

KILLING TIME

JANE K. CLELAND

Driving up Ocean Avenue, which ran alongside New Hampshire's three miles of shoreline, I decided to play hooky.

Instead of hot-footing it back to my company, Prescott's Antiques and Auctions, after acquiring a stellar collection of snow globes from a retiring professor, I was going to go for a walk on Rocky Point beach. It was twelve thirty on a sparkling bright mid November day, and it was almost sixty degrees, more than twenty degrees warmer than usual.

I parked on the sandy shoulder not far from Rocky Point Bed and Breakfast. I'd sold a fair number of antiques to Valerie Lane, the owner, and on a whim I decided to pop in and say hello.

A silver Sonata driven by a striking redhead was backing out of Valerie's small parking lot as I walked between Valerie's white van and a gold Impala to get to the walkway. She headed south.

Mounting the steps to the porch, I read the message embroidered on a heart-shaped pillow hanging on the front door: "Welcome! Come on in and call hello!" I stepped inside.

"Valerie! It's Josie! Josie Prescott."

"Coming!" a woman, maybe Valerie, shouted from somewhere upstairs, then a moment later, Valerie's head and torso appeared at the top of the stairs looking over the banister.

Valerie was a full-figured brunette, about my age, mid thirties, with an easy smile and a great eye for Victorian antiques and collectibles. Through the wooden balusters, I could see that she wore a silky robin's egg blue dressing gown. She held it closed, clutching a handful of fabric to her bosom. It was great looking, and I found myself wondering where she bought it.

"Hi, Josie!" she said, smiling. "Long time, no speak. How's the antiques biz?"

"Good. Everything's great. Listen, I didn't mean to disturb you. I'm going for a walk on the beach and just popped in to say hello. Is everything good with you?"

"That's sweet of you. Everything's fine. You sure picked the right day for a walk."



Joel Spector

"It's gorgeous out, isn't it?" I agreed. "Well, I'll see you later, Valerie."

I crossed Ocean Avenue, clambered up a dune, and skittle-ran down the side to the surf. I was on a hunt for driftwood. When I was a kid, before my mother died, we'd trek to Nantasket Beach, south of Boston, each November, just the two of us, and seek out the best-looking driftwood, a crucial element in the elaborate holiday decorations we created each season. I hadn't done it since I couldn't remember when, and this year I was determined to find a perfect piece and restart the tradition.

I headed north. Plenty of driftwood was scattered about, most of it tangled in seaweed, but nothing that fit the bill. After about thirty minutes, I turned back. An hour into my walk, just as I was about to give up, I found it—the perfect specimen, hidden behind an old log. It was a two-foot length of knurled applewood, sea- and sun-bleached to a satiny dove gray.

The screams, when they came, were piercing, and louder than the crashing waves. I spun toward shore, but I couldn't see over the dunes. I raced up the sand toward the street, driftwood in hand. The screams didn't stop. From the top, I saw a middle-aged woman wearing a Macon Cleaners uniform standing on the Rocky Point Bed and Breakfast's front porch.

She was shrieking, her eyes clenched closed.

I ran-slid down the dune, dashed across the street, and took the stairs two at a time to reach her on the porch.

"What's wrong?" I asked her.

"Jes" was embroidered on the pocket. She clutched a mop to her chest as if it were all that was holding her up. She didn't appear injured.

"What's happened, Jes?" I asked.

She didn't stop yelling. She didn't know I was there. I touched her shoulder.

"What's wrong?" I repeated. "Tell me."

She opened her eyes wide and I saw terror in her eyes. "Upstairs!" she managed, choking on the word. "Oh my God . . . oh my God . . . oh my God!" She began wailing, and folded into herself. The mop clattered to the porch.

My mouth went dry. I looked toward the parking lot. The only vehicle was the Macon Cleaners van. "Where's Valerie? Ms. Lane?" I asked.

"Grocery shopping," she moaned. "Oh my God!"

"What is it? What's upstairs?"

"Mother of God . . . he's dead."

