"Don't worry; you're not even worth spilling beer over." She gulped down the last of her beer. "Creep."

Terrance watched her walk off, sure that now that she was alone, Brian would find her and kill her. Just like he was sure he had done to Scott. "You and your friend are better blackmail than him screwing some girl on the side, sister," He toasted Summer with his bourbon as she stomped off. Inwardly, he was surprised it had taken as long as it had for him to get her insulted enough to leave.

With a satisfied smile, he got up and left, planning to go to whatever room had the most people in it -to build a rock-solid alibi for what would soon be the second and third murder of the day.

As soon as he stepped out of the bar area, Bill crowded him. "Where is she? Where is she!"

"Oh for the love of... What do you want, you moron?"

TWENTY-FIVE

Maxine scanned the area as she and Brian entered the convention center. She hoped to see someone she recognized- unfortunately, the people she knew at the conference could be counted on one hand.

"Looking for help?" Brian said. "There isn't any."

Maxine continued to look around without moving her head as much as they made their way to the bar.

As they crossed the open area between the escalators and the bar, she noticed Detective Thorndyke standing by himself as he wrote in a small notebook.

Maxine looked in his direction, hoping to lock eyes with him and hopefully convey some sort of message. She was relieved when he looked in her direction. Maxine looked at him wide-eyed then swiveled her pupils toward Brian.

Thorndyke scratched behind his ear with the back of his pen as he absently looked at her.

"You think that fat guy is going to do you any good? He'd die of cardiac arrest trying to fight me off." Brian leaned over and kissed her cheek roughly. "He just thinks we're a couple going for a drink; don't get your hopes up."

Maxine went back to staring at Thorndyke.

He looked at the end of his pen, then put it in his pocket. Without another look towards Maxine, he turned and walked off.

"He just saved his life and he doesn't even know it." He tugged on Maxine's waist. "Keep moving."

The pair walked into the bar area. It was mostly empty. "Where the hell is your partner?"

"I... I don't know. She said she would be here." Maxine said, genuinely surprised.

"Give me your phone."

"What?"

Brian turned Maxine and headed toward one of the conference rooms. "I am not going to repeat myself." He lowered his other arm- he had been keeping it casually bent across his chest, holding onto his jacket- the knife dropped down so the blade was in his palm. "Get out your phone." He continued toward the large conference room. The doorway was open but the room inside was dark. "We're going to make a nice private call in there."

Maxine turned her head and looked over her shoulder, hoping to see anyone she knew.

She didn't.

When they got into the room, Brian roughly shoved Maxine into a chair. "Don't even try getting up." He held out his hand.

Maxine begrudgingly handed over her phone.

"Unlock it."

Maxine unlocked the phone as Brian brandished the knife. She held it at arm's length.

Brian snatched the phone from her and swiped to open the message application. He laughed. "Oh no, your partner's picked up a crazy lovesick stalker? Believe me; I'll be putting her out of her misery." He looked down and tapped out a quick message to Summer. After he sent it, he put the phone in his coat pocket. "It'll all be over soon."

"I don't understand you." Maxine said. "Because of Stephanie? That's why you killed Scott? For a woman?"

"For a woman," Brian laughed. "First off, she's more of a woman that you'll ever be but no, not *for a woman*." He pointed the knife at her. "It was for my entire *life*." He turned to look at the door as Maxine's phone buzzed in his pocket. "For my practice that I built with blood, sweat, and tears. From one little dingy office in a strip mall to a dozen free standing practices *where I own the land and the building*. For my wife of twenty-three years that will take me for half of everything I have built up, that harpy."

"What about Stephanie?" Maxine said, hoping to at least keep Brian talking.

"Stephanie? She's *easily* replaced." Brian said. "Women are a dime a dozen when you're rich."

"You're rich?" Summer said as she entered the room. "Huh. That still doesn't help in your case."

Brian moved quickly to Maxine and yanked her to her feet and spun her around, putting her between him and Summer. "Oh it helps. Being a respectable, rich doctor helps a hell of a lot." He brought the knife up to Maxine's neck. "Get over here."

"Where?" Summer said. She took a step forward. "Beside you or in front of you."

