



# THE SUMMER OF LOVE AND DEATH

↓ A FORD FAMILY MYSTERY ↓

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McCREARY

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OF  
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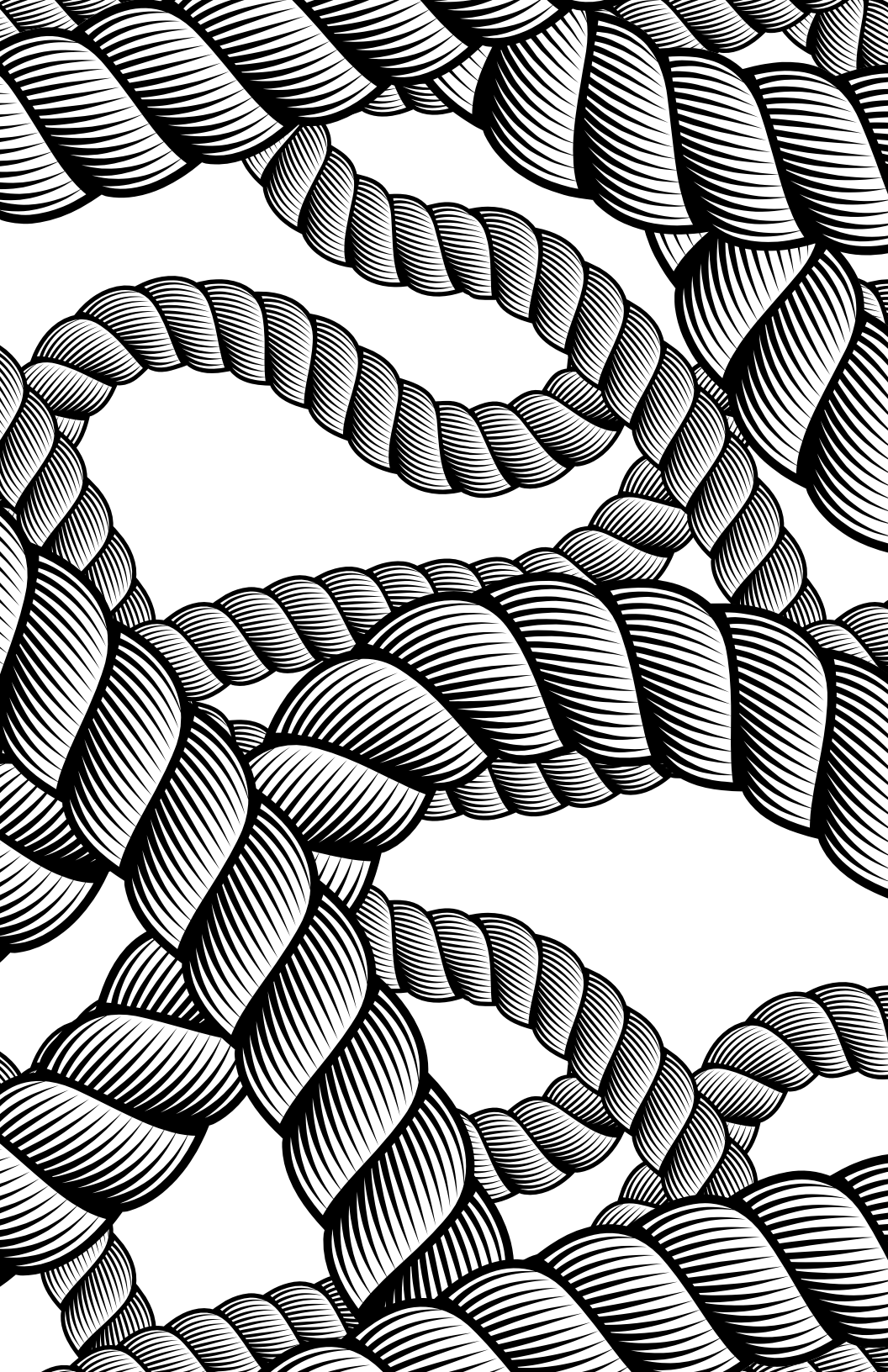
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## FOR MOM

Feel free to rip this page out of the book and  
hang on your refrigerator. I win.







# 1

FRIDAY | AUGUST 16, 2019

**YOU KNOW** that jittery, gut-roiling feeling you get when heading out on a blind date? That brew of nerves, anxiety, anticipation—plus a hint of dread. That pretty much summed up my morning. Today was the day, and standing at the front door, it finally hit me. I was no longer flying solo. A new partner was waiting for me down at the station.

My fingers twitchy, I fumbled with the zipper of my yellow slicker as I stood in front of the framed poster—an illustration of a white dove perched on a blue guitar neck, gripped by ivory fingers against a bright red background—touting three days of peace and music. Usually, I paid it no mind. But today it captured my attention. A signal, perhaps, that everything would turn out just fine, like it did exactly fifty years ago when four hundred thousand idealistic hippies descended upon this town. A projected disaster that ended up being a glorious experience. The legendary summer of love.

The Woodstock Music and Art Fair didn't take place in Woodstock, New York. The residents of Woodstock were not keen on having

the initially projected fifty thousand hippies traipsing through their town. The concert promoters eventually secured Max Yasgur's dairy farm in Bethel, New York—fifty-eight miles from Woodstock and six miles from where I live now. I was four at the time. I have no memory of it. Mom said I was sicker than sick that weekend. Ear infection. Fever escalating to 104 degrees. She tried to take me to a doctor, but the roads were clogged with festival revelers, so she had to postpone my appointment until Tuesday. But by then, the worst of it was over.

Fifty years. Those teenagers were in their sixties and seventies now. The older ones in their eighties. How many of them were still idealistic? How many were still into peace, love, and understanding? How many “dropped out” and berated “the man,” only later to find themselves the beneficiaries of capitalism? Becoming “the man.”

I leaned over slightly as I reached for the doorknob. The door swung open unexpectedly, smacking me in the forehead. “Whoa.” I ran my fingertips along my hairline. No bump. For now.

“Sorry, babe.” Ray's voice drew Moxie's attention. Our thirteen-year-old lab mix moseyed into the foyer, tail in full swing. Moseying was really all Moxie could muster these days. “Didn't realize you were standing there.”

Ray had left the house an hour earlier. I peered over his shoulder at the running Jeep. “Forget something?”

“Yeah. My wallet.” Ray stepped inside, dripping. Moxie stared up at him, waiting. He squatted and rubbed her ears. “Raining cats and dogs out there. No offense, Moxie.” He glanced up at the poster. “Just like fifty years ago.” He sighed.

Ray's parents were married at the festival by a traveling minister. One-year-old Ray in tow (earning him bragging rights as one of the youngest people to attend Woodstock). Tomorrow would have been their fiftieth wedding anniversary. Their death, at the hand of a drunk driver twelve years ago, spawned a program called Better Mad Than Sad—a class baked into the local drivers-ed curriculum that Ray (and



the drunk driver's girlfriend, Marisa) created ten years ago. Parents would join their kids for a fifty-minute session in which they pledged to pick up their kids or their kid's friends, no questions asked, no judgment passed.

Last month, Ray reached out to a few of his and his parents' friends asking if they would be up for a "celebration of life" vigil at the Woodstock Festival site this evening. Nothing formal. Just twenty or so folks standing around, reminiscing and shooting the shit about his parents.