I dug my cell phone out of my purse and called 911. The police

dispatcher told me to stay outside, away from the house, and to wait for the police to arrive. I took Jes's arm and guided her into the parking lot.

Four minutes later, a patrol car driven by a uniformed police officer I didn't know came charging into the lot. Jes, the maid, stood silently.

He tried to get information from her but couldn't. She was unable to say more than "Upstairs" and "Mother of God."

He started off toward the porch, spoke into his radio, then entered the house. I caught the door before it swung closed and stepped inside behind him. He stopped three paces in to listen. I backed into the corner behind him. The grandfather clock was ticking. Somewhere outside a dog barked. The refrigerator cycled on, then off.

The police officer fingered open his holster as he started up the stairs. My heart was thudding. I followed. When he reached the second-floor landing, he paused and glanced around.

Three closed doors, labeled, ROSE, TULIP, and VIOLET, were visible, one to right, the other two in front of us. A fourth door, on the left, stood open.

The officer drew his weapon and eased into the room with the open door. I stayed on the landing. After several seconds, I heard him speaking and crept toward the room. He was staring at something on the floor on the far side of the bed and talking into his radio. I saw rumpled sheets and a nightstand with a lamp on it. I stepped over the threshold.

"What are you doing in here?" the police officer snapped at me. "Get out!"

"Sorry," I replied, and as I turned to leave, I peered over the bed. A man lay on the floor. He was naked. His face was swollen and purplish gray. He was, beyond doubt, dead.

Detective Claire Brownley stared at me, her sapphire blue eyes meeting mine. "You didn't touch anything? Not even the watch?"

"What watch? I didn't see a watch."

She held up a see-through plastic evidence bag containing a gold pocket watch clipped to a chain. There was a circular onyx fob dangling at the chain's end.

"No. From what I can see, though, it's a beauty," I said.

We were sitting in a patrol car while the crime scene investigators worked inside. Valerie hadn't returned from shopping. The maid, who'd blurted to Detective Brownley that she knew nothing and that she was going to faint, was being interviewed in an unmarked police vehicle on the other side of the lot.

"The watch was under the nightstand near his body," she told me. "Do you think it's valuable?"

"I'd need to examine it. Some pocket watches are hugely valuable; others are worthless."

She nodded and was about to speak when Valerie drove up in her white van. Valerie opened up the side door and I saw a sea of white plastic grocery bags. Detective Brownley stepped out of the vehicle. I followed suit.

Valerie stood by her van as Detective Brownley approached her. She turned to me. "Josie?" she asked. "What's going on? Are you all right?"

I nodded but didn't reply.

"Someone died," Detective Brownley told Valerie. "The body was found in the room marked 'Wisteria.' Who was assigned to that room?"

Valerie looked stunned. She shivered despite the scarf wrapped around her neck and the down vest zipped all the way up. "Someone's dead? Who?" she asked.

The detective pushed some buttons on her cell phone. When she'd arrived, ten minutes after the first police officer found the body, she'd taken a head shot of the murder victim on her cell phone. "Do you recognize this man?" she asked, turning the phone so Valerie could view the display.

Blood drained from Valerie's face as she stared at the photo. One second, her complexion was rosy, and the next it was ashen. "What happened to him?"

"The ME is just starting her work," Detective Brownley replied, watching Valerie with laserlike focus. "Who is it?"

Valerie scanned the parking lot. "Where's Phyllis?" she whispered. "I don't see her car."

Detective Brownley paused, then said, "Ms. Lane?"

"That's Murray Jenkins. Phyllis is his wife. They're from Tampa. They decided to spend the fall up here. They've been guests since late September."

"What did they do with themselves all day?"

"I don't know." Valerie shrugged. "Murray stayed inside most of the time. Phyllis was gone a lot. I think she was a photographer. She carried equipment around—good stuff. I'd see her in the garden sometimes taking shot after shot of a flower or a leaf."

"What other guests are here now?"

"Besides the Jenkinses? Just Shannon. Shannon McIver. She's a CPA from Boston. She stays with me one week a month while she's working at the university. She's their outside auditor."

"So she's at work now?"

