

A Fear of Seaside Heights

by
Jane Kelly

A Note about *A Fear of Seaside Heights*.

This book was originally plotted and written in 2001-2002. The trials and tribulations of getting through the publishing process became moot when I learned that the plot twist involving the motive had appeared on an episode of *Monk*. The twist, based on a very brief incident in my life that provided the idea for the book, was specific enough that I became uncomfortable with the manuscript. I did not, however, want to see the characters languish. I decided to pull one storyline that I would like to use again and put the book on the web.

I know that reading online or reading a printed PDF file is a pain in the neck, but that was the best solution I could come up with. I did shorten the book before putting it online. The original version included a storyline that was very important to me. Because I would like to use that storyline in the future, I removed it from this manuscript.

I appreciate all the e-mails I received inquiring about *A Fear of Seaside Heights*. I will try to notify everyone who wrote that the book is now available online. I apologize if I miss anyone. I really appreciate each person's time and interest in the series.

If you have not read any of the Meg Daniels mysteries before, let me explain that the books are light reading. If you are a fan of blood, guts and gore, you will not like them. If you are looking for a fun read, I hope you will.

Jane Kelly
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CHAPTER 1

A fist slammed on the door. “Planning on coming out today, Ms. Daniels?”

I wasn’t. Ten minutes into my first day of work, I was locked in the bathroom composing my resignation letter. Again, the door vibrated. Big Al, my new boss and the man attached to the aforementioned fist, told me to get a move on.

Big Al and I had not exactly hit it off. Sure, when I reported for work at the ice cream stand his words of greeting were polite enough. “Meg Daniels. They just told me this morning you was coming.” Only his intonation added, “You, plague, and pestilence.” That welcome had pretty much been the high point of the encounter.

Identifying the low point would be the harder task. There was a time I would have bet on the moment Big Al showed me the royal blue angel gown that was the Heavenly Dips uniform. But that horror paled in comparison to the instant he stood on his toes, pulled a quivering handful of faux gold from the top of the cupboard, and handed me the shimmering mass. A halo. A halo he expected me, a thirty-four year old woman, to put on my head. And wear. In public.

Could I walk off the job? Not if I planned on facing Andy Beck, my PI boyfriend, ever again. My real job? Chatting up employees for information concerning the whereabouts of the heir to the Heavenly Dips ice cream fortune, the kind of info peers were unlikely to give to the kid’s parents or a private investigator hired by the kid’s parents. Sounded easy -- but when I made the promise I hadn’t known about the Heavenly Dips costume – excuse me – uniform. Even I, who believed that a flannel nightgown tucked into a pair of jeans made appropriate daywear, felt this outfit sank below my standards.

On the other side of the door, Big Al’s voice lowered into a growl. “All this commotion to rush you in here and now you . . . I don’t get it . . . why was they in such a hurry to get you started?”

I didn’t respond. I was studying as much as I could see of the gown in the mirror. Combined with the halo the mini-dress would have been appropriate for many occasions – most of them in the late 1960’s and all of them on Halloween

What would it matter if I quit? Maxwell Angel told Andy there had been other Mondays that the kid had, because of a surfeit of alcohol, drugs, or romance, simply failed to notice the weekend reach its conclusion. Sooner or later Jonas would show up whether I scooped ice cream at Heavenly Dips or not. Maxwell Angel had hired Andy simply to make sure that this time his son’s return came sooner.

Based on what I’d seen, or heard, of Big Al Braddock, it couldn’t be soon enough. He was continuing my employee orientation through the door. “You work first shift today. From here on we’ll figure it out. You fill in where I need you . . . you know, when we need you. You can make an extra twenty-five cents an hour for the late shift. Your title is Little Dipper. Things go good you move up to Big Dipper – get rid of your blue wings and get white.”

Wings? What wings? Apparently, I’d declared a low point before reviewing all the evidence.

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“I’m the store’s Archangel. An Angel or better opens and closes. You’ll recognize the Angels; they have gold wings. Remember, Big Dippers have white wings. You can tell the Little Dippers like you because they have blue wings. I got yours out here for you.”

Yes, it was true. I had wings. Not only would they make a strong fashion statement (I am a dork), they would be exceedingly practical for working in a confined space.

Big Al sounded perplexed as he continued. “You’re an odd ball here in Seaside Heights. We don’t usually get no blue wings in this store.” Again his fist hit the door.

I stared at the pathetic image in the mirror. Waiting. Hoping. For what? Word that angel gowns and halos were popping up on runways in Paris and Rome?

Big Al twisted the door handle. “Ready to come out?”

Not really but what choice did I have? It wasn’t as if this was a real job with a long term commitment. I’d only have to wear this outfit for one day. Maybe two. Just until Andy found Jonas and dragged him home. I could tough it out. I straightened my halo, took a deep breath, and began my life as a Little Dipper.

CHAPTER 2

Four pairs of wings were working first shift. Only Big Al, the store's Archangel, got to go wingless. His only wings were emblazoned on a bright blue badge that bore his photo. Big Al did his managing at desk behind the massive freezer near the rest room and communal locker. From my vantage point, managing the Heavenly Dips store looked a lot like reading the sports page.

Two white wings, Sharmaine DeAngelis and Hilde Bossick worked the counter. Sharmaine had warm brown eyes speckled with gold set in a face that still retained most of its baby fat. Combined with her curly blonde hair, the similarity to the older Shirley Temple or the younger Sally Struthers was overwhelming. She greeted me with a big smile full of teeth that appeared preternaturally white against her deep tan. From what I knew about Jonas, if he hung out with anyone in this group, Sharmaine would be the one. If I befriended her and got her talking, maybe I could quit before the lunchtime rush.

I didn't expect to get a smile, let alone any gossip, out of Hilde. Her dour expression suggested that she didn't do much partying. Her style indicated that if she did, it wouldn't be with a preppie type like Jonas. I didn't know what her own generation called Hilde's style – unnaturally dark hair, dark glasses, dark expression.– but I got the message. I got it, I just didn't buy it. I suspected her nose ring was fake. I felt certain her specs were.

The only gold wings on duty belonged to Ed Brickmeyer to whom my training was entrusted. With an early exit in mind, I tried to get Ed talking about Jonas Angel right away but he was in no mood for chit-chat. Apparently, I had much to learn about the ice cream biz before, as Ed explained, *commerce commenced*. “Within moments, we must be ready to greet our customers at the Pearly Gates.” He waved an arm towards the store façade where happy cherubs, each floating on a cloud named for one of the forty flavors, clustered around golden gates festooned with plastic pearls. I was thinking that subtlety wasn't the key to Heavenly Dips's marketing campaign when Ed lowered his voice to a whisper. “Watch out for Big Al. He tries to live up to his sobriquet.”

Why was a five-foot ten, 185-pound man called Big Al anyway? He wasn't big enough for the moniker to be accurate or small enough for it to be sardonic. I whispered my question to Ed.

He shrugged. “I don't know. As far as I know he's always called himself Big Al. He likes to appear belligerent and pugnacious. Actually, he isn't feigning..” After a nervous glance to the rear of the store where Big Al slumped over his desk, Ed whispered. “The good news is that he makes about ten trips a day to the bank.” Then, he raised his voice to a cheerful pitch. “Eat what you like but never eat in front of the customers. Store rule.” Considering the store was more of a booth, I couldn't figure out how we could eat out of the customer's sight unless we sat on Big Al's lap.

“So do the Angels, the real Angels, the owners ever come by?”

Ed ignored my question. “Let me show you our state-of-the art freezer.” Ed patted a heavy metal door with a level of affection most people reserve for family members and beloved pets. “This baby is enjoying its premier year as the nucleus our enterprise.” The pride in Ed's voice pegged him as the quintessential company man – or at least company boy. Considering the money he made and the

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getup he had to wear, his fervent devotion to Heavenly Dips was stupefying -- although not as stupefying as his vocabulary. I suspected I'd identified the owner of the GMAT prep book I'd seen in the communal locker.

When Ed pulled the freezer door open, I enjoyed the rush of cool air -- for about fifteen seconds. It didn't take long after we stepped inside for me to move beyond chilled to *maybe I can hang out in here, develop pneumonia, and quit this job*. I like to think of myself as an optimist.

Back at the counter, I again broached the topic of Jonas but according to Ed, there was still much to learn. Me, about the business. Him, about me.

Ed's tone sounded tentative. "I don't mean to criticize, but aren't you a little old to be doing this?"

"How old do you think I am?"

Ed shrugged. "I don't know. Out of college. Twenty-four?"

I didn't let my relief show. "Yep. Twenty-four." Subtracting ten years would be easy.

"You realize that you're old enough to drink."

"Yeah?" My intonation asked him to make his point.

"You could find a job at one of the bars -- or a good restaurant. A job like that would help you in your pecuniary efforts. One of my roommates waits tables. He makes great tips. Sometimes a hundred bucks a night -- sometimes more." Ed turned our tip cup upside down. One quarter fell out.

"Is that what you'll do when you turn twenty-one? Work in a restaurant?"

"Oh no. I'm already twenty-one. I've labored at Heavenly Dips since I was sixteen. This is my third summer on the Boardwalk. It's quite an honor to work in Seaside Heights. This was the first store Maxwell Angel opened thirty-three years ago. I worked assiduously to merit an assignment to this store. Maxwell Angel, himself, worked here himself for ten years. I find working where it all started so exciting. I'd never relinquish this job."

"Never?"

"I mean until I finish business school and embark on my career."

"Do you want to move up the ladder at Heavenly Dips?"

"That's not likely -- not with Jonas set to inherit the whole enchilada."

I didn't miss the bitterness Ed's tone. "Are you and Jonas friends?" I couldn't picture Ed partying with Jonas but what did I know, I was twenty-four. I mean thirty-four.

Ed's eyes narrowed but Jonas Angel wasn't the focus of his thoughts. "How did you ever get this job anyway? We hardly ever use Little Dippers in Seaside Heights. I think you may be the first."

Before I came up with an answer, the big hand hit the twelve and Ed hit a button. The dulcet tones of a choir of angels flooded the booth. Heavenly Dips was open for business and the customers were ready for ice cream.

Ed had explained Heavenly Dips's many rules and regulations but failed to provide instructions on the basics of cone construction. I didn't notice the omission because I figured anyone could scoop

ice cream. I was wrong. The first two cones that I produced were the same size in the sense that the dunes in Seaside Park and Mt Everest were the same size. Hilde just sneered. Sharmaine jumped in and helped. “Big Al goes ballistic if he sees a cone that’s too small or, god forbid, too big.” She shared her tricks for constructing a uniform cloud (plain cone), black hole (chocolate cone), and cup (cup). Most importantly, she shared her tricks for extricating a head topped with a halo from the freezer after scooping a perfect cone. With business booming, however, she did not have time to share any gossip. Sharmaine worked hard to earn those white wings.

At the counter the morning temperature exceeded ninety degrees and the humidity matched. The cloud shaped awnings protected my eyes from the sun, but not my body. The clock on the wall moved slowly as if it too found it hard to function in the sweltering heat wave. I checked to see how many hours I endured and found I had endured only minutes – thirty five of them to be exact. When Jonas Angel returned he would have to deal not only with his father’s wrath but with mine. I wasn’t feeling too kindly towards the kid responsible for making me suffer from boredom, heat, and aching feet, all while looking ridiculous on the Boardwalk in Seaside Heights, New Jersey. Lucky for him, I didn’t know anyone from Seaside Heights. The town, however, did not post guards at the borders, not knowing a citizen of the town’s 3.3 square mile town didn’t mean I wouldn’t run into a familiar face. I had to work fast. The longer Jonas Angel stayed away, the greater the possibility I would see one of those people, or worse they would see me

I’d served a dozen customers before the inevitable happened. The leader of a pack of ten year old boys, a smooth skinned, slick haired, blue-eyed blonde, placed the order and delivered the comment on behalf of himself and his friends. “I like all the planets on your halo.” His smirk told me he hadn’t finished. “But I can’t see Uranus.”

And just when the world had despaired of finding the next Noel Coward. I ignored his comment and put my head deep in the freezer to dip his Orion Orange.

“Happens all the time. Pretty funny don’t you think?” Sharmaine whispered as she scooped some Cloud Nine Cinnamon from an adjoining bin.

“It happens to everyone?”

“Sure.” Stars and planets bounced above her head. “Well, not Hilde. The customers don’t mess with Hilde.”

I could see why. Hilde might as well have worn a No Trespassing sign. She occupied a tiny amount of space in the stand -- not necessarily an easy task for a five foot eight woman wearing wings. Hilde’s eyes, so dark they were almost black, were small and narrow as if judging everything they saw - - harshly. I swore I detected fear in one customer’s eyes as she waited to see if Hilde would deign to take her order. Hilde followed company regulations and told the customer to have a nice day but I didn’t believe her and I bet the customer didn’t either.

Ed told me that Hilde was not really big on badinage which my memory of my own prepping for standardized tests told me was small talk. Nineteen that summer, she had graduated from high

school at sixteen and had only one year of college left. She'd been transferred to the Seaside Heights store in July of the previous year -- Ed suspected because her father had connections. His intonation told me he did not believe she had earned her white wings.

"She go out with the kid? You know, Jonas?"

"In her dreams." Ed's eyes told me he found my question odd.

"Orion Orange, please." The woman's tone suggested Ed and I had already annoyed her simply by existing. Ed leapt into action and lost interest in my questions about Jonas Angel.

Hilde would be a tough nut to crack but Sharmaine had no shell. Whenever I saw the crowd thinning I tried to work my way to her side. I couldn't raise the topic of Jonas Angel out of the blue so I began with general chit chat. Our conversation assumed an unproductive pattern. I'd learn a couple pieces of personal information about Sharmaine -- she had just graduated from high school, had no plans beyond a second fun summer working for Heavenly Dips, and had been promoted and transferred to the flagship store in mid-June. Then, rather cleverly I thought, I would say something like *tell me about the company*, or *tell me about the Angel family* or finally in an act of near desperation, *tell me about Jonas Angel*. Her responses were always similar. "The things I could tell you about this company. Excuse me, I have a customer . . ." "The Angel family is pretty interesting. Excuse me, I have a customer." "Jonas isn't as bad as everyone thinks he is. Excuse me, I have a customer." Her work ethic was admirable but irritating.

I considered Andy's plan and how easy we thought it would be for me to breeze into the store, chat up the staff, and find Jonas. Yeah, right. This was really going to work.

I was quizzing Ed on the Heavenly Dips uniforms -- and multitasking by restocking napkins -- when Big Al came to the front of the store to tell Ed he was in charge. Big Al had to run to the bank which wasn't unusual; Ed told me he ran to the bank every hour or so. Why, however, did he have to pick that moment? After spending six minutes maneuvering the conversation to the point where I could ask about Jonas's view of the uniforms, Big Al's departure threw Ed into a frenzied display of managerial efficiency. I'd have to start over.

I could still see the trail of smoke Big Al left in his wake when Sharmaine told me she had an errand to run. "Let Ed know." While Ed was too busy ringing up a family of eight to stop her, she scooped a double-dip of Celestial Chocolate and ducked out the back door. This would be a good time to talk up Hilde, or would have been if I could have forced her to make eye contact with me. When she ignored my direct question, "Have you worked here long?" I followed Sharmaine's lead and took advantage of Big Al's absence and Ed's preoccupation. I dug out a taster of Saturnian Spearmint and sprawled across the top of the Orion Orange display case to cool myself. I was humming along with the Heavenly Dips choir when I saw them. A news team, rushing up the Boardwalk, cameras pointed at Heavenly Dips. At me.

CHAPTER 3

The camera crew followed hot on the heels of a microphone in the hand of a familiar TV personality whose helmet hair even 90% humidity couldn't budge.

"Ed, where is that news team going?" I asked although I had a sick feeling I knew.

Ed looked thrilled as he slammed the cash register drawer shut. "I think they're coming here."

The group probably would have made better time if the reporter didn't have to worry about keeping her four inch heels out of the cracks between the wooden Boardwalk planks. The parade halted as she twisted a heel free.

"Why would the press be coming here?"

Ed didn't know why but he did know that he liked the idea. "I can appear on television."

The crew was on the move again and headed in our direction. True panic rose in me as I dropped to the floor. "I have to get out of here."

"They *are* coming here. I bet we can be on television." Ed appeared excited, in a happy way.

I too was excited but not in a happy way. "Oh, please God, no. I can't be on television." Not in this get-up. "Are they still coming?" I crouched between the two rows of display cases.

Hilde addressed me for the first time --with disdain. "You're not fooling anyone. They can see your halo over the counter. Why are you acting so silly anyway? It's only television." She redirected her serious gaze at the approaching news crew but made no move to attract their attention.

Ed, on the other hand, waved and called out to the lead newswoman. "Celeste."

"What are you doing?" Panicked I crawled through globs of Nutty North Star, Venus de Vanilla, and Space Shuttle Sundae towards the nearest corner -- a bad move that left me farther away not only from the press but also from the only opening to the back of the store.

"No problem." Ed smoothed his forelock. "I'll be the front man. Go get us more Cherubic Cherry and Celestial Chocolate."

"Right away." I would have agreed to move the pyramids at Giza if offering got me away from the press.

Ed puffed the sleeves of his angel shirt and straightened his halo. "I'll converse with the press. They're probably doing some story on ice cream sales during the drought."

I peeked over the counter and saw a crew from a competing station approaching. "And that story warranted two teams?"

Ed shrugged. "Whatever it is, I'll handle it."

I bent over and scurried along the counter and back towards the freezer. Holding the heavy door ajar, I watched the action through the small glass window. Ed was the center of two news crew's attention. Cameras were trained on his face and microphones were shoved in front of his mouth. I couldn't quite hear the conversation but I heard the name Jonas Angel. Repeatedly. This could not be good news. I wanted to find out what was going on but I wanted to stay out of sight more. I stuck one ear around the corner of the door and heard Ed explaining that Jonas stopped by the Seaside Heights

store most mornings but in the past few weeks he hadn't been coming to the store on a daily basis. Ed had not seen him since the previous Tuesday. The reporter asked if Jonas had seemed worried or concerned. Had he mentioned anything unusual going on in his life? I didn't hear Ed's answer because Hilde chose that moment to inform me that she was taking her break early. Like Sharmaine, she disappeared out the door before Ed missed her. Her departure left the front of the stand empty. Not that it mattered. The gathering crowd wasn't interested in ice cream -- only a chance to appear on TV.

Ed was in the middle of a sentence when Big Al, back from the bank, fought his way through the mass of onlookers that was expanding faster than my stomach with unlimited access to free ice cream. Interrupting Ed's interview, our boss introduced himself to the press as Big Al Braddock, store manager. He moved the news crew so their cameras could capture the entire cloud bank that decorated the storefront. Big Al understood there is no such thing as bad publicity. Unfortunately, he didn't understand that a comb-over might not stay combed over even in a gentle wind. Big Al began his interview with his red hair standing erect with a firmness any rooster would envy.

I grabbed a tub of Celestial Chocolate and, struggling to hold it at face level, staggered to the front to meet Ed. He was beaming. "Did you see me talking to them? I'm going to be on television."

"What happened?" I dumped the tub into his arms, grabbed a rag, and wiped a large spot of Venus de Vanilla from the floor.

"Well, Celeste asked me to stand with my back to the storefront . . ."

"No." I interrupted. "What happened to Jonas?"

The broad smile on his face contrasted with the news he delivered. "They found that Porsche that Jonas loves so much abandoned this morning. I can tell that they think maybe something awful happened to him. That's why they're here. They wanted to know all about him. Did you hear me? Did I sound good?" Sound good? Maybe. Look good? That was another issue. Ed had gotten a little too comfortable wearing a halo. "Do you think they'll use my shot?"

Could a producer resist broadcasting an interview with a man with a constellation of golden doodads orbiting above his head? I couldn't. I bet, however, that the fate of Ed's interview depended on the desire of viewers to hear that Jonas was "inexorably drawn to the ocean air so redolent of his childhood years." I didn't think Ed's chances were good.

Arriving reporters focused on Big Al and his recounting of what a great kid Jonas was. He felt certain that Jonas was fine. "He is smart and very resourceful. We all worry about the worst but I am sure that this will have a happy resolution. I know it's hard to think of a logical explanation but, as I once heard someone say, truth is stranger than fiction."

I worried that the cameras would turn our way when they no longer focused on Big Al. Reporters weren't being too fussy about their sources. Some were interviewing customers who had never even met Jonas for their insight into his disappearance. What was more amazing that everyone answered.

Ed grew despondent. "I bet they show Big Al not me."

“We’ll see.” I feigned casualness. “Well, it’s time for my break.”

“No, it isn’t. It too early. Besides, I take my break first.” Ed was almost grouchy.

“If you leave now you may miss a chance to get on TV.”

“We can get on TV?” Sharmaine had returned and no one but me had ever missed her. “I saw the crowd. What’s up?” She didn’t care much about the news regarding Jonas’s car but appeared excited by the sight of the cameras. “Can I get on television?”

“Not if you take your break.” My answer puzzled Sharmaine but not Ed. In under five seconds he agreed that I could take his slot. I moved fast – before he realized that Hilde was also gone. I hit the clock and slipped through the back door like a good Little Dipper just as a text message came in from Andy: batting cages. I headed for the arcade.

CHAPTER 4

The bells, whistles, horns, and electronic simulations of shootings, crashes, and other mayhem drummed the chanting of the Heavenly Dips theme out of my head although I suspected it was too late to prevent the repetition of the same sixty-four bars from dropping a marker in my DNA.

I found Andy in the relative quiet of the batting cage. He had the area to himself. As soon he spotted me on the steps, he dropped the metal bat. “Nice outfit. The way sweat makes it cling to your body is kind of sexy.”

“Andy, did you know about this . . . this uniform before I agreed to work at Heavenly Dips?”

“They’re in every store. In all the ads. It’s no secret.”

It was from me. “Thanks a lot, Andy. I appreciate the opportunity to appear on national television in an angel outfit.”

“The story won’t go national. Besides I was sure you would look cute in your little angel gown.” His tone lost its playful edge. He curled his fingers through the metal fencing. I moved forward to place my fingers over his. “I’m afraid this story is not going to have a happy ending. We found Jonas Angel’s car this morning. Actually, I did. Hidden about twenty-five yards into the woods off a dirt road that heads towards Gloucester County. When I couldn’t find anyone who had seen Jonas after he left the bar on Friday night, I started looking for the car on the side roads below Tuckerton on the way to New Gretna. I didn’t spot it on my first pass. It was behind a sand berm with stubby pines on top. The Porsche is low, black and the roof was up. Windows were down so there was no glare. Somebody really went to a lot of effort to hide that car.”

“And Jonas?”

“He wasn’t in the car. Or anywhere nearby.”

“You don’t believe Jonas ditched his car there?”

Andy shook his head. “From what I’ve heard, the kid is careless. Daddy fixes everything for him. But everyone says he loves that Porsche. He got it for his sixteenth birthday. I can see him leaving the car unlocked with thousands of dollars worth of golf clubs in the back and not worrying about them. Clubs are easy to replace. But damaging the paint job by forcing it through the trees?”

“You’ve heard that Jonas is arrogant and thoughtless.”

Andy chuckled. “That’s with people. Not with cars.” Andy’s cool green eyes gazed over my shoulder. “I saw Maxwell Angel’s face when he arrived at the scene. . . He believes the worst. I can’t disagree. He went public in an effort to bring in any leads but . . . there’s something else.” His intonation suggested *something else* wasn’t good. “I checked out Jonas’s golf clubs.”

I stared into his eyes.

“No nine-iron.”

I tried for a positive spin. “Maybe he doesn’t use one. Maybe he lent it to a friend. Maybe it’s getting fixed. Maybe he hiked away from the car using the club as a walking stick. Okay, scratch the

last one, but there may be an explanation.” I stroked his fingers gently. “I would feel terrible if something bad happened to the kid, but I must say that quitting Heavenly Dips will bring me great joy.”

“Quit? Why would you quit?”

I pointed at my head. “Andy, what did I say about hats?”

“It’s not a hat.”

“It’s a hat.”

“Meg, you were quite clear. You said that you would do any job that did not require you to wear a hat. If you meant any form of headgear, you should have been more specific.” Andy caressed my fingers. “And this is when we really need you to stay. Now more than ever. This is not fun and games anymore. Maxwell Angel asked me specifically to keep you on the job. Keep in touch but be discreet.”

Yeah. Discreet. That pretty much described me at the moment.

CHAPTER 5

After I said good-bye to Andy, I checked my watch and ignored the time. My break had been over for five minutes. Nonetheless, I headed to the Stewart's Root Beer counter for a Black Cow. The irony of paying for ice cream, even ice cream doused in root beer, didn't hit me. I wasn't as interested in the ice cream soda as in the seat I could occupy while consuming it.

I'd taken only two sips of root beer and hadn't gotten anywhere near the vanilla ice cream when I saw him. Big Al. On the Boardwalk sucking on a cigarette, peering across the counter, searching the arcade. I bent my head over my cup and averted my eyes. If I didn't see him, he couldn't see me. As his face disappeared from view I considered throwing on the halo that I had removed in blatant violation of company policy but I had no time. Big Al charged into the arcade with a stride as belligerent as his expression. Apparently, I wasn't the only person Big Al didn't like. From what I could see of his expression, I wasn't even sure he liked the person whose deeply tanned hand, long and thin but definitely male, emerged from behind a video game and fell onto Big Al's arm for a reassuring squeeze. And when I say fell, I mean fell. The hand was weighted down by a big gold square that someone -- in my mind someone with bad taste -- found an appropriate size for a ring.

Big Al was deep in conversation between me and the exit. Just in case he turned around I plopped the halo on my head but getting back into my wings wasn't that easy. I was three-quarters in uniform when the family of four at the next booth finished their pizza just in time for me to mingle with them, and, head down, sneak out the door hidden in their midst.

Back at work I had only scooped two Space Shuttle Sundaes, three Pisces Pistachios, and one Cloud Nine Cinnamon when my cell phone vibrated. I held the receiver between my ear and my shoulder as I dug two scoops of Big Bang Bubblegum. I whispered, "I've got a customer. I have a job you know."

"That's why I'm calling." Andy was brief. "You're about to get a surprise." And then the phone cut off.

"What surprise?" I raised my voice as if yelling could bring the connection back. "What?"

I handed the cone to the perplexed customer and hit redial. Before Andy picked up, I saw my surprise coming across the Boardwalk. The smooth pale skin. The sultry dark eyes. The brilliantly white teeth. The smirk. Petino. I could figure out why we were getting a visit from the Ocean County police. What worried me was why that visit came in the form of Detective Petino. The last time I'd seen Petino, the detective was investigating a homicide.

The cop smirked as he walked towards the Heavenly Dips stand. His expression told me nothing. He had smirked almost every time he looked my way -- and he had looked my way quite a few times in the course of a murder investigation on Long Beach Island several months earlier. I couldn't recall if Petino worked exclusively on homicides but I steeled myself for the news that Jonas Angel was dead. That, however, was not the information Petino conveyed.

"I'm looking for Al Braddock." If Petino recognized me, he didn't let on.

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“Big Al?”

“That’s what I’ve been told.” The expression in the detective’s eyes matched the smirk on his lips.

“He’s in the back. You can go around and I’ll let you in. Or, you can move fifteen feet to your left and slip under the counter.”

“Thanks. I’ll do that. And by the way, don’t go away. I’d like to interview everyone here. Tell your buddies.” He nodded at Ed, Sharmaine, and Hilde.

Petino flashed his badge at Ed and slipped under the counter. I went back to scooping.

After ten minutes of mumbled conversation at his desk, Big Al came forward to send us, one by one, to meet with Petino. I was last. Before I was summoned, Ed emerged looking excited. Hilde emerged looking perplexed. And, Sharmaine emerged looking worried. No one explained why.

Big Al introduced me to Petino as “our most recent hire. She don’t even know the kid but you can talk to her if you want.”

Petino wanted.

“Hi.” I said in a friendly tone but Petino did not respond -- even after Big Al returned to the counter.

“Your name?”

“Meg Daniels.”

He gave no sign that he recognized me or my name. He must have. Did he handle so many cases, suspects, and witnesses that he had already forgotten me?

“Date of birth?”

“Date of birth?” I repeated a little too loudly.

“Yes, date of birth.”

I glanced over my shoulder to make sure no one was listening and leaned close to the detective. I stated the month and day clearly, and then mumbled the year.

“Didn’t get that.” Petino smirked.

I repeated the year nervously and he jotted the four digits down.

“Occupation?”

That was the first time since going undercover I’d been asked. I stumbled through my reply, “I . . . well . . . I guess . . . I’m an ice cream scooper. Little Dipper is my title.”

He didn’t seem surprised. Nor did he push for an explanation. He simply made notes on the yellow lined pages of a small notebook with a green cover. “How long have you worked for Heavenly Dips?”

“Well . . . I just . . . today is my first day with the company.”

“Not usual starting in the flagship store. You got connections?” Why was he asking? Didn’t he know? He was smirking but since he was always smirking, I had no idea if the expression was meaningful.

A Fear of Seaside Heights

“A friend of mine hooked me up with the job.”

The detective nodded. “Do you know Jonas Angel?”

I shook my head. “I’ve never even met him.”

“Have you heard anything in your work here today that would give you any idea where Jonas Angel might be?”

I shook my head.

“Are you planning to leave any time soon?”

“You mean quit Heavenly Dips? I’m only here for the summer. I’m start graduate school in the fall.”

“Ah, right.” His smirk became more pronounced. Yep. He remembered me. “You know, you’re old enough to drink. You could find a job in a restaurant around here. Make good money. Have you ever thought of that?”

“I’m committed to the ice cream industry.”

His expression almost widened into a smile. “Well, Ms. Daniels, here is my card. I trust you’ll call me if you hear anything you think I should know.” And then, of course, he smirked.

CHAPTER 6

The ice cream business is not as glamorous as it appears. Sure, I had access to all the free ice cream I could eat. But I paid for those cones with blood, sweat, and tears. Okay, sweat. Plus, my feet, back, and right arm ached from the rigors of bending over and digging in vats of ice cream. I nursed my pains on the deck of Andy's sailboat, the recently rechristened Maggie May. The sailboat was moored on Long Beach Island in a slip behind the bay-front Beach Haven home of Andy's friend, Oliver Wilder. Much to our surprise, Andy and I were living on the boat, legally he assured me - without making eye contact. We thought we would be staying, at least for a few weeks, in Oliver Wilder's guest room. However, Oliver -- a good friend who had stuffed into his mailbox a warm letter of greeting, a sheet of instructions for every electronic gadget in the house, a complete list of the refreshments in the kitchen, and a calendar of cultural events in the county -- had forgotten to leave the key and the code to the burglar alarm. Luckily the neighbors on the left, a kind couple in their eighties, knew that we were coming and understood our predicament. The house on the right had been taken over by kids for the summer. They wouldn't have cared, or noticed, if the QM2 had docked at Oliver's deck.

Sprawled across the cockpit bench, I was almost comfortable. The air was bearable but not cool. Humidity still hung in the air. The Northeast was in the midst of a drought -- the longest in over a decade. More than a month had passed since the last sign of rain -- not a good follow-up to a dry winter and spring. The temperatures were high. The woods were scorched. The reservoirs were low. The airwaves were full of *I Wish It Would Rain*, *Baby the Rain Must Fall*, *Have You Ever Seen Rain*, *Walkin' in the Rain*, *Laughing in the Rain*, *Purple Rain*, *Fire and Rain*. You get the picture. The sounds of *Raindrops Keep Falling on my Head* drifted across the lagoon as I glanced through the file Andy had compiled on Jonas Angel.

Andy had accomplished a lot in just over thirty hours. While I served ice cream he visited all the clubs -- country, sport, and night -- that Jonas frequented. While I got to wear a fluorescent gown, slip-on wings, and a halo, Andy got to wear his best clothes -- although I suspected he was significantly overdressed in some of Jonas's seedier hangouts. Although Andy and I dressed very differently for our investigation, the results we came up with were similar. Neither of us found any information about where Jonas had been partying since Friday night. And now the game had changed.

I looked through web pages that Andy had printed out from Jonas's computer on a visit to the Angel home. Most were from the Heavenly Dips corporate website. The photos were shot from a low angle to make the headquarters look impressive. Ansel Adams couldn't have done much shooting the dull red brick building through the chain link fence topped with razor wire. The photo screamed not ice cream but juvenile detention center, which in fact was what the building had been before Maxwell Angel moved the company headquarters there twenty years ago. The only thing that looked at all modern was the metal console that I assumed was a card reader. I was surprised the headquarters' entrance unlike the store's façade didn't replicate heaven's pearly gates. No St. Peter, not even an

automated facsimile, was stationed at the entrance to serve as greeter. How did the marketing department miss that opportunity?

Behind the corporate information, I found Andy's notes on a number of interviews. No one had seen Jonas since Friday night or had a clue where he might be.

Among the female friends Andy interviewed only one, Schyler Devereaux, said she had seen Jonas a few times within the past two weeks. She had tried to catch up with him on Friday night but by the time she reached the bar, he had left. Schyler described her relationship with Jonas in glowing terms. Next to her comments Andy had printed, MOM SAYS NO.

Andy's other comments were about the Angel family. In the notes, written before Jonas's car was found, Andy described Maxwell Angel as fed-up, unwilling to let Jonas worry his mother that way. He thought his son had finally matured. Andy had scrawled "recent grad" in the margin. Amanda Angel was concerned long before the Porsche was located in the woods. She didn't mind if he didn't come home over the weekend. She'd much rather he stay put than drive if he had been drinking. She even understood why he would turn off his cell phone. Andy had scribbled "no message Saturday or Sunday." I assumed the notation "I should have called his friends" was a quote from Amanda.

In family photos, Maxwell's physical appearance was average in every way – height, weight, coloring. Amanda's appearance was in no way average. She was beautiful with a smile that could be measured in megawatts. Both Jonas and his ten year old sister, Rebecca according to the caption, inherited their looks from their mother. And, apparently, their dispositions. The family looked happy, casually embracing in picture after picture. The only picture of Jonas where he did not grin was a portrait where he held a sultry look for the camera. In that photo taken on a beach at dusk, he had his arm wrapped around an almost-pretty blonde in a long white gown. I turned the photo over and saw the notation Jonas and Schyler, spring formal.

I was still studying the photos when Andy boarded and plopped opposite me. He passed me a bottle of coke and hit a speed dial on his cell phone. "I didn't think so." He flipped the phone closed. "It would be too easy for Jonas Angel to decide to answer his cell phone."

"Can't you use his cell phone to find him?"

"The cops can if he's used it, and hasn't moved since. I can't find anyone he's called and I've talked to a lot of people. How about you? Did anyone at the store speculate on what might have happened to Jonas?"

"They didn't seem very interested in what happened to him. They did, however, seem very interested in appearing on television. But Big Al did most of the talking. Even though his desk is way in back where no natural light reaches, he's out of the booth so often he actually puts on suntan lotion several times a day. Of course, he is a blue-eyed redhead. And he fraternizes with men who wear really, really big rings."

"And that means . . .?"

"That he knows men who wear really, really big rings."

A Fear of Seaside Heights

“And the meaning of this is?”

“I don’t interpret the news. I just deliver it.”

“Max talks to Big Al regularly so don’t worry too much about getting close to him. It’s the kids that might have some information.”

“I don’t know how much these kids are going to know. And by the way, they think I am twenty-four.” Before Andy could comment I added, “And, yes, they believe it. Anyway, no one said much about Jonas. We had to work too hard. ”

“All I know is that Maxwell Angel suggested that you work in the Seaside Heights store because Jonas went there the most. He liked to start just about every day with a visit to the store.”

“That’s odd. When Ed talked to the reporters I am sure he said he Jonas wasn’t doing that anymore and that he hadn’t seen Jonas at all since last Tuesday. “

“Was Ed at work every day?”

I shook my head. “Given what I’ve seen of Ed, I’d have to say yes. I can find out.” It was Andy’s turn to shake his head. “I can get that information. Jonas just might have been too busy to get there over the last week or so. But try to find out if there is any reason he has been avoiding the Seaside Heights store. Or maybe we’ll find out tonight?”

“Tonight?”

“You don’t feel like dancing?”

I didn’t feel like sitting up. “I thought you didn’t want us being seen together.”

“Not by the people you work with. I might have to speak with them at some point. Tonight I want to check out one of Jonas’s haunts in Point Pleasant Beach. That’s a dozen towns away. We won’t run into any of your coworkers. Don’t worry.”

I always worry.

CHAPTER 7

The crowd in line at Jenkinson's on the Boardwalk in Point Pleasant Beach was a lot younger than I was. Actually, the crowd was a lot younger than I was pretending to be. I aspired to invisibility as I calculated the average age of the folks waiting to pay the cover charge. Andy didn't seem to mind that we looked like geezers. He was surveying the mob searching for contacts. I was searching for people older than we were.

The bouncer did not laugh when he asked to see our ID but he studied my driver's license for an eternity or, more likely, fifteen seconds. Given my date of birth, he probably needed extra time to do the math. I was relieved when he handed my license back and I followed Andy into the night club. I had to look younger in the dark.

The space was vast with bars scattered around the room and a large dance floor ahead. I couldn't see the band but it was in the house. At least music was in the house. Whatever the source, the music was loud to a geezer like me.

Andy leaned down to yell in my ear. He said, "Lenny's a fink" or maybe "let's get a drink" since he headed for the nearest bar. He ordered a beer for him and a coke for me. "You seem sixteen," he shouted in my ear. Or maybe it was "you need caffeine." Probably the latter.

We sipped our drinks and watched the dance floor packed full of young and fit people most with tans that, if obtained naturally, would have alarmed the Surgeon General. There was romance in the air. Maybe romance was overstating the situation. The term *getting lucky* popped into my head.

I asked Andy what was next. He said he was "withering his left shoe" but I think he was actually considering his next move. His next move turned out to be mine. "Gawk at the sky over there." "Whaaaaat?"

His lips brushed my ear as he enunciated each word. "Go ask that guy if Jonas is coming here tonight." He pointed at the only individual in the building who had not been touched by the sun, a tall, emaciated twenty-something male with shoulder-length hair that was dirty blonde – in color and condition. A heavy coating of tattoos added the only tint to the man's skin. A black eye and an almost-healed split lip provided the perfect accessories to the burnt-out rocker style.

Andy said something that I would later learn was Lynyrd Matuchek. "Why would he talk to me?" My lips touched Andy's ear. He gestured that he couldn't hear me. Then I realized if he couldn't, neither could the guy. I didn't need a good story – just Jonas's name and a few hand gestures. With any luck he'd shout loudly enough or gesticulate clearly enough for me to understand his answers.

I assumed a confident posture and headed out on my mission. My target didn't see me coming, which was probably good. In black t-shirt and slacks and no makeup, I couldn't imagine that, even if I were ten years younger, I would be the woman he'd waited for all his life. He didn't even glance my way when I stopped beside him and called out, "excuse me." He was very into something – it might have been musical or it might have been chemical. Whatever the cause of his distraction, I had to tap

him on the arm to get his attention. He seemed amused as he gazed down at my five feet six inches from his eight inch advantage. Amused but not particularly pleased.

I held up my hand in an effort to convince him that my interest wasn't romantic. I gestured that I wanted to ask him a question. His gray eyes were cold and hard but they didn't turn away. I had to stand on my toes to get my words within shooting distance of his ear; the rocker dude wasn't going to make it easy for me.

"Is Jonas Angel here?" I screamed.

The man furrowed his pasty white brow and shook his head so that his straggly locks twirled in the air. I interpreted his response not as an answer but as an indication that he couldn't hear.

I waved him down and reluctantly he leaned forward so I could yell directly into his ear. "Is Jonas Angel here?"

He stood straight and studied me before he again bent down – this time to shout in my ear, "Who wants to know?" He turned his head for an answer. If he'd heard the news about Jonas's car, he gave no indication.

"A friend of mine told me to find him." That statement was actually true.

"He's not here." I not only heard him, the surrounding fifty people heard him. The song was over. The applause had died down. I needed a reason for asking. He lowered his voice. "I can probably help you. What do you need?"

An adequate cover story was my first thought. I couldn't come up with one. I copied his approach. I answered with a question. "What do you mean?"

"You said you're looking for Jonas. I heard something about his car on the radio. He's like missing or something."