Ray shook the rain off his jacket. "Met your new partner this morning."

"Yeah?"

"He's very good-looking." He smirked, then added, "Movie-star good looking."

I leaned back and gave Ray the once-over. "I'm more into the rough-around-the-edges type."

"So I got nothing to worry about?"

"Not as long as you treat me right." I smiled coyly.

I had been without an official partner for a little over a year, since July 2018. My ex-partner bought a small farm in Vermont. He told me not to take it personally, but he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I still wondered if I contributed to his anxiety in some small way. Then I got shot in the thigh that August. So hiring a new partner was put on hold. Upon my return to active duty in October of 2018, I was assigned an under-the-radar cold case with my dad brought on as consulting partner. By the time the Trudy Solomon case was resolved, in December 2018, Chief Eldridge still hadn't found a suitable replacement. Small-town policing isn't everyone's cup of tea. So for the better part of 2019, it was just me and my shadow. Dad and Ray assisted on the Madison Garcia case, but the chief made it clear that protocol called for two detectives working a case, and my partnerless days were numbered. Don't get me wrong. It's not like I didn't want a partner. I did. I just wished I had a say in who it was.



THE DREADED handshake awaited me as I walked into the precinct. I thought about using the “I-have-a-cold” excuse, but lying to Detective John Tomelli on Day One seemed like a dishonest way to kick off what should be a trusting partnership.

“There she is,” Eldridge called out, motioning me over to where he and Detective Tomelli were standing.

John thrust his right hand forward.

“Ford doesn’t do handshakes,” Eldridge said.

“Oh, oh,” John said, furrowing his brow and drawing his hand back to his side.

“Just getting over a cold,” I said with wavering conviction. Which wasn’t entirely a lie, as I spent all of July on antibiotics for a sinus infection.

“Well, I’ll let you two get to know each other,” Eldridge said, backing away toward his office.

“So, John—”

“Jack.”

“Jack?”

“Yeah, everyone calls me Jack.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

“My dad’s name is John. So to avoid confusion . . . y’know.” He eyed my right hand. “What’s with the no handshakes?”

“Well, *Jack*, I have a weird medical malady called *palmar hyperhidrosis*. Ever hear of it?”

He shook his head.

I held up my palms and wiggled my fingers. “Sweaty palms. Uncontrollably clammy hands.”

“Does it affect your ability to handle a gun?”

And this was why I didn’t tell anyone.

“No,” I said curtly. “It doesn’t,” I added for good measure.

Nothing like getting off on the wrong foot on the first day. I had to admit, he was *very* good-looking (Ray was right about that). But John/Jack wasn't my type—I wasn't blowing smoke when I told Ray I like my men rough around the edges, and this guy was as smooth as they came, right down to his perfectly coifed jet-black hair. It was going to take more than his chiseled jaw and dimpled cheeks to win me over after that barb.

“Ford! Tomelli!” Eldridge shouted before *Jack* had a chance to say anything else on the matter.

Jack led the way. At the door, he stepped aside and waved me in. Instead of being appreciative of the gesture, I wondered if I was a guy if he would have proffered the same courtesy. Was this a “ladies first” move or was he merely deferring to my seniority? I didn't know what was pissing me off most—his Hollywood good looks, that gun remark, or the fact that he just treated me like his date. *Shake it off, Susan.*

“I just got a call from dispatch,” Eldridge said as we lingered in front of his desk. “Possible homicide at the Monticello Playhouse. Paramedics are there now. Pronounced dead at the scene. Mark and Gloria are on their way. As is CSI.”

“Mark and Gloria?” Jack asked.

“Mark Sheffield is the county's medical examiner and Gloria Weinberg is our crime scene photographer,” I explained.

Jack turned to Eldridge. “Who's the victim?”

Eldridge peered down at the paper on his desk. “The woman who called it in said it was one of the actors. Didn't say which one.”

Jack turned to me and smirked. “I'll drive.”

My blood started to boil. Mom had a theory about exceedingly handsome men, especially those who knew they were. They strut like peacocks and puff out their chests to draw attention to themselves, then, after they get what they want, they shimmy over to the next shiny new object, and you're left wondering if it was something you said, something you did, or that you're just not special enough. Mom was

Miss Sullivan County 1961 and had her fair share of good-looking beaus, including my dad. So, perhaps she did speak from experience. Although a grain of salt was always needed when it came to Mom's doctrines. Was Jack one of *these* guys? Big ego, take charge, deliberately making me feel fragile compared to his manly-man bullshit.

Or was I making a big-ass mountain out of a pint-sized molehill?



THE MONTICELLO Playhouse was situated a mile down the road from the Holiday Mountain Ski and Fun Park—a seven-slope ski area with an elevation of thirteen hundred feet and a vertical drop of four hundred feet. I spent many youthful days zipping down their trails. Back then, you had to rely on Mother Nature for a good coating, and most winters delivered what was needed. These days, the owners relied on snowmaking machines—it was the only way for the ski area to survive the warming winters of climate change.

Jack lifted his hand from the steering wheel and pointed toward the windshield. “Ski area?” he asked as we passed the entrance sign. “Looks open.”

“Yeah. It doubles as an amusement park in the summer. Arcades, rock climbing wall, bumper boats. That kinda thing.” I side-eyed Jack. “You should take your kids.”

He frowned and shook his head. “Don’t have kids. You? You have kids?”

“One kid. Adult kid. Natalie.”

I waited for him to ask a follow-up question. *How old? What does she do for a living? Grandkids?* But he just tapped his thumbs on the leather-encased steering wheel of his fancy Volvo. I thought about volunteering more info, get a conversation going, get to know each other better, but he seemed tucked away in his own thoughts. Neither of us said another word.

We pulled into the parking lot of the theater. Jack swiveled his head from side to side, then swung his car to the right and parked below a canopy of trees, a good ways away from the hubbub of activity. Above our heads, birds tweeted in melodious call-and-response chirps.

I spotted Mark's silver Honda Accord and Gloria's Chevy pickup truck. "Gang's all here."

Jack popped open the trunk and grabbed his crime-scene kit, a duffel containing personal protective gear, evidence markers, and evidence-collection equipment.

As Jack and I strode up the stone walkway toward the entrance of the playhouse, Officer Sally McIver and her partner appeared from around the side of the building. Sally jogged over to us.

"You must be the new guy," Sally said. "Detective John Tomelli?"

"You can call me Jack."

"Jack it is." Sally held out her hand and Jack shook it firmly. She turned to her right. "This is my partner, Officer Ron Wallace."

Ron stepped forward. "About time they filled the position," he said, pumping Jack's hand.

"You guys first on scene?" I asked.

"Yeah. I just surveyed the ground under the windows," Ron said, twisting around toward the theater. "Nothing obvious, but I took photos, just in case. Hopefully, Gloria can get some pro shots before the rain starts up again." He paused. "All the windows lock from the inside."

Sally picked up the thread. "I checked inside the building and all the windows were locked. Doesn't mean someone didn't crawl through an open window, lock it from the inside, and then exit through one of the doors, but that's for you two to figure out."

I glanced over at the actors' dormitory, situated about twenty yards from the theater. A small crowd had gathered outside, craning their necks and whispering among themselves. Three officers stood between them and us, keeping them at bay.

“Mounted cameras anywhere?” I asked Ron and Sally, remembering how an obscure CCTV camera helped get my ass out of trouble a year ago.