"What time is it?" Valerie glanced at her watch. "Just after two. Yes, she should be."

"When did you last see each of the Jenkinses and Ms. McIver?"

"This morning at breakfast. Phyllis drove off. Shannon left for the university. Murray went to his room." She shrugged. "It was a typical day."

"What did you do after breakfast?" Detective Brownley asked.

Valerie took in a deep breath and held it for a moment. She swept her hair back, then took another deep breath. "I cleaned up the dishes. I made a grocery list." She shrugged again. "I checked the computer to see if I had any e-mail. Nothing unusual happened. It was a regular day."

"Were there any phone calls? Did you see anyone after breakfast?"

"There were no calls. Shannon came back for lunch, as usual. I allow her kitchen privileges as part of my deal with the university. She got here about twelve fifteen. Josie stopped by about twelve thirty to say hello. Jes from Macon got here right afterwards, and I left around one to do some shopping. Shannon would have left to go back to her job about one fifteen."

"Does that timing sound right to you, Josie?" the detective asked.

"I guess so. When I got here, Valerie's van was here, and a gold Impala. A silver Sonata was leaving at the same time as I arrived. When I got back from the beach, about one thirty, the Macon Cleaners' van was the only vehicle in the lot."

"The gold Impala's Shannon's. The Sonata is the Jenkinses' car," Valerie said. "Was a woman driving? A redhead?"

"Yes. That's right."

"Then Phyllis must have come back sometime during the morning and I missed her. It's a big house."

"Do you have contact information for Mrs. Jenkins or Ms. McIver?" Detective Brownley asked Valerie.

"Yes, both of them. Inside."

Detective Brownley used her radio to contact someone called Tillman, got permission to enter, then turned to me. "You can go. I'll be in touch."

I watched Valerie and Detective Brownley walk inside, then crossed Ocean Avenue, climbed a dune, and faced the ocean. I stood on the shifting sand for awhile, listening to the waves as they rolled to shore and watching the sea gulls spike and dive, and then I drove slowly back to work.

I was in my office on the phone with my boyfriend, Ty Alveraz, filling him in, when Wes, the annoyingly assertive cub reporter for the *Seacoast Star*, called.

"Whatcha got?" Wes demanded.

"Hi, Wes, I'm fine, thanks."

"So? What did you see? Was the dead guy really naked?"

"I'm on the other line, Wes. I'll call you back."

"Josie," he whined, "it's urgent! I've got a real shockeroonie."

Curiosity warred with an aversion to encourage Wes's unseemly delight in all things scandalous, and curiosity won. I told him to hold on, explained to Ty that I had to take another call, then said, "I'm back. What's your *shockeroonie*?" I rolled my eyes as I spoke the word.

"You first."

"I don't know anything, Wes."

"What are you talking about? You called 911. You found the body."

"I didn't find the body," I protested. "The cleaner from Macon did."

"What's her name?" Wes asked.

I felt it beginning again. Wes had a gift. He invariably drew out more information from me than I wanted to provide. I let him because I knew the score: if I didn't give information, I wouldn't get information. And Wes had sources everywhere, from the police to telephone companies to bankers. Wes and I had our own sort of quid pro quo and our own rules. Before answering, I demanded anonymity, and he argued that he was only asking background questions. After a familiar squabble, I succeeded in wresting a commitment from him.

"So, what's the maid's name?" he asked.

"I don't know, but her uniform had the word *Jes* embroidered on it."

"What was the murder weapon?"

"I didn't see anything nearby," I replied. My throat closed as I recalled the murdered man's face. "I don't even know how he died."

"Asphyxiated," Wes said.

"Suffocated?" I asked, shocked.

"Strangled." Wes sounded bloodthirsty.

"With what?"

"According to my police source, they don't know. Something soft, like a sheet. Not a rope or an electric cord, which would have left marks. You didn't see anything?"

"I saw sheets. The bed was unmade."

"What else? A towel lying around?"

I thought back to the scene. "No, nothing like that."

"Did you know him?"

"No. Nor his wife."