"What happened to him?" I played dumb.

The rocker dude shrugged. "I don't know but I don't think he's gonna show up here tonight. I might have whatever you need." Before I came up with an answer, the guy shrugged. "If you want to wait for him, fine. That's your choice." His tone indicated my choice meant nothing to him. "But . . . I haven't seen him in a week or two. Let me know if I can help you."

With that the tall skinny man waved towards the bar indicating he was going for another drink. I was dismissed. Just as his Lynyrd Skynyrd T-shirt disappeared into the crowd, a male voice whispered into my right ear. "They do random drug testing."

"What?" I spun around and found myself nose-to-nose, actually nose-to-chin, with Ed Brickmeyer. His eyes were as big as ever but not as bright.

"They do random drug testing at Heavenly Dips. Don't think because you passed the initial test that you're safe."

"What are you talking about?"

Ed shrugged. His wide blue eyes narrowed into a sad expression.

“Clarify. Please. I’m hot, I’m tired, and my feet are killing me. I don’t have time for guessing games. What are you talking about?”

The way he forced his words through clenched teeth left no doubt in my mind that he was angry. “I saw you with that guy.”

For a moment I feared he meant Andy.

“I know who he is. He and Jonas work together.”

“At Heavenly Dips?”

Ed infused his sigh with disgust. “Don’t play coy with me. I know why you were talking to him.” I raised an eyebrow to encourage him to continue. “Drugs. Jonas isn’t around so Lynyrd over there is the next best source.” I relaxed. He was talking about the rocker dude.

“Jonas deals?”

Ed turned his back on me but didn’t walk away. He spun to face me. “I was so wrong about you. I thought you were a nice person.”

“I’m nice.”

“No, you’re not. You’re one of them.”

“Them?”

“You know.” He waved off my question. And he was right. I did know. He meant the cool, the hip, the careless.

I positioned myself to block Ed if he tried to flee. With my head tilted back to catch his eyes, I pleaded. “I’m not one of them. I’m not part of any *them*. I’m just me. A graduate student who needs to make a few bucks to keep her head above water. Even if I liked drugs, which I don’t, I can’t afford them.” Why was I begging Ed to believe me? To like me?

“What about the old guy I saw you talking to?”

“Old guy?” Even as I asked, I knew. He meant Andy.

“Yeah. I saw you talking to a guy. He must be thirty or something. I saw him point out Lynyrd. I figured he sent you over to buy drugs.”

“Ed, you are so wrong. I was just talking to that . . . that . . . old guy. I had seen him around so I asked him about a bar in Seaside Heights. He didn’t know it but said that skinny guy did.” I was shocked at how easily I lied. “I didn’t know about any drugs.”

“Did you come with the old guy?”

“Him? No way. I came with my friend. Tracy.” I had no idea where the name came from. In my entire life I’d never met a Tracy. “You know, she’s seen Jonas around and kind of has a crush on Jonas but I better warn her about the drug thing. Tell me about Jonas’s drug business.”

Ed shook his head. “Business is an overstatement. He likes to supply a little Ecstasy for his buddies. And I’ve heard him talk about some other drug . . . HPC or GNP or something. It’s not like Jonas is a drug kingpin or anything. He just takes care of his friends.”

“How do you know all this?”

Ed's features registered his disgust. "I hear him on his cell phone. Sometimes he gets paged and makes jokes like 'time to do my good works'."

"Do the kids at the store use his services?"

"Kids? No."

"Big Al?" Why did I sound shocked? I didn't know Big Al.

Ed shrugged. "I don't know what's going on between Jonas and Big Al. For awhile they were best buds. We call them "the badge boys" and "the wingless wonders." They like to flaunt their superior status. I bet Big Al showers in that badge. And Jonas . . . geez, Jonas even wears his badge out clubbing. Like anyone cares about that disgusting blue piece of crap." He shook his head.

"Something happened between Big Al and Jonas?" I tried to get Ed back on the track I wanted.

"Those two were like peas in a pod but something happened between them. I don't know what and I don't care." Suddenly he shifted gears. "What bar?"

"What?"

"What bar in Seaside Heights were you interested in?" His eyes were devoid of their usual earnestness. Was he testing me? I hoped not because I would fail.

I waved off his question. "Oh. It doesn't matter. Not if those kinds of guys go there."

Ed seemed, if not satisfied, at least appeased by my answer.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Andy chatting with two scantily clad women who didn't see him as 'the old guy.' I wanted to get back to his side, but couldn't risk Ed seeing me with the PI. Besides, Ed seemed willing to be my friend and winning his confidence was my mission. Getting information wasn't a particularly tough job; he volunteered the key facts. As he described his life in the way that many Jersey residents do – by turnpike exit number -- his bright blue eyes sparkled. Ed, who was sharing a two bedroom house with nine friends for the summer, spent winters where he had grown up at Exit 10. He went to school at Exit 9. In the winter he worked part-time at another Heavenly Dips store at Exit 12.

What exit was I from? I told him I grew up in Philadelphia but now lived in Manhattan. Uptown. Ed noted that I had moved from Exit 3 to Exit 16E.

"Do you like working at Heavenly Dips?"

"I've only worked one day. And it was such an odd day. What do you think happened to the Angel kid?"

"I wouldn't know. Jonas and I are not exactly best buds."

"Why not?"

"Have you seen Jonas?"

I nodded then worried that Ed would question where I had seen Jonas. Maybe he would think I'd caught the news before coming out. The broadcasts must have included photos. The gloom on Ed's face told me he wasn't focused on how I saw Jonas but on what I thought. He knew what I thought. I found it hard to find the right adverb to modify cute when it came to Jonas Angel. He was

astronomically cute. Fabulously cute. Staggeringly cute. His profile brought to mind the classic movie stars of the silent era. He was, in short, both the cutest and the most handsome young man I'd ever encountered.

"Well, you've seen Jonas and you've seen me."

"So?" Ed looked adorable in baggy khaki shorts, an oversized navy blue T-shirt, and sandals. Adorable and skinny. He needed to eat more free ice cream. His loose-fitting shorts made his scrawny legs appear even thinner, his arms were like sticks hanging out of the voluminous shirt, and his head seemed oversized protruding out of the wide neckline. Every visible body part was in some way disfigured by bruises that I'd seen him pick up from collisions with ice cream freezers. Still, there was something appealing about the boy. So what if he wasn't adorable in the way that Jonas Angel was adorable. Few people were. Ed lacked Jonas's striking coloring, eerily light blue eyes, and lustrous brown hair. Ed's eyes were a flat shade of blue and what hair he did have was a dull brown that appeared resistant to summer highlights. Still his face lit up when he smiled, which he did not do while discussing Jonas Angel.

"I knew . . . or rather didn't know . . . kids like Jonas in high school. The kids who have it all. Money. Looks. Maybe not smarts . . . who needs smarts when Daddy's going to give you a company?"

Under other circumstances I would have liked to discuss Ed's self-image, but finding out about Jonas was my job. "I take it you don't care if Jonas ever comes back to the store."

"I should be so lucky. He'll be back. Over a hundred locations in three states and he likes Seaside Heights best. Like I told you, it's an honor to work there. You have to earn it." Suddenly his gaze met mine, his brow furrowed, but he kept silent -- wondering, I am sure, how I landed my cushy job at the flagship store.

I spoke quickly before he could ask. "I have to find Tracy."

I never did meet a Tracy but I did discover Andy on the Boardwalk chatting with a kid who might have been the most handsome male person I'd seen in recent years -- if it weren't for those photos of Jonas.

I hung back -- more to avoid getting caught by Ed than to be polite. I could make out bits and snatches of Andy's conversation with the kid whose name I could not catch. When I arrived he was telling Andy that when he last saw Jonas on Friday night he had been wearing Ralph Lauren khaki pants, a blue Gap shirt, brown Gucci loafers, and a stainless steel Rolex watch.

The kid, who claimed he had met Jonas 'just around' knew that Jonas had visited the brand new Heavenly Dips store on Long Beach Island on Friday afternoon. Then he had met a group of guys at a bar and restaurant they liked on Route 9. The place, just south of Tuckerton, was central enough that friends from different shore towns could meet there.

"Most Fridays, Jonas would have gone on with the gang for a full night of partying but he didn't even hang around until the entire group showed up."

"Did you see him arrive?"

“No, I was inside when he got there.”

“Did you see him drive off?”

“No, I stayed a long time after he left.”

“So you don’t know if he had the top up on his car or not?”

“He hasn’t put it up since the drought started. I assume it was down. Usually was.”

“Was he going out with anyone else that night?”

“Not that he told me.”

“Did he talk to anyone while you were there?”

“Only the guys in our crowd. I didn’t see him speak to anyone outside our group. Schyler Devereaux arrived minutes after he left. She hadn’t run into him on the way in so I assume he headed right out.”

“Was he meeting another woman?”

“If he was, he didn’t tell me and I think he would have. He knows I’m not a big fan of Schyler’s.” Andy asked why and the kid had no problem explaining. “She’s a predator and absolutely no fun. Doesn’t like Jonas hanging out with his friends. She wants him all to herself. I’m telling you she’s got a ring on hold, a wedding dress in her closet, and monogrammed christening gowns for the kids. That’s nuts. We’re only kids ourselves.”

“Does Jonas see Schyler that way?”

“He feels sorry for her. They went out in high school. He never meant for it to drag on. He never meant to hurt her. He tries to let her down gently . . . Jonas is really a pretty nice guy. She just will not be let down gently or otherwise.”

“Did Jonas talk about that on Friday?”

The kid shook his head. “He never mentioned Schyler. I was surprised when she turned up. She didn’t stick around. She told us to let Jonas know she would be home all night.”

“Was Jonas feeling okay on Friday?”

“If he wasn’t, he didn’t say anything to me.”

“Did he seem worried or preoccupied?”

The kid shook his head. “No. He seemed fine. Just Jonas. He said he had work to do. Lately he’s been really into his job. I assumed he was headed back to the office in New Gretna. He was still wearing his bright blue security badge on a chain around his neck.” When Andy pressed him, the kid admitted that Jonas never said where he was going. He simply made an assumption since the main office was not that far away. “Where else would he go?”

Apparently not to Heavenly Dips headquarters. Andy explained that to gain access to the grounds Jonas would have used his badge as a key card. The card reader showed that his had not been used. The kid shrugged. “There are lots of stores where he could do some work. When you’re in New Jersey you’re never far from a Heavenly Dips location.”

“Did he happen to mention anything about the Seaside Heights store?”

A Fear of Seaside Heights

“No.” His response was emphatic. “He loves that store. He goes there just about every day. I don’t know why. He just likes it. He likes the Boardwalk. He likes Seaside Heights.”

Hearing the town’s name made my stomach do a back flip. I had to get back into that angel gown in ten hours.

CHAPTER 9

I expected to be unconscious within minutes of hitting the V berth but the night was too hot. I stripped off my t-shirt but that didn't help. The heat was unrelenting – even in the middle of the night. The soft breeze I'd felt on the Boardwalk wasn't making it into the Maggie May's cabin. Andy had been planning on getting the air-conditioning running but then he found work. I was happy that he had a job – and an income -- but I would have been really been happy if he started the case after he fixed the AC.

It didn't take me long to give up on sleeping in the cabin. Wearing as little as I thought legally viable, I pulled a cushion off the cockpit bench, stretched out on the bow, and started the countdown. *If I go to sleep now, I can get six hours sleep. If I go to sleep now, I can get five and a half hours sleep.* At that point I realized Andy had yet to return from his shower. I peeked over the top of the deck house and saw him standing on Oliver's patio. He had wrapped towels around his waist and shoulders. He wasn't alone.

I couldn't make out the identity of the person Andy was talking to except that it was a male. The two spoke in hushed tones that were completely appropriate given the time of night. As I watched, they started across the lawn towards the boat. Good thing I had hidden. Good thing Andy -- for some reason to do with air-conditioning repair -- had turned the boat around so the bow faced away from the house. I flattened my stomach against the cushion and buried my head in crossed arms. Even if the man spotted me, he wouldn't see anything he couldn't see on the average beach.

I listened as Andy told his visitor to wait on the dock while he retrieved his notebook from below. He didn't turn on the light as he headed down the companionway. I heard him bumbling around in the cabin but couldn't see what he was doing through the port. Suddenly the light went on. I looked again. Andy was now wearing pants and a look of concern. He knew I had left the V berth. He just didn't know where I had gone.

I tapped lightly on the glass and pressed my face close so he could see me. His response confused me. "Karl." He called and stuck his head up the companionway. "Would you mind coming down here?"

Through the port I saw a buff man in stiff jeans and a tight white t-shirt. His carefully maintained physique was at odds with his face that was soft and unexceptional. His thin hair and small eyes were the same shade of brown – dull to match his expression. I hypothesized that Karl had developed his physique to fend off bullies that had plagued him since grade school.

Andy wrote something in his notebook, jotted a few words on his card, and handed it to the visitor. As Andy led Karl topside and escorted him off the boat, he blocked any view the man might get of me. Another ten minutes passed before Andy dropped a cushion beside me and fell onto it with a groan. We lay on our backs staring at the stars.

"Who was Karl?"

A Fear of Seaside Heights

“Karl Elkins. His wife worked for Heavenly Dips before she left him. He wants me to work for him to find her.”

“Does he think you have office hours between midnight and 6 AM?”

“He’s a tad on the desperate side. I was pleased to tell him that I had no time. I’d rather not take a domestic case if I can avoid it but I feel sorry for the guy. I took his number . . . if . . . when . . . we find Jonas maybe I’ll check it out for him . . . but even then I’d rather not take the job. I gave him a couple of referrals.”

“How did he find you?”

“Apparently when I was at Heavenly Dips yesterday, he was there too -- asking around about his wife. She worked there until Friday. Somehow he got the name of my boat out of Maxwell Angel’s new assistant. He started sobbing when he told me that he’d spent all day searching for the Maggie May until he saw the name on the floatation device.”

“Did he see us come in together?” .

“No. He took a shot and came by on his way home from his night shift job. He said he can’t sleep anyway. He’s awake all night missing his wife. He’s in bad shape. Poor guy works two jobs. He thought he was getting a cold so he decided to blow off his night job on Friday, take some cold medicine and sleep in the spare room so he wouldn’t give his wife his cold. He didn’t have to worry.”

“She was already gone?”

“Yeah but it took him a while to figure it out. He thought she got up early and went out. Her bed was made but she always made it before she left. So, again, he wasn’t worried. He went fishing. He figured she’d be home when he got back.”

“And she wasn’t?”

Andy yawned. “That’s when he got worried. He called all her friends. They said they hadn’t heard from her. He called the police but according to him they weren’t interested in what he had to say. Then on Sunday one of his wife’s friends had the pleasure of telling him that his wife had left him, that she had been planning to go for months.”

“Why didn’t the wife just leave a note?”

“I have no idea.” At least that’s what I think Andy said. His yawn sabotaged the message.

“Why did she leave him?”

“He hasn’t got the foggiest.”

“His wife worked at Heavenly Dips. His wife left Friday. Do you think she ran off with Jonas?”

“Not likely.” His tone mocked me.

“Why not?”

“For one thing, they would have taken his Porsche. He told me her car is a nine year old Toyota sedan.” Andy’s persistent yawning was serving as a sedative for me. “And, she’s twenty years older than Jonas.”

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“Age doesn’t always matter.”

“In this case I think it might. He showed me his wife’s picture. It kind of reminded me of your driver’s license photo.”

“That bad?”

“He said it was a good likeness.”

I got Andy’s point. “We’ve heard that Jonas used drugs . . .”

“They don’t make drugs that strong.” With that, he fell asleep.

CHAPTER 10

After a shower and a night on the clothesline my angel gown was not a lot cleaner or dryer than it had been the night before. It, and I, felt clammy as Andy and I inched down Route 37 past diners, stores, and a car dealership that bore an eerie resemblance to Oliver's house. Actually, to the orange and turquoise color scheme at Oliver's house, an homage to the Miami Dolphins. I had a lot of time to study the decor. The line of traffic was going nowhere. I grew impatient. We moved ten yards in three minutes. "I'm going to be late."

Andy checked the dashboard clock. "Bridge is probably open."

"I hope we make it through this time."

Andy was amused. "What's with this sudden display of zeal?" When I didn't answer he guessed. "Are you afraid of Big Al?"

"Afraid? No. Unwilling to be subject to his rudeness, yes."

The truth was I felt motivated. I was going to attack my real job: private investigator – okay, unlicensed private investigator -- with a vengeance. I would crack this case and then I would quit. With any luck before noon.

"What's the story with the guy I talked to last night?"

"Lynyrd Matuchek."

"He doesn't look like a Leonard."

"He isn't a Leonard. He's a Lynyrd. Lynyrd as in Skynyrd which explains his T-Shirt. His father was a huge fan and really devastated when Ronnie VanZant was killed in that plane crash. Lynyrd remains a big fan even though his dad deserted his mother when Lynyrd was about ten. Anyway, one of Jonas's friends told me about him. Lynyrd grew up in Point Pleasant. Right now he deals a small amount of drugs out of a motel back on Route 9. He appears to be the sole support of everyone he lives with -- his girlfriend, his five year old son, her four year old daughter, their one year old son, and a teen-ager who is his girlfriend's sister."

"So he can't be dealing too small an amount of drugs."

"He works at legitimate jobs too. Lots of them."

"His tie to Jonas?"

"Apparently, Jonas used his pharmaceutical services on occasion but then cut him out. He started getting drugs directly from Lynyrd's supplier."

"And Lynyrd didn't like it?"

"From what I hear Lynyrd didn't much care. That's why I wanted you to ask him about Jonas. Just to see how he reacted. From what I could see and from what you say, it didn't sound like he had much of a reaction at all."

I agreed. "He seemed fairly copasetic with the topic of Jonas. What did you expect? That he would turn to me and say, 'that creep Jonas . . . I hate him so much that I locked him in the kitchen closet in my house at 123 Main Street'?"

“That would have been nice.” Andy sighed.

I eyed the halo in my lap. “Yep.” I agreed. “That would have been nice.”

I was on the Seaside Heights Boardwalk before 11AM. The arcades, food stands, and souvenir shops were coming to life. My stomach balked at the aromas of the specialties being readied for the day but in another hour I’d be responding like Pavlov’s dog to the scent of hot dogs, pizza, and heavy grease in general. Rows of color -- chairs, towels, and umbrellas -- stretched across the beach from the water’s edge. Another bright and sunny day, bad news for reservoirs and farmland, was good for the beach business. And, I suspected for the ice cream biz.

I knew by the strains of chanting angels that I was late. I knew by the big hand on the timeclock that I was two minutes late. I knew from Big Al’s orientation that I would be docked for fifteen minutes. Nonetheless, I bounced to the front of the store as if I were reporting to work at my dream job. I needed to ingratiate myself with Hilde.

“Any word on Jonas?”

She shook her head.

“I heard Ed tell the press that he hadn’t seen Jonas recently. Any idea why he hasn’t been around?”

She shrugged. “Heavenly Dips opened a new store on Long Beach Island. I think he’s spending a lot of time there.”

“Jonas told you that?”

Hilde stared at me through small panes of glass surrounded by heavy black plastic frames with an intensity that suggested that I had asked her to calculate the square root of 7468 and walked away without answering.

I’d struck out. Hilde wasn’t interested in talking to me at all, let alone about Jonas, but maybe Schyler Devereaux would be. I was fairly certain the woman headed for our stand was Schyler. I recognized her from the spring formal photo in Andy’s file. Schyler belonged to a small group of women that, to my knowledge, held a disproportionate percentage of the world’s wealth: blondes who look good in white slacks. Schyler looked very good in the white slacks she was wearing. She’d accessorized simply: black, short-sleeved T-shirt, black leather flip-flops, Gucci sunglasses, and a Burberry baseball cap that cost more than I was likely to clear that week. Actually, the Burberry scrunchie on her arm cost more than I was likely to clear that week.

Schyler worked at the classic blonde style and almost pulled it off. She had the hair – pulled into a ponytail that protruded from the back of her hat. She had the classic jewelry worn on neck, wrist, and fingers. What she didn’t have was the beauty. Her features were angular –but not in that patrician ‘don’t I resemble my horse’ sense. The angles on Schyler’s face gave her a hard ‘don’t I resemble my bookie’ look. She slipped off her sunglasses as she approached the counter and I saw that her eyes were uninteresting, a dull green flecked with gray. Since I was the only server free, they were looking in my direction.

“Has anyone heard from Jonas?” When I broke the news to her that no one had, she gazed into space, bit her lower lip and, after many deep sighs, confided in me. I wasn’t surprised. I have one of those faces. “You heard the news about his Porsche?” I nodded.

“I know that something horrible has happened to him. I mean Jonas has run off in the past and not shown up at work but he would always call me. I mean we’re . . . well practically . . . I mean it’s not official . . . but . . . he would call me. It’s getting close to a week since I talked to him. He didn’t answer his phone on Friday when I called him so I tried to see him that afternoon but I missed him. He must have left the bar right before I arrived. I tried to reach him. He doesn’t always answer his cell but he would have called. He hasn’t called. That isn’t like Jonas.”

From what I’d heard from Andy, this was exactly like Jonas.

“The police aren’t taking his disappearance seriously you know. They say they’re working on Jonas’s case because of his father but they aren’t. If they were, wouldn’t they have talked to me?” I would have reminded her 24 hours had not yet passed since his car had been located but she never took a breath. “I mean we are practically engaged. They found his Porsche in the woods. I know that money is not an issue for people like us but why would anyone leave an expensive car in a place like that and go away? Why? It makes no sense.”

Schyler’s voice grew gentle. “You know Jonas always had a soft spot for the Seaside Heights location. This was his favorite store and Cherubic Cherry was his favorite flavor.” Her voice broke. I took the hint and scooped one pink and red dip into a black hole. She closed her eyes and licked the ice cream sensuously as if I had handed her Jonas in a cone. I was a little creeped out.

CHAPTER 11

While I served Schyler, Sharmaine reported to work. We all had to spend the next ten listening to his ranting about her tardiness. Sharmaine let his tirade roll off her back but Hilde developed a headache. She hung out a virtual No Trespassing sign and sulked in the corner massaging her temples for half an hour before Big Al gave in and said she could leave.

Sharmaine was thrilled when Hilde punched out. “Odd one. Very odd, that one. I haven’t met her twin but Ed says she’s pretty normal.”

“Hilde’s a twin?”

“So I hear.” Sharmaine spotted someone or something on the Boardwalk. I upgraded her usual cheerful expression to elated. When I turned to identify the source of her joy, I saw Lynyrd Matuchek – the same Lynyrd Matuchek that I’d approached the night before at Jenkinson’s. He was headed our way. My stomach did a quick back-flip. I thought of hiding. Instead, I gambled that Lynyrd would not recognize me. I was right. He didn’t acknowledge me on his first trip to our stand. Or his second trip. Or his third trip. By his fourth visit I felt comfortable that Lynyrd was not going to recognize me. Ever.

The very sight of Lynyrd in the hard light of day depressed me. He was thin but not fashionably so. His appearance suggested more than a passing relationship with chemicals not approved by the FDA – but no relationship whatsoever with soap. Lynyrd’s voice was raspy and the smell of nicotine escaped through his pores and traveled across the counter. He dropped his cigarette only when Sharmaine passed him a double scoop of one of his favorite flavors. He had a lot of favorite flavors. He left his job somewhere south on the Boardwalk and visited Sharmaine every hour or so to taste one of them. She believed his visits were driven by love. I agreed -- love of ice cream. Lynyrd acted as if he were doing her a favor letting her fawn over him, check his wounds, and give him free cones – a move that threatened her employment. Okay, she wasn’t risking a great job – but she did have white wings.

I was pretending to be twenty-four but I wasn’t. I was old enough to see through Lynyrd. Sharmaine saw Lynyrd with completely different eyes. For one thing hers glowed whenever she looked his way or mentioned his name – which was basically whenever she opened her mouth. “Can you believe it? This guy who lives next door to Lynyrd doesn’t like Lynyrd. He jumped him last weekend for no reason. Who wouldn’t like Lynyrd? Lynyrd said the guy was drunk.”

“Do you know the guy?”

“A real bully. It’s not the first time it happened. And Lynyrd is so sweet.”

Sweet and attached. I couldn’t understand was Sharmaine’s infatuation. With her kewpie doll looks and carefree personality, Sharmaine could do much better than Lynyrd.

”Lynyrd and I go to the same clubs a lot and if we run into each other, sometimes he’ll stay with me for a few days. We always have a good time together. He has a car so sometimes we go for rides up to Point Pleasant,” Lucky for me, she didn’t tag along the night before. I vowed to take her romantic well-being on as a project but first I had to find out what she knew about Jonas. So I asked.

Sharmaine gazed into space for a full moment before speaking. When she finally responded, her thoughts were well organized and her tone was controlled. Her eyes did not glow. “He isn’t my type. I mean he’s cute and all. He likes playing at being cool but he really isn’t. He’s just waiting to be his father.” She sneered. “For god’s sake, he lives at home and works for Daddy. Jonas wants everyone to think that he’s a wild one but . . .” She shook her head.

“Drugs?”

Again, she hesitated. “Sometime he provides stuff for his friends’ parties. Usually Ecstasy. You know Ecstasy?” Her question confirmed just how old twenty-four seems to an eighteen year old. “He likes to think that makes him cool. He isn’t a professional dealer or anything. I’m not sure he does the stuff himself. Jonas likes act like a big deal. He doesn’t ever seem to lose control. Maybe he just likes to see other people lose it so he can feel superior. I don’t know. Sometimes I just think he wants people to like him. He feels like he has to impress them or something.”

“How so?”

“I don’t know. Jonas is not all that mature. He’s not a bad guy but he doesn’t think things through. He’s getting better. He thinks that everything is okay between us and I guess it is. I mean I’m not . . . like being two-faced or anything.” Sharmaine punctuated her comments with a toss of her voluptuous curls. “When he talks to you and he’s like all charming and stuff, you can’t help but respond to him. Jonas has to win over every woman he meets. You’ll see when you meet him. After he gets a girl, he blows them off. Every one of them. Except Schyler. He tries to get rid of her. She won’t go. Schyler thinks that she’s special. That she is his girlfriend.”

“How do you know all this? Did Jonas talk to you about this kind of stuff?”

“No way. I see him and Schyler around. I watch. I listen. Schyler always comes by when Jonas is here. You were waiting on her when I came in. If you give her a chance she’ll go on and on about Jonas and how in love they are, how long they’ve been together.” Sharmaine sounded apologetic. “It gets pretty boring. It’s a long story. I think he took her to the senior prom. Jonas probably does see her more than anyone else but that’s only because she’s constantly showing up wherever he goes. She told me they’re getting married.”

“Are they?”

Sharmaine chuckled. “In her dreams. Schyler thinks she is some sort of sophisticate but she is so naïve. Jonas isn’t about to get married . . . not for years.” If I weren’t on a mission I would have challenged Sharmaine’s view that Lynyrd was any different. I was, however, on a mission. I didn’t interrupt. “I guess he could marry her eventually. I mean if she doesn’t mind waiting a decade or two. But why would he?”

“Because Schyler is special to him?” I answered the rhetorical question.

“No one is special to Jonas – except Jonas. Certainly not Schyler. Although he’s probably afraid to tell her.”

“Why?”

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“Did you ever see that old movie with . . . you know . . . Cruella DaVille . . . when she tries to kill the guy who married Catherine Zeta-Jones?”

“Glenn Close in Fatal Attraction?”

“Yeah, when Schyler finally realizes that Jonas isn’t planning on walking down the aisle with her she’s gonna make Glenn Close seem like a pushover.”

“Excuse me.” The voice was male. The tone was angry.

Darn those customers. While Sharmaine and I were chatting I hadn’t even noticed the fortyish couple with scowls that, according to the lines on their faces, they had been perfecting for years. After the couple, still frowning, moved on, I tried to get Sharmaine back on the topic of Jonas but failed miserably. Here is a sample conversation with Sharmaine.

Me: Do you have any idea why Jonas hasn’t been coming around?

Sharmaine: You think he would come here what with the sunny weather and all. Lynyrd likes working at the beach during the heat wave. Lynyrd . . .”

Me: Do you know the girls that Jonas dropped?

Sharmaine: Some girls are not easy to get rid of. Lynyrd’s girlfriends are always holding on. Lynyrd...

Me: Do you know anyone with a grudge against Jonas?

Sharmaine: Guys! Can you believe that someone had enough of a grudge against Lynyrd to beat him up for no reason? Lynyrd...

There would be no more news of Jonas Angel from Sharmaine.

CHAPTER 12

When my lunch break came, I set off in search of nutrients from the salt food group to balance a diet that so far included only sweets. I didn't have to travel far along the Boardwalk before the aroma of heavy grease lured me to a stand that offered to fry any item I could imagine.

I had triple digit grams of fat in hand and was picking up napkins by the fistful when I felt eyes on me. I glanced up but didn't recognize any of the people who were looking my way. In less than forty-eight hours I'd learned that if I glanced up while walking around in wings and a halo I'd always find someone looking my way – even in the middle of an eclectic Seaside Heights crowd.

I found an open bench facing the ocean and dug into my lunch. The massive number of napkins protected only part of my gown but the grease spots were small enough that I could hide them from Big Al's watchful eyes. Even as I had the thought I looked over my shoulder and saw him. Big Al. He was standing across the Boardwalk smoking a cigarette and feigning interest in the prizes available to air-rifle sharpshooters but he was watching me. I pretended I didn't notice. I had nothing to fear. My wings were in place and my halo was clearly visible.

I finished eating, checked my watch, and decided no way would I return to the Heavenly Dips stand early. I called Andy and he picked up on the first ring. "I met Schyler today. She came looking for news about Jonas. She appeared very upset."

"Why did she talk to you?"

"Just because I was at the counter. Schyler claims to want more official reaction to Jonas's disappearance so if you express your interest in the case you might be able to get more out of her. Hilde went home sick so I had a chance to talk to Sharmaine. She insists that Jonas planned on breaking it off with Schyler but she wouldn't let go. Schyler would never admit anything was wrong between them. That would destroy the myth of her great love. If someone could convince her, however, that being open and honest about their relationship would bring Jonas home . . . I don't know. I just wanted to report in."

"Thanks, Maggie. Love you. Gotta go."

"Love you too."

I tossed my trash in a can and started a slow march back to the prison that was my job. As I watched a father trying to win a stuffed animal for the preschool daughter who, with admirable loyalty, cheered his questionable pitching skills, I heard the sounds of an escalating altercation behind me. I checked out the commotion and discovered Big Al conversing in heated tones with a woman in hot pants and a halter top. From what I could gather she was angry because Big Al had failed to apologize for a collision that he caused by stopping in the middle of the Boardwalk for no apparent reason. In return Big Al delivered an expletive-seasoned accusation that if she watched where she was going . . .

Before my boss could notice me I slipped across the Boardwalk into the Magical Carousel Shoppe. I watched Big Al wave his arms wildly in the hopes of dismissing the woman who did not seem to feel the ugly encounter was over. She was barking what I could only surmise were insults at his

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back as Big Al headed across the Boardwalk directly towards the shop where I browsed. My boss didn't strike me as the type who bought miniature lighthouses or carousel horses for his home but then again I didn't really know him. It wasn't even my job to get to know him. I waited for Big Al to storm into the building but he stopped short of the glass doors. His face was as red as his hair. Both were soaked in sweat. He looked north. He looked south. When he didn't spot whatever he was looking for, he lit a cigarette and took several short, frantic puffs. I lost sight of him for a moment or two. The next thing I knew he was back at the front of the store. The cigarette was gone. He cupped his face in his hands, pressed them against the glass of the display window, and peered into the shop. Even though I was in full uniform, I hid behind a rotating jewelry display. I hated to sound neurotic but I didn't think there could be much doubt. Big Al was following me.

CHAPTER 13

I'd been back from lunch for two hours before Big Al deigned to make eye contact with me. Another hour passed before he spoke. I was more than a bit perplexed by the topic. He was working the register and I was dipping Comet Cherry Sorbet from the case next to him when apropos of nothing, he growled more than spoke. "I'm this store's Archangel, the only Archangel. I'm our store's link with corporate. I got the badge. The only badge." His emphasis on the word, badge, underlined the pride he took in wearing the bright blue card around his neck. "I'm the only one in this store who talks to the boys in New Gretna. The only one." His tone indicated that he knew I had been secretly calling the home office every fifteen minutes since I'd walked in the door. "You have any problems you go through me."

"Well," I ran through a list of appropriate responses and decided on "Thank you. That's nice to know."

"Excuse me, miss, my name is Karl Elkins." It was the man from the boat and he was speaking to Sharmaine. "My wife works at Heavenly Dips . . . or did until last week. I was wondering if she had stopped by at all. Do you know her? Bunny Elkins."

"Sorry, I don't know her." Sharmaine shook her head and the planets above it. The forlorn expression on Karl's face probably compelled her to ask, "Is she okay?"

"I don't know." He paused for about three seconds before deciding to spill the beans. "She left me. I have to find her."

"Have you talked to Big Al?" Sharmaine was all cheery solicitousness. "He might know her."

"No, I wouldn't want to impose." Of course not. He'd probably wait until sometime after midnight and drop by Big Al's house. "I just thought while I was here I would ask." Elkins used a bright blue Heavenly Dips napkin to wipe the sweat from his brow as he surveyed the ice cream display. "Could I have a Cherubic Cherry in a black hole, please? That's Bunny's favorite."

While Sharmaine dipped, I studied Elkins. In the daylight my impression was the same as in the dark: his head was sitting on the wrong body. If I weren't looking at him in the flesh, I would have thought he had pasted a photo of his face above a muscle-builder's body. The man was in good shape. His physique was sturdy with well-defined muscles but his face was soft with features that totally lacked definition. His bland coloring didn't help. Neither did the profuse perspiration. He glanced my way – probably because he sensed my stare. I flashed a brief smile and looked away.

As I listened to Karl Elkins whine to Sharmaine, I wished he was whining to me. His wife worked at Heavenly Dips headquarters. Maybe she had whined to him about her job and maybe that whining included some valuable information about Jonas Angel. But Sharmaine was never going to take the conversation in that direction. She was all solicitousness about his unfortunate domestic situation.

"Poor man." Sharmaine's big eyes were full of compassion as Elkins walked away. "Did you hear that? His wife left him. Hard to imagine someone leaving a nice man like that."

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“You know him?”

“Just now from serving him.”

“How do you know he’s nice?”

“I could just tell.” Sharmaine’s smile added ‘Silly.’

CHAPTER 14

When I heard Big Al grumbling on the telephone I figured something was up. I also figured *something* wasn't good. He walked to the front of the stand and snorted while he studied the current staff. He made a big show of deliberation but he knew what he wanted all along. He crooked a finger in my direction. "Daniels." With that he turned on his heel and took the few steps back to this desk. I assumed he meant that I should follow him. I did, knowing that Big Al was going to fire me. I was certain. My heart soared at the thought but then plunged back to earth. I was getting fired from a job that a trained monkey would accept only when the organ grinder business hit a slump.

As it turned out my employment was not terminated. I was simply being sent away for three hours so I could come back and help on the night shift. I had a lot of questions. Why? Why me? Why couldn't I work through to the night shift? I didn't ask any of them. I clocked out, and, without saying good-bye to any of my coworkers, slipped out the back door to kill three hours.

Newspapers claimed that northeastern cities were boiling. Beach towns like Seaside Heights might have been cooler but not by much. No breeze provided relief. Even the surf seemed lethargic. I certainly was. At the northern tip of the Boardwalk, I claimed a bench that faced the beach. Given my credentials as a Little Dipper, I could tell the seats had recently been vacated by persons who, for reasons I couldn't fathom, had been eating Uranus Raisin. In the interest of good marketing, I wiped up the mess with a pilfered Heavenly Dips napkin before I called Andy to leave a message telling him when to pick me up.

"Do you work at Heavenly Dips?" The words came from the far end of the bench. I turned and discovered a thirty-something man lounging opposite me.

"Are you talking to me?" A dumb question. Even if I hadn't been the only person in the area wearing a psychedelic angel outfit, I was the only person within earshot.

"I wondered if you worked at Heavenly Dips." The guy's voice, nasal and harsh, did not match the bright smile he offered.

I shook my head so that my galaxy of heavenly bodies made a quick orbit reminding me that I had not removed my halo. "No, I just think this is a cool look."

As his large display of teeth became huge, I realized how threatening the stranger's preternaturally white teeth appeared against the leathery skin tanned to a deep brown. Although I found the effect creepy, I guess he was attractive. But not as attractive as he believed. His was an image one worked hard to achieve. The tan complemented a slick style characterized by a dapper wardrobe and topped by blonde hair pasted back with a severity I viewed as a bit passé -- but what did I know. I hadn't seen a fashion magazine in months.

The guy looked vaguely familiar. He might have been a customer once or twice -- although I couldn't connect him with a flavor. Maybe I just spotted him on the Boardwalk. He was the type of person I would have noticed. Slick. Smarmy. And overdressed. In deference to the heat he had removed his shiny suit jacket. However, he didn't seem uncomfortable in a long-sleeved starched shirt

that, had he slipped out of it, would have continued to sit upright on the bench without him. The stranger extended his arm across the back of the seat. His fingers were only inches from the hard polyester surface of my right wing – giving me the opportunity to see the band of slightly lighter skin that, I assumed, his wedding ring had recently covered. A minute ago? An hour ago? A month ago? I didn't know. I didn't care.

“You're right. On you the look is very cool.” His brown eyes flirted with me.

Was this guy for real? Could he possibly be interested in a thirty-four year old woman in an angel costume? Or had he, in a burst of religious fervor, mistaken me for a real angel. I was relieved to hear the *William Tell Overture*, Andy's selection for my cell phone tone. I dug into my apron and pulled out the phone. I explained to Andy that my shift had been changed and that I would be three hours late.

“You're resourceful. Entertain yourself. After all, you're in a resort town.” Andy put a positive spin on the development.

“Dressed like a clown.”

“You can easily play SkeeBall for three hours. There's no dress code in SkeeBall.” Andy's tone grew kind. “I'm sorry. Do you still love me?”

“I remember thinking that I did but at the moment I can't quite conjure up the feelings.”

“You will.” There was a smile in his tone. It made me smile as I hung up.

“Boyfriend?”

I turned and fixed the stranger with a stare that I intended to ask ‘Are you still here?’ Apparently he believed the same look asked ‘Why don't you slide down here and make mad passionate love to me?’ His voice was sad, soft, and suggestive. “Don't tell me you have a boyfriend.” The intonation he intended as intimate, I heard as slimy.

“No problem. I won't tell you.”

Again he flashed those teeth in a tight, forced smile. “Really, do you have a boyfriend?”

Did I? The real me did. But what about the undercover me? Which me was I? I had no idea who this guy was. “That was my brother.” I dodged the question.

“Really?” He didn't seem to believe me.

“He's having problems.” I provided an explanation for my loving tone. “Tonight we're going to talk about it but I have to work late.” I sighed. “I hope I can help.” I let my features form a mask of concern for my imaginary brother.

“You know I couldn't help but hear . . .” he lied. “It seems you have some dead time on your hands. May I buy you a drink?”

“That's very kind of you . . .” I responded to his lie with one of my own. “I have a million errands to run.” I excused myself. I felt the man's eyes on me as I walked away.

CHAPTER 15

My first instinct was to play SkeeBall. I could easily kill three hours trying to bounce the ball into the fifty point circle but my finances were limited. I'd never been on the Sky Ride but since I had several hours to kill it seemed like the right time to try a glide above the Boardwalk. I bought a one-way ticket -- keeping my options open -- and waited for the car to swoop me up and carry me above the beach. Before long I knew I had made the right decision. Twenty feet in the air I felt traces of a breeze. That was the coolest I'd been since I last stuck my head into a freezer with Apollo's Apple Pie.

I got a new perspective on Seaside Heights from the Sky Ride. I could see the rooftop establishments along the Boardwalk where rooftop means second floor and I could see the stranger I'd met on the bench trying to work his charm on a waitress. Apparently he had a weakness for women in uniform. He was chatting up a blonde whose tan would have appeared deep had she been standing next to anyone else. I was so busy studying the stranger I almost missed Big Al at a table along the railing. Was this "the bank" our Archangel had to leave the store to visit so many times a day? Big Al faced west -- an odd choice for a man sitting alone at an Atlantic Ocean front bar. An odd choice by Big Al didn't surprise me but it did please me. He had his back to me as I rode by with my blue skirt flapping gently in the breeze and no sign of wings or halo to be seen.