"Man, I'm really going to enjoy killing you." Brian said. He gestured with the knife beside Maxine. "Over here."

"Whatever you say, Brian," Summer said. She walked slowly beside Maxine.

"Sorry," Maxine said.

"It's okay."

"Shut up!" Brian stepped back, pulling Maxine with him. "Keep moving, Summer. This will all be..."

"What have we here?" Detective Thorndyke said as he stepped into the room. "Am I interrupting some sort of crazy Yank dental demonstration?"

"Damn it all!" Brian cursed. "Get over here, you!"

"Who me?" Thorndyke pointed at himself. "I'd rather not, when all is said and done, my good man." He put his hand in his coat pocket. "Sorry about that, old man."

"Stinking British snobs." Brian brought the knife back up and pressed it against Maxine's neck. "Unless you're the world's best vascular surgeon, you're never going to..."

"Get away from her!" Bill said as he stormed into the room.

Thorndyke turned to look at him. "Come on, really?"

"Get away, I say!" Bill raised the gun up and panned it around the room, suddenly unsure whether Thorndyke was also a threat.

"Damn it all!" Brian said, as the entire situation spiraled out of control. He backed up, keeping a tight hold on Maxine. "Put that gun down you crazy bastard!"

"Crazy, huh? Who's the one with a knife to that woman's throat?"

"You'd do the same given half a chance, you stalker!" Brian shouted at him. "Now drop the gun or I'll kill her!"

Summer scooted to the side slightly, giving herself a little room as she got ready to kick at the side of Brian's throat.

"Stay where you are!" Brian snapped at her.

"Who are you?" Bill asked Thorndyke.

"Me? I'm an innocent bystander."

Bill looked toward Maxine. "Is he?"

"Yes." Maxine lied.

"My giddy aunt," Thorndyke said. "There; does that convince you?"

With a nod, Bill marched past Thorndyke, gun trained on Brian. "I said let her go!"

"You can't just go around stalking women who show interest in you." Brian said.

"But killing folks, that's okay?" Bill retorted. "And I'm the crazy one!"

"There was no girl in DesMoines!" Brian shouted.

"Yes there was! The love of my life!"

"You're crazy!"

"Said the man with the knife to that woman's neck!"

"Get over here." Brian said evenly. "Now." He pressed the knife harder against Maxine's throat. It was on the verge of drawing blood.

Bill took another step. "I should kill you for what you did to me. It's what you deserve. You, Doctor Anderson, Doctor Brushwood. All of you."

"There was no woman!" Brian roared.

"Oh yeah?" Bill reached around and took his cellphone out of his pocket. "Then who is this!" He swiped his phone on and tapped his photo album. He slid his thumb across as he paged through images. "I know it's here..." He kept swiping across images. "Just let me..."

"You're an idiot," Brian said.

"She's here, just let me..."

"Bring me that gun," Brian said, "and stop looking at your damned phone."

Thorndyke took a step forward then to the left so Bill wasn't in his line of fire.

"Look!" Bill held his phone up beside his gun. "Look! There she is!"

Brian glanced at the phone. "What?"

"JUST LOOK!"

"What is... how did...?" Brian said.

"Sorry to interrupt," Summer said.

"How did you..."

"Excuse me!" Summer raised her hand.

"What!" Brian said. His eyes were still on Bill's phone.

"I just wanted to point out that there is a laser dot on your shoulder." She pointed at Brian's shoulder. "Right there."

Brian looked down at his shoulder- there was indeed a red dot hovering on it. "What?" He said again.

"If you'll be so kind as to drop the knife," Detective Thorndyke said, "I'll not blow the important parts of your shoulder clean off."

Brian looked at the man. He was holding a massive pistol.

Summer looked as well. "Oh. In case you don't know, Brian, that is a .44 Magnum. It seems that Detective Thorndyke is a fan of Dirty Harry." She looked back at Brian. "And it really will do a job on your shoulder."

"Detective?"

"Drop the knife." Thorndyke said flatly. "I shan't give you another warning."

Brian dropped the knife. His eyes went back to Bill's phone.

"Now let go of the woman," Thorndyke said.