“Nothing obvious,” Sally replied. “But they could be hidden. I’ll look around.”

“Let’s get a perimeter going,” I said to Ron, scanning the vast outdoor area around the theater. “Fifteen yards out from the theater. Also, set up a single entry-exit point over there. I’ll get one of the other officers to log who comes and goes.”

I turned to Sally. “Who found the victim?”

Sally flipped open her notebook. “Jean Cranmore, the woman in charge of costumes. She’s over there.” Sally pointed to a fiftysomething redheaded woman sitting on a nearby bench, her hands tucked between her knees, rocking back and forth. Her blue windbreaker zipped up to her chin. “I took her statement when I first arrived. She said she’s seen enough cop shows to know not to let anyone near the body or say anything to anyone, so at least we know the crime scene hasn’t been contaminated.”

“Eldridge said it’s one of the actors,” Jack said. “Did she say which one?”

“Actually, the director.” Sally scanned her notes. “Adam Kincaid. She said she was freaked out and must have said actor by mistake when she called 9-1-1.”

“Let her know I’ll speak to her after I’ve surveyed the crime scene.” I noted that a scowl formed on Jack’s face when I used the word *I* instead of *we*. Perhaps I should have explained that it was merely a habit from not having a partner for a while. But I let the moment pass.

Sally jutted her chin toward the walkway that separated the dormitory from the theater. “What about the lookie-loos over there?”

“Interview them as well. That’ll help me sort out who I need to talk to first.” Oops. Did it again.

Sally flipped her notebook closed. “Will do.”

“You saw the body?” I asked.

“Yeah. It’s a weird one,” Sally hinted, knowing full well that I preferred to assess the crime scene without exposition. “You’ll see.”



THE MONTICELLO Playhouse used to be a Catholic church. It sat abandoned for fifteen years, until Malcolm Slater bought it six years ago. Yeah, *that* Malcolm Slater . . . lead singer of Blueberry Fields, an alternative rock band that dominated the radio airwaves in the nineties. After calling it quits with his bandmates in the mid-aughts, he drifted over to the production side of the business and opened a recording studio in the neighboring town of Forestburgh, New York. The guy was a bit of a celebrity around here. Rumor had it he was also a prima donna.

Malcolm Slater not only invested in the property, but he installed himself as the theater’s executive director, providing the bulk of the funding for the summer stock productions. Some called it philanthropy, a gift to revitalize the area. Others believed he had an ulterior motive . . . to give his girlfriend, Shana Lowry, a stage and a starring role.

I gazed up at the white gable-roofed building, the narrow bell tower shooting straight up over the entrance. Slater did a heck of a job transforming it from a rundown church to a refurbished theater. I’d give him that.

Jack raced by me, taking two steps at a time as he ascended the ten steps to the porch landing. He stood in front of the wooden double doors. I sucked in my breath, then slowly exhaled before climbing the stairs.

He unzipped the duffel and extracted two plastic bags containing Tyvek coveralls, booties, and a pair of blue latex gloves. He tossed one of the bags in my direction. We quickly donned our PPE. Jack opened the door and, once again, stepped aside and waved me through. With

a tightlipped smile, I hurried into the foyer, then up the aisle toward the stage. Mark was center stage, leaning over the body. Gloria was in the orchestra pit, hunched over her camera equipment. She looked up and waved me over. I glanced over my shoulder and saw Jack making his way up the aisle.

“Bring me up to speed,” I said to Gloria.

“Just took the global photos. Waiting on you for midrange and close-up.” Gloria tipped her head toward the dead body. “I’ve photographed a lot of crime scenes in my day, but this one takes the proverbial cake.”

As I mounted the steps to the stage, I heard Jack introduce himself to Gloria.

Mark stepped away from the body and walked toward me. When Jack caught up to me, I initiated the introductions. “Jack, meet Mark Sheffield, Sullivan County’s death investigator and medical examiner and, in my nobody-gives-a-shit opinion, one of the best in the business.”

“Good to meet you, Mark.”

“Likewise. Ready?”

Mark led the way to the center of the stage where the body was situated. Jack remained behind me but close on my heels. *Was this deference or a case of nerves?*

I wasn’t sure what to expect, but it wasn’t what I saw. No one prepares you for that.



A MAN, roughly late twenties, lay in a narrow platform bed.

I sucked in my breath, holding it for a few moments, then expelled a puff of air. *Holy shit* were the only two words that came to mind. I was so entranced, I wasn’t even sure I uttered them out loud. I looked over at Jack. His mouth was agape. I turned back to the body and inventoried the scene.



The victim's wrists and ankles bound by rough-hewn rope. Fancy nautical knots. Naked. And that wasn't the worst part of this tableau. His face was caked in smeared makeup. Lips bright red. Cheeks pink with blush. Eyelids powdery blue. A white pillow—placed below the feet of the deceased—was also smeared in makeup, looking like a second-rate Vasily Kandinsky knockoff. And if this gruesome display wasn't enough to throw me for a loop, the killer had laid a dazzling peace sign necklace over his heart. Shimmering hues of blue, green, and yellow stained glass soldered between the copper foil lines creating the peace symbol.

Jack swayed, shifting his weight from his right foot to his left. "What the—?"

Well, we shared that sentiment. I bent over to get a better look at the man's face, somehow thinking a close-up view would explain this twisted scene. But all I could make out was a pale face under swirls of garish color.

Someone, quite possibly associated with this theater, went to a whole heck of a lot of trouble to stage this body in this grotesque manner. *A message? A warning? A clown fetish? And what's with the stained-glass necklace? The killer's calling card, perhaps?* I closed my eyes to ground myself and focus on what else seemed out of place. A large makeup case sat on the floor at the side of the bed. I looked around for clothes, but there was not a stitch of discarded clothing anywhere on the stage. Jack was now hovering at my side, angling to get a better look, so I stepped aside. He wheezed slightly but remained silent as he took in the scene.

I turned to face Mark. "Approximate time of death?"

"It was called in at nine fifteen this morning. Based on rigor and lividity, I'd say between eight last night and eight this morning. Hopefully someone can tell you when he was last seen alive . . . help you narrow that down."

"Cause of death?"

“Possible asphyxiation,” he said, pointing to the pillow. “There’s some bruising around his nose and mouth. But until I get him back to the morgue I won’t know for sure. Didn’t put up much of a fight, so I’m thinking drugged, then smothered. Tox panel will give a fuller picture.”

“Can you make this a priority?”

“It’s not up to me,” Mark replied with a sigh. “But a bizarre murder like this will get the brass’s attention.”

I moved to the foot of the bed to inspect the body from a different angle. If I thought this vantage point would make the sight of this spectacle easier to stomach, I was dead wrong. “Well, we’ve got to make this a priority. Something this outlandish tells me we have a madman in our midst. I’m hoping our vic here was specifically targeted, but we could be looking at something more sinister.”

“A serial killer?” Jack offered. “Shit. Perhaps everyone in the cast are sitting ducks.”

That thought crossed my mind, but I wasn’t ready to jump to any conclusions. That was how Dad operated. I tend to hold off on assumptions until I’ve amassed more facts. But if we were dealing with a serial killer with a penchant for dolling up his victims, I feared we were going to need outside help.