As my car passed an arcade I saw a familiar blue dress, white wings, and gold halo. Along with Sharmaine's curls they were all flailing wildly about as she was danced according to the instructions of the game on the video screen. Sharmaine was working hard and looking good. A small group of passers-by had stopped to watch.

A moment later my car passed the Heavenly Dips stand where Ed scooped alone. If he minded, his annoyance didn't show. He had his usual professional grin plastered on his face.

The ride only killed half an hour -- and that was if I factored in the time involved in making the decision and buying the ticket. Two hours to go. At Casino Pier I watched the carousel, which according to the brochure had been spinning since 1932, spin a hundred more times. Hour and a half to go.

I sauntered down the boards checking out the games and ignoring the uninhibited barkers who offered me winnings -- usually in the form overstuffed animals -- in return for a modest display of skill and a slightly less modest investment of funds. I had no earnings to spend on entertainment. I watched. Games. People. The beach where a typical American family -- no longer WASP blonde but now in the more prevalent tones of tan and brown -- played touch football. As I watched a loud cheer went up at the paint ball stand across the boards. Apparently a player had just landed a particularly good shot on a living target that had more to fear from the costume than from the paint. What was the temperature inside that suit? Did anyone who wasn't working with Level 5 contaminants need that kind of protection?

No more than one minute later, the shooting stopped, the players wandered away and the target started a well-deserved break. He pulled off his helmet. Lynyrd. No wonder the guy's hair was so

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dirty. Maybe I misjudged Lynyrd based on his personal style, his hygiene, and his sneer. At least the guy was ambitious. Maybe ambitious was the wrong word but he was industrious. I wouldn't want to work dodging blobs of paint in ninety degree weather. I admired someone who would.

I shook my head. Was I having sympathetic thoughts about Lynyrd? What was wrong with me? It had to be the heat -- and the sun, the relentless sun.

CHAPTER 16

By the time Ed plopped onto a chair across from me, I'd already finished grazing the Boardwalk food stands. In half an hour I had managed to eat over 2,000 calories from both the sugar and salt food groups while avoiding intake of any nutritional value. I didn't think I could face whatever was hidden in the wrapping Ed laid on the table. I enjoyed the ocean view.

"Ah." Ed inhaled melodramatically. "I love the ocean air." I assumed he meant ocean air blended with the smell of hot grease, spun sugar, and my favorite aroma of the hour, caramel pop corn. I didn't ask. He was still waxing poetic. "Don't you just love the cacophony of the Boardwalk? The tapping of the feet on the wooden surface. The churning of the plane engines towing banners. The roar of the surf pounding the beach." Ed didn't mention the calls of the barkers and the sirens from the game stands. He left out the organ music, gongs, bells, and whistles that accessorized the amusements. He missed the screeching of metal wheels on the big rides' tracks and the screams that accompanied them. I could have waxed poetic on the items he overlooked but I was in no mood to play along. I shrugged. "Why so glum?" Ed pushed his butterfly fries under my nose.

I waved them away and fanned myself, ineffectively, with a paper napkin. "Did you notice there's a heat wave? It's in all the papers."

"No, really. You don't look happy." Ed bit into a cheesesteak. Sauce, onions, and several unrecognizable condiments overflowed the bun and dribbled down Ed's chin. Failing to create a breeze with the increasingly limp napkin, I donated it to Ed's cause.

"Big Al gave me a rotten schedule. Now, I have to hang around here killing three hours." I sighed. "I don't think Big Al likes me."

"Big Al doesn't like anyone. He's a misanthrope. At least no one could call him a misogynist. He hates everyone." With his next bite Ed had gotten half way through the oversized sandwich.

"But I never did anything to earn his disapproval." I ignored sneaking under the counter, extending my breaks, and wearing my gown sans halo. I didn't even consider the gargantuan effort Big Al made to lure me out of the bathroom in the first place.

Ed didn't nitpick. He claimed behavior didn't matter. "You will never win Big Al's approbation. Never."

"Why is he like that?"

"From what I hear he was okay until his wife died. Then he . . . like . . . he went nuts. Got crotchety.

"When did all this happen?"

"Before I came to this store. I'm not sure exactly, maybe five years ago. So see, he doesn't like any of us."

"I get the feeling he likes me less."

Ed had something to say but he wasn't going to say it. His reluctance had nothing to do with the handful of fries he shoved in his mouth.

“What?”

Ed shrugged.

“Come on, Ed, you can’t tease me this way.”

I waited while Ed chewed the remaining fries. “I heard him on his cell phone yesterday. He didn’t know I was in the freezer. He was talking to someone. I don’t know who. Big Al said he didn’t understand how you landed this job. He thinks you’re a plant.”

“Like a ficus tree?” My grin was feeble.

“That isn’t funny.”

I shrugged. “It’s not supposed to be.” I didn’t tell him what the comment *was* supposed to be - a quick answer to cover my fear and concern. “What other kind of plant could I be? That’s ridiculous. Just silly. Dumb.” I fought to control my mouth. My level of denial was becoming suspicious -- at least to me. Ed didn’t seem to notice.

“I think he’s worried that Maxwell Angel sent you.”

“Why would Big Al think the owner of the company sent me?”

“Well, you know that there is bad blood between Jonas and Big Al.”

“Yeah, but you said you didn’t know what it was.”

Ed squirmed in his seat. “I was being discreet. Big Al claims Jonas has been skimming from the daily proceeds. Not a lot. Just enough to give him a little extra cash but enough to make Big Al look bad. Jonas couldn’t have taken that much off the top. He didn’t come by to pick up the cash very often. Big Al claims the kid set him up to take the fall, that Jonas wants him to look bad. He thinks you’re here to catch him to entrap him.”

“Did Big Al tell you that?”

Again, Ed provided a negative answer. “Not exactly. I listen. I keep my ears open.”

I didn’t know how to respond except to issue a denial. “I never ever suspected there might be an embezzler in the store. And why would I care if there were? If you get a chance please communicate that to Big Al.”

“Right. I’ll find it easy to drop that nugget into a casual conversation. ‘Meg is not here looking for a peculator’.”

“Be discreet, Ed. And if you do get a chance promise you’ll speak English not GMAT talk.”

Ed didn’t promise. He took the last bite of his sandwich and told me to stay put. When he reappeared he was carrying tickets for the rides. “We’ve got to cheer you up. It’s bad for tourism to have someone with your morose visage hanging around the Boardwalk. You have a couple of hours to kill. Let’s use the time wisely. There is much to disport oneself with in Seaside Heights.”

“Don’t you have to get back to work?”

“I’m an Angel. Remember?” He pointed over his shoulders to his gold wings. “When I have to stay late to close, Big Al cuts me some slack on my mealtimes. What would cheer you up?”

“I like the ferris wheel.”

“So does my grandmother.” Ed shook his head. “Meg, you don’t want to get old before your time. Live a little.”

“You know I could have said merry-go-round.” I stared into his blue eyes and repeated my preference. “Ferris wheel.”

Despite his disdain for the tame amusement, Ed seemed to have clout at the ferris wheel. The attendant gave him one of those guy handshakes and a greeting. “How ya doing, man?” The operator’s ebullience struck me as odd simply because he never shot so much as a glance in our direction.

Once he had locked us into our own car -- so spacious it could have held six people -- I had Ed trapped. I went to work. “I met Schyler today. She’s kind of pretty. Sharmaine didn’t think she and Jonas were going to make it as permanent item. Were they?”

Ed stared at the horizon. “Sharmaine doesn’t like Schyler. She thinks she flirts with Lynyrd. She says that Schyler is cutesy and Sharmaine thinks that cutesy is disgusting.”

Sharmaine, who made a Barbie doll look like an offensively strident feminist, didn’t like cutesy? That was a thought to ponder but not then. Ed was on a roll. “But Schyler is cute. At least I think so. Very cute. She could have any guy she wanted. I don’t know why she is hung up on Jonas. A lot of girls are. We sell more ice cream when he’s in the store than we do all week when he’s not. Especially small scoops of Rain Cloud, the fat-free vanilla. His admirers don’t want Jonas to think that they might get fat.”

“Does that make Schyler jealous?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Probably. But she thinks that she and Jonas are the real thing. She is so caught up in the myth. She thinks that she and Jonas look good together. She thinks they’ll have a gorgeous wedding. She predicts that they’ll have the most incredibly beautiful children.” I didn’t say a word. I wanted Ed to keep talking. “I don’t know why she chases Jonas that way. She wants Jonas -- but for all the wrong reasons. I don’t mean to criticize. I kind of . . . like . . . admire her. She has that sort of steel magnolia thing going.”

“So you and Schyler are friends?”

He slid down his bench to the south edge of the car. “Not really. Sometimes when she’s hanging around the store we talk. That’s all.” He pointed a finger through the grating. “You know, I can see my house from here.”

CHAPTER 17

It was after 8 PM when Andy pulled alongside of the water park in his innocuous white sedan. The vehicle with absolutely no identifying marks served a private investigator much better than the classic Mustang convertible Andy now relegated to a recreational role. He pushed the door open. “How was the split shift?”

“Don’t ask.” I plopped into the front seat with a groan.

Andy dropped something into my lap. “A present.”

“A roll of quarters?”

“Next time you have three hours off on the Boardwalk I want to make sure you have SkeeBall money.”

My mood improved immensely. I had SkeeBall and a boyfriend who was nice enough to provide access to it. What more could I ask for? I had a big, inappropriate, smile on my face as Andy told me about his day. “I had to stop at the police station with Maxwell Angel. He wanted me to tell the cops everything I had discovered. I can tell the police still aren’t convinced the kid didn’t run away but Angel carries enough clout that they are pursuing his disappearance.” Andy’s voice sounded solemn. “I overheard something . . . I believe the crime scene team found traces of blood in Jonas’s car. I don’t know what they mean by traces. If I heard correctly they found blood on a tiny snippet of a trash bag. Those findings aren’t necessarily bad. Jonas is active. He could have cut himself . . . there are a lot of possibilities.”

I was listening but I was more interested in making sure the air-conditioning vents blew directly on me. “So it’s okay with the cops if you stay on the case.” I leaned forward and held my gown away from my body to let the cool air blow onto my damp skin.

“The cops are never happy if a PI stays on any case but Maxwell Angel insists on it. The cops will use me if they want to. I’ll stay out of their way. I’ll just keep doing what I’m doing.”

“And me?”

“Just keep on doing what you’re doing.”

“Do the cops know I’m working with you?”

“Not exactly.”

“Not exactly?”

“No.”

“Shouldn’t they?”

“We don’t have to tell them everything especially since you don’t actually have a PI license. Petino knows you’re on the Heavenly Dips payroll. He knows that I know Max Angel. He probably assumes I got you the job. That won’t strike them as odd. They don’t know the reason Max gave you the job. Besides, why would they care? Any information I get, they get.”

“What else did you do?”

“Talked to more of Jonas’s friends. He has a lot of them -- some unsavory. But they all seem to like him. He can cross all sorts of social barriers and fit in. A great skill if he puts it to better use. Lots of friends but not one of them has seen him since Friday. How was your day?”

“Big Al doesn’t like me.” I spoke in a tone familiar to parents of three year olds worldwide.

“Why?” Andy replied in the tone used by those same parents.

I filled Andy in on what Ed had told me. “Ed has turned out to be my friend. Of course, I feign incredible interest in the ways of Heavenly Dips. Tonight I asked him for an in-depth tour of the freezer and he was ecstatic. Anyway, his lips loosened up so he told me about Big Al.”

“Maybe we should pull you out.”

“Nah. Big Al isn’t dangerous.”

“You don’t know that. We don’t know what happened to Jonas. What if Big Al is lying to Max? What if he did do something to harm Jonas? What if he figures out that you are there for information about Jonas’s disappearance? Maybe you should quit.”

I couldn’t believe that the following word came out of my mouth. “No.” But it did. “Not after I finally came up with something.”

Andy considered his options while I considered crawling into the air conditioning vent. “I’ll let Max know what you heard about Big Al and how he feels about you.” I noticed the familiar way Andy used the word Max -- as if he had a new best friend. “Let me know whatever you hear about any financial irregularities but don’t push. Promise?”

I promised but Andy wasn’t convinced that staying at Heavenly Dips was my best choice. “If Big Al makes one bad move, you’re outta there.”

CHAPTER 18

Going home sick earned Hilde Andy's attention. "On the phone she seemed very different from the way you describe her. I was impressed by her social graces."

"Hilde?" I was disbelieving.

"That's who I asked for."

Andy headed north on Route 35 towards Mantaloking and the Bossick's vacation home. To me, Mantaloking meant spacious houses on a beach that despite its proximity to heavy populations retained a rustic feel. Ed told me that Hilde lived somewhere near Exit 10 in the winter. He never mentioned that she summered at the end of long driveways curving through tree-covered dunes to oceanfront homes in Mantaloking. Not that many houses could claim to be a spot where one *summered* but from the little I could glimpse these places could be counted in that group. "That's the Angel's." Andy pointed at a house I barely glimpsed. The little I did see explained why a twenty-two year old child might choose to live at home. Within a minute he spoke again. "That's the Bossick's." I almost spotted the house in the dusk as we sped by. I hadn't pictured Hilde living in the luxury the location suggested. I couldn't picture her living anywhere except a room with walls covered by photos of Che Guevara, Kurt Cobain, or whatever icon kids her age that swam out of the mainstream hung in their spaces. Of course if my image were correct, I would expect her nose ring to go through a real piercing and conscientious observation had not convinced me it did.

Andy traveled a dozen blocks or so past the Bossick house -- we might have pulled into Bay Head by then -- before he stopped near an access path to the beach. He pointed to a wooden platform high in the dunes. "I'll pick you up here when I'm finished at Hilde's." Over an hour and dozens of stroller passed before he slipped onto the bench beside me.

"So. How did you find Hilde?"

"I went to the door and knocked."

"Very funny."

"I found her a bit ... weird ... shy. There's something odd about her. She was nervous talking to me. Almost scared. Her behavior broadcast that she was hiding something."

"What?"

"I have no idea. She was hiding it." He nudged me with his elbow. "She had a lot of stories about Jonas. I wondered if she heard them legitimately -- or if she knew a bit more about Jonas than he realized. Something about her is just a little bit off. I can't put my finger on it. But one thing I know for sure. She hates Big Al. She thinks he's stealing from the store. He likes to work the register because he doesn't ring up all the sales. She says that Jonas knew. She claims he told her although she couldn't remember when he told her or produce a credible explanation as to why Jonas confided in her. I got the feeling she wanted me to believe she was closer to Jonas than anyone realized. When I pressed her she finally claimed that Jonas told her because he hoped she would keep an eye on Big Al."

"He asked her to do that?"

“That’s her story.”

“So maybe she believes she is close to Jonas. Maybe he leads her on to get her to spy on Big Al. From what we know of Jonas he isn’t above doing something like that.”

“Well, she’s not as naïve as you think she is. When it comes to Big Al and even Ed, she is downright malicious.”

“About Ed? What’s her gripe with Ed?”

“She thinks he sucks up to Big Al. She resents that he acts like such a company man, like he has a career at Heavenly Dips, like he’s more important than everyone else.”

“You know he is an Angel.” I defended the Heavenly Dips hierarchy.

Andy glanced at me with a wry expression but ignored my comment. “Hilde thinks Ed is jealous of Jonas. I thought she was kind of sweet and pretty until she started talking about Big Al and Ed.”

“You think she’s pretty?” This was a man who found me pretty. I was concerned about his grading scale.

“Yeah. You don’t?”

“I guess I don’t buy that geek thing she does. With the heavy glasses, the nose ring, and the chopped hair.”

“That must be her work image. Tonight she had on jeans and a white blouse. No glasses, no nose ring. Just ordinary looking..”

“Hilde?”

“Yeah. And her hair was kind of soft looking.”

“Hilde?”

“Yeah. Hilde Bossick.”

“Are you sure you weren’t talking to her twin?”

“I made an appointment to see Hilde. When I arrived I asked for Hilde. Her mother seemed to think she was Hilde. No one said a thing about a twin.”

I shook my head. I wasn’t convinced. What was Hilde trying to pull?

Andy didn’t seem concerned. “Don’t read too much into her appearance. Maybe she just doesn’t want to fight the battle with her parents so she dresses like a little angel at home and a little hellion outside.”

I shrugged. Maybe.

CHAPTER 22

My third day at Heavenly Dips and no one had heard from Jonas Angel. He'd gone off for longer periods but never without his car. Not that anyone at the Heavenly Dips stand in Seaside Heights was worried about him. Aside from the occasions I brought up his name, Jonas Angel was never mentioned. In my opinion any cost benefit analysis would show my tenure as a Little Dipper wasn't worth the effort but Andy wasn't convinced. More importantly, Maxwell Angel wasn't convinced. He and Andy concocted a new plan: make friends at work and use them. Okay, he didn't actually say *use them*. He suggested that if I couldn't wheedle information out of them during my shift I should try getting involved in the social life of my coworkers. I agreed if Maxwell Angel was willing to support that social life. He was.

I started my efforts with Ed. I convinced him that we had a chance at earning a reward for locating Jonas. He wasn't very interested in the cash which was actually good because as far as I knew there wasn't any. I persuaded him by claiming that the person who found Jonas would certainly win Maxwell Angel's favor and that couldn't hurt an Angel's career. Once that idea was on the table, Ed was in.

My plan was simple. He had heard Jonas talk about his social life. Ed would identify spots that Jonas's family might not have known to tell the cops about. We could wing it from there. Of course, I laid out this plan before I realized Ed was would come up with a long list of strip clubs.

"You're going *where*?" Andy sounded shocked.

"You told me to make friends."

"Can't you make friends riding the merry-go-round or eating pizza at Klee's?"

I ignored his suggestions. "Have you been to any of the men's places . . . I mean to look for information on Jonas?" I named a couple of the bars Ed mentioned. Andy hadn't. "Ed said Jonas used to frequent those spots. He's taking me. "

"Why?"

"For the reward."

"What reward? There's no reward."

"Yeah, but Ed doesn't know that."

"Why are you going to a strip bar?"

I explained to Andy one more time that Ed claimed these were places Jonas frequented.

"Why don't you wait until later when I can go with you?"

"Because I am undercover -- as you keep telling me."

"But you can't go alone."

"I'm not going alone. I'm going with Ed. I'll call you for a ride. You're going home eventually, right?"

He ignored my question. "What are you wearing?"

“Oddly enough strip clubs are one of the few places my Heavenly Dips angel gown looks good. I’ll take off the halo and pick up a pair of flip-flops and I’ll look great. I’ll fit in.”

“Why would you want to fit in?” Andy sounded exasperated.

I reworded my thought. “I don’t want to be conspicuous. How noticeable can I be in a shadowy bar?”

“You complain that dress glows in the dark. They’ll think you’re a working girl.”

“Andy, what are you worried about? Men don’t go to bars to meet women like me. And besides I’ll be with Ed.”

Andy sounded sulky. “If you wanted to go to a strip club, I could have taken you.”

“Andy, I don’t want to go to a strip club. I am going as part of my undercover work. What are you afraid of? That I’ll decide to quit the exciting world of ice cream and take a job as a dancer. Andy, I know you think I’m hot -- that’s one of the things I love about you -- but even if I wanted a career as an exotic dancer, no respectable strip joint would hire me.”

He didn’t answer. “What am I supposed to do tonight?”

“I thought you and Max were busy.”

“Yeah, early on.” He sulked.

“You have leads to follow. Follow them. I’ll call you later to catch a ride.”

CHAPTER 23

By the time we set out, five of Ed's roommates had joined the search party. Ed and I rode with a Rutgers student named Sean in a decade old compact he'd bought with last summer's earnings at Heavenly Dips. The car barely ran.

We chugged over the bridge towards Club Velvet, a spot our navigator, Ed, described as *somewhere north of Toms River*. The guys promised me that I would have a great time – even if I was straight. “It's like any strip club.” Sean assured me. I admitted I was a first time visitor to Club Velvet. I did not admit that I was a first time visitor to any strip club.

The parking lot at Club Velvet was as rough as I expected the bar to be but not as rough as the guy at the entrance. He sneered at us as if he were the doorman at Studio 54 in the 70's and we were not Liza Minnelli, Andy Warhol, or Halston. With a great show of reluctance he let us pass into a red velvet box. There two brawny guys in clothes purchased sometime during the Ford Administration stopped our progress. The bouncer asked the males in our group for ID. I offered mine. He could have at least given it a glance. Instead, he waved me in.

Apparently all of the velvet was in the reception area. The interior was all veneer and vinyl accented with splashes of duct tape. The bar was lined with males of all varieties -- some young, some old, some rich, some poor, some attractive, some not so attractive. Those who didn't have their eyes fixed on the redhead wrapped around a pole on the elevated runway were busy with off-duty dancers mingling in their midst. I was happy to count five other fully dressed women in the room.

Disappointed that they couldn't find seven seats together at the bar Ed and his roommates decided on a high table nearby. Sean leaned over and reassured me, “The girls come around to the tables too.” I didn't have a response. I gave money and told him to buy the first round. He glanced at the bills and sneered. I gave him two more. He smirked. I gave him two more. He headed for the bar with my order: bottled soda. If soda came in a glass, bottled beer. The key word was bottle. No Club Velvet glasses would touch my lips.

The guys watched the entertainment, I watched the crowd, and Ed watched the table. I appeared more comfortable than Ed. “I thought you had been here before?”

“Sure. Well, not really. Not actually here.”

“But other strip clubs?”

“Not like this.”

”This?”

“Where people are like all naked and all. You know I'm only twenty-one.”

I shook my head. Ed had misled me. “I counted on you to know the ropes. If we want that reward, you have to get used to this. We're never going to find anything out if you keep staring at the table. Do you recognize anyone? What about the girl on the stage?”

Ed glanced at the dancer and shook his head. He didn't recognize the redhead or Bambi or Crystal or Amber who one-by-one followed her onto the stage to dance to disco classics released before the oldest of the girls was born. Ed didn't know anyone in the audience either.

"Did Jonas ever mention the names of any dancers or anyone he met at these places?"

"I'm sure he did. He liked to brag but I don't remember the names. I never thought there might be money in listening to his bragging . . . I mean braggadocio."

A woman came onto the stage dressed in gold -- if wearing a G string can be considered dressed. She danced to Maniac if not with skill at least with enthusiasm.

"Why do guys like this stuff?"

Ed didn't answer. He simply turned his eyes towards woman who executed a split while hanging upside down. Watching her gyrate in a fashion that clearly appealed to the patrons, Ed at last became enthralled by the entertainment. Sean slipped a warm can of coke in front of me. I was still trying to sanitize the top with a Heavenly Dips napkin when he stuck an elbow in my ribs. "I didn't think Ed would ever notice that there were naked women around here. But these girls aren't his type. Any guy who could spend all his time pining for Schyler Devereaux isn't interested in an exotic dancer." He shook his head. "Any guy who would spend all his time pining for Schyler Devereaux probably isn't interested in sex."

"Ed likes Schyler?"

Sean whistled. "He knows he's not in her league . . . which in my opinion is the good news. But the guy is smitten." He chuckled.

"But he says . . ."

"He doesn't want anyone to know. From what I hear of that Jonas dude, he would go ballistic - not because he likes Schyler so much. He just wouldn't want Ed thinking he was in the same league."

"I didn't know you knew Jonas."

Sean shook his head. "I have never even seen the guy but Ed talks. I fill in the blanks. Trust me, I am right on this one."

What kind of undercover agent was I? I never picked up on Ed's feelings for Schyler. Ed, the coworker I knew best.

After her act, Crystal tried to mingle with Ed and got nowhere. He may have grown more comfortable with watching scantily clad women on a stage but having a scantily clad woman next to him was a step he was not ready to take. Ed was trying hard to focus on the small area of shiny material that was Crystal's lavender gown for mingling. Her outfit was a gown in the sense that a postage stamp is a quilt. I pulled a twenty out of my pocket and caught Crystal's attention. "Can I talk to you for a minute?" I got the impression the twenty wouldn't buy me much more time. I held out the bill and Crystal lost interest in Ed. Immediately. She brushed her less-than-ample breasts against my arm and I slipped the twenty between them. After that, I had a tough time convincing her that I really wanted to talk.

“You know, Crystal, those are lovely but I have a set of my own. What I’m looking for in a relationship is what I don’t have as part of my own anatomy.”

Crystal shrugged and pulled a lavender satin robe around her -- at least as far as she could. “Suit yourself. What do you want?”

I told her we were friends of Jonas Angel who were trying to find him. “It’s been in the papers. He’s missing. Has anyone been in to ask about him?”

“No. Why would they?”

“You know Jonas?”

“Sure.” She tried brushing against me once more. Was it force of habit?

“You know you don’t have to do that. Really.”

She backed off. “The Heavenly Dips kid. I knew him. Real charmer. Thinks he can get away without a cash investment. I don’t think he’s as charming as he does.”

“Did he get in trouble here?” She didn’t answer. “Like with a bouncer?”

“Nah, he never did nothing out of line. The girls didn’t like him much ‘cause he was cheap. ‘Cept for Randi. You could ask her about him. She comes on next. After that she’ll be on the floor.”

“Can you send her over?”

The woman glanced at my pocket. Apparently twenty bucks merited a brief conversation but wouldn’t get an introduction. A ten made Crystal willing if not happy. “I’ll tell her.” She leaned forward so her breasts grazed my arm. “I could spend time with you until she comes out.”

“Thanks. I’m fine.”

Luckily the DJ picked that moment to announce Randi’s appearance. Randi was a long, extremely lean woman in her twenties with purple spikes on her head that, although short for hair, were long for spikes. Randi had a little talent -- with the emphasis on little. I surveyed the audience. No one seemed to mind. Not the loners. Not the married men. Not the frat boys. Not Andy. Andy? Andy had positioned himself at the bar directly across from our table. His eyes were fixed on Randi but his attention was focused on me. Eventually he let his eyes meet mine. I was happy to see he was amused. Beside me, Ed didn’t notice a thing -- except Randi.

As Crystal had promised, Randi came to our table after stopping to wrap a small portion of herself in a dressing gown whose total length was about sixteen inches. I didn’t think of her as Jonas Angel’s type but if this investigation taught me anything, it taught me that everyone was Jonas’s type. “I heard you were looking for Jonas Angel. He’s not here. He hasn’t been here in a couple of weeks. I think he got religion or something.”

“Religion?”

“Well, not really religion but something happened. I used to see him sometimes, you know, when I wasn’t working. The last time I saw him, he didn’t even come to watch me dance. He met me after work. He was different. He hasn’t been back here since.”

A Fear of Seaside Heights

I slipped the last of my twenties into Crystal's robe. Her hands were fast. I yelped at her touch. "Not me. There's a guy over there in khaki pants and a yellow shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Go tell him what we were talking about. That's important, okay? Tell him I sent you."

"Whatever turns you two on."

I watched out of the corner of my eye as the woman approached Andy. He didn't see her coming and jumped when she ran an arm over his shoulder. A few seconds later Andy peeked around her maroon spikes. I raised my Coke can in a toast. "Come on, boys. It's time to get out of here."

CHAPTER 24

The first I knew Andy was onboard was when the ringing of his cell phone woke me. There was no sign of the sun in the sky. Andy knocked the phone to the floor, retrieved it, and grumbled “hello.” He swung his feet over the edge of the V-berth and leaned forward as he listened. I rolled close and waited for the bad news. No one calls that early to tell you anything good.

I felt Andy’s body slump as he listened. “Oh god, Max, I am so sorry. Sure. Sure. Right away. Sure.”

Andy didn’t have to tell me -- I knew. I stroked his back as he sat silently for a few minutes before speaking.

“I’ve got to go. They found him.” The battered body of Jonas Angel had been located on the same dirt road three miles east of his Porsche. Although the cause of death could not be confirmed until the autopsy was finalized, the assumption was that he had been beaten to death several days before. The police did not know or would not say if he had been killed in that spot or dumped there. Jonas had been found not by a search party but by a passer-by who had walked from his car into the woods to relieve himself. “That was Max on the phone. I didn’t know what to say to him. He’s sort of a blowhard but he loves his family -- especially that wild boy.” He took a deep breath. I reached over and grasped Andy’s hand. He squeezed hard. “I’ve got to go. I’ll leave cab money for you to get to Seaside Heights. Get to work early and watch how everyone reacts. Let them tell you the news. Pretend you didn’t know. And see what you can do about confirming Friday night alibis for everyone in the store.” He planted a light kiss on my forehead. Andy threw on his clothes. He didn’t speak until, as he climbed up the companionway ladder I heard him mutter. “I hate my job.” Andy and I had one thing in common.

I was about to call a cab when a male voice called Andy’s and then my name. I peeked out the port. The visitor’s long, languid strides across the lawn identified him. The visitor was no visitor. It was Oliver Wilder, Andy’s longtime friend and our host. I rushed to greet him. Oliver wrapped me in his arms and lifted me high off the deck and deposited me on the dock. He held me at arm’s length. “You know your dress is a damp. Why don’t you throw it in the dryer?”

I explained that Andy and I hadn’t been inside the house yet. “Oops.” His hand went to his pocket and extracted a clump of keys. “I guess this is a bit heavier than it should be. I didn’t mean to take the extra set of keys with me. I guess I shouldn’t have turned off my cell phone but Meg, I have a great explanation. I have been in Canada for a romantic interlude with a woman who is still speaking to me after more than two weeks alone.”

“Oliver, I’m proud of you. Can we go inside where there’s air-conditioning and talk about the remarkable, make that miraculous, improvement in one of the most abysmal love lives on record?”

Oliver’s arrival relieved all of my physical discomforts. While my angel gown tumbled in the dryer, I lounged on his leather sofa and cooled off courtesy of his central air that had been humming tantalizingly the entire time Andy and I had been locked out. I cradled the remote control in my hands

and, starting with Oliver's default selection ESPN2, ran through what seemed like a hundred channels. I found the local channel and waited for news of Jonas's death. When the story came it was brief, still in the category of breaking news. Reporters were pictured not only at the crime scene but in front of the Heavenly Dips offices and a large Victorian house that I assumed belonged to Maxwell and Amanda Angel. The press knew less than I did about Jonas's death.

"You should have just broken into the house. I left food, drink and look," Oliver pointed to a garish vase of dried-up blossoms. "I even left fresh flowers."

"In the Miami Dolphins' colors."

"Actually they are the colors of the car dealership. I got the flowers as a thank you for buying my car. I love the car. Wait until you see it. I'll drive you to work!"

Giving me a ride gave Oliver a chance to drive the new Saturn SUV in his driveway. "Isn't it great? I saw it on the highway and just had to have it. I didn't need a car but I bought it. This is a standard color."

I understood. The tone was almost a perfect match to the standard orange of the Miami Dolphins, the football team Oliver loved most, the football team whose colors Oliver had used when selecting furniture for the interior and paint for the exterior of his house.

On the way to Seaside Heights, the airwaves were full of the story of Jonas Angel, the scion of the prominent local family. We listened to several versions of the story but learned nothing more than Andy had told me. Oliver hit a button and music filled the car. Just in case I had been lulled into a sense of well-being by the air-conditioning, Martha and the Vandellas sang *Heat Wave* for the thousandth time that summer.

CHAPTER 25

The press arrived at work before I did. Not a huge number or the A team. No TV crews. I knew from the morning broadcasts I'd caught at Oliver's that the big wigs were at the crime scene, police station and the Angel home - they and their cameras. Despite no imminent danger of an unplanned media appearance, I remained vigilant.

"Did you hear about Jonas?" Ed didn't bother with hello or with taking his head out of the display case. He yelled his question from the vicinity of the Taurus Tofu Temptation.

"What?"

"They found his body." Assuming Ed was not aroused by the cone he was scooping, he must have been excited by the news about Jonas. He barely noticed the loud thump when his skull caught the metal edge of the glass case. "You didn't know?" A broad smile accessorized his question although I'd heard the thump five feet away.

I shook my head. Nonverbal lies didn't count.

"The story made the news on every station. I didn't see my interview used yet but I bet I get on. We haven't had any television crews this morning but I hope they come." He handed the cone to a teen-ager and turned to serve her friend, a regular customer that I feared had an addiction to Marshmallow Cloud. Ed's eyes were bright. "What do you think?"

"I think it's tragic that a twenty-two year old kid is dead. What do you think happened?"

Ed handled the register before answering. "Schylar caught him with another girl and finally gave him what he deserved. He crossed Lynyrd in a business deal. He picked up the wrong hitchhiker. He screwed with some tough guy's woman. He sold bad drugs and made someone mad. That's the thing about Jonas. He annoyed enough people that anyone could have done the deed." I could tell Ed was calming down when he dropped a few GMAT words into the mix. "Allow me a few more minutes to cogitate and I'll produce a myriad of scenarios. I mean even I hated him. Of course, I won't divulge that on TV."

"Don't kid, Ed. This is serious. You don't seem to get that. You don't seem to have much of a reaction, certainly not a genuine one, to his death. You knew Jonas. You worked with him."

"He didn't give a damn about me. Why should I care about him?"

I spoke from the heart. "Because he was a human being. He had a family, including a father you idolize, that loved him. Someone took his life. Like him or not, I thought you would have more of a reaction."

"No, you think I *should* have more of a reaction. I hear it in your voice. You want a reaction, talk to Hilde."

"Hilde?"

"Yeah. She called in sick today. Some coincidence. She's not sick. She's in mourning. You know she's nuts about Jonas Angel."

Or just nuts. "She doesn't speak to me at all. I doubt she would talk to me about Jonas."

“She was never nice to any woman who worked here. Notice she doesn’t really talk to Sharmaine. She sees all women as competition for Jonas.”

“For Jonas? Me? Competition? For a guy I never met?”

“But if you had, he would have worked his charm on you.”

I shook my head. “I’m too old.”

Now it was Ed’s turn to shake his head. “No one was too old. You must have heard how he was. He flirted with everyone. He even flirted with me. I mean he was straight and all but he just had to win everyone over. Everyone had to buy into the Jonas Angel myth. And poor Hilde bought in.”

“So Hilde isn’t nuts to have a crush on him if he hit on her.”

“But he didn’t hit on her. He charmed her. There is a big difference.” Ed grew thoughtful. “He did hit on her twin, Heidi. She worked here for a few weeks substituting for Hilde. Heidi looks a lot like Hilde but she’s prettier, smarter, more personable. Big Al hired her as a special favor to Hilde. Hilde was taking a class or something and she was afraid of losing her job. She asked if her twin could sub for her. Heidi was good. I liked her. I mean I try to like Hilde but I don’t think that her elevator goes to the penultimate floor.”

Big Al called from the back. “Stop yer yapping up there. We’re gonna be mobbed today. Word’s out. Jonas bought it last night.” Big Al emerged in a white short-sleeved shirt with Big Al embroidered on the pocket and a bright blue tie with the Heavenly Dips badge he was so proud of clipped front and center. His comb-over was well-combed-over and, if I weren’t mistaken, I smelled cologne. Big Al was ready for his close-up. “I’m going to meet the press.” He smoothed the tie that had seen its heyday at least a decade earlier and pasted a somber expression on his face. Then he did what he criticized me for: he slipped under the counter.

When he’d gone I reopened the topic of Hilde with Ed. “So, Ed, tell me about Hilde. She really is as weird as she seems, right?”

“Yeah.” He smirked. He continued as he moved a drum of Pisces Pistachio into the display case. “She’s a little unusual.” His tone suggested he was making one of the great understatements of all time. “So, anyway, Jonas lays his charm on her and she’s hooked. Last summer she thinks he loves her. When he comes to the store she thinks he’s coming to see her. She thinks he’s too shy to tell her. I told her there was nothing shy about Jonas but she insisted that he was shy with her because she was different. She thought he really cared for her.”

“She told you this?”

“She said a few things. I kind of . . . like . . . figured out the rest.”

I knew what Ed meant. He made it up but that did not mean it wasn’t true. “Did Jonas know how she felt?”

“The boy didn’t confide in me, you know, but I think he did know. Not that he cared. He went after Heidi when she showed up. Then, after his fling with Heidi was over, he still played the charming routine with Hilde. It was odd. Hilde grew calmer around him after he dated her sister. I don’t think

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she knew what happened with Heidi. She was out of town. If she did, I think she would have hated Jonas but she didn't. She believed that she and Jonas had a special connection. I didn't get it. Jonas was smart about those kinds of things. He was a lot more sophisticated than the average guy his age, for example, me."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"That I'm not sophisticated?"

"That Hilde's twin had a thing with Jonas."

He shrugged. "I guess it just never came up. Why do you care so much?"

I shrugged. "Just curious. What with the murder and all."

CHAPTER 26

Did all our customers really wake up with a craving for Heavenly Dips? No. They woke up with a craving for tabloid news in their own neighborhood. I felt disgusted. On the other hand, Ed was in a great mood. He loved the press. “Would you please stop calling attention to us,” I hissed in his ear as we juggled for scoop position in a drum of Venus de Vanilla. “If you keep cooperating they will never go away.”

“I’m only providing the members of the fourth estate with what they need. They need quotes. They need photo ops. I can give them both.”

When Sharmaine arrived to fill in for Hilde, she was as excited as Ed. “Do you believe the crowds? If Big Al had known killing Jonas would be this good for business, he would have offered him months ago.”

Since Sharmaine wasn’t renowned for her sense of irony, I asked. “Do you think Big Al killed Jonas?”

Sharmaine whispered conspiratorially. “There were plenty of times Big Al probably would have loved to kill Jonas. They were mad at each other about something. A couple weeks ago I heard Big Al telling Jonas to keep his nose of his business. Do you think he could have done it?” She made no attempt to hide the excitement in her voice. Like Ed, she didn’t seem particularly saddened by Jonas’s death.

“Can’t you think of anyone else who would have killed Jonas?”

At first Sharmaine was confused. I could see that her brain was in high gear. Suddenly a look of indignation spread across her face. “No, why would I?” She turned to greet customers with a flounce of her halo that made it clear she would no longer be available for gossip. I didn’t spot her usual smile again until she looked across the Boardwalk and spotted her beloved Lynyrd.

I had the distinct impression that Lynyrd had washed his hair and possibly shaved within the past twenty-four hours. Along with the three day growth he had also lost the sneer. I had to admit it. Lynyrd looked almost cute. Okay, he looked cute. Especially since his bruises were clearing up.

Given the traffic at the stand, Sharmaine had no time to chat or to provide free ice cream. Lynyrd leaned on the railing across the Boardwalk and watched her for as long as it took to smoke a cigarette. She gazed longingly over the counter at him. He gazed longingly at the display cases. I was more certain than ever that he was in it for the ice cream.

As soon as I noticed a television crew approaching, I yelled at Big Al. “Sorry. I have one of those female emergencies. I’m taking my break.”

As I stepped out the back door I ran into two high school girls from the night shift, white wings, who did look angelic in their gowns and halos. Backup had arrived.

I fled down the alley and didn’t go up on the Boardwalk until I was confident I’d passed the parameters set up by the press. I purchased refreshment from the salt food group and picked a spot to lay low until the reporters moved on.

“So whatta ya think about the Angel kid buying it? The place is crazy, eh? Do they know who killed him?” I looked up and found Lynyrd grimacing, more than smiling, at me. He blew smoke my way and he plopped on the bench beside me.

“If they do, no one told me.”

Lynyrd wiped the sweat from his brow with his red Lynyrd Skynyrd t-shirt giving me the opportunity to view the serpent tattoo that wound from just above his navel over a few ribs before disappearing around his right side. “Do you have any ideas?”

I shrugged and played dumb. “I didn’t know him. You did. What do you think?”

“Why would I know?” Lynyrd sounded more than a little defensive.

“Well, you were in the same line of business.”

“Oh.” He shrugged. “I only do that to get money to take care of my kids and get a decent place to live. We’re living in a motel ‘cause we can’t come up with the deposit for an apartment. Once I have those kids in a decent place I can walk away from the drug thing. It ain’t like drugs are my career or nothing.”

“But it was Jonas’s?” I worked hard to keep my mind on Lynyrd’s words and off the snakes, symbols, and mythical creatures tattooed on his hands and arms.