"How about the other guest? Shannon McIver?"

"No." I swiveled to face my window and gazed out past my bare maple tree toward the church on the other side of the woods. "What's your shockeroonie?" I asked.

"I have two. First, you know how they said their names were Phyllis and Murray Jenkins? And that they were from Tampa? Well, guess what? There's neither a Phyllis Jenkins nor a Murray Jenkins in Tampa!"

"Well then, who are they?" I asked, bewildered.

"No one knows. There's no ID. No wallet. No laptop. The police have run his prints and there's no match."

"That doesn't make any sense. Why would people lie about their names in Rocky Point?"

"Makes you wonder, huh? There's more—are you ready? They were able to recover trace evidence from under the dead guy's fingernails—blood and tissue."

"Whose is it?"

"Who knows? Until they have someone to compare it to . . . you know the drill."

"What do they do now?"

"Hope his wife comes back soon."

The next afternoon, Detective Brownley showed up without an appointment, wanting to talk to me. I told Gretchen, my receptionist, to send her up.

I started my company in an old canvas factory. I refurbished it to include a luxurious, high-end auction venue on one side; a cavernous warehouse for sorting, cleaning, and storing inventory in the middle; and a Spartan tag-sale shack on the other side. There was a big office in the front. My private office occupied the mezzanine level.

From the landing, I watched as Gretchen walked the detective to the spiral staircase that led to my office. Per my insurance company's requirements, no one was allowed to be in the warehouse unescorted, not even a police detective on duty.

"I was wondering if you can tell me anything about the victim from this watch. Apparently, it's his," she said after we were settled in matching yellow Queen Anne wing chairs. She dangled the plastic bag containing the pocket watch. "According to both Ms. Lane and Ms. McIver, he wore it all the time." She extended an arm. "The lab is finished with it."

I opened the bag and allowed the watch to spill gently onto the table, then I picked it up and held it to the light. The watch was

gold, a terrific example of a classic gold damaskeened pocket watch. Made by the Waltham Watch Company, it featured a pristine white porcelain dial, black Arabic numerals, red five-minute marks, and black spade pointers. Inside there was an inscription in delicate script:

For Edmund T. Blair
25 Years Faithful Service
1972-1997

“Did you look up the name?” I asked.

“Yeah—no luck—there were almost a hundred fifty thousand hits. We checked the Waltham Watch Company too. It’s out of business.” She shrugged again. “So what do you think? Can you help?”

I turned the watch over. The etched design was ornate, featuring vines, hanging fruit, blossoms, and tendrils. The Waltham Watch Company mass produced watches, but this one didn’t look like a mass produced product, and if it wasn’t, there was a chance I could trace it. “I can try,” I told her.

“Thanks,” she said.

I slid the watch back into the plastic bag and walked her downstairs. Gretchen took digital photos and typed up a receipt, our standard procedure for an antique left for appraisal.

“I’ll call as soon as we know something,” I told the detective.

“Hurry, okay?”

I nodded, understanding the exigency. She was out of options and was counting on me.

I showed the watch to my appraisers, Sasha and Fred. Sasha, my chief appraiser, was shy and quiet, diligent and persistent, with small-town style. Fred was assertive and confident, a pit bull, with big-city sass.

“We need to find the owner,” I told them.

“It’s a Waltham,” Fred said, snorting dismissively. Fred was an antiques snob and Waltham had produced something like forty million watches.

“What about the fob?” I asked. “It looks like onyx. Any chance we could trace it?”

Fred held up the circular black stone attached to the watch chain through flat links. The stone was encircled in chased gold. “Unusual,” he said. “And engraved—it says, ‘. . . a form of madness.’”

“I know that. Is there more?” I said, racking my brain trying to recall the reference.

“No,” he said.

“My dad quoted it,” I murmured, feeling the familiar stab of loneliness and loss whenever I thought of him. I missed him every

day. “I know I know it. Give me a minute.” I shut my eyes, then opened them. “It’s from *Man’s Rise to Civilization*, by Peter Farb. The quote is something like romantic love exists, but people need to recognize it for what it is—a form of madness.” Seeing Fred and Sasha’s astonishment, I added, “My dad loved words used well,” then shook my head to chase the memory away.