I could just picture the attention-grabbing moniker the press would give our perp: the Makeup Murderer of Monticello or the Peace Sign Perp or some such nonsense. Was Jack right? Was it possible that the cast were sitting ducks? “Let’s hope you’re wrong about that,” I finally said.

Jack glanced over his shoulder. “Is this bed part of the set?”

“Yeah,” Gloria chimed in, then turned to me. “You’re gonna love this, Susan . . . they’ve been rehearsing Agatha’s Christie’s *Murder on the Orient Express*. Supposed to open tonight.”

“*Murder on the Orient Express* is a play?” I was familiar with the book and movie (Ray and I watched the movie about a year ago, when

we were both waylaid with a stomach bug. His first viewing, my second), but I had no idea it was adapted for the stage.

Mark straightened up. All six foot six of him in full view now. “Yeah, in fact I had tickets to the Sunday show.”

“Well, I hope you can get a refund, because I’m pretty sure there won’t be a Sunday show. It’s going to take a while to process and clear the scene.” I surveyed the stage for anything else out of the ordinary. But nothing leaped out at me. “They’ll be lucky if they open on Monday . . . if at all.”

My phone rang. It was Sally. I walked to stage right. Or was it stage left? I could never remember if the wings were from the actor’s perspective or the audience’s perspective. “Yeah.”

“I got Malcolm Slater out here. He’s demanding to go inside.”

“He can demand until the cows come home. Tell him I’ll be out to talk to him when I’m done in here.”

A man’s voice erupted through the line. “Give me the phone!”

Sally abruptly ended the call. She’s no shrinking violet. If anyone can handle that guy, she can. An aging rocker versus a no-nonsense police officer with two tours in Iraq under her belt. I got my money on Sally. Even so, I did not appreciate being rushed, but suddenly felt somewhat obliged to speak with Malcolm Slater sooner rather than later. I rejoined our little group and conferred with Gloria on the mid-range and close-up shots. Jack simply nodded as I spoke. The side door opened and a sudden burst of light illuminated the stage. Three county CSIs entered and strode toward us.

“Let’s use this pathway for getting on and off the stage,” I said, motioning with my arms a narrow passage from where we were all standing to the steps. “Jack, can you mark the path with the cones? There should be some in the CSK. Feel free to confer with CSI. I’m going outside to chat with the theater’s executive director.”

Before Jack could object or offer a different strategy, I turned away from him. I flashed a smile at Gloria, and she winked back. She knew

exactly what I was doing. Establishing my dominance. Making sure Jack knew who was in charge.



BEFORE LEAVING the theater, I lingered in the lobby. I had hurried through this area when first arriving with Jack and didn't get a chance to see if anything was amiss in here. Along the wall to my right were three evenly spaced five-foot-long wooden benches—a seating area for patrons to wait for the theater doors to open or perhaps chat with fellow theatergoers during intermission. On the wall to my left hung eleven-by-fourteen framed photographs of all the troupes—cast and crew—who had performed in the theater over the years. I walked over to the photograph closest to the door: the first troupe to perform in 2014. I strolled down to the last photograph. Engraved on a gold-plated plaque above this photograph were the words: Cast and Crew of Mousetrap and Murder on the Orient Express, Summer 2019. I surveyed the faces of the people who were about to be shocked to hear the news about their director.

When I exited the theater, I beelined it to Sally, who was standing at the designated entry/exit point. Pacing behind the yellow crime tape was none other than Malcolm Slater —tall and wiry, with hair too dark and too long for a man his age, which I pegged at about fifty. He charged toward me.

“I've been standing out here in the rain for a fucking hour!” he screamed, tilting his large black umbrella slightly backward. “I'll have your badge! Your supervisor will be hearing about this. Chief Cliff Eldridge, right?”

“You're free to file a complaint,” I said, doing my best to sound cordial. Well, somewhat cordial. I glanced around looking for shelter and spotted a large shed at the edge of the tree line. “We haven't cleared that shed over there, but we can talk under the overhang.”

As we strode toward the shed, plump droplets replaced the gentle mist. By the time we reached the overhang, the rain intensified, and all I could think about was all the outdoor evidence being washed away.

“I have a right to know what’s going on in my theater.” Malcom lowered his umbrella, shook off the water, and pulled it shut. “Was there an accident? Or something . . . worse?”

“There’s been a murder. The body has been identified by a witness, so until we notify next of kin, there is not much more I can tell you.”

He stepped closer to me. “What witness? Who?” he demanded, waving his free hand around.

“You need to calm down, Mr. Slater.” I said in my firm, steady, kindergarten-teacher voice.

“This is bullshit! Utter bullshit!” He shook the umbrella, causing it to open slightly. He grabbed the little strap and secured it around the middle. “Was it someone in the cast or crew? At least tell me that much.”

“Mr. Slater, I have an investigation to run. I will not risk fucking this up just because you threaten to ‘speak to my superior’ or ‘have my badge.’ Got it?”

Malcolm stepped back. He opened his mouth, but quickly snapped it shut.

I took a baby step toward him, closing the gap. I also knew a thing or two about intimidation. “Who has access to your theater at night?”

Malcolm rocked slightly back on his heel but maintained his position. “Ricky is responsible for locking the front and side doors after rehearsals and shows, but there are a few people who have keys to the side door.”

“Ricky?”

“Ricky Saunders. Our maintenance guy.”

“Okay. I’ll need a list of everyone who has a key.”

I thought this demand would be met with resistance, but he merely scowled, then quickly said, “Sure.”

I thought about stepping back, giving him more space, but decided to stand my ground, not give an inch, make it crystal clear I was not taking his guff.

“Are there security cameras on the premises?”

Malcolm sniffed derisively. “I find them to be invasions of privacy. And I don’t want my actors to think I’m spying on them.”

That’s understandable, given his previous profession. In his heyday, the paparazzi were relentless. He’d leaned heavily into the “sex, drugs, and rock ’n’ roll” stereotype. Although I always felt some of his shenanigans seemed manufactured, played up for publicity.

“Who lives in the old rectory?”

Malcolm tilted his head to the right, craning over my shoulder to glimpse the building. “The Equity actors and a few department heads live on the first and second floors. The non-Equity actors live on the third, fourth, and fifth floors. There’s a smaller building behind the rectory that houses the crew.”

“And those bungalows?” I asked, pointing to the edge of the property abutting the woods.

Malcolm’s eyes followed my finger to the cluster of bungalows; he squinted, then turned back toward me. “That’s where the musicians live.”

“So, the entire cast and crew live on-site?”

“No. Not everyone. Some department heads are scattered around the area. I bought a few small bungalows around Smallwood and Sackett Lake to house them during the summer. This way I can attract top talent from around the country.” He cleared his throat. “Now that I’ve given you the lay of the land, I would appreciate you telling me who has been murdered.”

“I’ve already told you more than I should have. Now, I suggest you tell your cast and crew to cooperate.” I leaned forward, lifting my heels slightly off the ground. “In fact, the more you cooperate with me, the more I will cooperate with you. Do I make myself clear?”

Malcolm whipped open his umbrella and stormed away just as a crack of lightning lit up the gray midmorning sky.



TO SHIELD our witness from the rain, Sally had escorted Jean Cranmore, the costume director, to the gift shop—a one-story stand-alone building about forty feet from the theater’s side exit door. Sally had asked Malcolm to unlock it when he arrived on scene so CSI could do a sweep of the place. When given the all-clear, Sally asked Jean to wait in there.