“Hell no.” He hesitated. “You ain’t a cop or nothing are you?”

“No. Why you would think that?”

Lynyrd shrugged. “I mean you just appeared here. And you talk about Jonas who you say you never met. And now you ask if he made a career of drugs.”

“I never met the kid. I’m just curious about him. That’s all. You’ve got to admit that he is a hot topic of conversation today. I wonder why he was killed. Doing drugs is one way to get yourself killed.”

“Man, are you naive.” Lynyrd had only scorn for my claim.

“Maybe so, but I just wondered about how much drug action Jonas was involved in.” I was determined to get an answer to my question.

“Not much. Half the time he bought the stuff and gave it away. But this summer I haven’t seen him around much. Haven’t laid eyes on him for almost a month, I bet. People were asking for him but he was pulling out.”

Lucky Lynyrd still didn’t remember the night at Jenkinson’s when I was one of those people asking for Jonas. “Why was he pulling out?”

“He didn’t tell me no secrets, you know. I think something spooked him. He got real serious and then last few weeks he just didn’t show up around here so much.”

“But he didn’t say what was bothering him?” I realized I should be studying Lynyrd’s expression but I couldn’t tear my gaze away from the way his hand movements made the monster-like creature on his left forearm grow more threatening.

“I hardly ever talked to him. He was a creep. A rich, snotty creep. He didn’t want nothing to do with me ‘less he needed cash and pawned off some of those crap drugs he sold.”

“The drugs he sold weren’t any good?” I decided the creature on his arm was a dragon.

“There are drugs and there are drugs. I think some drugs are crap.” Flames burst from the dragon’s mouth.

“Why do you hate Jonas so much?” I watched the dragon breathe fire.

“Like I said, he was a creep. All handsome on the outside, you know, like a movie star or something. But inside, in here,” Lynyrd held his hand on my chest and held my gaze with an intensity I found surprising but not off-putting, “there was nothing inside that guy. A pretty face. That’s all he was. A pretty face.”

A pretty face. A perfect body. A winning smile. I made the list mentally and kept quiet. Why make Lynyrd hate Jonas more? “What did he actually do or say to make you hate him?” I eyed Lynyrd’s fading bruises.

Lynyrd removed his hand and shook his head in disgust. “We never had words or nothing. He, like, thought that he was better than the rest of us. Just because he got all the breaks. Jonas didn’t earn anything. He was just born into a rich family. I coulda been born rich. If I was lucky – which I certainly ain’t.”

“Did he say mean things to you?”

“Yeah, even though he thought we were all too dumb to know. I knew. He would tell me that my girlfriend was a real fox but I knew what kind of broads he likes. My honey is not one of those blonde bitch goddesses he goes for, like that Schyler chick who trails him around. So yeah, he’s mean. He sneers when he says my girlfriend is a fox. He knows that is a word I use. He would never say fox. When he says my girlfriend is a fox I know that he is really saying your girlfriend is a loser and you are a loser and you always will be a loser and your kids will be losers and I, Jonas Angel, am not a loser. He acts nice but he is saying -- and I know that he is saying -- I owe him because his dad pays people like Sharmaine two crummy bucks over minimum wage and he knows that is the best we will ever do because we are losers.” Lynyrd took a long, deep drag on his cigarette. “You know I’m feeling okay . . . almost good that he’s dead. He got what he deserved.”

I was stunned. Sharmaine was making two bucks over minimum wage?

CHAPTER 27

Another detective, not Petino, commandeered Big Al's desk to interview all employees. The officer's crisp, nouvelle preppie appearance made his surroundings seem all the shabbier. The good thing about using that space, partially shielded by the big freezer, was that it offered as much privacy as one could get in the store. The bad thing was, thanks largely to the chanting of the Heavenly Angels choir, I couldn't hear most of the conversations although I could still steal an occasion glance to size up how they were going.

I could tell by Ed's posture during his interview that he was using his best GMAT vocabulary. I could also tell from the cop's expression that he thought Ed was from Mars. Sharmaine seemed nervous. The planets above her head never stopped orbiting. Her wide brown eyes were at their widest giving her face a cartoonish naiveté. The cop didn't mind. I got the impression Sharmaine could have told him she'd planned and executed several murders and he would have thanked her for her honesty. He thought she was adorable. He did not think that I was adorable.

"Can you tell me where you were on Friday night?"

"On Friday night I had never heard of Jonas Angel."

"Just answer the question, Ma'am." The guy's expressionless tone and blank stare made me miss Petino's smirk.

"I can't remember where I was on Friday night."

"Try."

Remembering wasn't easy. When you don't have the rhythm of Monday through Friday in your life, all the days seem to blend together. I knew that Andy and I had been at Oliver's. "I was with a friend. I know that."

"Your friend's name."

I ignored his question. "I remember now. Friday was the night we went out to dinner at Kubel's in Barnegat Light and then to a movie in Manahawkin. I remember because I don't like to go to the movies on weekend nights because it gets too crowded."

"What movie did you see?"

That was no problem. He corrected me on the full title but I was close enough.

"And your friend's name."

"We went to the 7:30 show which I generally hate because there are just too many people. Lots of dates. Lots of kids. Teenagers not little kids."

He wasn't interested. "I didn't catch your friend's name." The cop had perfected an intimidating stare. I was intimidated.

I glanced towards the front of the store. Couldn't this guy figure out that I didn't want to be overheard? I leaned forward and murmured. "Andy Beck."

At least the cop's expression changed. His eyes narrowed with suspicion. "I didn't get that."

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I moved forward on the seat so that I could get closer to the cops ear. Heaven forbid he should lean forward and help me. “Andy Beck.”

“Lady . . .”

First ma’am, then lady. I did not like this kid. I heard the impatience in my voice. “May I have your pen?”

He gave it to me reluctantly -- actually I pulled it from his grasp. I wrote the eight letters on a napkin and handed it to him. “I don’t understand. Who is Andy . . .”

“Please.” I cut him off with one word.

He stared at me but remained quiet. His face was expressionless. I definitely missed Petino’s smirk.

CHAPTER 28

The combination of a sunny day and a juicy scandal drew the weekend crowds to Heavenly Dips like flies to . . . well, like flies to Heavenly Dips. The work day flew by. Ed, Sharmaine, and I scooped with the part-time weekend workers many of whom could barely remember the flavors -- and none of whom could remember Wham. Whoever came up with the idea of sticking wings on eight people and dropping them in a ten by twenty foot space to dip ice cream had to be considered a genius -- right up there with the folks responsible for New Coke, Nehru jackets, and the Edsel.

Big Al assigned himself the job of clearing makeshift shrines to Jonas from the front of the counter. He wasn't willing to lose customers because they couldn't get through all the crap people left around for Jonas. Personally, I viewed the improvised shrines as a good marketing ploy and suspected the sales director had dropped most of them off. That's why I supported Big Al's effort to get rid of the displays. Not that I told him. Why would he care what a blue wing thought?

Big Al cut back on trips to the bank and, when he wasn't removing tributes to Jonas, handled the register -- as I noticed him do before in times of high traffic. Considering that he thought I was a plant, I didn't observe too closely but I wondered. Was he ringing up every sale? I tried to keep an eye on him but that "surfeit of customers" Ed talked about kept interfering with my surveillance efforts.

"Jonas's death is almost as good for business as MTV." Ed was almost breathless with excitement. More than once, MTV had located its beach house not only in Seaside Height close enough to Heavenly Dips to bring in customers, cute girl customers in undersized bathing suits. "Of course, they were all interested in the VJs." Dejected by the recollection, Ed turned to help a group that included -- if you judged by their T-shirts -- lifeguards, escaped prisoners, and JERZ girls. I think the JERZ girls were the only ones practicing truth in advertising.

When I saw Karl Elkins headed towards the booth and my line, I felt a knot in my stomach. I reassured myself that the man had no idea who I was, that he had no way of connecting me with Andy.

When Elkins reached the front of the line he spoke softy. "All these people are here because of the kid, eh?"

I smiled, nervously, and nodded.

"You probably think that's why I'm here. Trying to get gossip about the kid. I bet you get a lot of that. You probably don't know anything anyway, right." Again, I nodded. "Did they give you a canned statement to make?" I shook my head. "Not that it matters. As I said, that's not really why I am here. I have my own problems. I told you or maybe one of the others." He spoke sheepishly, "My wife used to work for Heavenly Dips."

"Really?" I played dumb.

"Yeah." The abandoned husband appeared wistful.

"Do you know her?"

I shook my head and frowned as if to ask *who is she*.

"Her name is Bunny Elkins." A single bead of perspiration slid south from his hairline.

“I never met her. I’ve only worked here a few days. When did she work here?”

Karl explained that his wife had recently left her job in the home office. “Since it’s the flagship store and all . . . I thought she might feel sentimental . . . I hoped she’d come by for some ice cream.”

I hoped he’d nab that drop of sweat headed for his chin. I brushed my cheek but he didn’t emulate my action. The drop reached the precipice that was his jaw.

“I’m sorry. If she did drop by she didn’t introduce herself. Maybe she talked to one of the other kids.” Other kids? Was I seriously beginning to see myself as one of the kids? I corrected myself. “You know, one of the other employees.” I thought I could ask about Jonas Angel but suddenly he went for a kicked-puppy-dog look. “She left me.” The words knocked the droplet of sweat from his chin. It splattered leaving a dark circle on his pale blue t-shirt. I was so relieved that the flow of perspiration has ended that I almost forgot to say that I was sorry. When I did, he responded in soft tones. “So am I. You know, before this news, before we found out what happened to Jonas Angel, I actually worried that he and Bunny had run off together. She always talked about how she disliked him but you know that line about protesting too much.”

From what Andy said about Bunny’s picture, Jonas would be the one protesting.

“Why didn’t your wife like Jonas?”

“He was spoiled. His father gave him everything. Bunny saw how hard I worked for so little . . . and that kid got the best of everything. Clothes, cars, sporting equipment. Everything.”

The woman behind Elkins had figured out it didn’t take this long to request an ice cream cone. I ignored her huffing and puffing even though it was easily heard her noises over the chanting of the heavenly choir.

“Did she ever talk about anyone who disliked Jonas enough to kill him?”

Elkins shook his head. “Kid like that probably had a lot of enemies. Look at Bunny. She liked almost everyone but she didn’t like him.” Elkins voice perked up as he ordered a dip of her favorite flavor: Solar Eclipse -- vanilla with a chocolate swirl. Not to be confused with Lunar Eclipse -- chocolate with a vanilla swirl. Nor with Cherubic Cherry the flavor he claimed was her favorite on an earlier visit. I felt like telling him if he had paid closer attention his wife might not have run away.

“If you see her . . . if she comes by . . . would you tell her that Karl misses her?”

I bobbed my head several times.

“Excuse me.” The waiting woman didn’t feel obliged to hide her annoyance -- or her breasts but that was a different issue.

Karl was not disturbed. He gazed into the sky over the ocean. I waited for his next declaration of love for his wife. Instead, he said. “It’s got to rain. This heat is getting to me. Do you think it will ever rain?”

He didn’t expect me to answer. I didn’t. I gestured towards the woman behind him. She stepped forward and Karl wandered away

CHAPTER 29

Cool air was the only good news in Andy's car that evening. I fanned the air conditioner's discharge towards me as Andy told me what was known about Jonas's death in a subdued, flat tone. "It was brutal, Meg. Max told me. We won't know the details until the autopsy results come in but Jonas was beaten badly. We can only hope he was dead before most of the blows were delivered. Max can't bring himself to tell Amanda. Her beautiful baby. He kept repeating that. Jonas's face was almost unrecognizable."

I envisioned his handsome face and imagined the hatred that compelled someone to destroy it. "Could Big Al have done something like that, just because of the money?"

"Max feels it's impossible. I told Max I wanted to pull you but he would really like you to stay. He was impressed with the information you got about the money issues between Big Al and Jonas. He feels you might hear something. I told Max that it's up to you. To convince you to stay, Max is having surveillance cameras installed to tape everything that happens in the Seaside Heights store."

"So he'll be able to see who killed me?"

"Max asked Big Al about some talk he heard that he didn't like you. By bringing it out in the open Max feels Big Al can't make a move towards you. He doesn't think Big Al is capable of hurting you. Max has known that man for twenty-five years. That's a long time. Besides, he told Big Al about the cameras so even if he were tempted he to do anything won't be able to. He'll know he's being filmed."

"Does Big Al think Max is installing cameras because of the theft?"

"Max told him that there were suspicions that someone was stealing. Max made Big Al think they are on the same team. However . . . I don't actually think that Big Al is aware of every camera."

"What about my safety when I'm not at the store? Big Al and I do leave the building."

"Yeah." Andy sounded pensive. "We have to talk about that. By the way," he changed the subject, "nice work today." His intonation told me my work was anything but good.

"What's the problem?"

"The cop sent to interview the people at the Seaside Heights store came back and reported that only one employee had acted suspiciously. Wanna guess who?"

I knew I was the one. "I didn't want to give your name aloud."

"I know. I took care of it."

"At least I had an alibi. Did everyone else have an alibi?"

"Of sorts. The police are having trouble pinpointing the time of death. As far as I know they are only able to limit it to sometime between 8PM Friday night and 8AM on Saturday morning. With the exception of Big Al, your colleagues are not suspects so the police only asked the question as a formality. Lynyrd is Sharmaine's alibi. Hilde says she was at home. Big Al and Ed worked until closing. I don't think the cops are going to check them out unless something else points the finger at one of them."

“That’s a big window, time-wise.”

“That was the last I heard. It’s a one-way street. I give the cops information. They don’t reciprocate unless they have a motive or want to throw me a crumb to give me the illusion we’re a team.” Andy pulled over to the curb. Why did he seem so happy to find a spot? We’d only driven three blocks.

“Where are we?” I knew we were on an east-west street lined with neatly maintained houses with minimal landscaping and maximum cement between them and the street. I also knew that we were in front of a two story commercial building -- clearly the most poorly maintained structure on the block. What I didn’t know was why. “What is this?”

“There’s an apartment on the second floor. It’s your new home.”

“Why are we moving?” We both knew we were crowded on the boat but now that Oliver was back we could live in the house.

I repeated my question but Andy didn’t answer. He came around the car, opened the door, and reached a hand in to help me out. He continued to hold my hand as he guided me up a metal staircase that climbed the side of the brick building. We stopped in front of a door made of plywood that couldn’t resist an unwanted visit from Woody Woodpecker let alone an intruder with malfeasance on his mind. “This will be replaced tomorrow.” Andy put a key into the shiny gold lock, flung open the door with a flourish, and stepped aside to let me enter.

I stepped into a sea of gold. Not gold as in Fort Knox gold. Gold as in autumn harvest appliances of the 1960s gold. The color was ubiquitous, as Ed would be sure to say. It covered the floor, the walls, and the upholstery. Only the ceiling had been spared. “What is this place?”

“I told you. It’s your new home.”

“You mean our new home.” I grimaced at the cracked linoleum, sneered at the rickety furniture, and sniffed at the mildew. “I don’t think so.”

“You’re undercover. Remember?”

“At work. I’m undercover at work, remember?”

“If you’re going to make friends with the people at work, you can’t disappear at night.”

“But I make friends easily. When things slow down I’ll be able to get information during my shift.”

Andy ignored me. “We were lucky to get this place so late in the season.” Lucky wasn’t the first word that came into my mind. “Especially since it’s so close to the store. You can invite people back.”

“But we don’t want them to see us together.”

“Well...I won’t be here. I’ll be . . . well . . . Max . . . Maxwell Angel wants me to stay near his house.”

“Which means?”

“In Mantoloking.” Andy lowered his voice to name the town that as far as I knew did not have a plastic curtain or a plywood door within its borders. Andy was quick to explain. “Max is building a new house there. It’s finished except for the kitchen. Given what’s happened the Angels aren’t planning on moving anytime soon, if ever. It’s just sitting empty. Max thought I should use it but Mantoloking isn’t really commuting distance for you.”

“And Long Beach Island was?”

Andy sounded nervous. “You need to be near your job.”

“Andy, people move to be near jobs where the benefits are great, the pay is high, and the bonus pushes it over six figures. People do not move to be closer to jobs that pay minimum wage.”

“You need to be closer to make friends.”

“By bringing them to this place? Who would want to come?” I pressed the dining table. The top shifted six inches to the left.

Andy was talking as I regained my balance. “They’re kids. Do you forget the places you stayed in when you were young?”

I tried to. Memories like those have a tendency to persist. The half-painted bedroom that matched mustard yellow with mint green. The hole in the ceiling that provided easy but unwanted access to the attic. The weak porch that required caution signs on almost every board.

“When will I see you?”

“I am going to check on you every day. I’ll meet you after work – when you’re not entertaining.” Andy wrapped an arm around me and pulled me close. He kissed my forehead and reminded me that no one at Heavenly Dips should connect the two of us. “I can’t live here but we’ll have dates. After we wrap this case up, we’ll have plenty of time. Maybe we can even take next winter off.” I didn’t remind him that I was once more scheduled to start graduate school. “I have to admit that I have mixed feeling about having you live here but I do believe that when you are undercover you are safer . . .”

“Yeah. I get it.” I pulled away and plopped on the couch, a mistake I wasn’t likely to make twice. I yelped “ouch” and rubbed my hip with exaggerated motions designed to elicit sympathy. “I hope you got a bargain on this place.”

That was when Andy told me Maxwell Angel was paying.

I stared at him hard. “Maxwell Angel, the millionaire ice cream mogul, is paying and this is the best he can do?”

“Well, it would hardly make sense for a Little Dipper to live in a beach front mansion.”

“It would make sense to me but what do I know? I’m just a Little Dipper.” I rubbed my sore hip. “Why didn’t you ask me first?”

“Well, actually, this is my way of asking you. I hoped if you saw that the place wasn’t too horrible . . .” Andy paused and took a long look around the apartment. When he finished he appeared anxious. “I thought that you would say yes but it’s up to you.”

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I took in the details of the room. Plastic curtains from the fifties. Formica tables from the sixties. Vinyl couches from the seventies. As far as I could see no later decades were represented in the décor. Even the room air-conditioner, which I was thrilled to see, appeared to predate the first Reagan administration. “That work?”

Andy hit a button and the AC rumbled into action. It performed better than it looked or sounded. A 747 taxiing into the room could hardly have made more noise.

“This is all Angel agreed to pay for?”

“In a way. I asked for a car for you because the commute was becoming a problem. Max proposed a different solution. This place is what he came up with. He knew this apartment was sitting empty. He owns the building.”

“He’s a slumlord!”

“He’s our boss right at the moment and the money he gives me will pay for whatever we decide to do next, so let’s show a little respect.”

“For 25¢ above minimum wage he doesn’t buy my respect -- which is by the way for sale. Tell him to throw in a few more bucks and we can talk.”

“Actually,” Andy sounded more than a bit sheepish, “I’m billing him for your time and expenses.”

“Beep.” I mimicked a buzzer and raised a finger to call for a ruling. “You’re billing him for my time?”

“Sure.”

“At what rate?”

“\$30 per hour.”

“And of that, I get . . .?”

“Well . . . after I deduct administrative costs . . . and overhead . . . you’ll get about . . . \$30 an hour.”

I grew excited. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I had to figure out how to bill your time since you’re not licensed. By the time I figured how much it would be, I felt it would make a nice surprise. Plus, I thought living on minimum wage would make it easier to stay in character.”

“Andy, I’m not an actress.” I paused before letting the issue pass. “I don’t want to starve to the death in character.”

“You won’t starve -- and not just because you can eat all the ice cream you want.” Andy pointed to a bag of groceries on the kitchen counter. “I put the perishables away along with a thirty-pack of Coke -- in case you can’t consume enough sugar at work to feed your habit.” Very carefully he slipped onto the couch beside and rocked me in his arms. He was apologetic. “I never would have gotten you involved in this if I knew how it was going to turn out. When I first met Max, I never thought we were talking murder. None of the people you work with are considered suspects or I’d say

quit now. We just need someone inside. Someone to listen to the group. Someone who hears gossip non one will share with the cops. Besides, I'd rather you not be living with me until we see how this plays out. I've talked to a lot of people, many of them shady. Since I can't be with you to protect you every minute, I honestly think you'll be safer here. Tomorrow you'll have a heavier door, a stronger lock, motion sensitive lights and a very prominent surveillance camera aimed at the bottom of the stairs. It will appear to be for the business's protection."

"As we passed I thought I noticed that the business was actually an *out of business*."

"Hey, if you don't think this place is safe, you don't have to move in."

I thought the security was plenty. It was the harvest gold that concerned me.

Andy tried to be upbeat. "Tonight, we'll take a ride down to LBI for your clothes and you can move right in. I stocked all the food you like. You'll find linens in the closet. And there's cable."

"Cable." I perked up. "Where's the remote?"

CHAPTER 30

“You look awful, like you were up all night.” Ed’s greeting was completely appropriate. “Your halo is crooked.”

“I have my own place. Really close.” I told Ed. “It has cable and air-conditioning.” Since, unlike me, Ed had been living with all the modern conveniences I didn’t expect him to appreciate my excitement. I was wrong. We talked cable. We talked sleeping under the covers. We did not talk about Jonas. I was shocked, He hadn’t even been buried but no one appeared interested in talking about Jonas’s murder. Ed wanted advice on getting to know the blonde from the arcade. Sharmaine wanted to wax poetic on Lynyrd. Big Al wanted to berate the employees. Only when Hilde came in did I think I had a chance at getting any info on Jonas.

I suspected Hilde might be in mourning. The girl was so uncommunicative to begin with, it was hard to tell. But I swore she was even quieter than usual. So, clearly, any information wasn’t going to come from her mouth. To me, that did not mean she couldn’t be a source. Wherever she went, I would follow. Surveillance was the only viable investigative skill I had learned from Andy, although the way I did it very little skill was involved.

My first opportunity for surveillance came when Hilde took her break. I told Ed I had a female emergency and ignored his comment that I seemed to have a lot of them. Hilde went out the back door at 11:33. I went out the back door at 11:34. She had broken into a run down the alley. I waited on the small platform behind the store until I saw her white wings vanish around the corner. Then, with planets bobbing above my head and wings flapping on my back, I ran after her. If I wanted Hilde to confide in me I had to stay in uniform.

Following Hilde wasn’t easy. Wherever she was going she was in a hurry. I turned the corner just in time to see her disappear onto the Boardwalk. She headed north. I ran up the ramp and tracked her by keeping an eye on the dancing constellation above her dark hair. I was surprised that Hilde was in shape to keep up her pace. I’d fallen for her look, which I read as intellectual and above bodily concerns. I never pictured Hilde outdoors -- at least without SPF 25,000 on her skin. Yet she was flying along the Boardwalk with long powerful strides. Apparently, I had failed to notice that Hilde was virtually all legs. Someone with my legs couldn’t keep up with her wide strides. Even if someone with my legs was in shape. Which in my case, someone with my legs wasn’t.

My breathing was labored by the time I spotted Hilde at the end of the Boardwalk. I watched her as I caught my breath. She stood on a twenty by twenty platform that maps posted along the Boardwalk identified as the Heiring Street stage. I hadn’t been in town long enough to know what might be staged there. Hilde was poised on the edge as if she might jump. She could. No railing prevented her from leaping off the edge. But considering she was only four or five feet above the sand, I wasn’t worried.

Hilde gazed over the beach to the ocean. I couldn’t see her face. From the heaving of her shoulders I could tell she was taking deep breaths that failed to calm her. I wanted to approach Hilde

but how could I explain my presence? Then I remembered. I was on a female emergency. Maybe the fictional crisis was over.

“Hilde, I saw you as I was coming out of the bathroom.” A believable lie. After all, people in Heavenly Dips uniforms weren’t easy to miss and the public rest room was just across the Boardwalk. When she turned I saw that Hilde’s face was covered with tears. “Are you okay?”

Hilde nodded. I pulled a Heavenly Dips napkin out of my apron pocket and passed it to her. One blow and her nose turned rough and red. Heavenly Dips had a larger budget for stuffed angels than for napkins.

“Is it Jonas?”

“Why would you say that?” The fear in her voice wasn’t hard to detect.

“I don’t . . . I mean that is a traumatic thing that happened . . . I can’t understand why everyone isn’t crying.”

“They were jealous. They didn’t like him.”

“Who?”

“Big Al. Ed. Sharmaine and she even likes that Lynyrd guy. Everyone, the weekend staff, the night crew, people who didn’t really know him, they all resented him.”

“But you liked him.”

That statement brought tears to her eyes. “I guess I did -- even though in a lot of ways he didn’t deserve it. People are complex, aren’t they?”

I shrugged. “I guess. Hilde, what do you mean by ‘he didn’t deserve it’?”

She searched for a clean portion of the napkin. “I don’t know. Everyone thought he was so cool and detached -- and part of me thinks he was. But another part of me . . . Oh, I don’t know what to think. And . . .” She shook her head and stopped talking.

“It’s okay. You can talk. And . . .” I prompted her.

“And?”

“You started to say something. You said ‘and.’”

“I don’t know.” She tossed her head back so the constellation above bobbed wildly. “This is silly. Jonas’s murder has nothing to do with me. I should get back to the store.”

“Are you okay to work?”

“Yes.” She synchronized her nose blowing and nodding. “You go ahead.” Her dark eyes grew icy. “And Meg, please don’t tell anyone I’m upset.”

I went back to work but not before I squeezed in two quick games of SkeeBall and a call to Andy -- actually Andy’s voice mail. I described Hilde’s behavior and let him draw his own conclusions.

When I got back, traffic at the stand was heavy. Ed was handling it all with a broad smile. As I slipped under the counter, I noticed that he was smiling through gritted teeth. I found the next customer and returned to scooping heavenly dips. . The customers came in a steady stream -- a steady

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stream in the sense that Niagara Falls is a steady stream. I had no illusions about why. “Do you think the Director of Sales killed Jonas?”

“Why?” Ed’s puzzled tone said he didn’t have any idea what I was talking about or, despite his aspirations for an MBA, any proclivity for marketing.

“You know because business is so good.”

“Oh yeah. Good one.” Despite his efforts at vocabulary building, Ed wasn’t really much for repartee. God, I missed my friends.

CHAPTER 31

Sharmaine and I reached the time clock within seconds of each other. We were both waiting for the big hand to hit the twelve. “Got an exciting night planned?” Sharmaine’s didn’t seem capable of sarcasm but I detected doubt in her intonation.

“Yeah. I’m not sure whether to spend it with George Clooney, Hugh Grant, or David Duchovney. I have a real weak spot for David.”

“Why don’t you have a boyfriend?” Sharmaine’s tone made not having a boyfriend sound like a terminal condition.

I shrugged. “I’m between, if you know what I mean.” The clock hit the hour and I plunged my card into the time clock.

“Tell me about it. I was between all of my adult life until I met Lynyrd.”

I ignored her claim of adulthood and commitment by Lynyrd. “You have big plans for tonight?”

Sharmaine shook her curls as she stamped the time on her card. “No. Lynyrd is usually busy on Saturday nights.” She didn’t add ‘with his family.’ “But you know,” her big round eyes grew rounder, “you should come out with Lynyrd and me sometime. He has lots of friends.”

Why did people always think that I was just like them? The sun would rise in the west before I would be interested in someone like Lynyrd. Yet Sharmaine couldn’t see why I wouldn’t love a guy just like the one she loved. I didn’t argue the point. I agreed that maybe we could work out a date but in the meantime I was going home. “My feet hurt.”

“Too much for a little dance machine?” Sharmaine mocked the name I’d given the arcade amusement. “Want to try it? It’s really awesome.”

My feet were killing me yet I felt the urge. I had to face it. How bad could I be? I pictured myself on the dance machine. The vision wasn’t encouraging and I hadn’t even factored in the Heavenly Dips uniform. Could I gamble that no one I knew would come by? I hadn’t seen anyone yet. I took the chance and followed Sharmaine to the arcade.

Sharmaine went first. Her blonde curls bounced wildly about her head as she performed for a family of five and three women in their sixties. I peeked around her bobbing curls and read what the machine was telling Sharmaine. The words were encouraging. She was *Perfect*. She was *Great*. She was occasionally *Very Good* but nothing less. The crowd murmured its approval but said nothing to Sharmaine when the heavy beat stopped and she collapsed against the rails designed to keep her from spinning out of control and into the arcade. After a minute’s rest she was ready to go again. I took my position on the left pad and let Sharmaine take the right position. She made all the initial selections, dumbed down for my benefit. Before the entire word “ready” came out of her mouth, she began following the prompts.

Left. Right. Forward. Back. Forward to the right. Backward to the left. My eyes saw the instructions but by the time my feet caught up, the message had changed.

“Use a light touch.” Sharmaine called without missing a beat. I tried to obey her instruction but I wasn’t exactly the Brittany Spears of my generation. My skill level had not improved by the time the music stopped.

“It’s hard the first time.” Sharmaine sounded sympathetic as I leaned against the guard rail gasping.

“Yeah. I found that out.” I leaned forward and wiped my brow with my skirt.

“But I think you were getting better. Want to try it again?”

“No way. You’re on your own.”

Sharmaine was dancing to a heavy rock beat when I heard the male voice. “You are very good at that.”

I turned and saw Karl Elkins. I was, as usual, shocked by his appearance: the head of a milquetoast on the body of a bully. “Thanks.”

“I see you at Heavenly Dips. You wait on me.”

“Leo Lime?” To dupe him into thinking I didn’t remember his visit I named a flavor he never ordered.

“No. Karl Elkins.”

I laughed -- a tiny insincere sounding laugh. “Leo Lime is a flavor, not a name. I thought you ordered Leo Lime. Sorry.”

“Oh.” I glimpsed no trace of a smile on his lips. “Remember me? I told you my wife used to work for Heavenly Dips. In the corporate office. She loved working for that company. She worked too hard, too much. Sometimes she didn’t get home until almost midnight. I think she was married to that job more than she was married to me.” He swallowed hard and gazed over my shoulder. “Did you notice I said ‘was’? I make myself do that, to force myself to accept that she left me.”

“I’m very sorry.”

“Did you know my wife? Her name was Bunny.” He pulled his wallet out of his pocket and showed me her picture. Whoa. Now I saw what Andy meant.

“I’ve never been to Heavenly Dips headquarters. I’ve never even been to New Gretna. I’m not from New Jersey.”

“Where are you from?”

“New York.”

“New York? I was there the other day.”

“Yeah, you and ten million other people.” I didn’t say that. Elkins was trying to make polite conversation. The least I could do respond in a courteous fashion. Besides I wanted to hear more about why his wife disliked Jonas Angel. I tried to figure out how to return the conversation to the talk of his beloved Bunny. There was no need. Apparently Elkins couldn’t keep off the topic for more than a few seconds.

“Bunny liked New York. She was a happy person.” He used the back of his hand to wipe the perspiration from his brow. “She liked almost everyone.”

“But not Jonas Angel.” To stave off the frown starting on his brow I added, “You told me the other day that she didn’t like him. Why not? He seemed to have everything.”

“That was the problem. He had looks, money, and a cushy job. He didn’t have to work for any of it.” I didn’t need a PI’s license to detect the resentment in his voice.

“You knew him?”

Elkins said he had never met the kid but had heard plenty about him from his wife. “Bunny was Maxwell Angel’s assistant. She likes and respects the father. He’s a self-made man but Jonas, she has no time for Jonas. From the time he was sixteen, his father let him work in the business. Gave him every opportunity. Gave him everything. Fancy schools. Fancy clothes. Fancy cars. Spent more on golf clubs than some people spend on food in a year. And what does he give his father in return? Grief. He’d be okay for a while and then he would slip right back into his old ways. He wouldn’t do what he was supposed to do or show up where he was supposed to be. It makes Bunny furious. She never understood how he could be such an ingrate. Like I said, she really likes the old man.” He sighed. “Liked. She liked him. I have to accept that she’s gone. You know she didn’t even tell me where she went. Bunny. She just left.”

Given the pain in his face I didn’t think it would be appropriate to return to the topic of Jonas. I’d have other shots at chatting up Elkins. “Maybe I’ll see you at the store. Leo Lime, right?”

He flashed a grin so shy I expected him to kick the Boardwalk and go ‘Oh pshaw.’ Instead he said, “Maybe I’ll try it.”

“Great.” I waved and turned north heading directly into a four foot tall purple teddy bear that was heading south in the arms of a person I never glimpsed.

CHAPTER 32

A cold drink, a warm shower, and a revved-up air-conditioner revived my work-weary body. I was actually cheerful when there was a knock on my new steel door with two heavy metal locks. I peeked through the peephole and saw an eye staring back at me. When it pulled away I recognized Ed's earnest grin illuminated by my security lighting. It took me three tries to master the new locks. Ed was still smiling when I got the door open.

"I hope you don't mind that I dropped by. Big Al said he'd close and I figured I could find your house by your description." He bounced on his toes and looked around. "It isn't a bad place. It's much nicer than mine."

"You're kidding." I stared at Ed in disbelief.

"You have your own bedroom and all. I share mine with two football players and wrestler."

"Yeah, I have two." As soon as the words left my mouth I realized I'd made a mistake. I didn't want a roommate. Maintaining the deception for eight to twelve hours was hard enough. But twenty-four hours a day? I didn't think I could do it.

"Boy, you could probably use help on the rent. I mean how much is it? I could chip in." Ed tried out the couch. Actually, he tripped over the formica coffee table and landed on the couch. "Not too bad. And, I could bring my music. I can't believe you don't have any music here. I don't see any." All my music was in storage – which was good news. The vintage of the CD's would have given me away. Ed paused as if he realized how hard he had pushed. He lapsed into GMAT talk. "I don't want you to believe that I am trying to inveigle my way in here. It's not as if I am living in penury or anything. You can cogitate about my moving in. If the rent is exorbitant and you'd like to share, I'd be happy to vacate my current habitation. My domicile, however, is not unbearable. I've encountered the occasional contretemps but I witness no persistent internecine conflict in that house or anything. But if I lived here I could perambulate to work. Think it over."

I promised that I would but I was lying. I needed downtime. Such as it was, this apartment was my escape from my undercover life.

Ed continued to do a verbal backstroke. "I have a car now, not that my roommates weren't great, I could borrow their cars whenever I wanted, but I needed my own. The tough part of commuting is finding a parking space at work . . . especially when I'm not on day shift . . . and on weekends when the town pullulates with tourists. Seaside Heights is set up to handle a lot of day-trippers so it offers an amplitude of parking. During the week I can find a meter space . . . but on the weekend I can't presuppose the certainty. Plus, the parking lots hike up the rates. Usury, you know." Finally, he took a breath.

"Ed, you're a twenty-one year old guy -- a very cute twenty-year one year old guy -- and hanging out with me is the best you can do on Saturday night?"

A sly grin stole across his face. "You have cable, air-conditioning, and more than one chair. Where I've been living I have to sit on the floor most of the time, even when everyone isn't home. I

work all day. I work most nights. I don't want to party all the time. Sometimes I just want to kick back."

"Don't you want to meet someone? A girl?"

Ed didn't meet my gaze. "I don't think it's all that easy to meet someone you like. I mean all the good ones are taken."

Had I just been insulted? I suspected the answer was yes but I didn't pursue the issue. Paling around with Ed wasn't about me. It was about Jonas. And, in Ed's case, Schyler.

"You must meet some girls you like."

"I'm not exactly Brad Pitt." Ed focused on tossing a pillow in the air and catching it between his knees.

I really needed to talk to him about his self image but first I wanted to find out what he knew about Schyler. "Very few men have much in common with Brad Pitt. They still have girlfriends. What's your type? Do you like blondes?"

Ed eyed me with suspicion – or since Ed started at such level of eagerness – near-suspicion. "Of course. Everyone likes blondes. I also like red heads and brunettes."

"But you must have a favorite."

"What? Are you going to find me my dream girl?"

"I'll try if you describe her." Okay, I was naïve. I was waiting for Ed to say five nine, one hundred and twenty pounds, blonde hair, gray-green eyes, named Schyler.

Ed wasn't going to tell me a thing. He grabbed my cell phone off the coffee table and bounced it his hands. "You're phone is vibrating." He hit the talk button and handed the phone to me.

"Do you miss me?" Andy's voice told me he expected a positive answer.

"To whom am I speaking?"

"Ah, I see. So many men call every night saying they miss you."

"We do get a lot of those calls."

"We. What do you mean *we*?"

"I'm sorry. I don't need an Ed-ucational journal.."

Ed scowled at the phone and made a gesture I interpreted as "I'll give myself a tour."

"Is Ed there?"

"Yes."

"Good work. You can't talk."

"I'm not interested right now."

"I just wanted to give you a piece of information. Max pulled the phone records at Heavenly Dips and found out there were incoming calls to Heavenly Dips from Jonas's cell on Friday night. One just after 8PM went to his father's office. Max's assistant, who worked late with Bunny Elkins that night for training, remembers that Bunny picked the phone up but if there was anyone the other end they didn't speak. It was the second hang-up they got that night but the other call was a couple of hours

earlier can come from a 609 number that Max didn't recognize. Even though he says it's not that uncommon, his number is one digit off from a rectory, he gave the number to the cops. The second call came into the voice mail system but again the caller hung up almost immediately. If I was Jonas he didn't listen to his messages."

Did Jonas make the call? I couldn't ask. "I told you I'm not interested." I imbued the phrase with great annoyance.

Andy continued. "That doesn't necessarily mean that Jonas made the call. Max assumes Jonas had both numbers programmed into this phone, so anyone could have called, possibly to establish that Jonas was still alive. The killer probably did not expect that Bunny would still be there training her replacement. You can imagine the panic when someone answered. And, no, I don't think the call was a secret code from Jonas to Bunny that he was ready to run away with her. So, don't even go there. I'd better hang up or your little friend, Ed, will get suspicious. Love you."

"Thank you."

I disconnected and switched the setting to ringer as Ed returned from his tour of the apartment. "You know your kitchen has a great view." I stared at Ed in disbelief. As I recalled the tiny window overlooked the back of a guest house and a garage. "But I couldn't find the beer."

"Beer?" I had no idea how Andy had stocked the house. If Ed couldn't find beer, it was likely I had no beer. I'd never look for it.

"Do you have any money? I'll go get some."

As soon as Ed disappeared out the door, I called Andy. As I listened to the ringing, I peered out my kitchen window to check the view. What Ed liked about the sight was not found in nature. What Ed liked was sitting on the garage-top porch: a half dozen blonde preppies of the female persuasion. A half dozen Schyler Devereauxs. "Where are you?" I spoke to Andy's voice mail. "Ed is visiting tonight. We're watching TV. Try me later. I'm not sure how long he's staying."

Pretty long according to the thirty-pack of Budweiser he carried through the door. "I figured I might as well stock up for when I visit." He seemed to experience no pain as he threw himself on the couch. Despite his claim that television was both soporific and sophomoric he snapped open a beer and hunkered down for an evening in front of the tube. Ed found a rerun of "All in the Family," the episode where Archie offends Mike and Gloria by making an outrageously prejudiced remark. No matter how often I reminded Ed we had a hundred options, he selected a rerun. After "All in the Family," we watched "Gilligan's Island," the episode where the Captain gets frustrated with Gilligan. Gilligan was about to redeem himself when the phone rang again. "Gee." I hit the talk button. "Now I'll never know how it turns out. Let me know if they get rescued."

Ed almost responded before he realized I'd made a joke. Or tried to. He chuckled.

"You alone yet?" Andy sounded a bit frustrated.

"Nope."

"Good. You're making friends."

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“Yes, I am.”

“So you can’t sneak out to meet me?”

“Not at this time. This isn’t a good time to call.”

“I’m at Oliver’s. We’re heading to Spring Lake to talk to one of Jonas’s buddies. If I can, I’ll call you after.”

“That would be good.”

“If it’s too late, I’ll call tomorrow. I love you.”

“I hope so.”

“Do you still love me?”

“I recall thinking I did. Since I moved here . . . Let’s just say that I’m not quite sure at the moment.”

“Sure you are. I’ll call you later -- if I can. Love you.”

“Who was on the phone?” Ed was bouncing the remote in his hand.

“Telemarketer.”

“On a cell phone? On Saturday night?”

I shrugged. “An ambitious telemarketer.”

“You were too nice to him. Sometimes you just have to let people know who’s the boss.” He glanced at the screen. “Hey, isn’t that incredible. I said ‘Who’s the boss’ and I look at the screen and guess what’s coming on?”