Maxine shrugged out of Brian's grasp and went to Summer, who pulled her out of the way.

"Now get on your knees and put your hands on your head."

Brian obliged. "How did you get that picture?"

Summer looked at the picture on Bills' phone. There was a beautiful brunette sitting in a hot tub smiling at the camera. She wasn't wearing a top. "Who's that?"

"That's Heather!" Bill pointed the gun at Brian. "The love of my life!"

"That's my wife, you bastard!" Brian said. "How did you get a picture of her?"

"Put down the gun, young man," Detective Thorndyke said. "So far, I've nothing to charge you with. I recommend you keep it that way."

Bill turned to face the detective, "But they ruined my life." Without realizing it, he was now pointing the gun at Thorndyke. "What about that?"

"Put the gun down." Thorndyke swiveled his pistol to aim at Bill.

Bill looked at his pistol, realizing what he was doing. He flinched and dropped the pistol. It made a hollow sound as it hit the tile floor.

"Bloody hell! Is that thing plastic?" Thorndyke asked.

"Well sure..." Bill started. "I can't own a real gun."

"I could have killed you, you dolt!" Thorndyke started toward him as he lowered his pistol.

Brian hopped to his feet and started toward Thorndyke who was looking at Bill.

Summer jumped forward and tackled Brian as Thorndyke brought his pistol back up again. He didn't aim at Brian since he was tangled up with Summer. "Everyone freeze!"

Summer grabbed one of Brian's wrists and pushed his hand away as he tried to grab her arm, she pushed it to the floor and spun around to put her weight on top of him. Even though he outweighed her by over fifty pounds, he wasn't in a position he could leverage her off. Brian swung at Summer awkwardly, trying

to get her to release his wrist. She spun around again; ending up at the end of the arm she had by the wrist. She maneuvered her legs under his shoulder and smoothly tucked her feet under his back. As he struggled to release his hand, she leaned back, pulling his arm up and over her thighs while his body remained on the floor. The pain -and realization- of her starting to dislocate his shoulder made him stop struggling.

"Freeze!" Thorndyke said again.

Summer smiled at the detective as she kept pressure on Brian's arm. "I think he's done fighting, Alistair."

"It's *Detective* Thorndyke."

"Are you sure?"

"I am indeed, young lady." Thorndyke reached into his other pocket and pulled out his radio. "I need back up in room..." He looked around. "What room is this?"

"Room two," Summer said.

"Ah yes. Room two," Thorndyke repeated. "First floor."

"There's only one room two." Summer pointed out.

"If you'd kindly stop wrestling that man's arm out of its socket, I'm sure I can handle it from here."

"You going to behave?" Summer asked Brian as she leaned back slightly.

Brian only nodded. He was back to looking at Bill.

Summer slid away from the man then stood. "I can't believe you didn't call for backup."

"I had it under control," Thorndyke said. "And backup was close by. Didn't want to muddy the waters."

"How did you know to even come here?" Maxine asked.

"I had received indications that you confirmed for me." Thorndyke pulled a chair over while still keeping an eye on Brian. He sat in the chair and rested his arm on the table while still keeping the gun trained on the dentist. "Well done, by the way."

"I confirmed it?"

Thorndyke nodded. "Yes. When you walked by. That's why I signaled you back."

"You what?" Maxine moved closer to the detective. "What signal?"

"I scratched my right ear with my pen to let you know that I was going to be 'right 'ere' with you."

Summer laughed. "Obviously.."

"What?" Maxine said. "Come on."

"It's Cockney rhyming slang. Brown bread is dead. Apples and pears are stairs." He smiled. "Or Tumble down the sink is to have a drink."

"Why don't you just say 'dead' or 'drink'?"

"Where's the fun in that?"

Summer moved beside her friend. "Don't be a... a..." She looked at Thorndyke. "Sir?"

"A Khyber." He tilted is head, "Khyber pass... ass."

"I still don't get it." Maxine said. "Now how did you know I was in trouble?"

"Officer Simmons told me you and your friend were tracking down leads. And then Mattis confirmed that when he said he checked the deceased phone." He winked at Maxine. "He wasn't

too keen on spilling the beans. Neither was Simmons. Seems they were going to solve the case on their own and I mucked up their plans."