A tinkle announced my entrance. Jean was seated on a stool among the Monticello Playhouse-branded mugs, T-shirts, keychains, refrigerator magnets and other touristy tchotchkes. I quickly scanned the shop for stained-glass peace sign necklaces but saw nothing of the sort.

“How are you holding up?” I looked around for another stool or chair, but there was none, so I leaned against the glass counter.

She sniffled and ran her sleeve across her nose. Her eyelashes were moist and mascara smudges lined the area beneath her eyes. She inhaled deeply, then let out a long breath.

“Just want to confirm that the man you saw in the theater is the director, Adam Kincaid?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Even with the way he looked”—she shivered, then wrapped her arms tightly around her torso—“I could tell it was Adam.”

“Right now you’re the only one who knows. And until we reach his next of kin, I would appreciate you keeping it to yourself.”

“But they are going to ask me. The cast. They’re waiting for me. They’re going to badger me.” She fingered the small cross that hung around her neck. “What do I say?”

“I can take you to a motel if you’d like. Adam Kincaid’s parents live about fifty miles from here. I’ll be talking to them this afternoon.”

She nodded reluctantly. “Okay.”

“Tell me about this morning. What were you doing in the theater that early?”

A tear slipped down her cheek, which she swatted away when it hit her chin. She cocked her head, closed her eyes for a few seconds, then snapped them open. “I usually don’t get up early, but with the show opening tonight, I wanted to get a jump on things. There were a few costumes that needed adjustments. Some issues with fitting were brought up during the tech rehearsal last night, and Nathan was livid.”

“Nathan?”

“Nathan Fowler. Our production manager.” She shivered, perhaps still feeling stung by his wrath. Or maybe it was the air-conditioning.

“Is Nathan easily angered?”

“Not really. He’s just a stickler for detail.” She frowned. “He makes his displeasure known.”

“How did you get into the theater this morning?”

“I have a key to the side door nearest the dorms.”

“So the door was locked?”

“Yes.”

“Did you see anyone enter or exit the theater before you went in?”

She looked down at her lap and gently shook her head. “Tech rehearsal ran late so I imagine most people slept in this morning.”

“How late?”

“We wrapped at one in the morning. I left the theater shortly after that and went straight to bed. But a few people hung around.”

“Was Adam Kincaid among those who hung around?”

“No. He actually left before me.” She ran her fingertips under her eyes, smudging the mascara residue. “He wasn’t well-liked. Adam.”

I glanced up from my notepad. “Yeah?”

“He was just . . . a tad intense. He could dress you down pretty severely if he wasn’t pleased with a scene. He was all about the play, not the camaraderie. Don’t get me wrong . . . he’s super talented. The aggravation is worth it when you see the final product.”



“Could you think of a reason why someone would kill him?”

She straightened up a bit and squinted. “Well, there is a rumor going around that Adam was having an affair with Malcom Slater’s girlfriend.”

“Shana Lowry?”

“The one and only. The *star* of our show.” She snorted derisively. “And she never let you forget it.” Jean gazed around the gift shop, making sure we were still alone. “Rumor has it, Adam just broke it off with her. And she was none too pleased.”

“Okay. Good to know. Anything else you can think of?”

She looked past me, gazing into space. When she turned back toward me, her eyes were glassy. “It’s just . . . I mean, the way he looked. That’s definitely some level of crazy. I can’t imagine anyone doing something like that to Adam. You would think things like this only happen in the city. But here? Never in my wildest dreams would I think that . . .”

I waited a few seconds for her sentence to resolve, but she just stared down at her clasped hands. When she finally looked up, she whispered, “You know what’s also weird? That necklace on his chest. I mean, he never wore jewelry. I couldn’t imagine him owning a gaudy piece like that.”

I didn’t realize Jean had gotten that close. “You saw that?”

She nodded. “Hard to miss.”

“So you don’t think it was Adam’s?”

She shrugged. “Well, I’ve never seen him wear it before.”

“Was it a prop?”

She touched her own necklace. “I don’t think so, but you can talk to Libby. Libby Wright. She’s the prop mistress.”

I scribbled down Libby’s name, along with a note to assign Sally the initial interview.

Then I asked Jean to follow me outside, where I handed her over to Sally to drive her to a motel.



JACK AND I headed west to the village of Hancock, New York—situated just east of the Pennsylvania border along the Delaware River—to break the news to Adam Kincaid’s parents, Jason and Lynn. A fifty-minute scenic drive along Route 17 West.

“Fucking bird crap on my car,” Jack snarled as he deployed the windshield wipers.

“Probably shouldn’t have parked under the trees,” I said as I rolled down the window and inhaled the pine scent of the evergreens. My ears popped as the car crested a hill.

Instead of using this time to reset the relationship with Jack, I slipped on my earbuds and listened to an episode of *My Favorite Murder*. He glanced at me once in a while but made no indication that he wanted to chat. I couldn’t tell if he was reticent by nature or deliberately being aloof. I knew I could’ve been the bigger person in this situation, strike up a conversation, but I ignored him.

At two on the dot we pulled into the driveway of 39 Millhouse Lane. There was no worse part of this job than telling next of kin that their loved one was gone, murdered. Jack insisted on taking lead on this, and I was fine conceding this particular task to him. I will be the first to admit, projecting sympathy does not come naturally to me. I can turn it on when I need to, but I’ve always sensed it coming across forced and stilted. When I say to a complete stranger, “I’m so sorry for your loss,” it rings hollow in my ears and tugs superficially on my heartstrings.

As we made our way up the brick walkway, I surveyed the Kincaids’ modest home. A split-level probably built in the sixties or seventies. Neatly trimmed rhododendron bushes, bursting with purple flowers, flanked the front door. A well-maintained front lawn sloped gently toward the sidewalk. No flower beds or decorative lawn ornaments. Tidy but devoid of personality.

A knot formed in my stomach as I rang the doorbell. I glanced over at Jack, and he was slowly breathing in and out, cracking his neck, and shaking his arms, as though he was loosening up before taking his spot on a racetrack starting line.

Jason Kincaid opened the door. I glimpsed Lynn Kincaid leaning over the railing of the upper level. “Who is it?” she called out. When she made eye contact with the two strangers standing in her doorway, she scurried down the stairs to join her husband.

Jack displayed his shield. “I’m Detective Jack Tomelli and this is my partner, Detective Susan Ford. May we come in?”

Lynn spread her fingers out over her heart, and pressed gently. “Is it Adam? Did something happen to Adam?”

“If we can come inside?” Jack said gently.

They backed away slightly, but the entryway was too small for the four of us. Lynn retreated up the six steps to the upper landing, visibly shaking as she waited for the rest of us to join her there. A quick glance around revealed dated furniture in decent shape. The room tidy and comfortable with crocheted throws on the sofa and recliner. Glass trinkets sat atop doilies on the end tables.

Jack broke the news.

Their reactions were textbook.

Lynn collapsed to the floor like an imploding building, straight down. She stuffed her fist into her mouth, attempting to stifle the wails. But she eventually lowered her clenched hand to her lap and allowed her cries to fill the room. Jason Kincaid squatted next to her in an attempt to console her as she swayed back and forth. He eventually managed to take hold of her elbow and waist, lift her gently, and guide her to the couch. Jason repeatedly asked, “Are you sure it’s Adam?”