“Who’s the Boss?” I cited the Tony Danza sitcom.

Ed appeared puzzled. “No. A Springsteen video.” He regarded me as if I were nuts. We were, after all, in New Jersey.

CHAPTER 33

I'd worked an uneventful shift and was relaxing on the sofa when the phone rang on Sunday night. I found it hard to believe Andy's news. "Andy, Little Dippers don't get transferred."

"You are not just any Little Dipper. You're special." Andy sounded a bit embarrassed about the favor he was asking. "Besides the Stone Harbor store is short-handed."

"Andy, I have an apartment in Seaside Heights. I am at exit 82. Stone Harbor is . . . what . . . exit 13?"

"10." He corrected me.

"Am I supposed to walk down the Garden State Parkway?"

"I'll take you. Max thought moving you around would be a good idea. I mean the more stores you visit, the better."

Not for me.

The Archangel in Stone Harbor, a neatly-attired, well-groomed man whose physique suggested that he never touched the product, was a lot happier to see me than I was to see him. Bob, according to the name embroidered on his shirt, told me that I was subbing for a girl named Serena. He didn't tell me that Serena couldn't come to work because she was too distraught about Jonas. I learned that from Morgan, a bouncy blonde who actually did resemble an angel in her Heavenly Dips uniform.

"She was his girlfriend?"

Morgan nodded. I noticed that on her the stars-rotating-above-the-head fashion worked. She leaned close to share a secret. "She's known him for two years but they just started dating in the spring when Serena worked over spring break. No one was supposed to know since they worked together. People might think she was getting favors from him."

"Did she?"

"Well . . ." I couldn't tell if Morgan didn't want to speak ill of the dead or of Serena. "She did make Big Dipper." I detected a touch of bitterness in Morgan's voice. She was still wearing the blue wings of a Little Dipper. "But she deserved it. This is Serena's third summer here and she works hard."

Yeah. The competition for those coveted white wings was cutthroat. Here was a topic crying out for an enterprising investigative journalist.

"She must be really upset." I turned the statement into a question.

Morgan nodded. "The last time Jonas was here she claimed he seemed unusually serious. He said he needed to talk to her but they didn't have time to hook up. She feels bad about that." So bad she couldn't face coming to work. I understood. I could barely face coming to work myself.

At least Morgan, who barely knew Jonas, saw his death as a tragedy. "You know he was so cute and pretty nice. I mean, he was the boss's son so he didn't have a lot of time to fraternize. But he knew all our names. And it wasn't as if ours was the only group of names he had to learn. He visited all the stores. He was always in a rush. Plus, when he was here he needed time to see Serena."

"Did Bob like him?" I asked about the squeaky clean manager.

Morgan shrugged. "He seemed sad when Jonas died. Said it was a shame. Said he always liked the kid. Why would he lie?" Morgan couldn't think of a reason. Neither could Megan who arrived looking adorable in her Heavenly Dips attire.

I was confused Archangel Bob expressed his gratitude as if I were leaving. Turned out I was. After he thanked me for covering in Stone Harbor, he thanked me for volunteering to do the same thing at the Ocean City store. I didn't even know Heavenly Dips had a store in Ocean City but apparently I had agreed to travel twenty miles north to work another shift. "I'll drive you up. I know you got a ride this morning. The company will arrange to have you picked up. We really appreciate what you're doing."

Bob led me to a fluorescent blue station wagon painted a color Subaru management would probably want everyone to know was a custom job. On the ride north, Bob continued to heap compliments on me. He attributed my work ethic to my maturity. "These kids don't work as hard as we do." So Bob, whom I judged to be about my age, had spotted me. It was easy to fool the younger kids with hair and clothes -- any fashion statement that their mothers wouldn't make. Bob knew better. "I admire your doing this. Going back to school and all. I hope you don't mind but I asked the guy from the home office who called how we were lucky enough to get someone like you for the summer. Not that the kids aren't great. They are. It's fun watching them learn but sometimes I wish they already knew. I watched you with the customers this morning. You'd really succeed in a service position."

Been there, done that, I thought.

"That was young Jonas's strong point. He was great with the customers. He could charm anyone. Well, given what happened, I'd have to say almost anyone. His death was such a shame. I feel for Max. I liked the kid but I really think a lot of his father. Max Angel is the real deal. A self-made man. I have a lot of respect for him."

"But not for Jonas?"

Bob needed a moment to find the right words. "With the kid, it wasn't a matter of respect. He was a kid. I heard the rumors like anyone else."

"Rumors?"

"Sure. I wouldn't gossip to any of the kids in the store although they probably know a lot more than I do. You're mature enough not to blab the story around. There were rumors that Jonas was the life of the party if you get my drift. He had access to stimulants and shared them freely. At least that's how I heard it -- or overheard it really. One thing about kids, adults are invisible to them. I heard them talking. Mostly about what he did up north. He didn't spend enough time down here to make much trouble. Except for poor Serena. Sweet girl. Too naive to see through a roué like Jonas Angel."

"A roué?" I hadn't heard anyone use that word in years, if ever.

"Old fashioned term to describe an old-fashioned ladies man. The kid was just a natural."

When Bob pulled up to Ocean City's Boardwalk at 9th Street, he apologized for not escorting me to the Heavenly Dips store. "Gotta get back and keep an eye on my angelic little helpers."

A Fear of Seaside Heights

The story in OC was much the same as in Stone Harbor except that the girl's name was Caitlyn, not Serena. She too had called out because her boyfriend, the same boyfriend, Jonas, had been killed. I got the scoop from an elegant twenty-year-old whose English mother and West Indian father had produced an incredible genetic mix. Danielle had completely symmetrical features, smooth skin the color of cinnamon, and a warm personality that made my job as Little Dipper easier. Her cynicism made my investigative job easier. Within ten minutes of meeting her I got more information than I'd uncovered during my entire tenure in Seaside Heights.

While Danielle talked, I ate Marshmallow Cloud in a black hole in accordance with the manager's marketing plan to woo passers-by with the sight of staff members happily devouring the product. The story Danielle told about Caitlyn sounded familiar. Caitlyn saw Jonas whenever he was in town which was only once every couple of weeks. The last few times he visited, his tone had been more serious than usual. Like Serena in Stone Harbor, Caitlyn too suspected Jonas wanted to get serious about their relationship. "And then . . ." Danielle shrugged. "Now she knows that isn't going to happen. Not that it ever was. Jonas could get just about any girl he wanted. He didn't strike me as a marrying kind."

CHAPTER 35

Before I told Andy anything I had learned, I expounded on the lack of management skills in the Seaside Heights store.

“Did Maxwell Angel fill you in about a big change in Jonas lately?”

“He said he thought he had finally matured. That’s why he reacted so strongly when he thought he had reverted to his old ways. Over Memorial Day one of Jonas’s friends got into some sort of jam. Max thought the incident might have been responsible for the changes he’d seen in Jonas.”

“Did you talk to the kid?”

“The cops are handling that. The kid’s parents shipped him off to France for the rest of the summer.”

“I am sure the store could function without me if you want me to follow up with him.”

Andy ignored my offer.

“The timing is so sad. It really seemed that Jonas was growing up, maybe only a little, but growing up.”

“What’s this?”

I pulled a piece of paper out from under me.

“I ran into Karl Elkins today.”

“By accident?”

“He said so. Anyway, he gave me a list of places his wife may have gone.”

“Are you working for him now?”

“No, but I am having trouble getting him to understand that.”

“Maybe Bunny never really left him. Maybe she killed Jonas, by accident or on purpose. Then maybe she and Karl devised this scheme.”

“I can’t wait to hear. What scheme?”

“He runs around whining about how she left him to create a diversion. All the while he knows exactly where she is.”

“Do you really think one day Maxwell Angel’s assistant got up and said, ‘Gosh, Maxwell Angel is nice and doggone it that kid of his isn’t treating him right. I’ve made elaborate plans to make sure today is the first day of the rest of my life but I think I’ll throw my world into complete disarray and create an elaborate plan to kill Jonas?’”

“Maybe.” I wouldn’t concede. “What better time to murder someone than right before you sneak away to start that new life?”

Andy shook his head and sputtered. “Max mentioned that she picked up a new Saturn the day she left. If she was going to murder someone, don’t you think she would have been smart enough to buy a new car after she disappeared?”

“Maybe.” I wasn’t giving up on Bunny Elkins as a suspect but apparently, I was the only one who wasn’t.

CHAPTER 36

Back in the Seaside Heights store, I focused my attention on building a social life with my coworkers. It turned out to be a lot easier than I anticipated. It wasn't so much that they liked me. They liked a fully stocked, air conditioned, cable-equipped apartment within walking distance of Heavenly Dips. I didn't even have to issue invitations. Ed did. Even Hilde tagged along. I wasn't sure why. My taciturn colleague wasn't about to say.

Tuesday night saw a sea of fluorescent blue in my living room. I couldn't believe I was entertaining this crowd. Actually, I wasn't. My television was. Ed and Lynyrd, who arrived at Sharmaine's invitation, were roaring at a rerun of "Hogan's Heroes," the episode where the POWs try to put something over on the Nazis. Sharmaine was smiling but only because she was basking in what she perceived as Lynyrd's glow. Hilde just seemed content to be included in the group. None of my guests seemed to mind that the furniture had appeared dated when "Hogan's Heroes" first crossed the airwaves. Viewing the situation through their eyes, I began to see the virtue in chairs you could prop your feet on and tables that didn't cry out for a coaster.

When my phone rang, Ed spat out his instructions. "If it's a telemarketer, hang up."

The caller was, of course, Andy. "How are you doing?"

"I have friends here."

"Good work. Any news?"

I slipped into the kitchen. "Have you finished working on the information I gave you yesterday? That ought to keep you busy for a while. I've got to go. They're calling me."

"Hey, Meg." The voice summoning me from the other room belonged to Lynyrd. "Ed just told me you talked to me at Jenkinson's in Point Pleasant Beach one night. I didn't remember. What did you ask me about?"

I feigned a faulty memory but Ed piped up with an answer. "Some club your friend wanted to know about?"

"Was that it?" I shook my head and moved on to the always popular subject of refreshments. "More to drink, anyone?"

"You should let Tracy know about Jonas."

Tracy? Oh yeah. Tracy, my imaginary friend. "Ed, she reads the papers." I sounded irritable at the need to defend the cultural literacy of my imaginary friend. "She had kind of crush on Jonas." I affected a sheepish grin as I explained to Lynyrd.

"You wouldn't want no friend of yours going out with him no how. He didn't have no respect for women." Lynyrd spat his words.

My initial reaction was, 'And you do?' I didn't say that. I said, "How so?"

He wrapped a protective arm around Sharmaine to reassure her, and us, that he was above such behavior. "Some of those drugs he gave to his friends. They wasn't for changing your own mood.

They was for changing other people's mood if you know what I mean." I'd heard enough about date-rape drugs in the news to know where Lynyrd was headed.

"Don't be ridiculous, Lynyrd," Hilde chimed in to defend Jonas. "Why would someone like Jonas need a date-rape drug?"

"Number one, you're naive if you think a guy like him wouldn't enjoy tricking someone just for sport. I don't really know about him but I do know he supplied his friends. And, believe me, those guys look all nice and clean but trust me they ain't. Not at all." With that he ran a hand from Sharmaine's ankle up her leg until it disappeared under her dress. Sharmaine gasped with pleasure and rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. He pulled away, slapped her calf, and asked her to get him a beer. This was a man who believed Jonas Angel did not respect women.

My guests left shortly after "Get Smart." The episode where Agent 99 outsmarts Smart but he isn't smart enough to realize it. Everyone was in a jovial mood as I walked them and my trash downstairs. As I waved good-bye I realized that I'd had a good time. I was actually feeling happy. Improved weather helped. The air was clear and not as sticky as most recent night's. I strolled down the few blocks to the beach to enjoy the sight of the sky and the sounds of the surf. I wasn't the only one lingering at the north end of the boards although I might have been the only one without a mother worrying if I'd be home by curfew. To the south I could see crowds of people on the Boardwalk. The lights sparkled and the cacophony of the Boardwalk, as Ed liked to call it, sounded reassuring. Life moved on without Jonas Angel.

On the walk back to my apartment, I felt uncomfortable, then anxious, and, finally, downright spooked. I turned but no one was behind me. When I reached my new home, I ran up the steps. Once behind the locked door, I turned off all the lights before I checked out the street. I peered through the window and saw the block was quiet. The sidewalk was empty. Nothing moved. I jumped when the motion-sensitive light clicked off. I had to get a grip. This undercover thing was really getting to me.

CHAPTER 37

I enjoyed morning on the Seaside Heights Boardwalk. Countless feet had not yet ground away the commercial logo combed into the sand each morning. The din of the surf and the cries of the gulls had not yet been drowned out by the incessant patter of feet on wood. The relentless heat and humidity hadn't yet calmed the morning breeze and strained the happy mood of the people on the boards.

"Hello, Andy." I had the phone in my hand when it vibrated.

"I have some information from the autopsy report. Most of the blows were delivered while Jonas was lying on his back. He was hit once from behind by a right handed perp. Not really sure about the height but slightly shorter than Jonas who was six feet tall. Even though they are not suspects, I thought you might want to check out your coworkers. Just for the record. I missed you last night. I love you."

"Love you too." I didn't bother to whisper. I should have.

"You love that brother of yours, don't you?" The voice belonged to Mr. Smarmy, the deeply tanned stranger who was into women in food service uniforms. He was again overdressed, still overeager and unfortunately going my way. He fell into step beside me.

"You remembered I had a brother. Quite impressive. But that wasn't him."

"Sister?" he asked with a big smile.

"You really were listening. How did you figure that out?" I actually did have a sister -- albeit a sister living in Prague whom I spoke to only a couple times a year. I figured the closer I could stay to the truth the better.

"Oh." He seemed less than embarrassed. "I didn't mean to eavesdrop . . ."

Of course, he did but I didn't challenge him. "No problem. I understand." I understood that this man could not be within forty yards of a female and not make some sort of remark. If he were interested in a woman in my getup, he was interested in any woman.

"How come you're working at Heavenly Dips?"

"I'm a grad student. I need the money."

"But why Heavenly Dips?"

"You mean because I'm old enough to work at a place where I could serve liquor and make big tips?"

"Well . . ." Clearly he hadn't seen his question exactly that way but he found my interpretation interesting.

I stopped and faced the ocean. Why lie to the guy? He didn't know me. He didn't know my name. But why not lie? I was undercover. He could know someone at Heavenly Dips. Besides I needed to expand my cover story. Behind my shades I stared wistfully out to sea. I considered removing my sunglasses but I wasn't sure I possessed the necessary acting talent. "I'm sorry. You hit . . . you hit a nerve. You see . . . I used to . . . the reason . . ." I affected an earnest tone that would have made Ed proud. "I don't want to say if you don't mind." Mostly because I didn't have anything to say.

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I implied that I shouldn't be around alcohol but I didn't actually make that statement. What I implied wasn't true. I barely drank -- except on rare occasions when I believed, always erroneously, that a drink or two would improve an unhappy situation. But the stranger didn't know that. He never would. He didn't know me. He never would.

CHAPTER 38

Not long after the pearly gates opened for business, Karl Elkins dropped by for a scoop of his wife's favorite flavor. This time it was Gemini Grape. I'm not normally one to lecture but I was tempted to advise the grieving husband that if he had paid more attention to his wife's likes and dislikes, he might not have been crying the blues at the moment. I didn't actually get the chance. Business was booming. But I got another chance while I was eating my Taylor Pork Roll lunch sandwich for lunch.

"Remember me, Leo Lime?" Karl Elkins plopped onto the bench beside me.

I nodded. My mouth was otherwise occupied.

"I guess you think I'm kind of a pain in the neck coming around all the time hoping for word from my Bunny."

I was kind of relieved my mouth was still otherwise occupied. I shrugged.

"I don't know if you've ever been in love but it's not easy." I didn't know if he expected a response. Since I didn't have one, I took another bite of my sandwich. "You know she didn't even tell me she was leaving. Bunny. My wife. I just thought she went out early that Saturday morning but when she didn't come that night, it was frantic. I called all her friends. I even called the police. At first her friends said they hadn't seen her but that was just part of the plan. I couldn't believe that she would ever leave me."

I nodded and chewed.

"Okay, by Sunday morning it occurred to me. I called the computer at the bank for the balances in our checking and savings accounts but she hadn't taken a dime. That's when I called the cops again. I knew she had to be in trouble. They came on Sunday morning and took my statement. I don't know what they did with it but it didn't matter. In the afternoon Bunny's friend Sandy called and told me that Bunny had left me."

Elkins was fighting tears. I took another bite.

"She didn't tell me because she wanted time to put some distance between her and me before I found out. She didn't want me to know where she had gone. She had been planning for months. She wanted to start a new life. A new life! What was wrong with our life?" He shook his head to underline his amazement. "I loved her so much. You think you know someone and then . . ." His voice cracked. "I was so surprised . . . so . . . so shocked. Then the moisture started down his face but this time the substance wasn't perspiration. His cheeks were covered by tears. "You know she might know something about the Angel murder. I told the police that. They should find her. They said they were searching but I don't believe them."

I thought about consoling him but went for another bite instead.

"I need to talk to her, to make her understand how much she hurt me."

The time had come when I had to say something. "It's a very hard thing to go through." Non-committal yet supportive. I could have taken up his banner – if I believed Bunny Elkins was just a bad seed, a rotten person who had run out on the most wonderful husband on the planet -- but there are two

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sides to every story. Karl Elkins might have acted like the most vulnerable man around but maybe that's all his grief was, an act. Okay a good act. Beside me, he started to sob. Loudly. He buried his face in his hands.

Two elderly woman seated on the next bench stared at me with hostile eyes that asked what I had done to make a grown man cry. I tried to calm the heartbroken husband. Great. Now I had three jobs. Little Dipper, unlicensed undercover operative, and therapist to the lonely hearts. How would I explain this on my resume?

CHAPTER 39

“Meg.” Sharmaine hissed in my ear. She nodded at the corner near the Angelic Anise, which, to my amazement, was running low. I moved to her side.

Sharmaine kept her voice low. “What Lynyrd said last night was true. About the girl. And the GHB but it wasn’t exactly the way he sees it.”

“You know the girl?”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to talk in any specifics but I don’t like the way Lynyrd talks about Jonas. I mean Jonas was no saint but he stopped with the GHB as soon as he understood . . . That’s all I want to say. He stopped as soon as he knew. It really upset him.”

“Who was the girl?”

“It doesn’t matter who the girl was. Jonas made amends. He was sorry. That’s it, Meg. That’s all I have to say. I just don’t want anyone sliming Jonas. Not that way. He wasn’t my favorite person but . . . he’s dead.” With that Sharmaine moved away to wait on a grandmother whose grandson had gone to Disney World and all she had gotten was her lousy T-shirt.

I wanted to call Andy to tell him that I suspected I had more info on Jonas’s transformation but the call would have to wait. I had to scoop some ice cream for Mr. Smarmy first.

“Gee what a coincidence! I never would have guessed you worked here!” He was all teeth. My smile didn’t match. If I had liked him or invited his attention I probably would have thrown my head back and guffawed since we had discussed my employment only hours before. But I didn’t like him and I hadn’t invited his attention. So I responded with a feeble grin and a polite ‘may I help you.’

“I’m sure you could.” He paused to let the lecherous meaning of his words sink in before asking me to recommend a flavor. “I’m sure I’ll like whatever you like.”

Was this guy for real? He had never seen me in anything other than my Heavenly Dips regalia. He could not possibly have a crush on me. Yet that was what he wanted me to believe. He smiled at me with narrow eyes that sparkled with promise. I told him I liked vanilla.

“Venus de Vanilla.” He read from the menu. “I don’t think so.” He ordered a cup of Triple S as we insiders liked to call Space Shuttle Sundae, coconut ice cream with ribbons of blueberry and strawberry running through it. All in all not a bad flavor. I handed him the cup and waited anxiously for him to move to the register. No chance. No customers. No denying. I had time to talk.

We exchanged a few pleasantries, then he pumped me for my plans after the summer. Just when you need them, those demanding consumers stay away. I told Mr. Smarmy about graduate school. Still no customers. He asked what I had done before. Still no customers. I told him about my job in New York, remembering only at the last minute to shave ten years off my career. Still no customers. At last the heat wave came to my rescue. Mr. Smarmy did not strike me as the type who was willing to become Mr. Sticky. “You’re ice cream is melting. If you don’t get that suit all gooey, you’d better get started on that cone. I’ll let you go.” I handed him a stack of napkins, smiled curtly, and ignored his startled expression. I got busy cleaning imaginary dirt from the inside of a display case. The

temperature felt refreshing but that time the search for coolness was not my motivation. When I pulled my head out of the case Mr. Smarmy was gone.

“Ed, do you know that guy?”

Ed was finishing up a transaction at the register. “The man in the suit?”

“Yeah, I keep seeing him around the neighborhood. He must live near me. I run into him a lot.”

“Is he a hot prospect?”

“For what?”

“You know, Meg, beggars can’t be choosers. I can’t help noticing that your love life isn’t hopping and he’s kind of nice looking, isn’t he? For an old guy.”

“Old?”

“I bet he’s thirty.”

“Oh.” For a minute I had forgotten that I was playing twenty-four. “Yeah, I guess he is okay for an old guy.” Objectively, Ed was right. The guy was attractive -- although probably not as attractive as he believed. Good features. Deep Tan. Strong build. But the image the guy projected did not ring true. I shared my concerns with Ed. “There’s something slick about that guy. His smile isn’t sincere. I told you he’s smarmy.”

“Not to mention unctuous and oleaginous.”

“Ed you might want to work on becoming more terse, succinct, to the point and possibly even laconic.”

“Good one.” Ed laughed. He loved GMAT humor.

CHAPTER 40

When my cell phone rang that night, Ed and I were watching “Mission Impossible,” the episode when the team keeps having close calls before pulling off the mission.

“Can you talk?” I noticed an urgency in Andy’s tone.

“No and I wish I could”

“You and Ed watching cable?”

“Yes.”

“Do you miss me?”

“Yes.”

“I miss you. A lot.”

“That’s nice to hear.”

“I mean a whole lot. Really, really a lot. Do you get my drift?”

It was hard not to. “I understand. But this was the way you arranged things.”

“Can you get away?”

“I’m not sure . . .”

Andy had thought it all out.

“Repeat what I say.”

So I did. “How long will it take you?” “Just watching TV.” “If you need my help, I don’t mind.” “I’ve always liked Bryan and Melissa.” “What time are they due in?” “Don’t worry about a thing.” “If it gets too late I can doze on the couch.” “Hope you get out of that traffic jam soon.” “No, don’t send a cab. I can walk.” “Really, it’s not even dark yet.” “I’ll find it.” “See you later.”

I hung up and filled Ed in on the story Andy had provided. “Friends of mine in Ortley Beach have company coming. They’re stuck in traffic. They can’t get their visitors on the phone so I’m going to walk over and explain what happened and make sure their guests get settled.”

“I didn’t know you had friends in Ortley Beach.”

I smiled. “There are a lot of things you don’t know about me.”

“Yeah.” Ed’s tone was serious.

“And a lot of things I don’t know about you. If we ever turned off the TV and talked we could learn all those things.”

“I’ll walk you over.” Ed’s finger moved towards the off button on the remote and hesitated.

“No. Stay put. You’ve only seen this episode three times since I’ve known you. You should stick around and see how it comes out this time. I gotta go. I have my keys. Lock up when you leave.”

So without giving Ed time to protest, I grabbed my bag and ran -- out the door and all the way to the corner where Andy said he would meet me. The car was parked along the curb. Its engine was running. Andy’s was too. He didn’t even bother with verbal greetings.

“You don’t really have any friends in Ortley Beach, do you?” I snuggled against his shoulder.

“Of course not.” His kiss told me the reason for his ruse.

When he let me up for air, I spoke in a whisper. “Ed and Sharmaine are both right handed.”

“Good work.” Andy’s lips closed over mine once again.

“Hilde wasn’t in today but I recall she is right-handed too.” I nibbled on his ear as I whispered into it. “They are all at least five eight.”

He ran his lips down my neck and, pushing the strap of my t-shirt aside, across my shoulder.

“What about Big Al?”

“Right-handed.” I pulled back and gazed into his eyes. “Are we going somewhere more private.”

“Kind of.” He gave me a quick kiss. “I have a job to do. I thought you might want to come along. Like a date.”

Like a date was not actually a date. It was surveillance.

We parked on a tree-lined street in Toms River and watched a small, poorly maintained ranch home that belonged to Big Al Braddock. While Andy *surveilled* I took the opportunity to fill him in on the day’s events. “I guess you know all about the incident Sharmaine described.”

“I hope so. I assume that situation is the one Max mentioned to me. I’ll find a reason to chat with Sharmaine. Maybe she’ll let the girl’s name slip and I’ll check with Max to see if there was another incident he didn’t know about.”

“Why are we watching Big Al or should I say Big Al’s house?” We hadn’t observed any action in the couple of hours we’d been sitting across the street from the dilapidated rancher. “And why are we watching it without air-conditioning?”

In answer to my second question Andy raised the windows and turned on the engine. Cool air started blowing on our faces. “Okay? Now, the answer to your first question. We are here because of what you heard at work, that there was bad blood between Big Al and Jonas in the weeks before he was murdered. Big Al is the best suspect I have right now -- although he really isn’t that great a suspect. He was at work until midnight on the Friday Jonas disappeared. But we don’t know where he went after that. He could have met up with Jonas. He could have had an accomplice. We don’t know who he is close to. That’s what I’m hoping to find out. He owns that twelve year old Chevy in the driveway but I’m pretty sure he doesn’t own that Mercedes out front.”

“Are the cops looking at Big Al?”

Andy shrugged. “If they are interested in him for Jonas’s murder, I don’t know it. But I don’t know what the focus of their investigation is.”

I yawned. “Does Big Al ever leave the house?”

“I sincerely hope so.” Andy sighed.

“We could work on our cover story.” I slipped a hand onto Andy’s thigh. Our cover was that we were two lovers conducting an illicit affair on a suburban street that we’d picked at random.

“We could, couldn’t we?” He placed his hand on top of mine.

“I don’t think this dude is going out tonight.”

“Dude?” Andy was amused. “Do kids really say dude?”

“I have no idea. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. I’m impersonating a twenty-four year old graduate student, not an eighteen year old hipster.”

“You’re plenty hip for me.” He pulled me across the gearshift and smothered me with what males consider affection.

I felt like a kid. I hadn’t made out in a car since high school. Well, college. Well, a year or so ago if taxis counted. But I found the entire experience of sneaking away from Ed to go parking with Andy exciting. I was enjoying the romantic interlude right up until the moment the cop shone his flashlight in the window and rapped on the glass. As Andy slid his window down and greeted the cop, I scrambled to straighten my clothes. Technically each item of clothing was still on but tangled in a way that I couldn’t figure out. I gave up on redressing and opted for trying to conceal my condition instead. I sat with my knees pulled up with my arms wrapped around my legs.

“You’re not kids.” The cop was shocked. We were probably not a lot younger than his parents. “You two live on this street?”

Andy and I shook our head in unison.

“You two married?”

Again, we shook our heads.

“I don’t mean to each other. I can tell you’re not.”

Once more, we shook our heads.

“Then why are you out here?”

I waited for the usually assertive Andy to take charge. When he didn’t, I chirped an answer that sounded like a question. “It’s fun?”

“It may be fun but the neighbors aren’t gonna like it. So move along -- after you zipper and button up. And, if you don’t mind a suggestion, get a room.”

We did. But not right away. The cop’s tail lights had just vanished around the corner when the door to Big Al’s house opened. The glow from the outside light reflected off the shiny brown suit of the man who walked down the path to the big, black Mercedes parked on the street. He appeared preoccupied and didn’t even glance our way.

“It’s Mr. Smarmy.”

“Mr. Smarmy?” Andy was incredulous at the name.

“I run into that guy all over the place. Today, he kind of hit on me at the store.”

“Someone suspicious keeps running into and you didn’t you mention it to me!”

“I didn’t consider him suspicious.” I paused. “Okay, I did wonder why anyone would hit on a woman in an angel suit but . . . I don’t know. I can tell you that if you follow him, you’ll be seeing a lot more of me.”

“His name isn’t really Smarmy, is it?”

“No. I don’t know his name. If I had known we were interested in him, I would have asked. But I didn’t. If he comes around again, I will.”

Andy made a U-turn and followed the Mercedes at a distance to Route 37, over the bridge, and towards Seaside Park. When it finally stopped in the first block from the beach, the sedan was in front of a big, beautiful, old house adorned with heavy scaffolding.

“I can’t believe that Mr. Smarmy lives in such a nice place. He certainly has better taste in housing than he does in . . . anything else.”

Andy jotted down the address along with the license plate number. Almost immediately the house’s windows went dark. Andy leaned across the gear shift. “Well, he’s tucked in for the night. The policeman is our friend and we must do what he says. Now what did that police officer tell us to do?”

“I believe he told us to get a room.”

We paid for the night but used the motel room for only a few hours. My cover dictated that I wake up at home. Andy dropped me at my apartment well before dawn. As I climbed the steps, I had the strangest feeling that someone other than Andy was watching. I turned and glanced down the outdoor staircase. Andy waved a finger above the half open window. I waved back and put my key in the lock.

Ed was slumped in front of a rerun of “I Dream of Jeannie,” the episode where Jeannie puts Major Nelson in an embarrassing situation. The living room was brightly lit so I could easily spot the damage Ed had managed in the few hours I’d been gone. Nothing permanent. Spilled popcorn, crushed beer cans, fudge crumbs. I’d clean up in the morning. I snapped off the overhead light and the TV. When I went to the window I saw Andy’s white sedan across the street with its lights off. I waved to signal I was okay. He flipped on the lights and pulled away. I felt secure knowing Ed was still in the apartment. In the morning I asked him to move in.

CHAPTER 41

“Perhaps, Maggie . . .”

When Andy used my pet name it meant I was about to receive either very good news or very bad news. I had a hunch I knew which way the conversation was headed.

“Perhaps,” he started again, “I failed to mention one of the key rules of the private investigation biz. Let me be clear. I am in no way blaming you. This is completely my fault. I should have been more specific when describing your job. I should have provided some examples of appropriate techniques. It’s always a good idea to chat with the suspects, play a little Skee-ball with the suspects, even go out drinking with the suspects. But, and I never did think to mention this explicitly, don’t invite the suspects to live with you.”

“Don’t be a smart ass, Andy. Ed isn’t a suspect. He’s a source.”

“So you say.”

“Andy, you said that we weren’t really interested in the people I worked with as suspects.”

“But we can’t rule them out completely. Everyone who knew Jonas Angel is a suspect. And you said Jonas wasn’t Ed’s favorite person.”

“I doubt if I am Ed’s favorite person and he hasn’t killed me. He’s in my apartment all the time anyway. Beside what possible motive would Ed have to harm me? If he knew you and I were involved, he’d use me to stay close to the investigation. He doesn’t have a clue.”

“So you say.”

“Trust me, Andy, Ed just likes me for my palatial estate and I like having him in the house. I think this whole undercover thing freaks me out. You can’t be with me so Ed is the next best thing.”

Either I convinced Andy or he gave up on convincing me. He changed the subject. “What are you doing with your day off?”

“Andy, I don’t have the day off. I have to work the night shift. I’m calling from the beach. I’ll probably spend the day here dreading.”

“Dreading what?”

“Everything. My uniform. Big Al. The customers. Dipping.”

Andy interrupted. “You do still love me, right?” When I didn’t answer he asked again.

“I’m thinking. I’m thinking. Call me later and I’ll let you know.”

Jonas had minimal contact with the night crew but Andy figured it couldn’t hurt to check them out. There was a problem with the plan. When I reported for work, I found Ed and Sharmaine. “These high school kids are so unreliable.” Sharmaine complained although she had just graduated in June. “It’s just the three of us with Big Al tonight.”

Inquiries about Uranus reached their peak between seven and eight when groups of preteens were out on their own. After that the teen-age and young adult crowds, including a few sinister looking types, followed. They didn’t appear so threatening once I handed them their cones. I don’t think

Heavenly Dips attracted the toughest characters in town. It's hard to intimidate while licking a Sagittarian Sherbert on a Cloud.

When I finally got to punch out, I wanted to be at home but my thirty-four year old limbs were just too tired to deliver me there. Figuring a few moments off my feet would refresh, or at least lessen the pain in, my throbbing extremities I headed for the Sky Ride home.

I appeared to be the only commuter and the only person riding solo. I felt a bit pathetic. At the end of the ride I strolled to the edge of the Heiring Street Stage and admired the moon on the water. The humid air wasn't as fresh as I hoped but the view was beautiful and what breeze there was felt great. Yet my mood was veering towards sadness. I was home sick – or would have been if I had a home. My apartment in New York was sublet. My personal possessions were in storage. The only thing that was mine in Seaside Heights was a rather limited wardrobe of shorts, t-shirts, and bathing suits. I was having fun of sorts with my young coworkers but I missed my old friends, my old clothes, my old life. I even missed Andy the man with whom I was supposedly spending the summer. It didn't help my mood that I was the only one enjoying the vista by myself. Soon I was the only one enjoying the vista.

I was enthralled with the sight of the moon when I felt them. Hands. Hands that pushed me. My flailing arms grabbed for something, anything to hold onto but found nothing. I flew into the air and discovered that the wings on my Heavenly Dips uniform were not actually functional. I could not fly. As I landed on all fours in the sand, the jolt knocked the air from my lungs. At the same moment a loud, plaintive sound stopped. I think it was my screaming.

I gasped and attempted to climb to my feet but found that I couldn't. I fell onto my back and stared at the sky. Even in the bright moonlight, I could see that the heavens were crowded with stars. Real stars, not the painted aluminum variety that decorated the ceiling at Heavenly Dips. Suddenly, a face blocked my view. A surprised face. "Did you fall?" The young man with a light accent asked. I tried to answer but no words came out of my mouth.

The stranger yelled a few words in Spanish over his shoulder and jumped to the sand beside me. Turned out he was a doctor. Lucky for me, a doctor who in a litigious society was still willing to help. Until I got my breath back I nodded or shook my head in response to his questions. His family had come down the steps to join him by the time I could sit up. A teen-aged girl handed me a bottle of water and I drank slowly. Once I could breathe I felt fine, but I foresaw what was coming the next day. Pain. Especially the pain of admitting to Big Al how that I had crushed my wings -- which I suspected I had.

"Can you check my wings?"

The doctor appeared confused. I didn't know the Spanish word for wing, but the translation wasn't the problem.

"Here's your halo." The doctor's pre-schooler daughter regarded me with wide eyes as if she believed I was, in fact, an angel.

A Fear of Seaside Heights

I asked one of the older children, a boy about thirteen, to find Ed. “You’ll recognize him. He’s dressed a lot like me. He works down the Boardwalk.” My directions to Heavenly Dips explained my attire. The entire family seemed relieved that dad was not administering to the medical needs of a lunatic -- or an extraterrestrial. The boy disappeared and reappeared only minutes later leading Ed to the spot where I was sprawled in the sand.

When I commented on the speed with which Ed had appeared by my side, he explained. “I did move with celerity but this young man did a formidable job of finding me. Of course, it’s not hard to identify a man in an angel outfit.” I knew it. Sooner or later I had to find an upside to these getups.

Ed listened intently to the doctor’s instructions and nodded enthusiastically in response.

“I didn’t know you spoke Spanish.” I spoke admiringly as he helped me to my feet.

“I don’t but the guy was so enthusiastic that before I could tell him he just started talking. Then it just seemed like it was too late to confess.” Ed wrapped an arm around my waist. “Lean on me.”

I resisted his embrace. “So if he told you I had a blood clot that could break free at any moment and kill me, you wouldn’t know.”

“I didn’t hear him say that.”

“You didn’t hear him say anything.”

Ed shrugged. “He didn’t point to his head at all. Except when he gave me this.” The sight of my battered halo made me collapse against Ed. “You got ‘splaining to do.” Ed did his best Ricky Ricardo. The imitation wasn’t very good but I laughed anyway.

CHAPTER 42

Ed wanted to call the police but I wanted to call Andy. Not that I could tell Ed that. I'd have to wait until I could catch a private moment and that wasn't going to be easy. The suddenly solicitous Ed manifested true mother-hen characteristics. He walked me home, guided me to my bedroom, and brought me an ice-filled baggie wrapped in a thin dish towel.

He felt I was the randomly chosen victim of a teen-aged prankster. He was willing to concede that the Heavenly Dips uniform could have been a factor in my selection. "You know what kids are like. You see the bad element that can come down the Boardwalk late at night. They would think attacking a stranger, especially a stranger in an angel costume, was fun. It was a test -- to see if you could fly."

Maybe Ed was right. My tenure at the store had convinced me that people can be cruel to angels in their midst.

"It's a good thing I'm moving in. I can stay tonight. Tomorrow I'll get the rest of my stuff." He went off to refill my ice bag.

After the cubes melted I traded the cold comfort of the water-filled baggie for the warm comfort of a hot bath. I called Andy from the tub. He was concerned. "Are you sure you're safe?"

"Don't worry. I scrubbed the tub before I took my first shower."

"I wasn't concerned about the bathtub although now that I think about it . . . I was actually worried about the incident on the Boardwalk. It's a warning." I was more inclined to agree with Andy's viewpoint than Ed's random act of violence theory. Then again I knew that the undercover life had been getting to me before I took the header into the sand. "That attack was designed to frighten you and I can't think of anyone who would want to scare you off except Big Al. He's the one who thinks you're a plant. God, maybe this is my fault. I should have stayed away from you. Maybe he saw you at his house with me. I don't want you going back to the store. Tomorrow we'll tell Max that you quit."

"No, let me stay." Maybe the hot water had lulled me into a false sense of complacency.

"You fell on your head, didn't you? Did you hear what you just said?"

"I want to stay. Whoever pushed me wasn't really trying to hurt me. If they even knew me. The perp could be some sort of demented stranger. We don't know. But if it wasn't, if my attacker does know me, he or she just wanted to warn me. I only fell five feet. I was in never in any real danger. The only threat was to anyone who happened to be under me when I landed."

"Maggie, I disagree. You could have been hurt."

"Unlikely."

"If not this time, next time."

"I don't think so." If, a week earlier, anyone had told me I'd be having this argument with Andy, I would have told them to lay off the wild mushrooms. "Andy, I was alone tonight at least until I screamed. If someone wanted to hurt me badly, they would have. They didn't. If someone wanted to warn me, there's something they are warning me about or, should I say, something they are warning me

off. Let me go to work at least one more time. If anyone at work did this to me, and Big Al is the obvious suspect, we might be able to catch a reaction. Why don't you drop by and observe. Get there first and decide what you think."

After a moment of silence, Andy agreed. "Okay. Ill be there but I still wish I could come by tonight. Maybe I should."

"Let's not blow my cover until we have to. I'm fine. Really. Although I can't say the same for my wings and halo. I plan on spending what's left of the night trying to make all my planets align." I eyed the battered headpiece. My work was really cut out for me. "Besides Ed is staying over."

"Right. That makes me feel better." His intonation added the *not*.

CHAPTER 43

When I got to the Heavenly Dips stand, Andy was slumped in a chair next to Big Al's desk. The PI looked as if he had slept in his clothes.

"You're late," Big Al growled at me as I slipped through the back door.

I didn't apologize. I clocked in before dropping the mess of blue polyester and tangled wire on his desk. Then I backed towards the front of the store so I could check his reaction.

"And," Big Al spat out the word with a combination of rage and disbelief, "you're out of uniform. I'm going to dock you fifteen minutes pay."

With a show of incredible maturity, I waited until Big Al turned his big back to stick my tongue out at him. "Don't you even want to know what happened to my wings?" I called over my shoulder as I made my way to the counter.

"All I need to know is that you're not wearing them," he yelled from the back.

Knowing he couldn't see me, I directed an obscene gesture his way.

"You'll get in trouble," Hilde hissed in my ear.

"I'm too old to get in trouble." I settled onto the only seat available – the stool designated for those working the register, a task I was allowed to do only when the remainder of the staff was incapacitated by medical emergency or natural disaster – neither of which had occurred that summer.