Fred leaned back with a knowing grin and pushed his square-framed glasses into place. “That’s pretty good.”

“What’s on the reverse?” I asked, bringing our conversation back to work.

Fred turned the stone over and examined it under a loupe, then scrutinized the gold, turning it slowly. “Nothing on the stone. And just ‘14 K’ stamped on the ridge.”

“Sasha, what do you think?” I asked.

“We could research companies that awarded gold watches for twenty-five years’ service in 1997.”

I nodded. “What else?”

“The inscription’s worth a shot.”

“Fred? Any other ideas?”

He shrugged. “Nothing’s likely to work. Whoever owns it now probably bought it used. Tracking down the company or the inscription is more likely to lead to a guy who bought it from a pawnshop ten years ago and sold it on eBay five years after that.”

I nodded again. “You’re probably right. Still, we’ve got to try . . . I’ll take the watch and the inscription. Why don’t you guys give companies who gave gold watches in 1997 a whirl?”

“Okay,” Sasha said.

Fred agreed without enthusiasm.

Upstairs, I used a loupe to examine the pocket watch millimeter by millimeter. Woven into a vine near the bottom, clear as day, I spotted letters: RfTD. It meant nothing to me.

I Googled the initials and got more than a thousand hits, articles and press releases about Roy farrell Thomas Design. From my reading, I gathered that Roy farrell Thomas Design had been a big deal design studio based in San Francisco back in the ’90s. That Mr. Thomas used a lowercase middle initial was one of many eccentricities he and his studio were known for.

I clicked on a retrospective in *Design Issues @ Work* referencing a change in ownership. Mr. Thomas had sold his studio to Shapiro Graphics, an L.A.-based full-service graphics agency, in 2004.

I called Shapiro Graphics and got a nice woman in personnel, but she couldn’t help me. No Roy farrell Thomas Design employees were employed by Shapiro Graphics, and if any ever had been, she was unaware of it. She passed me on to the client relations

manager, a crabby-sounding man who acted as if he could get some work done if only clients would stop bothering him.

"Kill 'em with kindness," my dad once told me. "Works better than going toe-to-toe."

"I'm sorry to disturb you," I said, apologizing in a ploy to soften him up.

It didn't work, but my persistence did, and finally he explained that Shapiro had bought Roy farrell Thomas Design for its client list, not for the designs, so he could provide no useful information. I asked to be transferred back to the woman in personnel, and when I asked for Mr. Thomas's contact information, I struck out again. Last she heard, he was living somewhere in Costa Rica.

Fred called up. "Finding companies who in 1997 gave watches to retirees is impossible. There's no central listing. There's nowhere to search. There are no experts to ask. It's a bust."

I told him that he and Sasha should go back to other appraisals, and I turned back to the inscription.

Detective Brownley said she got too many hits on the name. I thought for a moment, then Googled "Roy farrell Thomas" and "Edmund T. Blair" and "pocket watch," and I got no hits. I tried again, this time dropping Mr. Blair's middle initial from my search. Just because he used it didn't mean other people were as diligent. A single reference appeared: Mr. Blair's obituary in his church's online newsletter. He died in Lee, Massachusetts in 2005.

The article stated that Edmund Blair had loved his Roy farrell Thomas watch, the one he received from Landler Metal Works when he retired. And that he was survived by his wife and one son, Chester, a playwright, who lived in New York City.

Further research provided a photo of Chester Blair at the opening of his latest Broadway hit, *No Time for Crying*. It was hard to be certain that Chester was the murder victim, since the only time I'd seen his face, it had been misshapen and discolored, but I was fairly certain that I was staring at a photo of the dead man.