“Someone at the theater identified your son,” Jack said, as he maneuvered his way around the furniture to an armchair opposite the sofa.

There were no other seating options, so I stood to the right of Jack.

“Do you have a picture?” Jason draped his arm around Lynn’s shoulder; she buried her face in her hands. Her sobbing subsided into a soft whimper. “So we can be sure it’s him.”

Lynn lifted her head, her eyes lit up with a glimmer of hope that we might have gotten it wrong. That a photograph would prove otherwise. We had no intention of showing them a photograph of their dead son in his current condition, with makeup slathered all over his face.

“We’re sure it’s him,” Jack said gently. He leaned forward, his forearms rested on his thighs, his hands clasped. “However, we will need a next-of-kin positive identification from one of you. We can accompany you to the morgue now or we can set up a video feed, if you prefer.”

Jason and Lynn exchanged glances. Without verbally conferring, Jason said, “We’ll both go.”

Lynn rubbed her eyes, smudging her black mascara and eyeliner to the outskirts of her eyelids. “How?” she asked, her voice cracking. “Why?” she whispered.

Jack tilted his head toward me, eyebrows raised, discreetly asking me how much we should disclose.

I jumped in to answer. “Until we have all the facts—”

“No! I want to know now.” Lynn rocked forward dislodging her husband’s arm from around her shoulder. “I *need* to know.”

Jack cleared his throat. “Ms. Kincaid. The cause of death is still under investigation. All we can tell you is that Adam was murdered at the Monticello Playhouse sometime between one o’clock and nine o’clock this morning. Detective Ford and I have made Adam’s case a top priority. We will leave no stone unturned. You have our word.”

As he spoke, Lynn shifted her gaze from Jack to me, to the photographs that hung on the wall just off my right shoulder.

I turned toward the annual family portraits—lined up in chronological order—along the wall leading to the bedroom level. In the first photo, a smiling baby boy sat on Lynn’s lap. In the second year, the

boy was joined by a baby girl. By the fourth year, the girl was no longer in any of the pictures. I'm guessing this was their second heartbreak.

Jason must have noticed me eyeing the portraits. "Twice now," he said. "No one should have to bury their children."

"I'm so sorry for your loss." I gulped down a knot forming in my throat. This situation hitting me harder than usual. This family had seen its fair share of hard knocks and bad luck. Future holidays and birthdays fraught with reminders of what has been lost. No weddings. No family gatherings. No backyards filled with grandchildren and mischief. I thought of how truly lucky, even blessed I have been. No real heartaches. No tragedies. Dysfunction aplenty. But, I'll take that over what these folks have endured.

Lynn pinched her lips into a thin line and shuddered. "Emily was only four. Leukemia. We do two good deeds and still get punished." She started to weep. "If you'll excuse me," she croaked out before she launched off the sofa and ran up the four steps to the bedroom level. A few seconds later we heard a door close.

I turned to Jason. "What did she mean by 'two good deeds'?"

Jason glimpsed the stairs, then back to me. "We adopted Emily and Adam. Lynn wanted Adam to have a baby sister. We thought about adopting again, but Lynn didn't want to go through any more heartache. Not to mention, a few adoptions fell through before we got Adam, and I didn't think she was up for the rigmarole of it all. I know I wasn't." He sighed.

We sat quietly for a few moments, then Jack got back to business. "We'll need the address of Adam's primary residence."

Jason blinked a couple of times, as though mentally shifting gears in response to Jack's request. "Um, Adam was in between apartments, so he was crashing here . . . in his old bedroom. But he hasn't been here in weeks—he's been living at the theater, in an apartment there."

I glanced at Jack. "We'd like to take a quick look around his bedroom."

“It’s the second door on the right,” Jason said, jutting his chin toward the stairs. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll let Lynn know we’ll be leaving soon.”

Jack and I entered the small and tidy bedroom. The closet and dresser drawers were filled with men’s winter clothing. Definitely Adam’s, as the style was more suited to a millennial than a boomer. His summer clothes were probably in the playhouse apartment. I leafed through a few wire-bound notebooks filled with directing notes. Jack rummaged through the desk drawers. Nothing related to his murder jumped out at us during this cursory sweep. CSI would confiscate his possessions for closer inspection.

“Find anything?” Jason asked as we emerged from the bedroom. Lynn stood close to his side.

“Nothing obvious, but we’ll need you to stay out of that room until we can get someone out here to collect his things. Oh, almost forgot . . .” I pulled out my phone and scrolled to the photograph I took of the stained-glass necklace. I held it up. “Is this Adam’s necklace?”

Jason pulled a pair of readers from his shirt pocket and stared at my phone for a few seconds. “If it is, I’ve never seen it before.”

“That’s not something Adam would wear. He was a conservative dresser.” Lynn tilted her head. “Why do you ask?”

I hesitated, thinking how best to phrase the answer, then said, “It was found at the scene.”

Jason blinked rapidly, but could not prevent a few tears from escaping. “So it belonged to . . . to the person who killed my son?”

“We don’t know, Mr. Kincaid. It’s evidence. And we’d like to find its owner, that’s all.”



AS JACK pulled away from the curb, my phone dinged with a text message from Sally.

*Ron and I finished interviews. Check your email for my report.*

I opened my email. “Sally sent over her interview notes.”

“And?” There was an edge to his voice I hadn’t heard before.

“And, you know the saying, ‘Patience is a virtue, possess it if you can. Seldom women have it, but never does a man.’ Give me a sec to pull it up.”

Jack drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. He glanced up at the rearview mirror, probably making sure the Kincaids were still tailing us. His energy was different. Maybe it was the encounter with the Kincaids. Maybe he didn’t like my quote about being impatient. I think we were both rattled, neither of us expecting to get an earful about another dead child.

I scanned Sally’s report. “Interesting. There are two sets of cast and crew that alternate throughout the summer season, a musical troupe and a drama troupe. The musical troupe just wrapped *A Walk on the Moon* and went to a party in Manhattan, which was arranged by Malcolm Slater. He chartered a bus and booked them a hotel. They will start rehearsals on Monday. *Little Shop of Horrors*.”

“So while one group is performing at night, the other group is rehearsing during the day?”

“Yeah. Which means all the musicians were also in the city the night of the murder. Each show runs for two weeks, starting on a Friday night and ending on a Thursday matinee. They also hold a matinee on the Wednesday of the second week.”

“So eight performances per week running for two weeks?” Jack let out a low whistle. “They sure do pack in a lot of performances over that two-week time frame. And I thought our job was grueling.”

I spun the knob on the radio to lower the volume. “First piece of business when we get back is to confirm that everyone who said they went to the city actually went to the city. I can put Ron on that. Unfortunately, that still leaves us the entire cast and crew of *Orient Express* to clear.”

“Maybe they all did it, like in the book. Life imitating art.”

“That’s one heck of a theory you got there, Inspector Poirot.” I wasn’t ready to entertain the possibility that we had more than one sicko on our hands.

“Just saying it feels a bit like a reenactment.”

That thought crossed my mind as well, but it felt too premature to start theorizing. That might be his style, but it wasn’t mine. I let the evidence tell the story.

And the evidence had yet to tell me this was a reenactment of the plot of the play they were all performing. That seemed incredibly far-fetched. And even a bit too on the nose. I closed my eyes in an attempt to stave off an impending headache.