"What are you doing?" Hilde asked with real fear in her voice.

"I'm being docked for fifteen minutes. I won't work for fifteen minutes. Besides, I hurt myself last night. I need to sit down."

"Daniels, what the hell happened to your wings?" Big Al appeared with the crumpled mass in his shaking hands. Andy was at his side.

"I had an accident."

"Well, missy, you're gonna pay for these." He waved the blue wings in the air. "I'm taking it out of your pay."

Andy interrupted. "What happened to you, Ms. . . ."

"Daniels." I filled in the blank.

"Yes, Ms. Daniels. How did you damage your wings?"

"What business is it of yours?" Big Al sneered.

"Given the nature of my work, of which you are well aware, I think I have a right to ask."

Andy directed a polite smile at me. "I just wondered how you happened to damage your wings." It was the type of question that was hard to ask with a straight face but Andy did.

"I was attacked."

Both Andy and I watched Big Al for a reaction. He seemed genuinely shocked and clearly annoyed as if I conspired to harm to my wings. Hilde was the one who asked if I'd been hurt. If I'd seen a doctor. If I needed anything. Big Al's only concern was for the angelic accessory. He asked, "Someone grab you by them wings?"

After I explained, Big Al pooh-poohed any concerns about my experience. “That platform ain’t that high. You should never had rolled onto your back. I’m billing you for them wings. Money’s coming out of your next check.” Big Al threatened to turn into a big cry baby. I swore I saw tears welling in his eyes. “I can’t believe you did this to a perfectly good set of wings.” He was muttering as he wandered to the back of the store.

Was Big Al behind the attack? I didn’t think so. I checked out Andy’s expression. He didn’t think so either. We both understood that Big Al would never risk ruining a perfectly good set of wings. Andy wore a puzzled expression as he said good-bye.

As soon as Andy disappeared down the Boardwalk, Big Al returned to the front of the store to demonstrate his managerial skills. “I’ll get a pair of blue wings sent up. In the meantime, you get to wear these white ones.” He shoved them into my hands. “Just because you’re wearing white wings, don’t go thinking you’re a Big Dipper and don’t go looking for any extra money in your check.” As if. Big Al wiped the sweat from his forehead. For once I didn’t blame the heat wave. Big Al could handle heat and humidity but not the untimely demise of a perfectly good set of wings.

“He really got in a snit over the wings, didn’t he?” I spoke through gritted teeth.

Hilde checked to make sure that Big Al had returned to his desk. “Cops.” She mouthed the single word.

“What?” I tried to whisper but I yelped. I slipped off my seat and sidled up to Hilde pretending to help her straighten the cups and spoons. “Were the cops here again?”

Hilde glanced nervously over her shoulder but the hair that fell forward obstructed her view of Big Al in the back. She could hear him, however. People in the pizza place next door could hear him -- even over the Heavenly Dips Choir. He was throwing unidentified items around to the accompaniment of colorful phrases that would have made an angry rapper proud.

“He can’t hear you that well when he’s sitting beside you. He’s not going to hear you back there raising a racket.” Again, I spoke with minimum mouth motion.

“Daniels, are you wearing your halo?” Big Al had been so focused on the wing issue he had failed to note that my halo, good as new only because it wasn’t that good when new, was in place. I took three steps to the back and pointed to my head. “Lucky thing.” He sneered and went back to tossing things around.

“Tell me about the police.” I grabbed a rag and ran it over places that Hilde had already cleaned. “They’ve been here before. Why did this visit upset Big Al so much?”

“Well,” Hilde took a breath so deep it set her planetary headgear to frantic bobbing. “They came and took him across the Boardwalk to talk. I pretended I wasn’t watching but I was. They were not being nice to Big Al. I could tell. He was waving his arms like this.” She flung her arms about in tiny motions.

“That doesn’t look mad.”

“No.” She hissed. “Like this but bigger. I don’t want Big Al to catch me imitating him.”

“What did he say when he came back?”

“He was murmuring a lot of not very nice words. Then that investigator, Andy Beck, came by. That really pushed Big Al over the edge. He tried to be polite but I was waiting for the top of his head to blow off.”

“What do you think Big Al did?” I said the words as much to myself as to Hilde.

She shrugged and shook her head. “I don’t know.” The surprisingly talkative Big Dipper sounded earnest. I figured out the reason for her new openness when she moved onto her next topic. “I think that Andy guy is cute. I mean, he’s old and all but I don’t think that matters, do you?”

Normally I didn’t believe that an age difference created an insurmountable problem, but this was my boyfriend we were talking about. I told Hilde I didn’t think it was wise to get involved with an older man. My statement was almost true. I didn’t think Hilde should get involved with that older man.

“Has he interviewed you before?”

A trick question? It was to me whether Hilde intended it that way or not. “Yeah. I think when Jonas was still missing. I’m not sure. I remember thinking that talking to me was a waste of time since I’d never even met Jonas.”

Hilde had another question but luckily Derek Jeter chose that moment to step up to the counter and order Venus de Vanilla in a black hole. In retrospect, I don’t think the customer was actually Derek Jeter. I think he was a thirteen year old wearing a copy of Jeter’s baseball jersey. No matter who he was, I provided the most courteous of service. I wanted off the topic of my interview with Andy.

Then *the old guy* called. I felt a little guilty, as if I were cheating with Hilde’s man – especially when he told me to ride the carousel on my break. Big Al was at the counter so I couldn’t talk. I simply stated the time. Big Al thought that was far too much conversation. “I never said you could have no cell phone.” He was right. He hadn’t. Unfortunately, from his viewpoint, neither had he said I couldn’t. Cursing under his breath, he shuffled back to his desk to amend the shop rules.

When my break came, I was ready to run. I reached the carousel just as the last riders were mounting their steeds. I didn’t see Andy but I followed his instructions and climbed on. I grasped the pole tightly as my noble steed, Jessie, rose and fell in time to the organ music. After the carousel reached maximum speed, I felt my phone vibrate

“Where are you?” I eyed the crowd as I whirled past.

“Next time around check outside the door.”

I did and spotted Andy – briefly. He was standing across the street on Ocean Terrace. He raised his hand as if to wave. If he actually did make the gesture I didn’t catch it. Jessie and I had already spun by. “Meet me in the photo booth. The small one with the curtain.” He gave me directions.

As the merry-go-round came to a halt, Jessie stopped in the high position. I tumbled off and headed for the booth. I peered under the curtain and recognized Andy’s jeans and loafers. As I opened the curtains, he shoved a few bills in my hand. “Put those in so we can buy some time in here.”

I slid the money into the slot, pushed onto the stool next to Andy, and pulled the curtain closed. “Talk fast. This seating arrangement is rather painful.”

“Okay, first and most important, smile. We’ll have these pictures forever.”

“Luckily you look your best.” I scowled. Andy checked out his image in the reflective glass. Wrinkles in his polo shirt and around his eyes gave him away. “Did you by any chance sleep in your car last night?”

The camera flashed as he shook his head. “No sleep involved. I thought I should keep an eye on you. I’ll be fine.”

How lucky was I to find a boyfriend would sleep in his car to keep an eye on me? How unlucky was I to find a boyfriend who needed to sleep in his car to keep an eye on me? I spoke through gritted teeth. “You should go home and take a nap but first tell me what’s up.”

“Turns out that your Mr. Smarmy is Big Al’s stepson. He was estranged from his stepfather for years. They gotten close in the past few years – especially after Mrs. Big Al died. Now, the police are looking at Big Al and Bobby Briggs . . . that’s his name . . . the cops are looking at them for fraud. Smile. Seems Jonas was right about Big Al and the money. He was skimming.”

“Do the cops think Big Al murdered Jonas?”

“If they do, smile, I haven’t heard about it. But let’s proceed on the assumption he did. I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to work there if you are on his bad side. And you are.”

“But if the authorities are onto Big Al for fraud, he’ll lose his job, right?” I saw the side of Andy’s head reflected in the glass.

“Knowing is one thing. Proving is another. We don’t know when or if he’ll go. For all we know, he thinks you’re the one who fingered him.”

“Look Andy, Mr. Smarmy doesn’t realize that I know who he is. I can use that. I can leak to him that I’m not interested in fraud.”

“Smile. How are you going to do that? Casually take a walk down his street, maneuver to run into him, and drop into the conversation that you don’t care what Big Al steals, you’ll never tell.”

I spoke to his reflection in the glass. “I’m clever. I’ll think of something. Anything else?”

“Look, Maggie, I got you into this but now I’m not so sure . . .”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be fine.”

“What if Big Al and Ed are in cahoots?”

“Ed doesn’t strike me as someone you’d recruit to be your partner in crime.”

“That’s why he would be so good. He doesn’t seem the type.” Andy handed me more bills. “Here’s a couple more dollars. You can keep the first strip, as long as you don’t leave them laying around the apartment or show them around at work. Let’s take some pictures for me.”

“Yeah, you’ll want some mementos in case you were right about Ed and one night he kills me in my sleep.” I laughed. Andy didn’t.

CHAPTER 44

If Big Al suspected I had something to do with the law's interest in him, he didn't let on. He behaved the same way towards me that he did towards everyone else. Badly. We all had a relentlessly rotten day. Big Al didn't make a trip to the bank and Mr. Smarmy didn't make a trip to the Boardwalk. I had no opportunity to leak the news that I wasn't interested in fraud. Since I had yet to figure out how to word that leak, I wasn't too disappointed.

I spent my lunchtime lying on the sand. It was, of course, a beautiful beach day. I feared I would never see a cloud in the sky again. That's why I realized no weather was involved when I felt the shade on my body. To tell the truth, the coolness felt good. I didn't rush to open my eyes. But when the shadow persisted, I looked up. A man towered above me. My first reaction was surprise. The figure didn't belong to the only man I expected to find looming over me, Andy. As my eyes adjusted, I realized Karl Elkins was casting the shadow.

"Hi." He plopped onto the sand beside me. "Is this what you do on your break?" He nodded at the unmistakable blue gown neatly folded at the top of my beach towel. "Your manager doesn't object?"

I shrugged. "It's a gorgeous day."

"Yeah, and they're all like this now. Every single day. It's gotta rain soon. I mean how long can this go on?" He didn't want an answer. He wanted to whine. I said nothing while he grimaced and wiped his forehead with the hem of his T-shirt. When he spoke again, he changed the subject. "I saw you and thought we could talk." He didn't specify a topic. He didn't have to. I knew. Aside from the weather, Karl Elkins only had one topic of conversation. He checked in with Andy almost daily to see if the Angel investigation had wound down and Andy could start the search for Bunny Elkins. I didn't even wait for a question. I just answered.

"I'm sorry. I don't have any news about your wife. I never hear anything. As I said, I've never been to headquarters. You still don't have any news?"

"No. Her friends say she left because I was smothering her. I didn't smother her."

Based on my limited knowledge of the man, I would be willing to say Karl had the potential to be a first-rate smotherer.

"I loved her." He stuttered, "I still do. I miss Bunny. I miss being married. The way married was before Bunny got all caught up in her job." He lit a cigarette and gazed out to sea. "I even started smoking again, to solve my nerves. I gave these things up over a year ago." He eyed his cigarette with disdain. I expected, I hoped, that he would grind it out in the sand. For a second it appeared he might. Then he explained, "I have no reason to quit now. I only got in shape for Bunny." A smile, more rueful than wistful, crossed his face along with a plume of smoke.

Karl told me the story of his physical makeover in excruciating detail. How many crunches he did (two hundred at a shot). How many miles he jogged (thirty five a week). How much weight he pressed. (Me, even after a summer of eating free ice cream.). "I've run down every road in this county.

People who saw me the first day would not even have recognized me if they passed me a year later.” Why? Because a year before Karl’s nebbish face had a body to match. But he had devoted the next twelve months to developing the physique that was now, he confessed, deteriorating at an alarming rate. I gave him a pep talk with all the usual bromides about keeping fit for yourself, your health, your feeling of well-being but Karl claimed he didn’t care about himself. I didn’t think he was ready for the *you’ll find somebody else* lecture so I fell silent. If Karl had been smothering Bunny wouldn’t he have pressed her for details of her job? He might have information about Jonas Angel that he didn’t even know he had. How could I turn the conversation in that direction? I didn’t have to. Karl broached the topic.

“Have they found anything out about the Angel boy?”

“I don’t know much about that. Nobody tells us anything.”

“Us?”

“The people at the store. I never met Jonas. You know more about him than I do.”

“I never really met him either. Didn’t even know what he looked like . . . except from those picture Christmas cards they sent. I might have seen him at a party at Bunny’s office but she didn’t ask me to come that often. Not at all in the last couple years.” His voice quavered.

Oh, oh. The topic was headed back to Bunny. “But you told me Bunny talked about how she didn’t like him. When did that start?”

“She thought he was a charming kid but a phoney..”

“So she held Jonas’s charm against him?”

Karl shook his head. “No, I remember the first thing that got her ire up. She caught him doing a drug deal on the phone, her phone, when she came back to her desk one afternoon. Got her all riled up. She didn’t care what he did but she didn’t think he had any right to involve the company.”

“Was anyone in the business mixed up in his drug dealings?”

“Only all those girls he dated and he dated a lot of them. Bunny didn’t like the way he hit on all the women.”

Pushing for names was fruitless. Karl didn’t know any. His knowledge of Bunny’s dislike of Jonas was general. “Did Bunny ever say anything about Big Al Braddock?”

“Did she! He was a good employee. He worked at Heavenly Dips even longer than she did and she was there for twelve years.”

“So she liked him.”

“No, she hated him. Thought he was rude and obnoxious. She tried to tell Max. She did get him to send Big Al to some management training but after a week or so he’d be he same old disgusting bastard he was before.”

“How so?”

“He smoked in the hallway. He spat in the parking lot. He made off color remarks that bugged Bunny. I told her to lighten up but she hated the guy. Good thing she didn’t see him that often –

although in the winter he spent some time in the corporate office.” Elkins drew quotation marks in the air. “Helping.”

“At least Jonas didn’t smoke, spit or make obscene remarks.” I threw out the comment and waited for Elkins to redirect the conversation to his wife’s opinion of Jonas but he didn’t. He gazed over the surf with a smile I didn’t understand on his lips and a faraway look in his eyes. “Do you think it will ever rain again?”

“Don’t know.”

“Man, I hope it does. This drought is making me crazy.”

Karl and I sat in silence staring at the ocean doing its daily job. Maybe it was the gentle surf that softened my attitude towards him. Obviously the guy had made some mistakes in his marriage. And now he was suffering. I had to feel bad for him. If only he’d figured out what he’d been doing wrong sooner.

“Thanks for listening.” He mumbled as he climbed to his feet. “See you soon.”

I had no doubt. Some things were inevitable. Death, taxes, and Karl Elkins asking about his wife. “Nice talking to you.” I smiled politely before settling facedown onto my beach towel. After a brief period of shade, the sun streamed back onto my back. Elkins was gone.

CHAPTER 45

Maxwell Angel closed all the Heavenly Dips stores so that employees could sing at Jonas's funeral – in full Heavenly Dips regalia. Apparently, since we wore robes, he believed we were a choir. Ed, Sharmaine, Hilde, and I had, by some quirk of fate or of Heavenly Dips management, been included in the lucky group of employees that ended up inside St. Catharine's in Spring Lake. Had I not destroyed them, I would have been the only one in blue wings waiting for the service to begin. In my temporary white wings, I didn't stand out from the crowd.

There was one good thing about being involved: the temperature inside the church. The air was as cooling as the Heavenly Dips freezer but not so punishing. The Catholic church, which loomed above the lake in Spring Lake, was the home parish not of Jonas's parents but of his paternal grandmother who had been buried from the church only nine weeks earlier. Maxwell and Amanda Angel had lived in two bedrooms of Elizabeth Kennedy's Victorian mansion while Maxwell labored to build his business. St. Catharine's, where the milestones in Jonas's childhood had been marked, was the church in which he had been christened and the church from which he would be buried.

Three priests and three altar boys processed to the back of the church to welcome Jonas and, after a few prayers, turned and led the funeral procession down the aisle. First came the casket escorted by six pallbearers who, had they been posing with Adirondack chairs instead of a coffin, I would have believed were modeling the expensive blazers on their backs.

The Angel family followed. Maxwell Angel and his wife Amanda struggled under the weight of their grief. Each of Jonas's parents held the arm of a miniature Amanda, whom despite her red and swollen eyes, I recognized from photos as Allison Angel. Seeing the family in person confirmed what I'd noted in the family snapshots. Jonas had gotten the self-assurance that comes with wealth from his father but he had been lucky to get his looks from his mother. She had the same clear blue eyes and striking dark hair I had noted in pictures of Jonas. She was neatly attired all in white chosen, I read later in the *Asbury Park Press*, to celebrate Jonas's life.

Schylar Devereaux, supported by a couple I assumed were her parents, trailed closely behind members of the extended Angel family. The Devereauxs stood out in the group as less attractive and less affluent. As I watched, I had a terrible thought. The Devereaux family looked unhappy, but they also looked angry. Bitter that the meal ticket they had hoped would support their daughter had vanished? I felt guilty at the thought but not so guilty that I could drive it from my head.

Andy came in near the end of the procession and sat two pews in front of us on the other side of the church. Hilde nudged me and pointed. "See that guy over there? The one in the navy sports jacket." I realized that she was pointing to Andy.

"That sort of tan guy with the more or less sandy blonde hair that seems kind of sun-bleached?" The less specific I sounded, the less suspicious I sounded. Right? If I had described Andy as that incredibly handsome guy with the chiseled features and the cool, penetrating green eyes, Hilde might have noticed my interest.

“He’s the guy who came to store to interview us. Don’t you remember him?” Hilde sounded amazed.

“Sure.” I tried to sound distracted which is hard to do when whispering directly into someone’s ear.

“He’s cute don’t you think?”

“Isn’t he kind of old for you?”

“You know, Meg, you have a thing about age. I think he’s handsome. He has green eyes. They are a very cool shade. Have you seen them up close?”

“I didn’t really notice.” I lied. That cool shade was one of the first things I noticed about Andy. Depending on the light, Andy’s eyes called to mind the waters of the Caribbean, the fields of Ireland, or the emeralds of Tiffany’s. My eyes were also green but their color evoked the Army jackets worn during jungle warfare. “So you’ll miss Jonas, won’t you?” I tried to shift Hilde’s attention back to the reason we had all assembled. But Hilde’s eyes remained fixed on Andy. “Do you think he has a girlfriend? I’ve never seen him with one . . . you know . . . for sure.”

“Never?” How often had she seen Andy?

“Well, when he questioned me and when he came to the store.”

“He was working. That’s his job. He wouldn’t bring a date to work.” Actually, he would. He had. I giggled to myself.

There was no more giggling after the funeral mass began. I was shaken by the palpable grief inside the church. Beside me Ed, Sharmaine, and Hilde seemed unaffected. I couldn’t chase the image of Amanda Angel’s face from my mind. Until the week before Amanda Angel had been a woman with everything. If you believed the press, Amanda Kennedy had, after a privileged upbringing, married her husband for love before he built his business -- and a very nice life for his family. Suddenly, she was a woman who knew only grief. Certainly she must have worried about Jonas but I imagined her thinking that his adolescent antics would end and, just as Sharmaine had predicted, Jonas would become his father. I made all this up based on a fleeting moment when Amanda Angel’s eyes met mine and let me see the depth of her pain. I saw it and I felt it. I suspected I was the only one of the group in my pew that had. Even before the service ended, Ed whispered the suggestion that I host a small get-together. We were still on the church steps when my coworkers decided that coming to my place to watch cable was a great idea. So much for grieving.

CHAPTER 46

Spending hours in front of the tube seemed like an appealing thought but I was twenty-four. Excuse me, thirty-four. The others were not. I couldn't understand why they had nothing better to do but they all claimed that they didn't. I hoped that under their cool surfaces they were affected by Jonas's death and the Angel family's grief. I wanted to believe that but I didn't. They wanted to kick back, eat my food, and watch my tube.

I made lemonade -- with powder, not lemons. We had a late lunch of pizza that Ed picked up at Klee's -- with my money. In less than fifteen minutes the group polished off all but a few slices, even the ones with spinach that I ordered for myself. Then we settled down for a long afternoon of television viewing. Ed, the only one who had changed out of his angel gear so it would be fresh for the next day, took the sofa, the entire sofa. Hilde sat upright in the middle of the floor. Sharmaine staked out the armchair. I'm not sure how Lynyrd got his invitation but he arrived from one of his many jobs and, after killing off the last of the pizza, squeezed onto the worn cushion with her. I grabbed a pillow and reclined across the linoleum that was only marginally harder than the pillow. Once again everyone commented on the fact that I had premium channels. Then we watched reruns on one of the many cable stations that offered television new only to those under ten. We started with a half-hour of "Cheers," the episode where Sam acts like a ladies man, Woody says something dumb, Frazier acts pompous, Norm drinks beer, Cliff pontificates, and Carla insults them all. We followed "Cheers" with four more sitcoms all from decades before my guests were born, some from decades before I was born.

Between "I Love Lucy" and the "The Lucy Show" I brought out some salsa and chips and called it dinner. We ate in front of two more sitcoms and a episode of Charlie's Angels. When "Bewitched" came on, Ed spiked the lemonade with tequila and a slice of lime and declared the concoction a margarita. He and Hilde started working their way through a pitcher. Sharmaine and Lynyrd drank beer from Ed's thirty pack, that is the thirty pack he purchased with my money

After two episodes of "Bewitched", we switched to "Matlock" because Ed had fond memories of watching the detective show with his mother. It was the episode where Matlock's client is falsely accused. Although Ed picked the show, he was the first one to yawn. Hilde was the first to close her eyes. I felt fairly certain I'd identified the culprit who had framed Matlock's client as I drifted off on the hard linoleum. Soon Andy Griffith's voice faded away and I fell into a deep sleep. The floor seemed even harder and definitely colder when the rising sun woke me. The morning sky was gray. That wasn't unusual. What was unusual was that the gray sky was directly above me. Rising to a sitting position was a struggle. I found myself in a cage with two benches, four wire mesh walls, and half a tin roof. I was fairly certain I had just awakened on a ferris wheel.

The car resembled the one I rode on Fun Town Pier but felt considerably less spacious. I couldn't even straighten my legs. I put my palms on the cold metal bench and yanked myself up. As my eyes came level with the back of the seat I saw nothing. I climbed onto the bench. Whoa. I was on

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a ferris wheel all right, but no ferris wheel I recognized. Instead of the ocean or bay view I expected, I saw trees. Miles and miles of pine trees. Where was I?

I peered down onto the grounds of what appeared to be a small fair, the kind of traveling carnival that pops up periodically in a town near you. Although the portable ride wasn't high when compared to the big amusements in Seaside Heights, the ferris wheel was the tallest of the amusements scattered across the grass. I was not happy to find myself alone at its top.

How was I going to get down? There was one obvious answer: wait for the fair to open. But who knew what time these amusements got rolling. The sun was still big, orange, and low in the sky but it had cleared the horizon. I had no idea what time the sun rose, except that it happened before I got up. Six? It had to be later than six. I shivered, the first time I'd ever done anything but swelter in my bright blue angel gown. My bare feet were downright cold. With my luck, today would be the day the drought ended. This was shaping up to be one darn inconvenient situation. I slumped on the cold metal bench and considered my options. I could worry about how I ended up on the ferris wheel later. What mattered was how I got *off* the ferris wheel.

Didn't this carnival have a guard on duty? Of course, if the security was good I probably wouldn't have spent the night on the ferris wheel in the first place. Nonetheless I invested a few minutes in screaming for help. My voice was weak and strangely hollow. The words came out slow and deep like voices in movie nightmare sequences. Heeeeeeeelloooooooo. Caaaaaaaan yooooooooou heeeeeeeeeelpppppppp meeeeeeeee. Screaming accomplished nothing. I stopped.

I wasn't at all sure I should climb down. I wasn't at all sure that I *could* climb down. I didn't imagine I would be able to climb any better than I could speak. The sensible course of action was to stay put and wait for carnival workers to arrive. When a half hour passed and the sensible course of action produced no results, I decided to climb. The ferris wheel appeared to be an old design full of heavy girders with rims that a foot could fit between and lots of wires that hands could hold onto. Going out the door was not an option. It was locked by some sort of bolt on a hinge on the outside of the cage.

Two slabs of tin meeting in a point covered most cars but half of the roof that was supposed to be above my head was missing. I stood on the bench and tried to hoist myself up. Andy never harangued but he did hint that I might want to work out on occasion. If I had taken his advice I probably would have been able to lift myself through the roof on my first try. Since I didn't, I couldn't. I slipped back to the floor with a loud thud. I climbed back on the seat and, over the top of the car, managed to grab the edge of the doorjamb. I was swinging my feet in an effort to propel myself up when it started. The ferris wheel. My car couldn't go up much farther but that was the direction I was headed. The ride seemed to take forever but I think only seconds passed before the car swept around to the platform. When it stopped I was still swinging from the roof. I dropped onto the floor of the car.

Standing in front of me was a man in his thirties, really more of a giant in his thirties, who apparently had joined the carnival from the World Wrestling Federation. He stood with his feet firmly planted and his massive arms crossed across his chest. “And *who* are you?”

“Thank you so much.” I waited for The Rock-wannabe to open the gate to the cage. He opened only the top half. Ignoring the hint that I should remain inside, I climbed over the half-door talking all the while. “I am so glad you came. Did you hear me yelling? I thought I would have to climb down.” When my feet were back on solid ground, I turned and smiled up into gray eyes that made Lynyrd’s cold eyes resemble molten lava. The man remained immobile. All of him. Arms. Legs. Eyes. Lips. Especially his lips. This man was not going to smile.

“Well, thanks. I’ll just call a friend and have him pick me up. If you can tell me where I am. I’m not sure how I got here. I certainly didn’t come of my own free will, although this place looks great. It’s just that I’m staying in Seaside Heights and we’ve got impressive ferris wheels there. So I wouldn’t under normal circumstances come here, wherever here is, to ride the ferris wheel. Although if I weren’t staying in Seaside Heights . . .” The man’s face made impassive look animated. “So,” I shifted gears. “If you could just direct me to a phone . . . I don’t seem to have my cell phone with me . . . As you noticed I don’t even have shoes with me.”

One of us had to move. I figured the one had to be me. I thanked him for his help and tried to slip by him. Before I reached the ramp he moved a strong hand and hooked it through my arm at the elbow. “You ain’t going nowhere.”

I turned and stared into his eyes that didn’t appear so much cold as artic. Apparently breezy wouldn’t work with this guy. I wasn’t his type so sexy was out. I considered weepy but he didn’t seem like the type who would melt at the sight of tears. There weren’t many approaches left. I tried aggressive.

“Listen, buddy,” I virtually spat the words, “I don’t know what you’re trying to pull here but when I tell my lawyer that someone managed to stick me on your ferris wheel and send me to the top while your security . . . well, let me ask. Where was your security while I was being carried into your fair and thrown onto a ride that should have been guarded?” I thought I was getting somewhere. The guy’s eyes narrowed. Of course, he appeared even meaner than before but I suspected he was thinking over what I said. “So, listen. You appear a bit miffed that I spent the night on your ferris wheel. So you could call the police and have them charge me with trespassing. And then I charge you with negligence. That would be, as they like to say in business, a lose-lose. On the other hand . . .”

The monolith spoke. “Just get out of here.”

“Ah . . . sure . . . I’m gone. Could you just point me to a phone?”

The guy snarled.

“I’ll just find one. There must be one along the main road that I could see from above which is located . . . that way.” I pointed right. He pointed left. “Thanks.” I took a few steps down the ramp when I realized I had nothing to lose. “I don’t suppose I could borrow your cell phone, could I?”

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The man took a deep breath and let the air out slowly. I was just about to turn away when he tossed me a flip phone.

CHAPTER 47

Close to two hours after I'd reached Andy on the borrowed cell phone, the sound of screeching brakes announced his arrival. He leapt out of the car and rushed to the bench where I was sitting with Barry, monolith who I had pegged as a WWF wanna-be. "Sorry, traffic was horrible. I left as soon as I could. I was with Max when you called. Andy stood beside me stroking my hair as if I were Lassie come home. "What happened to you?"

"We wish she knew." Barry answered Andy's question to me. "I glance up and see this woman in a loud blue dress in one of our cars. I was ready to call the cops on her." He chuckled at the thought.

"Yeah. We didn't really hit it off at first. But that was . . ."

"Bet it was two hours ago now." Barry held a box of grocery store donuts in front of Andy. "Want a donut?" Andy didn't. I accepted my third.

Barry shook his head. "You know, I'm no PI but the way I figure it, somebody gave her a knock-out drug, although judging from her appetite, not a very strong one, carried her here, and dumped her in one of our cars. They must have known how to work the wheel. We've been over the names of all of the people that she works with. I don't recognize any of them. If this was some sort of a sick joke, it wasn't funny. The gag was really dangerous. I don't know what would have happened if you went ahead and climbed down."

"Climbed?" Andy was horrified.

"That reminds me did you bring my shoes?"

"In the car. You climbed?"

"Didn't have to. Barry here brought the car down."

Barry explained to Andy that I didn't recall a thing after I dozed off in front of the TV the night before.

I clarified. "Hilde fell asleep first. I think Ed yawned."

"Didn't the fact that you were all passing out make you suspicious?"

"Not particularly. We were watching "Matlock"."

"You love "Matlock"."

"Yeah, but I'm thirty four. I think even the producers would tell you that twenty year old kids was not the show's strongest demographic. We watched the show because . . ."

"You're thirty-four?" Barry interjected. "I wouldn't have guessed. You could pass for twenty-four."

Lucky thing, I thought to myself. Aloud I thanked him.

"Meg, can we talk about what happened to you?" Andy worked hard to keep his tone even.

"I have no idea what happened to me. I fell asleep on the floor of my apartment and woke up on a ferris wheel. You now know everything I know about what happened to me."

"Except that I saved you." The pride in Barry's tone was unmistakable.

“Yep. I owe this man my life.” Barry was living proof that one cannot judge a book by its cover.

Even Andy had warmed up to him by the time he guided me into his car. “I am sorry it took so long. I couldn’t just run on Max. He was telling me that the cops confirmed that Jonas was killed with his own golf club. At least that’s the assumption since his is missing and the imprints match the model. I moved as fast as I could but you just don’t walk away when someone is delivering that kind of news.”

While I was impressed with the beneficence of Barry, Andy was concerned with the malevolence of the unknown perpetrator of the stunt on the ferris wheel. “This time you’re out of that job. You’re quitting.”

“And let whoever did this to me win? I don’t think so. I need to be in that store every day to annoy them . . . him . . . her.”

“We don’t really know if one of your coworkers is responsible.”

“Right. We were all drugged by a stranger who stole me from the midst of my coworkers for the sole purpose of depositing my sleeping body on a ferris wheel. We have to find out what happened to the others. Barry did check the other cars just to be sure they weren’t there.”

“This was done as a warning, a second warning. You cannot stay at Heavenly Dips. You’re in danger.”

“Danger, schmanger. Nothing bad has happened to me.”

“You got pushed off the Boardwalk. Then this. You hate that job. All you want to do is quit. Now, because you believe someone wants you out, you won’t go.”

“I have to work at least one more shift so we can gauge everyone’s reactions. We have to find out who did it. Maybe when I come in they’ll all laugh like my little escapade was a practical joke.”

I borrowed Andy’s cell and called Big Al and told him I had a personal situation I had to handle. After a lecture on why I was irresponsible to call in after I missed my start time, he told me, grudgingly, that I could cover an afternoon shift. “But don’t be late.” He snarled as I disconnected.

I returned my attention to Andy who appeared pensive. “I don’t want to bring the local police in on this. I’ll call Petino. If this incident is tied to Jonas’s murder, I don’t want a local cop spooking the perp. Let’s go to your apartment and see if anything is wrong there.”

I assumed he meant something other than the decorating atrocities.

CHAPTER 48

On my walk to work I spotted Sharmaine on her favorite amusement, dancing – but not very well. When the music stopped she wiped her face with the bright blue skirt of her uniform. His face was already flushed so I couldn't tell if she blushed when she spotted me. "I am a little off today. I fell asleep in your chair. I was out cold. I was worried when we woke up and you were gone. I hope you were okay."

"I was fine." I took my place on the pad next to her. The last thing I felt like doing was dancing but I needed to get Sharmaine talking. "Did everyone spend the night?"

"When I woke up, Ed was asleep on the couch. Hilde was on the floor. Lynyrd came back with coffee just after I woke up." Sharmaine held the money in her hands but did not put the coins in the slot. She bit her lower lip. I sensed tears welling inside her. "Meg, tell me. I need to know."

I bit my lips hard to control whatever reaction I might have to Sharmaine's question.

"Did you . . . are you . . . I mean . . . I know you and Lynyrd were chatting the other day . . . and I know he thinks you're kind of cool . . . you know, for someone your age. I just wondered if . . . did you and Lynyrd leave together last night? He said you were gone when he woke up to go get coffee but . . . I mean, did you and he . . ."

"No way." I heard myself. I was yelling. "I would never, never do that." She didn't have to know that I would never, never do that . . . even if I hated her . . . even if Lynyrd were the last man on earth . . . even if the world were going to end in fifteen minutes . . . even if I hated her *and* Lynyrd was the last man on earth *and* the world was going to end in fifteen minutes.

Beside me I felt her entire body relax. "I'm sorry. I know you're my friend. I know you wouldn't lie to me."

I wasn't lying about my feelings for Lynyrd. Everything else but not that. I was so busy thinking about my own perfidy I didn't realize that although Sharmaine was concerned about what I hadn't been doing, she never actually asked what I had been doing.

After only one dance, a dance during which I believed I outperformed Sharmaine, the two of us headed to work. As we approached Andy was on the Boardwalk in front of the store waiting. He claimed to be waiting for Big Al to return from the bank. Andy had already talked to Ed and Hilde, both tired and healthy, under the guise of needing information on Jonas. When he asked if anyone knew if a Meg Daniels would be in that day, Ed had told Andy that he was really worried about me. So worried that he did not include one GMAT prep word in his monologue. Hilde explained that she had stayed overnight at my apartment but I was gone when she woke up. She thought I might have gone jogging. Andy told me he had difficulty stifling a guffaw.

Ed pounced on me the moment I reached the counter. If I had a secret boyfriend that was okay with him. He was happy for me. As a matter of fact, he had been a little worried about my social life. But if I had run off in the middle of the night I could at least leave him a note. "That PI guy asked if I called the police. It never dawned on me but next time I will. He had a good idea."

Hilde spoke through yawns. "I woke up on our floor this morning, Meg. No offense but that linoleum is really hard." I agreed that floors often are. "Ed's margaritas hit me over the head like a hammer. I was out for almost twelve hours." She pulled me aside. "I wish I knew that PI was coming today. I look awful. Don't you think he's cute?" Her dark eyes so hard when they looked at me softened as she gazed at Andy. "I think he's cute. He came in to see Big Al, I guess, and when he wasn't here he chatted with all of us. He's really nice. Do you think he likes me?"

"I'm sure he likes you, Hilde, but at his age he probably has a girlfriend -- or even a wife."

"He isn't wearing a ring." Hilde protested.

"Why don't you ask him?" Let Andy take care of this.

But Hilde didn't ask. While Andy came to the counter to ask if he could speak to me privately, Hilde watched him with adoring eyes. Looking at him through those eyes, I just didn't get it. Sure, I thought Andy was adorable but I was thirty-four. Hilde was nineteen. What did she want with a man who was pushing forty? Okay, not pushing very hard but pushing. In this decade.

"Gotta answer some questions." I spoke to no one in particular as Andy and I started off down the Boardwalk. And I would have answered his questions, if I had given him a chance to ask one. "According to Sharmaine, Lynyrd was gone when she woke up. He told her he went out to get coffee. Maybe he wanted to scare me off because he thinks I'll rat him out to the cops on the drug thing. Although I've never actually seen him involved in any drug action."

"He makes no effort to avoid you. I don't get it, unless somehow he's connected you to me. I've never talked to him but it wouldn't be hard for him to link me to the investigation. I'll see what he has to say."

I showed Andy the paint ball stand where Lynyrd worked. Andy watched a few minutes before confirming my sentiments. "I'm hot just standing here in street clothes. How can he stand it under that . . . that suit? He looks like one of those scientists who work with the Ebola virus."

"Lynyrd has a lot of shortcomings but laziness isn't one of them. Sharmaine tells me he has three jobs. He works here during the day, on the pier on weekends, and I think he has some restaurant job."

"Not to mention his sideline." Andy grimaced as the human target fell to the ground in an effort to dodge the paint. "Ooooooh. I don't know if I'd be willing to work as a human target."

"He tells me he's going to quit the drug thing when he gets ahead. Maybe he already has. The entire time I've been around him, I've never seen any evidence of drug use -- or sales. Oh oh."

Andy followed my gaze. The human target was removing his helmet. He brushed a hand through his hair that was plastered to his skull by perspiration. His black hair. Lynyrd was not that day's human target.

"I thought he would be here now."

Andy waited ten seconds before he responded with a shrug. "See if you can find out anything about his hours from Sharmaine. Let's go the store and see if Big Al has returned."

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“I can ask Sharmaine about Lynyrd’s schedule but I have to be careful. When she woke up and he was gone, she was worried. She thought he was with me. She was afraid there was something going on.”

Andy gave that idea consideration. “She thinks Lynyrd likes you?”

“She knows that he likes me but she worries that he *likes* me. But she worries that Lynyrd *likes* everyone. Every female at least. And she worries that every female *likes* Lynyrd.”

Andy thought for a moment before he spoke. “I’m assuming she’s wrong.”

CHAPTER 49

“You’re closing tonight.”

“Me?” Had I heard Big Al correctly? My first reaction was pride. I, a lowly Little Dipper, was being asked to close. I, a lowly Little Dipper who was never allowed to work the register? Pride was replaced with skepticism. Was Big Al setting me up? Skepticism turned to fear. What was Big Al planning? I had to get a call off to Andy. This was not a night for me to walk to a meeting place. I wanted, no I needed, Andy at the store by midnight.

Big Al didn’t seem to be any happier about the news than I was. “I don’t like it but I don’t see any other way. I got somewhere I gotta be.” Sure -- to establish his alibi. What about Ed? Sharmaine? Hilde? Why had he let them clock out within the past hour? I could see why Big Al wouldn’t want to let the kids who blew in and out of the Heavenly Dips jobs on a weekly basis close. But was I any better? I had just started. We both knew that I hadn’t earned the white wings I was wearing.

“Sorry this just came up.” He explained as he stuffed his wallet, cigarettes, and keys into his pockets. “You’ll be fine.” He reassured me. “I emptied the register. You’ll only be alone for an hour if that. You’ll just have a small deposit to make. Don’t make no show of what you’re doing. Put the cash in one of them bags.” His instructions were specific enough to be insulting. “Don’t let this go to your head. You ain’t keeping those white wings, you know. I’m still getting those blue ones for you.”

Al repeated the instructions – every word of the instructions – before he stepped out the door. He made it clear that he was very worried -- even though he’d left under fifty dollars in the register. Four five dollar bills. Twenty-four one dollar bills. Sixteen quarters. Ten dimes. Twelve nickels. Forty pennies. I got his point. He knew every bill and coin in the drawer. He wasn’t worried about theft; he was worried about embezzlement. As if I’d risk losing this great job by skimming from the profits.

As soon as I heard the back door close, I was on the phone. Voice mail answered. “Andy, Big Al is letting me close. I don’t like this Andy. I am being set up. You were right. I should have quit. I will. I promise. I will. Just get here as fast as you can. Not the meeting place. Here. Come to the store.” There was more than a hint of desperation in my voice.

Motivated less by my work ethic than the cameras hidden in the store, I greeted customers politely, dipped energetically, and worked the register as well as I could. I left several credits for Big Al to handle to the next day. Between customers I ran to the back and checked the timeclock. The hands had never moved so slowly.

Late at night most of the families had disappeared from the Boardwalk. The customers were mostly groups of kids many of whom offered some variation of the tremendously humorous Uranus comment. I took no chances at incurring their wrath. I laughed every time. “Good one.” “Very clever.” “Never heard that before.”