"I see. That's very proactive of them." Summer said.

"Your womanly wiles put the thought in their head, I should think."

"Womanly wiles?" Simmer grinned. "He says we have wiles, hear that Maxie? I'm not sure I believe him."

"Madame, from my experience, you *all* do. In any case, thanks to Officer Mattis' aptly described *proactive* police work, when I saw you with that chap," he pointed at Brian, "who Mattis had told me had sent the last message to our recently departed Doctor Anderson, *and* you gave me a wild-eyed gawk."

"It wasn't a gawk," Maxine interjected.

"A wild-eyed gawk," Thorndyke said again, "I deduced that he was indeed the killer and was looking for your partner to get rid of the pair of you and your meddling ways." He leaned back. "So I watched you two walk in here and waited for Miss Summers to show up to get everyone together."

"Well done," Summer said. "Except for one minor detail."

"Oh?"

Officers Mattis and Simmons jogged into the room, guns drawn.

"He's all yours officers," Thorndyke said to them. He looked at Summer, "What detail?"

"It's Summer without an 's' because it's my first name. Summer. Summer Schauers."

"I see." Thorndyke didn't even smile. "Miss Schauers, then."

"Since we're all friends now, how about an exclusive?" Summer asked. "Yes?"

"No." Thorndyke said as he slipped his gun back into his pocket.

"They make these things called holsters to keep those things in," Summer said. "Especially when you're carrying a hand cannon like that .44 Magnum around with you."

"This is much more discrete." Thorndyke pointed out. "No one suspects anything when I casually put my hand in my pocket. If I reached for a holster, that wouldn't be the case."

Simmons hauled Brian to his feet as Mattis kept him covered with his weapon. Simmons brought Brian's hands behind his back as he handcuffed them.

"Well done, Officer Mattis," Thorndyke said. "And you, Simmons. Well done, indeed."

Jerry nodded at the man. "Thanks, Detective." He looked at Summer and smiled.

"If you'll do the honors." Thorndyke gestured at them. "We will meet at the station to write up the report."

Jerry looked at Brian. "You have the right to remain silent."

"How did you get Ann's picture?" Brian said to Bill. "How?"

"That's not very silent," Maxine observed.

Bill looked at his phone. "This is Heather. Who's Ann?"

"Ann is my wife, you bastard!" Brian struggled against the handcuffs as Officer Simmons held onto them.

"I think that's poetic justice!" Summer said. "Just great!"

"What?" Simmons asked.

"So Brian is having an affair with Doctor Dixon while his wife is having an affair with Bill. Or had an affair," she corrected herself. She snapped her fingers. "Hey! That's why you can't find her, Bill!"

"What?" Bill said. "Why?"

"You're looking for the wrong person. Her real name is Ann Larson and she's from..." She looked at Brian. "Where do you live?"

Brian looked the other way.

"We'll get that bit of information when we book him, Summer. I'll let you know." Mattis said.

"Reno." Brian sighed. "We live in Reno."

"That's where you need to look, Bill. And who you need to look for."

"Why you..." Brian struggled against his cuffs again.

"Get him out of here, Officers," Thorndyke said.

"Yes, Sir," Mattis said as he holstered his weapon. "Ready?"

Simmons nodded. "Sure am. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law," He said as he took Brian's elbow and led him away.

"You have the right to an attorney," Mattis said as he took Brian's other elbow as the pair led Brian out.

"This convention is like a soap opera," Maxine said. She moved to the chair and sat beside Thorndyke. "It's out of control."

"Barking mad is what we'd call it in Sussex."

"Barking mad sounds just about right," Summer said.

"Oh!" Maxine exclaimed.

"Now what?" Thorndyke looked at Maxine.

"Terrance Brushwood has to be in on the murder because he texted Brian to get him to bring me here."

"How do you know that?" Summer asked.

"When Brian looked at a text he got, he knew that you were talking to Terrance. So Terrance had to have told Brian where to find you and to bring me along. To murder us both!"