My phone pinged again. Another message from Sally. I read aloud to Jack.

“CSI swept through Adam’s apartment. Retrieved phone from the nightstand. There’s also a laptop.”

“Phone on nightstand tells me he left his place in a hurry,” Jack said.

“Maybe. It’s also possible he was just groggy.”

This morning I woke up thinking Ray’s anniversary tribute to his parents would be the most thrilling part of the day. But this bizarre murder and a less-than-auspicious start to a new partnership had upstaged Ray’s get-together.

The swish of the Volvo’s windshield wipers abruptly stopped and I cracked open my eyes. The clouds were dissipating and the sun was inching toward a clear patch of blue.

I leaned my head against the headrest, searching for my own patch of blue sky. The bright side: Ray’s planned gathering of friends and family could be just the antidote needed to counter this awful day. Clear the old noggin, because tomorrow was going to be equally brutal—questioning a bunch of temperamental actors who had the skills to deceive us.





THE SUN was setting as I ascended the knoll to the Woodstock monument—a gray rectangular slab of concrete featuring a raised sculpture mimicking the dove with the guitar and fingers from the poster, and two bronze plaques with the names of all the bands that performed. Concrete benches flanked the monument on either side. I spotted Ray chatting with his mother’s best friend, Phoebe, and her husband, Paul. A quick headcount put the crowd at sixteen. I was a bit surprised to see my parents in the mix.

As I sidled up to Ray, he smiled and whispered in my ear: “Glad you could make it.”

I slapped him playfully on the arm. “Sorry I’m late. Had to stick around the morgue until the Kincaids left.”

He kissed me on the cheek, then turned to face the group. “Okay, everyone gather around,” Ray shouted, as he moved closer to the monument. “As you all know, today would have been my parents’ fiftieth wedding anniversary. And I appreciate y’all coming out on this drizzly night to honor and toast their enduring love.” He flashed me a mischievous grin and a conspiratorial wink. “But that’s not the only reason why I called you all here this evening.”

Ray suddenly dropped to his knee. Then gazed up at me. “Susan, will you marry me?” He unfurled his fist, revealing a little black box in the palm of his left hand. He lifted the lid.

Wasn’t expecting this. Nope. Not in a million years. I stood stock-still. But my heart was racing like a son of a gun. A fiery sensation burned in my lungs, then started radiating outward. *That’s good, right?* My brain was about two steps behind my emotions. I couldn’t speak. I stammered, tried to say something, then I thought, *Wait, is this some kind of Candid Camera stunt?* I glanced around. But everyone was smiling, definitely in on whatever Ray had cooked up. Dad had the biggest grin on his face.

Even Mom cracked a rare smile.

I turned away from Mom and leaned over to inspect the contents of the velvet box. A square-cut sapphire ring stared back at me. Ray's father gave that ring to his mother on their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. "Uh, yes?" I found Ray's eyes. "Um, I mean, yes. Yes, I'll marry you."

Ray jumped up, nearly bowling me over. He wrapped his arms around me, squeezing tight like a boa constrictor and lifting me slightly off the ground. He laughed as he released me, his eyes glassy and bright.

"So, you gonna do the honors?" I said, holding out my left hand.

He plucked the ring out of the velvet box and slipped it on my finger.

I admired it for a moment, then grabbed Ray's collar and kissed him. Our embrace was interrupted when everyone rushed toward me.

"Mazel tov," Paul yelled. "It's about time!"

The fiery sensation that ripped through my lungs earlier had now settled comfortably into my chest. And that warmth more than made up for my shitty day.



A FEW moments later I steered Dad away from the revelers toward the open field. "So you knew about this?"

"We all did. Ray may act all tough and shit, but he's a romantic." Dad peered over my shoulder. "You got a good one there."

"I have to say, I'm oddly excited. Getting married at fifty-four, who woulda thunk." I held up my left hand and stared at the ring. "Just don't want to ruin what we have. I know that's silly, seeing nothing will change, but still."

"Look, I'm not one to give advice about marriage, but I know a good thing when I see it. Under that exterior of yours I can tell you're

as giddy as a, well, a younger bride-to-be. So, tie the knot. Make it official. Besides, you'll get a better tax break. And his social security benefits and pension when he kicks the bucket."

"Jeez Dad. That's morbid." As that word tumbled out of my mouth, I sucked in my breath as today's grisly events crept into my brain. I was hoping this joyous moment would override it, momentarily erase what I had witnessed at the theater. I knew what Ray would say: *leave it at the precinct doorstep*. It always amazed me how well Ray compartmentalized, while I perseverated about my cases after clocking out—my professional and personal life bleeding into one another like a watercolor painting. Without the capacity (or willingness) to just let it go, I turned to Dad and said, "The murder scene I attended today was like something out of a bad B movie. The guy's ankles and wrists tied with coarse rope. Naked."

Dad grunted. "I've seen worse." He started walking further into the field, so I fell in step with him.

"The murder victim's face was covered in makeup. Caked on like Bette Davis in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*"

Dad stopped abruptly and spun toward me, his earlier plastered-on smile replaced with a twisted grimace. "Was he smothered with a pillow?"

"Um, yeah."

He pointed to the ground. "Was the pillow at the feet of the victim?"

Bells were going off in my head. And they were not wedding bells. "Who told you about this?"

Dad started pacing. He ran his hands through his mane of gray hair, forcing it to stand on end. Couple that with the wild look in his eye and he looked like a caged tiger ready to take out whoever got in the cage with him. "That's the MO of Mac Gardner. Ankles and wrists tied with rope. Naked on a bed. Caked makeup on the face. Pillow placed at victim's feet." Dad stopped pacing and rubbed the back of his

neck as though tamping down raised hairs. “Susan, it was my first case working as a detective in the summer of 1969.”

“Holy shit,” I exclaimed, although the words got caught in the back of my windpipe and escaped as a hoarse whisper. I coughed into my fist to clear my throat, and my head. “Was there a stained-glass peace sign necklace placed on your victim’s chest?”

“Peace sign necklace?” Dad scratched the side of his forehead. His head started bobbing up and down. “Yeah, yeah. But not stained glass. Carved out of wood, dangling on a leather cord.”

Maybe Jack was right about this being a reenactment. Except for one detail: this murder was not a reenactment of the play but a reenactment of a fifty-year-old murder. “What else do you remember?”

“I’m a little fuzzy on the details.” Dad poked at the dirt with the tip of his right loafer. “There were three murders with the same MO.”

“Wait. There was more than one murder? Are you saying this guy was a serial killer?”

“Yeah. The victim in our jurisdiction was a guy named Sam Blackstone. He was a waiter at one of the hotels. His wife’s name was either Ellen or Helen. They had two, maybe three kids.” Dad scratched his chin. “I might not remember the details, but I sure as heck remember how my partner Jimmy solved the case.”

“I’m all ears.”

“Jimmy was hailed a hero after quickly piecing together the evidence that led to the arrest of Mac Gardner,” Will began. “The dominoes started falling when Jimmy recalled a newspaper article about a similar murder a month earlier up in Kingston. He then called around to the surrounding counties and got wind of a similar murder in Ellenville, confirming his suspicions that we were dealing with a psycho.”

“So, three look-alike murders over a three-month period?”