I was surprised but happy to see Schyler Devereaux headed my way. She wouldn’t rob me but more importantly she wouldn’t ask me about my, excuse me, Uranus. My biggest worry was that she

would bore me to death with tales of her great love affair with Jonas. I'm sure she would have done that if she was sober but, I realized as soon as she spoke, she wasn't. I scooped a Cherubic Cherry on a cloud and watched as the ice cream melted onto her hands between her very occasional licks. She didn't seem to notice. All she wanted to do was talk. After I gave her change for a twenty, a twenty she claimed Jonas had given her for ice cream. I had nothing else to do. I listened. "I remember you. You were nice to me when I came to ask about Jonas. The others aren't nice to me. Except Ed but Ed . . . well Ed . . . Ed would pretty much do anything I asked."

So Ed's secret crush on Schyler was no secret.

"Like I could like him. I love Jonas. I still love Jonas. Did you know Jonas?"

As I shook my head, I was very conscious of the planets orbiting about my head but my outfit didn't seem to put Schyler off. I was her new best friend. She leaned across the counter to confide in me. Her ice cream toppled off its cone and slid down the glass. That mess would slow me down at closing. "It's my fault, he's dead. If I had gotten to the bar earlier, he couldn't have left. You know how that feels?" She stared at me long and hard with the unseeing eyes of a drunk. "Choices I made . . . choices that seemed so unimportant . . . what route to take . . . whether or not to run a light . . . where to park . . . they were a matter of life and death to Jonas. They told me I missed him by a minute. One minute and my whole life could have been different."

I said all the appropriate things. *You can't blame yourself. Hindsight is 20/20. No one could have changed what happened. There was nothing anyone could have done.* My platitudes didn't help. Tears flowed freely down Schyler's cheeks. "If I had been there earlier, he would not have dared leave." She slammed her fist on the glass with a ferocity that drove her point home. I began to see why Jonas had trouble breaking up with her. I didn't even want to ask her to step aside. Behind Schyler a group of four, who if one could believe their shirts all played for the New York Yankees, was growing impatient.

I was relieved when a young woman who appeared to be a good friend rescued Schyler and coincidentally me. I resumed service to the paying customers.

As the little hand crawled towards twelve and I saw no sign of Andy, my apprehension grew. I had done every closing chore I could think of and was ready to run when the clock hit the stroke of midnight. I glanced up the Boardwalk. No Andy. I checked my phone. No call. I considered my options and decided that getting out of the store was the best plan. Who'd know if I closed a few minutes early? Who'd know if I defined *few* the way others define *many*. I pulled down the metal shutter that provided overnight protection from all bad elements, human as well as natural, and locked it. After stashing the money from the register in the bag Big Al provided, I headed towards the timeclock and the back door. That was when I noticed the freezer door was open. Just like a victim in a horror movie, I did exactly the wrong thing. Did I have to close the door? Of course. Did I have to make sure that something hadn't gone awry inside the freezer? Of course not. But did I? Of course.

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I approached the freezer door with caution. Then, just as I would in any b-movie, I felt the hands. Big hands. Big hands strong enough to propel me into the freezer. I fell through the door onto the wooden floor. The door shut behind me and I heard the lock click. The lights inside the freezer went out.

Great. I'd fallen for this trick once before. Okay, not in a freezer but in a confined space. A confined space that, shortly after I was locked inside, was set afire. That's why when Ed first told me that Big Al didn't like me, I engaged my white-winged co-worker in a deep conversation about freezer technology. No manufacturer in this age of consumer litigation would make a freezer that could cause death -- either accidentally or intentionally. I found the switch, turned on the light, and went to the spot where Ed had told me the emergency release was located. I was barely chilled by the time I stepped back out in the store, which appeared empty -- and probably was. I wasn't sticking around to find out.

Going out the back door into a dark alley was not a viable option. With surprising manual dexterity given my adrenalin level, I used the key to raise the metal grate. I didn't waste any time. As soon as the opening door left enough room for me to slide underneath, I did. My fear was punctuated by a fleeting satisfaction that by doing so I was ruining yet another set of wings -- this time white ones. I wasn't worried about Heavenly Dips' uniform budget. I was worried about me.

A few people gawked as I shimmied out on my back. Among them was Mr. Smarmy. For once he wasn't flashing his big white teeth. "Are you okay?" He looked and sounded concerned but I had my doubts. For all I knew he had just tried to kill me.

"I'm calling the cops and I'm not going in that store until they come." I called 911 on my cell phone and then I called Andy. He still didn't pick up. "Andy, I think it's time for me to quit. Someone just tried to kill me."

CHAPTER 50

Mr. Smarmy and I sat at Big Al's desk talking to the two local police officers, one light, one dark, both of whom had arrived on bicycles. The cops who wore shorts and helmets, and looked adorable in both, must have been nearby when the call went out. If not, they should have been training for the Tour de France rather than answering 911 calls in Seaside Heights. As I explained what had happened, the handsome twosome had a difficult time understanding my concern.

"So you locked yourself in the freezer?" The blonde asked.

"No. Someone pushed me into the freezer and locked the door behind me."

"But you let yourself out immediately?" The brunette took the follow up question.

"Yes, but only because I knew about the emergency release."

"So someone played a practical joke on you." The blonde reached a conclusion.

"Some joke. I could have frozen to death. No one knew that I could locate the emergency release."

"Then how did you find out about the release?" It was the brunette's turn to question me.

"One of my coworkers showed me the release."

"So someone did know you knew how to get out." It was the blonde again.

Cute or not, the twosome was beginning to exasperate me. "Someone tried to hurt me."

Mr. Smarmy jumped in. "I think that this was more than a matter of Ms. Daniels accidentally locking herself in the freezer. I do think your idea that it might have been a practical joke is a good one except that the staff had gone for the day. My name is Bobby Briggs. My stepfather is the manager of this store and he had told me that he was worried that Ms. Daniels would be closing the store tonight. She was inexperienced. It was her first time. I just happened to be walking by. I thought I would check on her and see if she required help. I was too late, meaning the grate was down -- although it was not yet midnight -- when suddenly the door slid up and Ms. Daniels slithered out onto the Boardwalk. I think what we have here is a robbery attempt. Someone saw Ms. Daniels alone in the store and took the opportunity. Unfortunately for them, so I guess I should say fortunately, Ms. Daniels had the money in her hand when they pushed her into the freezer. I think we should be on the lookout for a would-be robber."

I didn't agree with Mr. Smarmy's assessment of the situation but I did agree that we should be on the lookout for someone. My opinion? Mr. Smarmy himself might be that someone. I just couldn't figure out how he got to the front of the store so quickly. The perp had to exit through the back door. If not, I would have heard the grate open and close, wouldn't I?

I could have told the young cops about the other scares I'd gotten over the past week or about the security cameras Maxwell Angel had installed. I could have but I didn't. I decided to wait for Andy. The local police wouldn't care about those incidents but maybe Detective Petino would. In the meantime, Mr. Smarmy and the police discussed the aborted robbery as if the alleged crime didn't have much to do with me. I sat on the chair and listened.

“Who are you?” The brunette cop yelled the question. I glanced up to see Andy ducking under the grate.

“I’m here to pick up my girlfriend.” I glanced at Mr. Smarmy in time to see his eyes narrow. Did he know who Andy was? My guess was yes. “What happened?”

“I was attacked.”

“An apparent robbery attempt,” the officer drowned out my response.

Andy turned to me and I shrugged as if to say “whatever.” He appeared more puzzled than concerned as he gave me a quick hug. “Are you okay? I got here as soon as I picked up your message.” I assured him I was fine. I guess he believed me. He joined the boys in the discussion from which I had long since been excluded. I could tell by the touch of a smile on his lips that Andy’s view of the situation was pretty much the same as mine but the cops bought Mr. Smarmy’s analysis.

I knew Andy would want to deal with Petino. He asked the police if he could take me home. The cops said they had all they needed. Mr. Smarmy said he would close up. I said I would make the deposit at the bank. We all said good-night.

As soon as Andy and I hit the Boardwalk I spoke through gritted teeth. “You know that was no robbery attempt.”

“I know.”

“You know that it was no coincidence that Bobby Briggs -- you know Mr. Smarmy -- was at the Heavenly Dips stand when it . . . the attack . . . the alleged attack . . . happened.”

“I know.”

“You know he had the police convinced the incident had nothing to do with me personally.”

“I know.”

“You know he’s wrong.”

“I know.”

“You know I forgot my wings and halo in the store.”

“I didn’t know that. But I do know that you’re not going to need your wings and halo. I know you’re not going to work tomorrow. I know you’re not staying at your apartment tonight. Call Ed and tell him there’s been an attempted robbery and that you have to . . . I don’t know . . . you’re . . . shaken up . . . Just tell him you won’t be in tomorrow. That gives us a day to mull all this over.”

“A whole day off?” A day off just might make my trip into the freezer worth it.

“Sound good?” Andy wrapped an arm around me.

“All but the part about calling Ed. He doesn’t have a phone.”

“We’ll drive by and you can run in and tell him.”

We did drive by but Ed wasn’t at home in my apartment. I left him a note.

CHAPTER 51

“This is where you’re living.” My voice had more than a slightly antagonistic tone to it.

“I told you I was living in the house the Angels had built in Mantoloking. I pointed out their old house when I went to see Hilde. Why would they build something that wasn’t as nice?”

“Nice is not the word to describe this place, Andy. Magnificent is the word.” Andy had told me the Angels had planned to abandon their eighty-year-old brown-shingled oceanfront Victorian for a brand new gray-shingled oceanfront contemporary home. Partial to old houses with traditional windows and covered porches, I wondered why they would move until I stood in the living area, a space apparently professionally decorated although obviously not by the designer responsible for the Heavenly Dips décor, and enjoyed the view through the wide windows. I felt as if I were already on the beach. “I bet this house doesn’t have harvest gold appliances.”

“Odd you should mention that. The house still doesn’t have any appliances. The kitchen isn’t finished yet.” As if I would care.

When Andy led me onto the deck that wrapped around the house, we gazed across grassy dunes at the surf breaking as close as you would ever want the ocean to venture if you weren’t wearing swimwear. I’d seldom seen the stars twinkle as brightly as they did against the pitch black sky. The ocean breeze made it seem as if the heat wave was happening somewhere else.

“I am living in a smoke-stained remnant of the sexual revolution and you are living in 10,000 square feet of oceanfront opulence.”

“I don’t know if it’s 10,000 square feet.” Andy spoke quickly and somewhat proudly before reconsidering. “The exact number wasn’t your point, was it?”

I stared into his cool green eyes. They appeared somewhat amused by my hostility, at least my pretense of hostility.

Andy pulled me into his arms. “But you get to stay here tonight and maybe as long as we’re on this case. I was thinking while you were asleep on the ride up here. I don’t think you should go back to that apartment. Or that job. Stay here.”

“Let me think about this. I can either go back to standing on my feet in oppressive heat for six hours a day. Or, I can lay on one of these chaise lounges I see all around me and spend the day reading and snacking while the ocean breeze . . .” I interrupted myself. “This is a hard one.”

His tone grew solemn. “I think we will prove that Big Al was responsible for pushing you into the freezer.”

“Won’t the cameras tell the story?”

“If the security cameras didn’t catch the action it would be because Big Al adjusted them. He was the only one who knew where they were. There was at least one he didn’t know about. We’ll see if that covers the freezer. If he’s the culprit, and I for one don’t think that there is much doubt that he is, tonight marks the end of his career at Heavenly Dips. I’m fairly sure that Max doesn’t approve of managers locking employees in the freezer, actually for locking employees in anything. I mean I didn’t

see that specific offense listed in the handbook but if I read between the lines it's pretty much implied. If Big Al delivered tonight's warning, logic says he's responsible for your dive off the Boardwalk and your trip on the ferris wheel."

"Then, I could go back." I said with an eagerness that surprised even me.

"I guess so. With him out of the way, you would be out of danger and could go back."

"So I just lay low until we see what happens with Big Al?"

Andy nodded. "I don't think anyone would question your taking a little time off after the incident."

"Speaking of laying low. Is that a double chaise I see behind us?"

Andy turned to check out the porch furniture. "I believe it is."

"Why don't we lay low together and watch the moon rise."

"Why don't I bring out one of the lovely covers I picked up at K-Mart and we can lay low all night and watch the sun rise."

As I drifted off to sleep with the ocean breeze caressing my hair and Andy Beck caressing other parts of my anatomy, I had to admit that laying low was looking a lot better than going back to Heavenly Dips.

CHAPTER 52

I didn't actually set out to see Hilde. I set out to take a walk. When it came time to pick a direction, the thought that Hilde's house was south of our borrowed home did occur to me. I'm not sure what prompted me to go up to the Bossick's door and knock. Actually, I am. I couldn't quite reconcile the image Hilde projected at work with the Hilde that Andy described, or with the house at the beach. I was curious. Plus, I was bored. On my first day off, I didn't miss my job at Heavenly Dips but I did feel a little lonely ensconced on the deck overlooking the ocean.

From my glimpse from Route 35, I concluded that the Bossicks must own the gray shingle Victorian that earlier generations considered spacious. In deference to modern conventions, a monolithic glass palace tripled the size of the house. The addition's architecture was oversized and overwrought. I liked it. Just not as a wing of a classic summer cottage.

It took me a few minutes to find a stretch of wood boards that cut between the tilting fences that protected the dunes and lent a rustic beauty to the scene. Another stretch of path led to a wide deck in front of a glass wall. If the Bossicks were at home, I expected one of them to appear. I plastered a smile on my face and waited under the oversized American flag that snapped in the wind above my head. No one came. I had turned to return to the beach when I heard the voice.

"I was on the phone. I saw you come up. You didn't appear dangerous. Am I wrong?" I turned and found a petite woman was grinning at me -- something I had never seen Hilde do. The resemblance became more pronounced when she feigned a scowl. "I hope not."

"Not dangerous. Just looking for Hilde."

This time the woman did not feign a scowl -- she scowled. When she did, I realized where Hilde got the cold expression that was part of her customer service demeanor.

"My name is Meg. I work with her at Heavenly Dips."

"Oh. I was afraid . . . wondered . . . I didn't know . . . I was under the impression that only kids worked at Heavenly Dips." Mrs. Bossick had spotted me right away. I could fool the young ones with the sartorial equivalent of smoke and mirrors but no way could I fool the old ones. Not that Mrs. Bossick was such an old one. She could not have been fifty yet. "You're the one with the apartment. Do me a favor? If Hilde stays over again, could you ask her to call home?"

I had a flashback to the age of sixteen and mumbled an apology. "Hilde was in her room getting ready for work. Make yourself comfortable. I'll run up and see if she's available." Mrs. Bossick pointed to a wide selection of seating options on the deck. I was settling onto a chaise overlooking the ocean when I heard a glass door slide open behind me. Hilde stepped out -- looking exactly as she did every day when she arrived for work.

"Meg?" Hilde sounded confused.

I stopped my descent onto the chaise. "Hilde." I sounded thrilled to see her.

"How did you know I lived here?"

Now that was a good question. An obvious question. A question I should have anticipated. I

didn't. All the time I'd spent with Andy, and I didn't. I wanted to try the answer a question with a question routine. "I was visiting up the beach and took a walk . . ." I couldn't come up with a question.

Hilde could. "But how did you know to stop here?"

"Someone mentioned that you lived around here and described the house."

Hilde sneered. "I'm sure someone did." I'd barely made the *wh* sound in what, before she continued. "Don't lie to me, Meg. I've seen you with him. With Andy Beck. You're in the Angel house. I was taking a walk . . ." She parodied my explanation. "And I saw you."

Hilde was the one who should be a detective. I'd only been in the Angel house for sixteen hours. "Hilde, there was an incident at work last night and the PI thought I shouldn't stay in my apartment." That was true.

"I could tell what he thought." Her tone was bitter. "I saw you."

I wasn't sure what she saw but her intonation made it clear that Andy and I weren't playing scrabble at the time.

"Hilde, I know you thought he was cute . . ."

"It doesn't matter." Her tone said it did, a lot.

"Hilde, Andy's twice your age. And I'm . . . older . . . we have more in common." I didn't mention that more meant sharing an underwear drawer.

"Whatever you say." Hilde was in a huff and wanted me to know it.

"Hilde, can I tell you a secret?"

"What?" She sounded petulant but petulance was a step in the right direction.

"I lied about my age. I'm not twenty-four. I'm thirty-four." What the heck? Her mother would tell her if I didn't. "Ed guessed I was twenty-four and I was so embarrassed. He didn't think a woman my age should have a job like this one . . . I let him think I was twenty-four. And then I couldn't get out of the lie. Do you understand?"

Hilde did. I could tell. Her sour expression didn't exactly turn sweet but it did soften. She said she understood and I believed that she did. "I know what you mean. You say something or you do something and then you're stuck with the story. I know exactly what you mean." Suddenly, I knew her mind had returned to the issue of Andy Beck. "But still, you knew I liked him. I gave you lots of opportunities to say you liked him too."

"And remember how I tried to say he was too old. That's because I liked him too but I didn't know how to say it." Okay, that was true. More or less. "Hilde, please don't tell the kids at work about Andy. Then you'll have to explain how old I am and that would be embarrassing." I clarified. "For me."

She shook her head. "I don't talk at work. I've got to go." She pulled a pair of dark sunglasses from her apron and covered her eyes. "Why did you come here anyway?"

I shrugged. “Just felt like chatting. I’m not working today. I didn’t know if you were. I thought we could hang out.” I saw my face reflected in her glasses. I wasn’t even lying and guilt was plastered all over my features.

“Sorry, I’m on my way out. I’m covering swing shift.” She fanned out her skirt as if to confirm her destination. Just as she turned to leave her mother appeared -- tray in hand. “I made lemonade for you girls.”

“I can’t, Mom. I’m leaving.” Hilde spoke only a few words to her mother but her attitude added plenty. You’re dumb. You never listen to what I say. You’re a great disappointment to me. You’ll probably get along fine with Meg. “I don’t have time for lemonade.”

“I do. Do you mind?” I smiled and reached for a glass. The icy surface felt great. I might have been at the beach but that didn’t mean I wasn’t experiencing the heat wave.

“Do what you want. Maybe I’ll see you later.” With that Hilde disappeared into the house.

I sipped the lemonade, made not from powder but from actual lemons. “This is great.” I held the cool glass to my forehead. “When you take a walk, you have to walk back. I always forget that part.”

Mrs. Bossick smiled but appeared distracted. She went to glass wall and slid the door shut. She gestured for me to take a seat at a white wooden table under a purple umbrella. “Do you mind if I ask you something?” She slipped into the chair across from me.

Not if it gave me an excuse to sit and polish off the lemonade. I shook my head.

“I’m a little worried about Hilde. I know the Angel boy died and I realize she went out with him a few times . . .”

That was more than I’d realized.

“But she seems so distraught by his death. Has she said anything to you?”

“About Jonas?”

Mrs. Bossick nodded.

“I know she, like a lot of people, had mixed feelings about Jonas but I think she felt terrible about what happened to him. Who wouldn’t? I realized that she was sad. I’ve seen her get emotional. But I don’t know any specifics. I’m sorry I can’t help you.”

Mrs. Bossick gazed into space, formulating her next question until the phone rang. She asked me to stay and disappeared inside to answer the call. I finished the lemonade – mine and the glass she had brought for Hilde. Mrs. Bossick she still hadn’t returned. I put the glasses on the tray and carried it with me as I stuck my head inside the door. A very agitated Mrs. Bossick was pacing the wide tile living room floor discussing a shipment that never left Hong Kong. I gestured that I was leaving. She held up a finger. The universal sign for ‘hang on a minute.’ I could tell the delay would be more than a moment but I nodded. I slid the tray on a tile-topped table and wandered over to a photo display on a long table under a wall of even more pictures.

Clearly Mrs. Bossick loved photographs. There were dozens. The wedding portraits went back three generations. I worked my way through them to recent photos of the Bossick family. There were several recent shots of Hilde but more of Heidi. The twins were identical but Heidi's style was soft, friendly, approachable. I searched for a picture of them together. Call me crazy but if I had twins, at some point I would have photographed them together. I found photos that covered every year of the young Bossick girl's life. One Bossick girl per photo. I couldn't tell them apart.

"I love pictures. I guess you can tell." Having resolved her business problem, Mrs. Bossick joined me in front of the array of photos. She pulled out her favorites to show me. "Hilde was such a beautiful child -- always with a worried expression on her face. I don't really like that get-up she wears when she goes out these days. I think she looks much prettier like this." She handed me a photo that I had assumed was of Heidi.

"I thought Hilde was a twin."

Mrs. Bossick appeared amused. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"I think I heard someone mention Heidi."

"Oh, Heidi. Hilde must have been talking about her childhood. When she was a kid she had this imaginary friend -- really more of an alter-ego. She called her Heidi. She was so cute. Sometimes she would be Heidi all day. She would dress up like Heidi and make us call her Heidi. Her little routine was adorable."

Adorable? I wasn't so sure Mrs. Bossick had the right adjective.

CHAPTER 53

I returned to the house I had christened Scamelot and found Andy reading in the screened-in gazebo. “You’re home early.” I plopped onto a chaise lounge beside his.

“Big Al cracked like an egg on ceramic tile. I think he was relieved to confess and not just to pushing you into the freezer. Big Al believed you had been sent by corporate to catch him skimming money -- especially after the home office refused to let him fire you when it so apparent that . . . well . . . you weren’t the best Little Dipper they ever had.” That comment hurt. I hoped they threw the book at Big Al. “Turns out Jonas was right about Big Al. It’s sad that he never got to see Big Al confess. He’s been stealing from Heavenly Dips for years. Seems that his trips to the bank included an extra stop at his own piggy bank – a lock box he kept in the trunk of his car. Jonas actually trapped him from beyond the grave. He’d given Schyler a wad of twenty dollar bills and told her to break each one buying an ice cream cone at the Heavenly Dips store in Seaside Heights.”

Oops. I’d missed that one. If Schyler told a professional investigator that Jonas had given her money to buy ice cream, the PI would have asked why. I just took the money and made change. I didn’t share that information with Andy.

“The cops of them found five of them in Big Al’s private bank.”

“Did Schyler know why he asked her to do that?”

“No, she would pretty much do anything he asked. Jonas stayed away giving Al enough rope to hang himself.”

“So maybe Jonas’s only fear of Seaside Heights was that Big Al would catch on that he was watching him. So he sent Schyler instead.”

“Possible.” Andy didn’t sound convinced.

I recalled Schyler’s lanky build. “He should have asked someone with my eating habits to do it. He would have gotten faster results.”

“Speaking of you, Big Al maintains that he did not mean to kill you. He believed one more scare might make you leave which he wanted you to do. Desperately. He thought you were on to him.”

I had solved a crime -- just the wrong crime. And okay, maybe *solved* was the wrong word. Maybe *smoked out* was a better term. My presence had simply forced Big Al Braddock into doing something stupid. “So because he thought I was investigating his embezzlement he decided to launch a harassment campaign to force me out? Why bother? I might be gone but the surveillance cameras would remain.”

“He had those all figured out. Or thought he did. Max had told him there were two. He found them and figured out how to block them. Unfortunately for him, he never considered that there might be a third.” Andy shook his head. “He doesn’t deny responsibility for last night. But that’s all he takes responsibility for. He says he took advantage of the earlier attacks on you by adding one more.”

“So I still have enemies out there? How many enemies can one Little Dipper have?” I was preoccupied by that thought but Andy went on with Big Al’s story.

“Even though he denies any involvement in Jonas’s death everyone wants to jump on the band wagon that he killed the kid. Except Maxwell. He feels betrayed by Big Al but he still can’t believe that someone he’s known so long would kill his son. Petino told me that Big Al was spewing details of his crimes. Once he got started, he couldn’t fess up fast enough. I think Big Al would have confessed if he killed Jonas. The cops see the situation differently. I don’t think we can assume that the case is solved but Max suggested that I wait until we see what happens with Big Al before I continue the investigation.”

I was looking forward to some quality time with Andy when he broke the news that he had agreed to do some checking around for Karl Elkins. “He’s not going to give up. I don’t know if I told you but I ran into him the other night. It couldn’t have been an accident. Technically, he’s stalking me. I might as well take advantage of this free time to get rid of him.”

“Why is he so intent on having you do the work?”

“I asked. He said he knew Max Angel would never settle for less than the best.” Andy blushed. “I talked to Max so I have a pretty good idea what I am about to find out. In many missing persons cases, the missing person doesn’t want to be found. Max intimated to me that was the case with Bunny. Unless she lied to Max for some reason, I don’t think Karl will like what I come up with: Bunny Elkins does not want to be found. Nonetheless, I’ll confirm the story with her friends.”

“While you’re talking to them, why don’t you ask for some details on why Bunny hated Jonas?” I forced casualness into my tone.

Andy smiled. “I know what you really want. I go in and tell them I’ve been hired to locate Bunny Elkins and nonchalantly add, ‘by the way my girlfriend thinks she killed Jonas Angel so I’d appreciate your providing any evidence that might incriminate your good friend in his murder’.”

“You’ve got my drift but you could be more subtle. Anyway, you don’t know. Maybe she told them something that would hold a key to his murder.”

“Right.” Andy returned to his reading.

“If it turns out Big Al is not the culprit, I came up with another suspect this morning -- if being a complete lunatic is grounds for suspicion.” I told him the story of my visit to the Bossick house. “Her mother is worried about her. She wanted to ask me something. She hesitated and then the phone rang and she never said what it was that bothered her.”

Andy expressed more concern about my cover. “So, people realize that you know me. We have to think that through. That’s one more reason you shouldn’t go back.” Andy grew pensive.

“Andy, I just told you that Hilde Bossick has been appearing in public as her imaginary twin sister, Heidi, and all you’re worried about is that people will know we are dating.”

“I think about you first. I thought you’d like that. Want a drink?” Andy made no move to get up.

“I can serve myself.”

“So then it wouldn’t be a problem to serve me?” He handed me an empty glass. Luckily, Andy Beck was very cute. I was willing to serve both of us. I retrieved margaritas and chips. We ate, drank, and stared at the ocean. I loved life at the Angel’s beachfront home. “It’s hard to believe we can’t really afford this.”

“Some day we will.” Andy sounded confident.

“Not if we keep living the way we are.” I hated to be practical but somebody had to be. When I am the more pragmatic half of a couple, that couple is in real danger.

“I like the way we live. You can’t complain about this.” Andy was right. I couldn’t complain. “So someday we’ll stop and get nine-to-five jobs but we can’t do that until we’re finished with this life. When we feel the need to settle down . . . when that happens . . . if that happens we’ll stop what we’re doing. In the meantime, I’m off to get the story on Bunny Elkins. I’d ask you to come along but I’m pretty sure you would spend all your time trying to prove she killed Jonas Angel.”

“Let me repeat, it wouldn’t hurt to ask the people you interview what they think.”

Comments like that explained why Andy left me home.

CHAPTER 54

My cover was blown. Hilde knew. Big Al and his son knew. Soon everyone would know that I was Andy's girlfriend. Soon everyone would have a good guess at why I had come to Heavenly Dips. No one would confide in me. Maybe no one would even talk to me. Nonetheless, Andy and I decided I should work one last day at Heavenly Dips. My goal? Observe the reactions of the others to Big Al's arrest and his attempt to warn me off.

Andy dropped me in front of my apartment in Seaside Heights to pack up my meager wardrobe before I reported for work. Eventually, I would have to close the apartment and evict Ed but at the moment I was focused on moving myself to Mantoloking.

As I came through the dilapidated wooden door, Ed greeted me with wide eyes.

"Why do you look so surprised to see me?" I sounded suspicious, perhaps because I tripped over a gigantic cardboard box and a heap of bulging trash bags on my way in.

"I was wondering if you would show up for work today, swing shift by the way. I only scheduled you for five hours. After all, you didn't come to work yesterday. You don't even know that they came and arrested Big Al. He is currently incarcerated." Ed's tone indicated he was excited by the news. I stared at the rerun of "The Beverly Hillbillies," the episode where the Clampetts do something that their snobbish neighbors find appalling. "No wonder Big Al was worried that you were a plant. Big Al has been stealing for years. Not big amounts. Just enough to stay under the radar. But over the years, the figures mounted up. Luckily Big Al used the money to send his stepson to law school. He's going to need a good lawyer." Ed chuckled.

I knew more but didn't share with Ed. Maxwell Angel told Andy that Big Al's son hoped to work a restitution deal so his father would have to serve minimal time, if any. Maxwell Angel was inclined to support the deal as long as Big Al had nothing to do with Jonas's murder. Big Al denied the charges vigorously but the cops thought they had their man.

What I didn't know was that with Big Al indisposed Ed would be managing the Seaside Heights store for the remainder of the season. He believed he was up to the task. "I have been cogitating about the problematical reactions associated with my assumption of a managerial role. Although I have been an Angel for two years now, I have behaved in most ways like a peer. I will brook no disrespect. My first step will be to make that clear." I wasn't sure he could make the directions to the rest room clear but Ed seemed determined to hold onto his GMAT talk. I considered telling him his grandiloquence was recondite and could make employees perceive him as a popinjay who spouted taradibble but knew he wouldn't accept advice from a simple blue wing.

If Ed knew true motive for working at Heavenly Dips, he didn't say. He was so impressed with the news about his step up the corporate ladder I wasn't sure he would have mentioned it if he had learned my true identity.

"You know, Meg, I appreciate your letting me stay here and all. But now that I am management I think the arrangement is inappropriate." His comment explained the piles at the front

door. Ed was moving out. He didn't want to fraternize with the help. He didn't say Little Dipper but I knew what he meant. Maybe now that *Big Al* was gone he would be replaced by *Big Ed*. After all, Ed had learned management skills, or non-skills, from Big Al. "I'm moving back in with my friends. I paid for the entire summer. I guess I should regret that I only got this job because Big Al is a murderer . . ."

"We don't know that. Big Al is being held for theft not for murder."

"Yeah, right." Ed snickered.

"Ed, there has been no resolution in Jonas's murder. You can't condemn Big Al until the proof comes in."

"Right, Meg. Jonas finds out Big Al is embezzling. Jonas stops coming to the Seaside Heights store -- his favorite I might add. Why? Because he's afraid of Big Al. Are you telling me after that sequence of events somebody else just happened to kill Jonas?"

"Maybe." I heard the defensive note in my voice.

Ed shook his head as he grabbed the bags he'd piled in the doorway. "That limited way of thinking, Meg, is why you are not in management." His statement would have had more impact if he hadn't tripped on his untied shoelace on the way out.

CHAPTER 55

My biggest reservation about returning to Heavenly Dips even for one day was working for Ed who was now what he had called Big Al. A wingless wonder. A badge boy. Ed could barely stop fondling the bright blue tag that hung around his neck.

I knew that if he said one cross word to me, I'd be out of there but first I wanted to check out which hand he used when he thought no one was watching. To avoid conflict, I obeyed all the rules. I went to the counter, got the key, and went around to the back door. I clocked in a few minutes early. Ed had an old halo and a new pair of wings waiting for me. Blue wings. "I had them sent up from New Gretna especially for you." I didn't bother telling what wings I wore hardly mattered since within hours I would disappear from Heavenly Dips just as I had arrived – without warning.

Sharmaine was on duty. If she knew anything about my role in the events of the last few days, she didn't mention it. She focused on the fate of our former boss. "So, how about Big Al killing Jonas?" She lounged along the counter watching the daily parade of visitors pass by.

"We don't know that. Big Al hasn't been charged."

"Yeah, but it's only a matter of time." I noticed her bright brown eyes scanned the Boardwalk to the south as she spoke. Looking for Lynyrd? I assumed so.

"I'm sure the police are looking at him but they haven't stopped looking elsewhere. The crime is not solved."

She turned towards me, shook her head, and opened her wide eyes even wider. "Lynyrd says it's so obvious. I mean, Big Al tried to kill you. He pushed you in that freezer. He pushed you off the Boardwalk. And he put you on that ferris wheel."

I didn't control the impulse quickly enough. I turned to Sharmaine with a frown on my face. She appeared nervous. "I think that was a really mean thing to do. Ed told me about it." I didn't tell her that Ed didn't know. Or did he? I couldn't figure out how the story of the ferris wheel could have gotten out -- to Ed or Sharmaine.

Sharmaine jabbered on about what happened the day before when Big Al was arrested at Heavenly Dips. I should have listened but I didn't. My mind stayed focused on one thought: Sharmaine knew about the ferris wheel. She wanted me to think that Ed had told her but I never told Ed.

My eyes were on Ed as he worked the cash register with but my mind was on Lynyrd. Was he the culprit? Had he told Sharmaine? He was the one who went out that morning -- and the one most likely to speak with Sharmaine. What possible motive would Lynyrd have to hurt me or scare me? I barely spoke to the customers as I reviewed every word I had ever exchanged with Lynyrd -- and with Sharmaine. My head was in the display case when the realization hit. The customer had hardly walked away with a free Cherubic Cherry on a cloud – won as part a random free cone promotion I invented to get him on his way quickly -- before I turned to my coworker. "Sharmaine, did you have a thing with Jonas?"

"A thing?" She acted dumb but she knew what I meant.

“A fling? A romance? Sex?”

“No way.” Her big brown eyes opened wide but not from surprise, from fear.

“Sharmaine, I won’t tell anyone if you slept with Jonas.”

“No. No. I didn’t. That’s the truth. I didn’t.” I did not get the impression that she was lying but I did get the impression that she was frightened. “Never with Jonas.”

Sharmaine’s tone was so earnest I believed her. Still, her relationship with Jonas was all I could think about as I dipped four triple deckers.

“But the girl you told me about.” My intonation softened. “The girl with Jonas’s friend. The girl he tricked.” Sharmaine stared across the Boardwalk but I could tell she wasn’t seeing the passers-by. “That was you, wasn’t it?”

Her eyes filled with tears.

“Did Lynyrd know?”

She shook her head sending a few tears down her cheek. “Yes.”

“And you think that’s why he killed Jonas?” Why not give the direct approach a shot?

“No,” she screamed. I expected Ed to appear from the back of the store to practice his management skills but he didn’t. “Lynyrd hated Jonas for what he did. He didn’t hear the story from me but he heard it. He didn’t know me then. He just knew the victim was a girl like me.”

“A girl like you?”

“You know. Someone that Jonas and his friends wouldn’t normally hang with.” She shook her head. “I should have known.”

Two teen-aged girls with a hankering for Milky Way Mint kept me from finding out what Sharmaine should have known. By the time I finished dipping two scoops into black holes for them, Sharmaine had left for the day.

During a break in traffic, I got right to the point with Hilde. “Hilde do you have any idea who played those jokes on me?”

I didn’t expect her to know but her guilty expression told me she did. “I heard things had happened to you, that Big Al pushed you into the freezer. I heard about the stage and the ferris wheel.”

“Who told you about the ferris wheel?”

“I don’t know. Ed or Sharmaine.”

“Please try to remember, Hilde. It’s important.”

She said she would try but by the time I clocked out for dinner she hadn’t. At least she claimed she hadn’t. I didn’t think Hilde was particularly interested in helping *the other woman*.

CHAPTER 56

I found Bobby Briggs, aka Mr. Smarmy, waiting at the end of my Sky Ride commute. “I’m not here to hurt you. I would never hurt anyone.” The man appeared almost as earnest as Ed but not as convincing. “Can we talk for a moment? I couldn’t come . . . I didn’t think it was right to come to the store.” Mr. Smarmy was much more attractive -- and much more believable -- without his slimy grin.

I let him lead me to the same bench where he had chatted me up what seemed like years ago -- but what was only a few days before. The gentle wind found its way under my gown and the polyester lost its grip on my clammy skin. I didn’t know how Mr. Smarmy survived in his shiny suits. Despite the heat he appeared cool, crisp, and, as always, slick. The breeze that tousled my curls blew by Mr. Smarmy without disturbing a single hair. When he rested his hands on his thighs I recognized the really, really big ring that had amazed me in the arcade on my first day at Heavenly Dips. Big Al must called him as soon as I arrived, if not before.

“I walked by earlier today and was surprised to see that you were back at work.”

“Today was my last day. The kids at the stand don’t actually know that.”

“Do they know that you are Beck’s girlfriend?”

I didn’t single out Hilde. I shrugged. “They didn’t mention if they do. I didn’t tell them. I think word might get out given all that’s gone on in the past few days.”

“It’s odd. Big Al knew there was something up when you showed up. He never thought it had anything to do with the kid going missing. He said the kid did it all the time. Not so much this summer but Jonas going AWOL wasn’t an unheard of occurrence. So, he figured you were there to spy on him. He knew the kid was suspicious that he was stealing. Then, Jonas stopped coming around on a daily basis and next you show up. Big Al said you made such a big stink about not knowing Jonas, he figured you must know him.”

Okay, so I wasn’t the natural investigator I imagined

“You do know my stepfather hasn’t been charged with the murder of Jonas Angel. That is, if you don’t count the court of public opinion where it appears he’s been charged, tried, and convicted. Have you seen the headlines? ‘Heavenly Dips into the Till.’ ‘Heavenly Dipster Arrested.’”

I nodded and felt planets orbiting above my head. I removed the halo casually. This was not the kind of conversation that needed punctuation by bobbing doodads.

“You know why he hasn’t been charged? Because he didn’t do it.”

“I told people that all day today, that even though your father is in custody he has not been charged with murder. I tried to explain that . . . but you’re right. People do not differentiate between the theft and the murder.”

“There hasn’t been an indictment -- and there won’t be. The truth -- my father’s innocence -- will come out.”

“If you’re looking for a PI, Andy isn’t available.”

Bobby Briggs interrupted. "I'm not asking Beck to go to work for my father. I understand that would be a clear conflict of interest. Besides, my father doesn't need a PI. He is innocent. There is no physical evidence linking him to the murder." I didn't remind the guy that there was no physical evidence linking anyone to the murder. "There will never be enough evidence to indict because he is innocent."

I agreed that there might not be enough evidence to indict. Unlike Bobby Briggs, I didn't necessarily believe the reason was that Big Al was innocent. "I am sure you believe in your stepfather."

"I know my stepfather. I know his limitations. I know what he's capable of and I also know what he is not capable of. Believe me, over the years no one has been more critical of Big Al Braddock than I've been. I don't doubt that he stole the money. The amount wasn't that much; although the total mounted up over the years." His voice softened. "I didn't understand . . . I didn't even know the money my mother gave me was his money." Bobby Briggs stopped staring into my eyes. He gazed over the ocean. "I feel responsible. Big Al wanted to help me with my tuition. Before I went back to law school, he and I had been estranged for so long. I think financing my education was his way of having someone in his life -- for his old age. By then my mother was dying. Maybe he helped me to please my mother. No matter why he did it, he got in too deep. But, he isn't an evil man."

"He tried to kill me."

Bobby Briggs eyes met mine. In them, I saw eagerness similar to the emotion I so often spotted in Ed's eyes. "He did not. He knew I would save you. He loved that store too much to let its reputation be damaged by anything as gruesome as a stiff in the freezer."

I didn't protest being dismissed as a stiff in the freezer. Bobby Briggs was on a roll.

"Big Al told me he was suspicious of you. That's why he told me to get to know you. He'd tell me when and where I'd be able to run into you."

So much for my incredible sex appeal.

"Don't you find it a bit odd that he joked with me that some night he was letting you close and push you in the freezer? Don't you find it odd that he phoned me and let me know that you were closing for the first time the other night? He didn't tell me what he was going to do. He couldn't without making me an accomplice but in a way he did. He knew I wouldn't let it happen. And, I didn't."

"I got myself out."

"But if you couldn't, I was there. With the keys. Spare keys he gave me for backup -- in clear violation of company policy. You know what a stickler he was for company policy."

"He stole from that company, Bobby." I used the man's real name. Calling him Mr. Smarmy might have broken the mood.

"I'm not defending his behavior, or my own. I feel responsible for what happened to you and not only in the freezer."

My eyes asked the question.

Bobby Briggs stared at the surf. “I was waiting for you on the Heiring Street stage. I saw you stop to admire the view. I thought it would be too obvious if I strode right up to you. I was waiting for the right moment when that kid ran up behind you and pushed you off. I didn’t see him coming. I couldn’t have stopped him.”

“Wait a minute. What kid?”