"A quick check of his phone will reveal that," the Detective said as he pushed himself to his feet. "And, seeing as how you've been right on the other matters of the case, I think I'll bring an officer with me to question him." He shrugged. "And charge him with two counts of conspiracy to commit murder."

"That's a pretty productive day, you're having, Detective," Summer said.

"Quite."

"Makes you want to give us an exclusive for all our help, right?"

"Not quite." Thorndyke said. He sighed. "But I imagine that Officer Mattis is going to call you with the sorted details unless I order him not to. So I suppose I won't."

Summer clapped her hands. "I could hug you!"

"Madame..." Thorndyke started. "I'll have you know..." After a moment, he just turned and walked out.

"Huh." Maxine said. "Just when I thought we were making progress with that man."

"Right? Maybe the next murder will go smoother."

"Next?" Maxine shuddered. "Our next assignment needs to be a nice quiet restaurant opening, or flower show, or something else boring."

"I'm sure it will be," Summer assured her friend. A thought occurred to her. "Hey!"

Maxine raised an eyebrow. "What now?"

"If we hurry, we can get a photo of them putting Brian and Terrance in patrol cars. Those would be great shots to go with our story!"

"That's true since it's a double affair, single homicide story now."

"That's better than the other way around, I think." Summer grabbed Maxine by the hand. "Let's go get those photos." She pulled her along. "Then we're done for the day."

"Except for one more thing." Maxine said.

"What's that?"

"I've still got a date."

"Ahh! I almost forgot," Summer said. "Okay. You go on the date and I'll head to the paper to get the story banged out for the morning edition. Deal?"

"Deal."

"I'll expect details when you get in in the morning." Summer said. "After having me do all the work."

"Okay, okay."

When the pair got out of the room, they headed straight for the main entrance.

TWENTY-SIX

Eddie rubbed his temples. "So the dentist's wife was having an affair with another dentist's assistant who was being blackmailed by him. And that dentist was having an affair with someone else."

"No." Summer said. "Well, sort of. The two were having affairs, but the Dentist having the affair was blackmailing a different dentist who was..."

"Just put it down and I'll figure it out then." Eddie said.

"The pictures are nice and simple," Summer offered. "The bad guys are in handcuffs. The good guys are wearing police uniforms."

"That does help." Eddie admitted. "Why isn't Maxine explaining that?"

"She has a date."

"A date. We've got a big story sitting in our laps and she's got a date."

"He's really cute. And he helped with the investigation. He's a security guard at the convention center."

"And the guy who was murdered...Were any of these people locals?" Eddie asked.

Summer shook her head. "No, none of them. Apparently the dentists in Tucson are well behaved. Why?"

"Because that means I won't have the Chamber of Commerce or the Mayor calling me about the story when it's on the front page in the morning."

"That's a good thing then." Summer said. "You know, Terrance did say there was more sex going on at the convention than a high school prom." She glanced at Eddie. "Think I can work that into the story?"

Eddie stared at her.

"How about if I make it sound quaint?" Offered Summer. "And tasteful?" Summer sat up. "Wait, did you say front page?"

"Yeah, yeah. Put it all down and I'll give you the front page... without the sex."

"Above the fold?" Summer leaned forward.

"Below the fold but center," Eddie continued, "and the whole front page of the local section."

"That works." Summer said as she stood. "Okay, I'll get this all written out for you. I hear that the paper gets put to bed by ten thirty."

"Ten thirty sharp," Eddie said. "So you've got plenty of time to get it to me so I can edit your mess." Eddie exhaled. "Who knew the dental world could be so cutthroat." He smirked.

"Nice." Summer said.

"You can use that if you want. And get me some sort of diagram with arrows so I know who's who when I read your piece. There was a lot of shenanigans going on."

"You got it boss," Summer said as turned to the door. "I'll be glad for a nice quiet restaurant opening after this weekend."

"There's one of them later this week." Eddie gestured at the door. "Off you go, diligent worker of mine."

With a smile, Summer left the office to type up the entire ordeal.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Summer brought the paper down onto her lap- her feet were up on her desk. "What do you think, Maxie?"

Maxine was at her desk, paper in front of her. "Very nice. Below the fold, but still on the front page."