“Yeah. And I even remember the victims’ names and the dates they were murdered . . . that, somehow, got etched in my brain.” Will raised his hand and ticked off his fingers. “Sam Blackstone on July

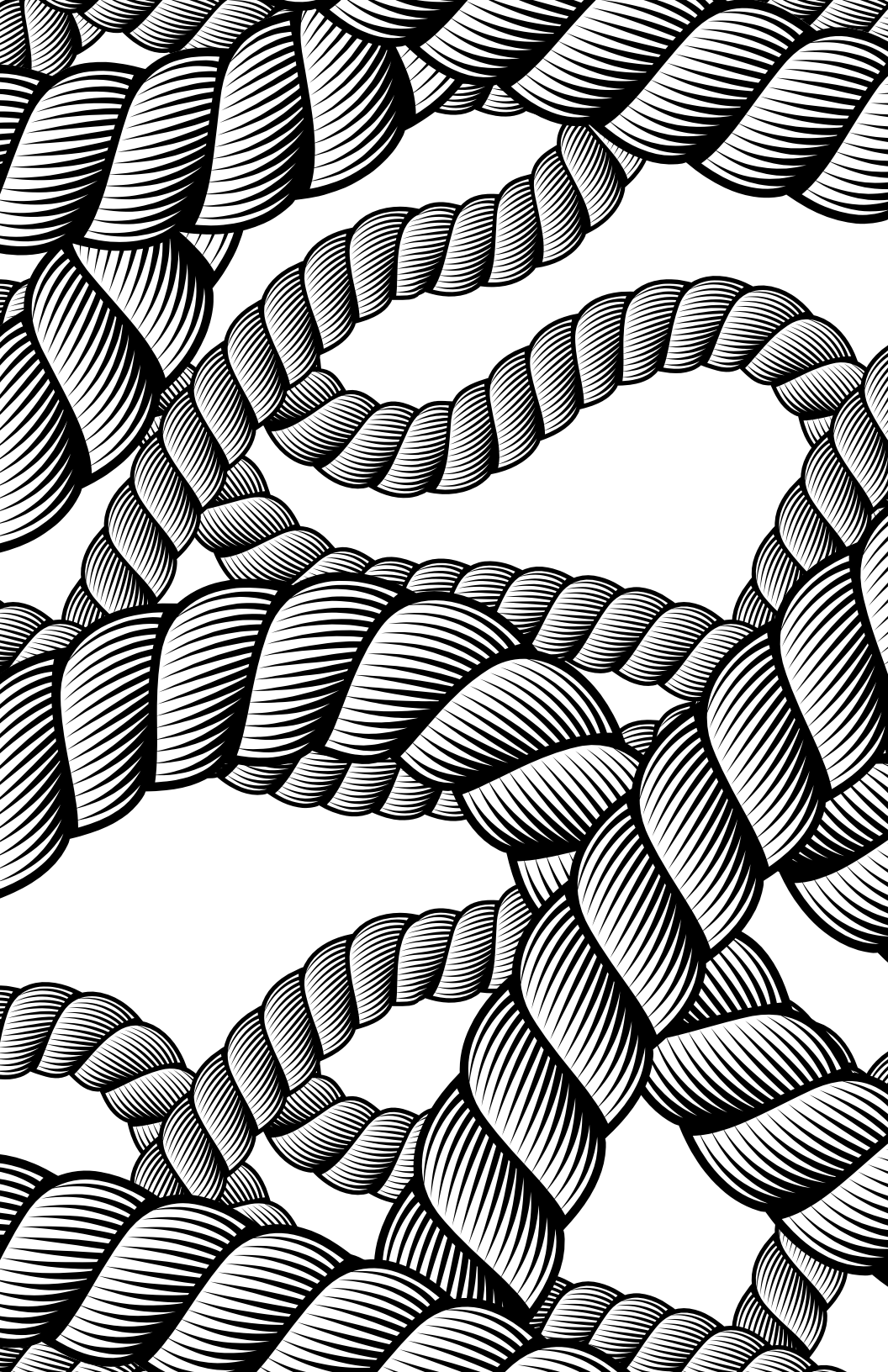
fifth in Monticello. Robert Sherman on June seventh in Kingston. And Kenneth Waterman on May second in Ellenville. All male victims in their early twenties.”

“Shit. So, how did Jimmy figure out it was Mac Gardner?”

“Well, a little bit of luck helped him nab the killer. A fingerprint left at the Kingston crime scene matched an old arrest record in Ellenville. From there it was easy to locate Mac Gardner. Lived in Liberty with his wife and daughter. He was a truck driver for a commercial bakery that supplied bagels, bread, and other baked goods to half the hotels in the region.” Will sighed. “I remember meeting Jimmy in a diner the day we went to interview Mac’s wife like it was yesterday.”

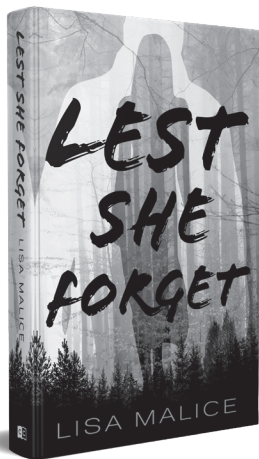
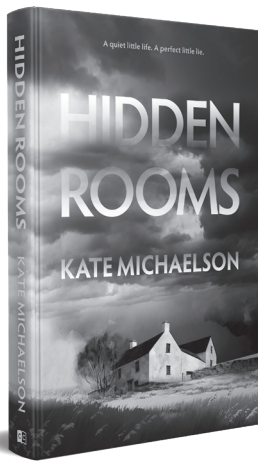
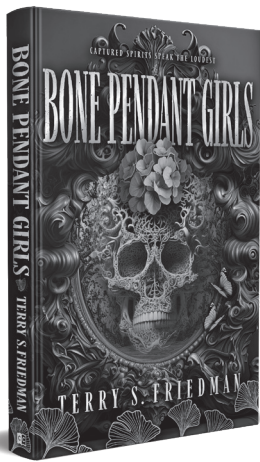
“Yeah? What made that so memorable?”

“It was the day after the Apollo 11 moon landing and there was just this sense of promise and progress in the air. Like the world was a better place.” Will guffawed. “And that son-of-a-bitch ruined it.”



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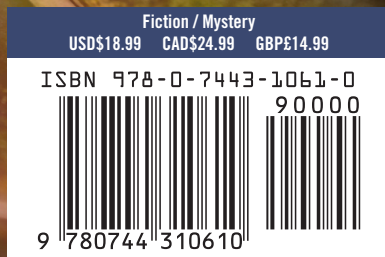
# IF TIME CAN'T HEAL ALL WOUNDS, TRY REVENGE.

DETECTIVE SUSAN FORD AND HER NEW PARTNER, Detective Jack Tomelli, are called to a crime scene at the local summer stock theater where they find the director of *Murder on the Orient Express* gruesomely murdered—naked, face caked in makeup, pillow at his feet, wrists and ankles bound by rope. When Susan describes the murder to her dad, retired detective Will Ford, he recognizes the MO of a 1969 serial killer . . . a case he worked fifty years ago. Will remembers a lot of things about that summer . . . the Woodstock Festival, the Apollo 11 moon landing, the Miracle Mets . . . yet he is fuzzy on the details of the decades-old case. But when Susan and Jack discover the old case files, his memories start trickling back. And with each old and new clue, Susan, Jack, and Will must narrow down the pool of suspects before the killer strikes again.

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