“Some punk maybe fourteen or so. Kids all look alike to me these days. The hair. The clothes. The mouths. I heard him talking to his friends as they disappeared down the Boardwalk. He was saying something like ‘I told you they couldn’t fly.’ I would have stopped them but I was more concerned about you. I ran to check on you but a family was taking care of you. I was kind of annoyed. I didn’t want you to fall, but once you did I figured taking care of you would be a great way to bond. But I wasn’t fast enough. I didn’t see any way to casually chat you up at that point. I left.”

“You weren’t responsible?”

“Not for that but I feel responsible . . . I told Big Al what happened. He concluded a good scare might be just what you needed to get you to quit. I told him it was a dumb idea, that it would just draw attention. Then, when he heard about the ferris wheel incident . . .”

“How?” I interrupted.

“When you didn’t show up on time Big Al called corporate to see if he could fire you. I think Maxwell Angel told him to give you a break you’d had a rough night. He told him what had happened. Big Al figured you’d hit a limit on what you would take. That’s why when he told me you were closing I worried that he might do something. He was really scared.”

“Of me?”

“He thought you could cost him his job. From the minute they told him you were coming, he never took another cent. He could have left it at that but he wanted to know if the company, if Max, suspected. That’s why he asked me . . .” Briggs didn’t finish the thought.

I did. “To hustle me?”

Briggs appeared if not ashamed, at least embarrassed.

“Why are you talking to me if you don’t want Andy’s help?”

“Because I think you need to know that my father is innocent. That means the murderer is still out there. You and your boyfriend nosed around in everyone’s business. I think you could still be in danger.” As he spoke, Bobby Briggs never smiled. His solemn face seemed much less threatening than his smile. “And, I want to make sure Beck keeps searching for the real killer.”

I didn’t see the harm in telling Bobby Briggs that Andy was still on the case or would be if Big Al wasn’t charged. “He’ll go on.”

Bobby Briggs shook his head and gazed out to sea. “For years I hated Big Al. I didn’t want him taking my father’s place. But now . . . just over the past few years . . . he has come to mean a lot to me. I didn’t let him know for a long time. It’s hard to eat crow. But I did. And now I want to help him.”

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We sat silently -- watching the day fade away. In my apron pocket, my cell phone vibrated. I didn't pick up. Bobby Briggs and I were having a moment. I wasn't sure what kind of moment it was, but I knew it was a moment. One that shouldn't be interrupted.

Finally, I spoke. "Big Al Braddock worked for Maxwell Angel for thirty years. He could have gone to Angel about the money. He could have explained. He could have made restitution. He didn't have to kill the kid. It makes no sense."

"Exactly." Bobby Briggs peered deep into my eyes. "It makes no sense."

CHAPTER 57

I was on the ramp from the Boardwalk calling Andy on the cell phone when I saw him hop out of the car to pump a few quarters into the meter.

“Where were you?” He sounded frantic. “You weren’t at the apartment. You didn’t pick up your phone. I almost panicked.” His intonation indicated that he had, in fact, gone ahead and panicked. “You should have called.”

“I couldn’t. Bobby Briggs stopped me on the Boardwalk.”

“Well that makes me feel better.” His tone said it didn’t.

“He wanted me to know his father is innocent. I told him we understood that there had been no murder charges filed.”

A car horn suggested that we move our discussion from the center of the street. Andy filled me in. “The police are building their case. Petino told Max the evidence is largely circumstantial. Max feels that the cops are not convinced that Big Al did kill Jonas but he is there best suspect. I can see why. He had the motive. Since Jonas was killed with his own golf club he had the means. The timeline is so imprecise it’s hard to figure out if he had the opportunity. The cops are pretty much convinced that Jonas did not make either of the calls from his cell phone on Friday night although both calls came from the area right around the bar where he was last seen.”

“The caller could have been Jonas. Maybe he was at a friend’s house. That would explain why no one saw him after he walked out the bar’s door.”

“I think it’s more likely that he was dead by the time the first call was made and Big Al was at work until midnight.”

“Did anyone time his dinner break? He keeps a car nearby.”

“On a Friday night in the summer, do you think he could have gotten out of Seaside Heights, killed Jonas and driven back without anyone noticing he took a longer than usual dinner break?”

The lights of Seaside Heights glowed even more brightly as the gray sky faded to black. The air grew cooler – which is not to say cool -- and a breeze kicked up as I explained Bobby Briggs’ position to Andy. “He feels the DA will never be able to get an indictment because the evidence just doesn’t exist. He insists that his father had nothing to do with the other warnings I received. He thinks we could be in danger.”

Suddenly Andy’s interest peaked. “Why would he think that?”

“His conviction that Big Al is innocent. I think he figures that as time goes by and no one goes on trial for the murder the killer, the person who tried to warn me off, will get edgy. Bobby Briggs swears Big Al only capitalized on the earlier incidents. Everyone knew about the flight off the Boardwalk, which by the way I took courtesy of some punk with a juvenile sense of humor. Max told Big Al about the ferris wheel. Maybe Big Al told everyone else. This morning I was really upset that Sharmaine knew but now . . . I wonder if Big Al remembers who he told.”

Andy tried to emulate Petino's smirk but on him the snide expression was more of a sweet smile. "Well, if you think about it we're fairly sure he never told Bunny Elkins. If we think the person who wanted to scare you off is the same person who killed Jonas, we have to rule out Bunny Elkins."

I sounded more disappointed than surprised. "So you spent today investigating Bunny Elkins and concluded she couldn't have killed Jonas Angel?"

"I pretty much concluded she couldn't have killed a fly."

"She hurt Karl pretty badly."

"Yeah, well, according to her friends that was the only way to get free of him. He was becoming increasingly controlling, showing up when she went out with friends, making surprise visits home when he should have been at work. She knew he was hiding in the woods and spying on her. She got concerned when she caught him reading a gun magazine. He said he was thinking of taking up hunting. Bunny was worried about Karl without a gun. She didn't want to live with Karl and a gun. When she left, she wouldn't even tell her friends where she was going. She doesn't want to put them in danger. She was afraid for herself and for anyone who knew where she was. She hoped if she disappeared for a while Karl might cool down. And he may have. Her friends say that after a flurry of phone calls when Bunny first disappeared, they haven't heard from him. Bunny sent one postcard from New York City just to let her friends know that she got away as planned."

"It could have been forged. How hard was it to forge her signature?"

"Not hard, actually. She signed everything BBFN, Bye Bye For Now. And drew a bunny. She'd been doing that since she was six."

"Hard to believe."

Andy ignored my comment. "She didn't want to send more because the postmarks would give her away. I guess she didn't realize some cell phones are not traceable. She has enough cash to keep her going for more than six months but she is going to check in around Thanksgiving to see if Karl has moved on – either emotionally or physically. Her friends believe she will be devastated when she hears about Jonas's murder simply because she knows how badly his death would hurt Max Angel. They know she'll be distressed that they had no way of getting the news to her."

"You don't think Bunny and Max . . ."

Andy interrupted. "No, I don't think. They did have a true mutual admiration society but it was strictly platonic." At the sight of my mouth opening he continued. "Believe me. I considered that option. Really."

"If I were Karl I would try to convince the authorities that Bunny was a good suspect in Jonas's murder. Then they would track her down for him. I mean they did try to reach her as a witness but they would have taken a whole different approach if she were a suspect."

"As your boyfriend, let me say, the idea that you came up that plan scares me. That said, none of her friends would have supported his accusations. Everyone knows she wasn't involved, that she would never hurt Maxwell Angel."

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“If that’s what they say.”

“That’s what they say, Maggie.” The pet name. A signal that the argument was lost.

CHAPTER 59

I didn't hear Amanda Angel arrive. She simply appeared on my, rather her own, porch. The white gauze blouse she wore over her white bathing suit blew gently in the wind. When she introduced herself I, in awe of her pained, ethereal beauty, barely responded. "You're Meg. I wanted to thank you for everything you've done for my family."

I gestured that she should take a seat but she leaned against the railing with the morning sun at her back. "I know the police are focusing on Big Al Braddock but they haven't indicted him. I can't believe he hurt would Jonas. They tell us there is no forensic evidence. No hair. No fibers. How can there be no hair and no fibers? How can someone do a thing like this and leave no evidence? Whoever killed Jonas must have planned carefully." She gazed out to sea. "Why did this happen? The police delved into every little indiscretion of Jonas's. And, I will admit there were a number of them. But none that indicated a strong enough motive for murder."

"There was an incident . . ."

"Max knows the girl. He took care of her. She doesn't blame Jonas. He apologized to her so profusely. So often. I can't believe . . ." She shook her head. "If he hadn't learned . . . if he had been unfeeling . . . I saw him . . . He changed after that happened." She released a deep sigh. "He wasn't evil although I'll admit he could be devilish." She smiled at the recollection. "This one young girl pretended to have a twin so she could date him. He went along with the joke but I was the only one he told. He didn't want to humiliate her."

"Did she realize that he knew?"

Amanda shrugged. "I don't think so. Why do you ask?"

"No particular reason." I changed the subject. "Have you seen Schyler recently?"

Amanda brushed a strand of dark brown hair from her brow as she shook her head. "I should get in touch with her. The police told us she actually helped Jonas uncover Big Al's thievery. Schyler is a nice enough girl. He told me he wanted to make the break but I don't think he ever found the opportunity to end it. After he died, I didn't have the heart to tell her what he was planning. I didn't know what to do. She was so distraught. Apparently the police had grilled her for quite a few hours. She couldn't believe they were accusing her. I explained that they spoke to everyone who was close to Jonas." She shook her head. "When I think of what she went through . . . I told her they needed to know where everyone was when . . . during those hours. If it ever appears that she isn't moving on with her life, I'll think of a gentle way to let her know the truth."

Amanda's released a deep sigh and stared into space. "I miss him, Meg. Every day. Almost every minute. I accept that he can't come back. All I want to know is what happened. I created a scenario that I try to believe. I tell myself that he was surprised by a stranger. That he never knew what happened. Then Max told me they found his badge, twenty feet from his body. If the killer pulled it off, he knew, he must have felt fear. He was hit on the back and the front of the head. Did he try to run? Was he afraid? Did the killer make him drive there? Did he even know the killer was there? Was it a

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stranger? Did he see the first blow coming? These are the things I want to know. These are things I need to know.”

“Maybe the badge just caught on something and fell off as he walked into the woods.”

“The chain wasn’t attached and the police didn’t find it.”

I had another suggestion that an animal had taken what looked like a shiny toy away to play but I kept silence. Amanda Angel wasn’t looking for a debate. She was looking for someone to listen to her. The unspeakable pain on her face made me regret complaining about my life in Seaside Heights. This was why Andy and I made the effort: to find answers for this woman. All that effort and what answers did we have? None.

CHAPTER 60

Over the next few weeks, Andy continued to pursue the Angel case but found he was running out of avenues to explore. Maxwell Angel asked Andy to retrace his steps. Occasionally, I tagged along but I spent most of my days sitting on the deck. I pressured Andy into hiring a rent-a-wreck so I could make occasional shopping trips. On one trip to pack up some items from the sugar food group at Mueller's Bakery in Bay Head, I spotted a plain white sedan that I assumed was Andy's. The trunk was open. When I peeked around the lid, I was more dismayed than delighted to find Karl Elkins on the other side. I was also surprised that he had packed on a good twenty pounds since I had last seen him. That couldn't have been easy.

"Ice cream angel. What a surprise." A smile would have turned that phrase into *what a happy surprise*. Elkins didn't smile. He returned the materials to his trunk which was a veritable hardware/medical supply store.

"Sorry. I thought you were someone I know. Your car is similar."

"I'm up here on a job. Just finished." He made an attempt at a smile. "How are you doing? I haven't been up on the Boardwalk lately but I heard they arrested Big Al Braddock. I've been reading the newspaper."

Karl abandoned his organizational effort and slammed the trunk closed.

"Yeah, for fraud not for murder."

"Yeah, but it's just a matter of time until they get him on that charge, right? I mean . . . that would really be an odd coincidence that someone else killed Jonas when Big Al was pulling all that crap." Elkins expressed the popular sentiment.

I shrugged. "I don't think Big Al killed Jonas but that's only my unofficial opinion."

"But the cops do, right?"

"If they did, I think they would have arrested him on that charge -- which they haven't. God knows I'm not crazy about the guy but I feel for him being convicted in the court of public opinion for a crime he didn't commit." I didn't want to say more on the matter of the Angel murder. I certainly didn't want to hear about Bunny Elkins, but for sake of politeness I asked Karl how he was doing.

"I'm doing okay. Better." He wiped sweat from his brow. When he spoke it wasn't about his wife. "This drought is really getting to me. It's got to rain soon, don't you think?"

The guy always had been a bit obsessed with the weather. "I'm no meteorologist but the odds are we've got to see some precipitation soon."

"I hope you're right. You'd better be right." Karl lit a cigarette. "I can't stand the heat . . . I can't take too much worrying about this dry spell." He stared into the distance for a moment. "You were very nice to me when I would go on and on, you know, before I accepted Bunny's decision. I'm doing much better now. I'm thinking of moving away, starting over." He must have caught the suspicion on my face. "No, not to the same spot where Bunny went. I don't know where she lives now but wherever she goes I wish her well. Maybe she was right. Maybe we will do better apart."

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Suddenly, I felt optimistic about the next rain. Karl Elkins was moving on. Until then I expected that the two events would occur on the same day, a cold one in hell.

“Well, I’d better getting going.” He pulled his keys from his pockets and made a great show of unlocking the door to his car even though all the windows were open.

CHAPTER 61

Within two hours of running into Karl Elkins, I got a blast from the not very distant past when Hilde Bossick showed up on the deck. When she came up the steps I was finishing a crumb cake. Not a piece of crumb cake, a crumb cake. It was the first time I had ever seen the girl without her Heavenly Dips robe and I thought she looked lovely in her street clothes. Of course, the street clothes she was wearing -- jeans and a white top -- matched my personal taste not the taste of the Hilde I knew. She wore no rings on her toes or her nose -- and her tattoos were gone. She'd gotten me with the tattoos. I never suspected the elaborate designs were temporary.

"You quit." Her voice seemed thinner than I recalled. Her tone was tentative.

I nodded.

"The store is really different now. Sharmaine is leaving at the end of this week. I think because Ed sucks as a boss." She leaned against the railing and studied her feet. The breeze blew her hair into a gentle frame for her face. She looked as pretty as her imaginary twin sister, Heidi.

"Now that Jonas is dead, Ed really thinks he can get somewhere in Heavenly Dips, and with Schyler. As if he could ever be Jonas's replacement. She comes by sometimes and he makes a fool of himself. It's the only time he ever takes a break. You know he always took that job really seriously." Hilde sneered. "He's building a career, angling for a job in New Gretna. He isn't going back to school full time. He wants to work at Heavenly Dips and go to night school. I wish he would start now and get out of my life, although I'm leaving before Labor Day. So I guess it really doesn't matter."

I didn't wait for a subtle segue. I asked the question that still nagged at me. "Hilde, did you ever remember who told you about the ferris wheel?"

She replied without hesitating. "I'll tell you if you make a promise to me."

"What's the promise?"

"My mother told me . . ." Hilde had trouble spitting out the words. "She said that you know I don't have a twin. I'm not nuts, you know. I invented Heidi as a joke. A trick to play on Jonas. Really, I resurrected the idea. I made up a twin sister when I was a kid. So when I realized that Jonas would never like my type, I couldn't just show up at work one day dressed to please him. I needed a fresh start. So I thought he might be interested in Heidi. It was just a goof but I was right. He asked Heidi out."

"Why didn't you stay Heidi?"

"Jonas was getting tired of her. I could tell. That's how he was with all the girls. I think he really liked Hilde better. He said really nice things about her when we were out. I knew that as Hilde I could be Jonas's friend. So I came back to work and Heidi left."

"You do know . . . ?"

"Don't worry. I don't have two personalities. Not everyone understands my sense of humor."

"Did Jonas?"

She shook her head. “He never even guessed. Still, I have been so frightened since Jonas died that someone would find out what I did. I couldn’t believe the cops didn’t want to interview Heidi.”

I could see how embarrassing the revelation would have been but wasn’t so sure that was the reason she was scared of the police. “You didn’t do anything illegal, did you?”

“Well, I guess making up a social security number was bad. I just brought a copy of my social security card and my license that I altered. Big Al didn’t care. He barely glanced at it. He was happy to have a body fill in while I was away.”

“No one ever saw you and Heidi together. Didn’t they notice?”

“Guess not. Ed did tell me he thought Heidi should have come to Jonas’s funeral.”

“If it was just a joke, why are you so frightened?”

“I don’t want to look crazy. That’s what people would think. But I knew what I was doing. I always know what I’m doing.” She wrung her hands and let her eyes dart nervously over her shoulder towards the beach. Finally, she turned to face me. “Please, don’t tell anyone about that. About Heidi and Jonas. Please. That’s all I ask. Please.” She stretched *please* to a five syllable word as desperate people do.

“Hilde, I’ve known for quite a while. If I were going to tell, I would have told by now. I mean, I told Andy but no one at the store.”

A twist of Hilde’s upper lip told me that she wasn’t happy Andy knew. At the same time I saw every other muscle in her body relax. No one else knew. I didn’t actually say that. I could only say that if they did know I hadn’t told them. “Now it’s your turn. Who dumped me on the ferris wheel?”

“Sharmaine told me.” Hilde hesitated. “She was afraid . . . she worried . . . that . . . you suspected Lynyrd killed Jonas.”

“Did he?”

“No. At least I don’t think so. Sharmaine doesn’t think he did it.”

I was confused. “Sharmaine told you that I believed Lynyrd was a killer. She told me she was worried that I was in love with Lynyrd.”

Hilde smirked. “Yeah, she said that to throw you off. She asked us all if we thought Lynyrd had really gone out for coffee or if he were involved with you. We all told her it was ridiculous. Lynyrd would never be interested in someone like you.”

It was one thing for me to say that but I found the words insulting coming from Hilde. “Why did she even say he went out? Wouldn’t it have been less suspicious if she swore he’d been there the entire time?”

“Apparently, Ed rolled over and opened his eyes at some point. Sharmaine needed a cover just in case he remembered which as far as we know he didn’t. Anyway, after you got that first scare, Sharmaine figured you would back off if you got another. On one of his jobs Lynyrd used to run a ferris wheel. I think it was his idea . . . about what to do but Sharmaine helped.”

“I guess it was obvious. He was the one with the drugs.”

Hilde shook her head. “I think Sharmaine just went to the drug store and bought some PM formula cold medicine. They didn’t want anyone to get hurt.”

I remembered my feet dangling forty feet above the ground but didn’t interrupt Hilde. “Lynyrd is so skinny I didn’t realize he was strong enough to carry me to that ferris wheel.”

“I don’t think he is all that strong. He told Sharmaine you weren’t as heavy as you looked.”

I ignored her comment. “She told you this?”

Hilde nodded – a bit shyly.

When did Sharmaine start confiding in Hilde? I didn’t ask that question. I had another. “Why would Sharmaine care what I thought? For all she knew, I was just some over-age Little Dipper.”

“Well, that might have been my fault.” Hilde seemed sheepish. “You know I really liked Andy. I told you that . . . I wanted to find out . . . I mentioned . . .” Her conversation took a sudden turn. “I thought that maybe I could get to know him . . . if I . . . like . . . ran into him by accident.”

“Yeah?”

“His car is identical to hundreds of others on the road. I learned the tag number after I followed some other dude by accident. I made the mistake of thinking because the guy was outside your house, he was Andy.”

“Yeah?”

“I thought I could run into Andy – you know, accidentally. Like one day I was in Ocean City visiting a girl I know from home. I wasn’t supposed to be there. I’d called in sick for the late shift and then I saw you working at the Ocean City store. I couldn’t say hello because I claimed I was so sick I had to stay in the house, the bathroom actually.”

“Okay.” I held up a hand in the hopes she would not provide any more details about her fictional medical condition.

“Anyway, you were leaving. And I saw you go down the Boardwalk and get in a car. And I knew the license plate. So I figured that maybe you worked for him . . . with him . . . and I told Sharmaine what I thought.” Her intonation was plaintive as she continued. “That’s why she thought . . . she wanted . . . Don’t be mad. She knew you couldn’t get hurt on the ferris wheel.”

“And she thought a scare would make me go away. That’s crazy.” As I said the words I realized it wasn’t such a bad idea. Andy and I had talked about my quitting after each incident. Quitting would probably have been the logical thing to do.

Even Hilde knew that. “If I’d been pushed off the Boardwalk and dumped on a ferris wheel, I wouldn’t have come back.”

I didn’t say a word. I didn’t know what to say.

“Don’t tell the cops or anything. You promised.” A hint of desperation crept into Hilde’s voice.

I didn’t think that was part of the promise I made but at this point I didn’t care. “Why would I think that Lynyrd killed Jonas? Did he have a motive?”

“Sharmaine has this illusion that Lynyrd is in love with her and that he would kill for her. I’m not sure why she believes that but she does. His actions certainly never told me that. Anyway, before she fell in love with Lynyrd, Sharmaine always had it bad for a friend of Jonas’s. The guy is pretty sweet. I’ve seen him. Anyway, there is some bad blood between Sharmaine and the guy. Whatever it is I think it was Jonas’s fault. I overheard him talking to Sharmaine one day. He was all apologetic.”

“They talked about the incident in the store?”

Hilde grew flustered. “No, I . . . they didn’t see me on the beach one day. They were talking on a bench on the Boardwalk and I was just underneath them . . . on the beach. When I heard them talking I couldn’t move. I couldn’t help but hear.”

I had my doubts. A reenactment would be needed to check Hilde’s story out and I didn’t really care how Hilde got her information. I was interested in the content: Sharmaine and Lynyrd’s motive for hurting me and/or Jonas. “Let me see if I understand Sharmaine’s viewpoint. Lynyrd is in love with Sharmaine. Jonas’s friend did something to Sharmaine. Apparently both she and Jonas agree that it was his fault. She thinks Lynyrd loves her so much he would kill Jonas to avenge her. If he were the killing type. Which she believes he isn’t. She thinks I will figure this out and suspect that Lynyrd killed Jonas.”

“Right.” Hilde underlined her answer with one hard nod of the head.

“I can’t even figure it out after you explained it to me.”

“Sharmaine was worried that you might point the cops at Lynyrd. Even though she never thought Lynyrd killed Jonas, she realized if the cops did take a look at Lynyrd they might not like what they found.”

I could accept that line of reasoning. I couldn’t accept that Hilde just happened to be in Ocean City the day I worked there or that she had just happened to be under the Boardwalk where Sharmaine and Jonas were talking. Coincidences did happen. I’d just run into Karl Elkins. I certainly wouldn’t want him to think I’d done that on purpose. But in one summer Hilde seemed to encounter an unusually high number of coincidences.

She filled the silence. “I didn’t mean to cut in on Andy. I kept asking you about him . . . trying to find out what was . . . you know . . . going on between the two of you. You aren’t mad at me, are you?”

I knew the reason she was asking -- probably the only reason she bothered to apologize.

“Look, Hilde, your secret is safe with me if . . .”

“If? No if. You promised.” She took a step away from the railing towards me. Despite her narrow frame the move was threatening.

“Hilde, tell me. Did you kill Jonas Angel?”

The cold eyes – the eyes I was familiar with – reappeared. “I know people wouldn’t understand what I’d done. I wanted the entire Heidi episode to remain hidden. Would that happen if I killed Jonas?”

A Fear of Seaside Heights

I got her point. If Hilde was worried about her secret coming to light she wouldn't want Jonas's life subject to intense scrutiny. Jonas's murder was the worst thing that could have happened.

CHAPTER 62

Every evening Andy and I lounged on the deck of the Angel's oceanfront home. I began to forget, or tried to forget, that this was not our actual lifestyle. I was getting used to the perks of beachfront living – the sights, the sounds, the smells. I ignored the costs. I was living in a fantasy world and had no problem doing so.

That night as we sipped one of Andy's fruity rum concoctions on the deck I filled Andy in on my visits with Hilde Bossick and Karl Elkins. "After all these weeks, I had two reminders of Heavenly Dips in one day."

"How's Karl doing?"

"He seemed okay."

"Don't tell me his wife came back! She planned too long and hard to get away from that man."

"No. He said he accepts that she is gone." I studied the surf for a few moments. "At this point, I suspect that I want her back here more than he does."

"Don't worry that the cops are giving up on finding Bunny Elkins. They still want her as a witness. Max told me the trail is cold, which is exactly how she wanted it. She'll be making contact before Thanksgiving. But the odds of her knowing anything about Jonas's murder are slim. She respected and cared for Maxwell Angel enough that she would have contacted the police with any information if she did. You don't seriously think that Bunny Elkins killed Jonas?"

I shook my head. "No. Talking to Hilde and Karl today got me thinking but in a different direction." I told Andy what I thought.

Andy's smirk looked suspiciously like Petino's. "A killer with no motive? What do you want me to do? Stage a big confrontation. It was so obvious. You had no motive to kill Jonas. It had to be you." He chuckled

I explained my theory, "I think it's a motive."

"For murder?"

I nodded.

"You think someone would kill Jonas Angel for . . ." Andy broke off and shook his head.

"It makes sense to me."

Andy stared at the waves crashing to shore. "What worries me is that it's beginning to make sense to me."

CHAPTER 63

Andy and I showed up at my prime suspect's house with a plan: bluff. Actually, I had a plan. Andy came along because he was afraid if he didn't, I'd execute the plan on my own.

I would do the bluffing. Andy would stay in the car listening on equipment from the spy store that he seldom had a chance to use.

"If he makes a mistake we go right to Petino." I promised.

"And if he doesn't?"

"The evening flight to Antigua?" I threw out the thought and jumped out of the car.

"Keep the logo on your hat pointed at him." Andy reminded through the window as I headed toward the Elkins's house.

Karl was surprised, not pleasantly, when he opened the door.

"Can we talk for a minute?"

Karl hesitated before he responded. "Sure." He wasn't so sure. "Come on in."

"Let's sit out by the dock."

"Why not?" Karl led me past what appeared to be a year's supply of trash to a cluster of rickety, aluminum lawn chairs that should have been added to the junk pile several years before. I told Karl why I'd come. "I came by because I wanted to tell you that I know you killed Jonas Angel." Why waste time with chit-chat?

Karl sniggered. "Me? Why would I kill Jonas Angel? I have no motive." I discerned no trace of anger in his voice.

"That is what makes it such a great crime. However, I think you did have a motive. I think you stole Jonas's badge so that you could go into the Heavenly Dips offices to see your wife." I studied the man's eyes for movement. I saw them narrow. Slightly. A smirk remained firm on his lips. "I think you understood that you were losing Bunny -- soon. How you knew, I don't know. Somebody may have slipped up. Said something. Whoever made the slip probably never even noticed. No one can ever prove that you knew. But I think you did know. At this point maybe you don't even remember what gave away Bunny's plan."

"If you believe that I killed Jonas Angel, aren't you afraid that I'll kill you?"

"Hardly. Number one, I told Andy I was coming here." I didn't mention that he was listening to every word we said. "Number two, all these people have seen us here." I waved to a family of four passing slowly though the inlet in a small Chris Craft. "Plus, why would you kill me? So what if I make wild accusations? Can I prove one point? No. I'll never be able to. Why risk a second murder? This one they'd connect you to really quickly."

I watched shade make its way down the inlet in our direction. At last real clouds, dark and heavy ones, were blowing into the area. The weatherman had called for rain but everyone had learned to ignore those predictions. They only led to disappointment. But suddenly I felt a chill in the air. Rain was really on its way.

Across from me, Karl, who had been so obsessed with the drought, seemed oblivious to the weather. His features contorted to confirm that he was deep in thought. “Let me see if I have this. Because I knew that my wife was leaving . . . what did I do? I don’t remember.” He chortled. He appeared nervous, self-conscious. His eyes were narrow but the expression was not menacing.

“I’m not exactly sure how it happened, Karl, but I think you ran into Jonas somewhere. I don’t know where. I don’t know how. I think you followed him and you grabbed his badge. Then you killed him.”

“And why didn’t the cops catch me when I used the badge to go see my wife?” He shook his head and smiled.

I could have read the dark clouds as portending trouble, but I didn’t. I plunged ahead with my theorizing. “Because you never used the badge. You never had to. You reached the office and you saw through the fence that she was gone. You were too late. I don’t know. But I know you wanted that badge.” I eyed the ramshackle boat pulled up his dock. “You probably got rid of all the evidence at the bottom of the ocean. But not the badge. When you had the chance, you threw it back into the woods near the body and went home. Even I thought an animal had moved the badge. No one would tie his badge to his murder. No one would ever suspect you. You had no motive to kill Jonas Angel.”

“You’re right about that but wrong about everything else. For one thing, I found out after my beloved wife was gone that buying a new car was part of her escape plan. Not that we could afford a new car, not since I’d been laid off after I ran into a bum supervisor after a dozen years of hard work.” Elkins seemed to hear the emotion in his voice and fought to regain his composure. “She planned her departure that carefully. I can’t believe she could disrespect me like that. Especially when she knew what I going through losing my job and all.” He brought his anger under control. “Even if I had wanted to find her, even if I went to Heavenly Dips, even if her car was there, I wouldn’t have recognized her new vehicle.”

“See. That proves my point. You got there and her car wasn’t there. She was still there when you called her on Jonas’s cell phone. You expected to find her at her office but you didn’t make it on time. Bunny was gone. So you went home. You’d killed Jonas for no reason. You didn’t think anyone saw you but just in case, you wanted to make it appear that Jonas lived until at least eleven o’clock. So you called his voice mail. Of course, you couldn’t get in because you didn’t know the code.”

“I couldn’t get in because I wouldn’t know what number to call.”

“You wouldn’t have to. The number was programmed in.”

“You’ve got this all figured out but I’m a little confused. Tell me again why I wanted to go to Heavenly Dips that night?”

“Because you knew Bunny was leaving.”

“I didn’t know my wife was leaving me until the police and her friends told me and that was on Sunday. I called the police and reported Bunny missing -- you can ask them -- I called on Saturday. But

did they care about her? No. They were only worried about Jonas. They only saw Bunny as their witness. When I called they blew me off.”

“Didn’t you notice Bunny was missing on Friday?”

Elkins lips almost curved into a smile. “Now you ask. Why didn’t the cops ask me? No, I did not think she was missing on Friday. She worked late a lot especially at the end of the month. She hadn’t gotten home when I went to bed early – I felt sick. I slept in the spare room so she would not catch the cold I felt coming on. And, yes, I wondered why Bunny had left the house so early on Saturday morning. No, I didn’t worry. She was a busy woman with a lot to do. No, I didn’t wonder why she did not leave a note. She seldom did. Yes, she always made the bed before she left the house. I had all the information the cops need but they didn’t ask. Like I said, they only were only worried about Jonas.” Karl let out a yelp. “What was that?”

I glanced up at the sky. All traces of blue had disappeared. The sky was dark gray. “Thunder. The pundits are calling for rain. Finally. After all the discussions of the weather we had this summer, are you the only one in the state who doesn’t know that the dry spell is set to end tonight?”

He shook his head. “Thank god.” He seemed preoccupied.

I continued. “Karl, I don’t even know if they looked at you for the murder.”

“The murder?”

Hearing the shock and the fear in his voice, I knew. I’d said the murder. Not Jonas’s murder. Karl Elkins thought I was talking about the murder of his wife. All the time I’d been touting Bunny Elkins as a suspect, she was a victim. Karl hadn’t missed her at the Heavenly Dips office that night. He didn’t use the badge because he saw found her before he reached the gates. Or, maybe the gates were open when he arrived. Maybe when the replacement Bunny was training drove out, Karl sneaked in. Whatever had happened, he had found Bunny. I didn’t voice these thoughts. I fought to keep my expression impassive. Karl fought to do the same. I went back to the topic of Jonas Angel. “Only thing cops asked me about was Bunny and how much she hated Jonas – which was pretty much. But my Bunny could never hurt him.” His tone grew angry. “She liked that father of his too much.” He leaned forward and spoke deliberately. “They never even asked me where I was that night. Know why?” He paused for effect. “Because I had no motive.”

“We disagree on that one, Karl. What we agree on is that there can’t be any evidence or the cops would have charged you. But there is nothing. No DNA. No murder weapon.” I broke the good news. “You got away with it, Karl.”

“Maybe I should say I did kill him and ask for a reward. Bunny said he was a no-good piece of crap. Bunny was a good judge of character.” I didn’t ask how such a good judge of character ended up married to Elkins. “That kid had everything handed to him.”

“Like expensive golf clubs?”

“Yeah. What did he do to deserve top of the line titanium clubs. Did he appreciate them? No.” He stuttered worrying, correctly, how he happened to see Jonas’s titanium clubs. “Bunny told me. He was a spoiled jerk. That kind of kid always is.”

I wished I had been a psych major. Clearly Elkins’s tongue was loosening up but I didn’t know how to manipulate him. Seduction was out. Sympathy wouldn’t work. Ego. That had to be the right approach. Play to his ego. Before I could, the clouds opened and we had to run for cover. I followed Elkins across the brown lawn to a metal canopy that ran along the side of the house -- protecting container after container of junk, rusted despite its protection from the weather.

Even as I brushed raindrops from my hair, I kept the conversation going. “So you agree that this was a perfect crime?”

“If no one’s been charged, you have to admit it’s a pretty clever crime.” Karl was smiling. “Let’s be real. You admit it. I had no motive to kill the kid. Lots of people have no motive to kill Jonas Angel. Let’s haul them all in. I don’t know why you’re looking in my direction.”

“The site where the body was found was clean in terms of evidence. It’s in the woods, yet there was no forensic evidence. For your business you keep protective gloves and slippers and who knows what all else in your trunk. I saw the stuff the other day. I think you used those items. That’s why there’s no physical evidence. I don’t think you planned to kill Jonas. I think you just saw the opportunity and took it.”

“Then why did the killer clobber the little bastard so hard.” Karl forced a nervous laugh.

“See, you’re calling him a little bastard and you don’t even know him. Maybe you resented what he represented -- an undeserving kid who had everything handed to him.”

“Well, that may be well and good but that don’t tie in with your no motive theory. I do watch a lot of reruns, you know, Law & Order, NYPD Blue, CSI, JAG -- even the old Perry Masons. So I know about this stuff. Someone who mutilates someone the way I hear that kid got worked over, he has a motive.”

“Of, it could be he has no motive and wants to make it seem like a crime of passion. Remember the person who did this crime was smart. He got away with murder.”

“You got an answer for everything.” His eyes flew open and he jumped. Only a small delay separated the thunder and the lightening.

A big grin spread across Karl’s face. “So whatta ya know. I missed this one. I didn’t know it was going to rain. You can wait here if you want, I gotta close the windows.” He ran the few uncovered steps to the wooden stairs and pulled the aluminum screen door open wide -- it had never actually closed all the way.

The sound of the rain falling at full force was unfamiliar. I’d forgotten how loud the drops could be, especially on a tin roof like the one above me. I hadn’t forgotten that under a metal roof was not the best place to be in a thunder storm. I wished Karl would hurry. I checked out the area. Most of the neighbors had disappeared inside to escape the rain but the group that I viewed as potential witnesses

still huddled on the porch next door. If Karl returned with weapon he would not be able to use it. At least without going directly to jail.

I perused the trash cans full of discarded household items and car parts lined the side of the house. Looking for what? A written confession? What I found was almost as good. Proof the Karl had been lying about Bunny's new car. Bunny had gotten flowers from the dealership, the same dealership where Oliver bought his, and Karl had seen them. He knew something was up. He had to get to Bunny to find out what, and, if she was trying to leave, to stop her. I was holding the container in my hand when Karl came outside. "I have a friend who would love this. I don't think there are that many people actually looking for an orange and turquoise vase."

Karl thought long and hard before he told me the vase was not for sale.

"Too bad. I wanted to get something out of this visit."

"Technique might work on the killer. Just not on me." Karl made that chortling noise again. I sensed no anger. I don't think I'd be so calm if someone dropped by my house to accuse me of murder. "You know, from the first night I saw you with Beck at Jenkinson's in Point Pleasant, I thought you were very intuitive. Almost psychic." He smirked. He'd been playing Andy and me all along.

CHAPTER 64

I've always believed in miracles. Okay, maybe not always but since the Saturday before Christmas when I got the parking space closest to Bloomingdale's. After that I *had* to believe in miracles. But the kind of miracle that I believed in was the small miraculous event: the check that didn't bounce, the train that didn't leave, the parking space that didn't disappear. I did not expect to win the lottery.

I became convinced that the little miracles in our lives were the result of many unconscious decisions people that we didn't know, and would most likely never meet, made days, weeks, or even months before the actual event. So as Andy and I drove to Tom's River to tell Petino what we'd learned, events rooted in a Friday night long before Andy and I ever heard of Jonas Angel were conspiring to bring Elkins to justice. That Friday was the night Carly Mims, a student at Rutgers University, agreed to accompany her friends to a bar near the campus. If Carly hadn't gone out on that night when she had a cold and felt like climbing into bed, she never would have met Todd Brinks and brought him to her family house for the holidays. If Todd had never introduced Carly to kayaking, her aunt wouldn't have given her a book on kayaking in Greenland for her birthday. If Carly hadn't shown Todd that book, it is unlikely that the couple would have been training for the kayaking trip they planned to Greenland. If Todd and Carly had not been so intent on conditioning themselves for the trip, it's unlikely they would have taken their kayaks to a small lake near Carly's home and the Wharton State Forest in south Jersey on the day the summer's drought ended and the water level rose. But they did -- and noticed a colorful object under the water. Carly stuck her paddle in as far as it would go. The paddle hit a hard surface. She tried several times -- hitting the hood, the windshield and the roof of a car that turned out to be Bunny Elkins' new Saturn. In the backseat police found the body of Bunny Elkins and an unlicensed handgun.

It turned out that Elkins who believed he had prepared his mind and his body for the moment he might have to use force to keep his wife, didn't really have all his bases covered. The upstanding citizen who sold a gun to Karl Elkins failed to reveal that it had been used in an earlier murder. He got a deal from the cops by rolling on Elkins. In order to keep the death penalty for the murder of his wife off the table, Elkins described the night he killed Jonas Angel, a young man he did not even recognize until he grabbed his badge – the badge he needed to get to his wife.

Before we left for another winter of delaying real life in Antigua, Andy and I got the details of that night from Detective Petino. After his suspicions were aroused by the delivery of flowers from the car dealership in the vase I spotted, Karl Elkins had gone in search of his wife and found Jonas Angel and his badge. When Jonas spotted Schyler coming into the bar and bolted out the back door, Elkins followed him. Jonas's stop to relieve himself in the woods presented Karl Elkins with the opportunity he'd hoped for – as well as an outlet for all his anger and frustration. Elkins realized that such a vicious crime would appear to be a crime of passion. In the end, his own emotion had taken over as he took years of frustration out on the kid who seemed to have everything.

Elkins did a lot of jogging that night moving Jonas's car, running from his own car to Heavenly Dips. His physical preparations paid off. He told Petino he "had a feeling" the deterioration in his marriage "might lead to something like this." That was why he had viewed the abandoned boat ramp at a nearby lake with such interest. Bunny's Saturn had rolled down the ramp and out of sight just as he had envisioned. The lake's dark water had seemed like a perfect spot – until the drought threatened to reveal the hidden vehicle. Elkins had never considered the possibility of the long, dry summer.

I'd been right about so much but sadly wrong when I said that Elkins had missed his wife. He had arrived in time to sneak through the gate when her replacement left -- in time to conclude that shooting her was the only way to keep her from leaving. "Kept talking about how much he loved her." Petino shook his head. "They do that a lot."

His love for Bunny made it easier for Elkins to play the distraught husband. Perhaps it was that performance that led a concerned cop to ask Elkins to notify the police if he received a postcard from his wife like the one her friends were expecting. Within days, Elkins had driven to New York and to forge and mail a card. He'd bought time before he would have to move on, time before everyone realized that Bunny had not disappeared according to her plan but his. And, his was a good plan -- except for the unexpected weather.

I told you. I believe in miracles.

Epilog

Not long after we sailed into our winter home, a package arrived from Heavenly Dips with an oversized envelope for me. Inside was a paycheck and a box wrapped in gold paper. Of course, the paper had angels on it. As did the ribbon. And the box underneath the wrapping. Inside the box I found a gold chain with a single charm dangling from it. Wings. Gold wings. I read the note from Max and Amanda Angel. It said simply, "Thank you, Meg. You've earned them."