Eddie walked over and sat on the corner of Maxine's desk. "How are my diligent workers today?"

"Did you hear that?" Summer said, "We're diligent. Our boss called us diligent. Us."

"I had a murderer call me 'beautiful', just so you know," Maxine said.

"Well, I'm not going to go down that rabbit hole," Eddie said. "But well done, you two." He was also holding the morning paper. "I have to say I was expecting at least one or two calls from the convention center for them being so prominently featured in this story, but so far that hasn't happened."

"That's good news. Really, it's not their fault they had a bunch of loons show up for their convention." Maxine said. "I mean, it was a bunch of *dentists*; you'd think they would be well behaved."

"Speaking of supposedly being well behaved," Summer looked at Maxine.

"What?"

"You're going to make me say it?"

"Say what?" Maxine turned the page of the paper. "Wonder what the weather will be tomorrow."

"Maxine Michael Bryant," Summer said tersely. "The weather tomorrow is the same as every day for the past four months until the Monsoons start. I demand to know the details of your date with mister Stephan full-of-muscles."

"Oh dear, I'm not sure I want to hear about that," Eddie said as he hopped off the desk. "I still want to be able to look my photographer in the eye." With that he walked off, paper tucked under his arm.

"Well?" Summer coaxed.

Maxine laughed as she leaned back and put her feet on her desk. "Rains. His last name is Rains."

"Rains?" Now Summer laughed. "So much for me dating his brother. If he had one, that is."

"Summer!"

"I'm sorry." She got serious. "So how was the date? Really."

"It was good. We talked until he had to go back to work." Maxine sighed. "The time really flew by."

"So, when will you see him again?"

"I saw him again that night."

"I'm dashed. On your first date?"

"We met for a late dinner when he got off and we talked." Maxine smiled. "And talked." She leveled her gaze at Summer. "And that's it. Even though it was technically our second date."

"I wasn't judging." Summer said. "So he's nice then, I'm gathering."

"He is very nice," Maxine answered. "And we're going to have another date next weekend. Once the convention is all packed up and gone."

"When the crazies are gone, is what you mean."

Maxine nodded. "Yes. Then they gear up for their next show."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I think he said they have a boat show scheduled next. I say we don't cover it just in case it gets crazy with margaritas and pirates or whatever."

Summer nodded. "We'll do quiet bike races, marathons even."

"Sounds good." Maxine said. "The less excitement the better."

"I can't wait." Summer said with a smile.

END

(Until the next convention)

About the Author and Cover Model

Robert P. Wills is a retired U.S. Army, Military Intelligence Chief Warrant Officer Four. He and his long-suffering wife have retired to Central Florida where they are spending far too much time walking around the various theme parks in the area.

Except Sea World.

The employees there tend to yell at Robert for petting the dolphins. At the dolphin petting pool. No, he doesn't understand it either.



(Robert in his native habitat- in Naples, Italy drinking Peroni)

He plans to continue his writing antics with several books in the works. Book seven in his wildly popular *Tales From a Second Hand Wand Shop* series, *Killing Grimbledung*, will be published in late-2022

Along with unstable Gnomes, an inspirational post-apocalyptic science fiction trilogy: *Apple Declined*, *Remnants of Sol*, and *The Prodigals* g available as ebook, paperback, and Audible audiobooks.

After getting stuck on the Great Movie Ride at Walt Disney's Hollywood Studios, he wrote *The Red Brick Road;* a visit to the world of L. Frank Baum's Oz. It is now also available on Amazon as an eBook and Paperback.

Robert plans to add more books to the Summer Schauers Mystery series with a trip to the World's Oldest Rodeo (they are holding the 131st in Prescott, Arizona this year!) and then a maybe visit to Roswell for their annual UFO festival.

Unless he is eaten by a shark first.

Robert isn't sure why he wrote all of this in third person. Robert is funny that way.

CrawlHer Cover Model

Tiffany is a Jeep Enthusiast who travels the country with her best friend attending off-road events and taking the road less traveled. They own CrawlHer an apparel company that caters to the witty off-road adventurer.

Yes- the Large white Jeep Wrangler she is sitting on is hers.