I searched for more information about Chester Blair and found a long, juicy article in *New York Monthly* from last year. Chet, as he was known, was apparently quite a ladies' man. He spent a lot of time tearing up New York City hotspots with a variety of young women, everyone from actresses who performed in the plays he wrote to waitresses who served him to neighbors who lived in the same trendy Tribeca locale, and more or less, he got away with it. One woman sued him for paternity, but the tests proved he wasn't the father of her baby. Another woman attempted suicide when she learned she was one of three women he was dating, but as she'd already attempted suicide several times in the past, the news

reports referred to the incident as unfortunate, not blame-worthy. Chet had never been married.

I called Detective Brownley to report.

I stopped by the Rocky Point Bed and Breakfast on my way home to see how Valerie was doing. She invited me in for a cup of tea, and led the way into her comfortable red and white gingham country kitchen. She wore a yellow turtleneck sweater and jeans, and she looked bone weary.

We sat at a rectangular table that jutted out from the far wall. A stacked washer-dryer was off to one side. Rhythmic churning told me that the washer was in use. A turquoise plastic laundry basket, filled with darks, rested nearby.

"This is Shannon McIver," Valerie said, introducing me. "Shannon, this is Josie Prescott. She's an antiques dealer and appraiser."

Shannon was a wispy blonde, with skin so white it was almost translucent. She wore a navy blue suit with a V-neck, sea-shell pink blouse. She sipped what I took to be green tea out of a big mug. The mug had an illustration of a va-va-voom-looking woman sitting at a desk, smiling. The text read: "World's hottest accountant. Only your receivables age." She appeared shell shocked.

I greeted her, then asked Valerie, "How are you doing?"

She shrugged as she fussed with the teapot, but didn't reply. She poured me a cup and slid it onto the table.

"Any news?" I asked.

The washer clicked off and she walked to the machine to switch the loads. "Nope."

"Have you spoken to the police?" Shannon asked me.

"Yes. Briefly. How about you?"

She shivered and nodded. "They came to the university to get me. It was awful. I was with them all afternoon yesterday and most of this morning."

I glanced at Valerie to see if she was listening, but I couldn't tell. Her back was to me. I saw her toss the blue negligée and its matching belt into the dryer.

"How did it go?" I asked Shannon.

She stared into her mug. "They wanted a DNA sample."

"What did you say?"

"No." She looked up at me. Her eyes were pale gray and red-rimmed. She'd been crying. "I said no. I want to help. I liked Murray, but no way am I letting my DNA get into a police database."

"It's a terrible situation all around," I said diplomatically.

A rat-a-tat-tat sounded on the kitchen door. Through the window,

I saw Detective Brownley's stern countenance staring at me. Valerie opened the door. I stood up.

"Ms. Lane, Ms. McIver, I'm glad to find you both here," she said. "I have a few more questions."

She spoke to them, but she was pinning me with her eyes.

"I was just leaving," I said. "Nice meeting you, Shannon. I'll talk to you soon, Valerie. Thanks for the tea." I got out of there before Detective Brownley could corner me and start asking me questions.

Wes called as I was driving home. I slipped in my earpiece.

"We need to talk. Can you meet me?" he asked imperatively.

It was dark and I was tired. "I can't, Wes. It's late."

"Josie!" he exclaimed, sounding astonished. "It's important!"

I wasn't impressed. Everything was urgent to Wes. "Sorry. Tell me on the phone."

He sighed, Wesian for acquiescence. "I hear from my police source that you ID'd the dead guy through his watch. Why didn't you call me?" he griped.

"Do you have any news about the missing woman?" I asked, ignoring his question. "The woman who's *not* Phyllis Jenkins?"

He sighed again, no doubt wanting to be certain that I knew that he was disappointed in me, then said, "Yes, I do." He paused. "Give me something, Josie. I'm on deadline and I need *something*."

I considered my options—what I could reveal and what I should hold back. "I have a photo of the pocket watch."

"E-mail it to me."

"Okay. Tell me about the woman."

"She's a New York City actress, Dahlia Hearn. Mostly Off-Broadway and a couple of TV commercials. She's slotted for the lead in Chester Blair's new play. They've been up here while he's revising the script. He likes to get out of New York to write. She's keeping him company. They're not married."

"Where is she now?"

"She went to New York, but now she's back here. She came voluntarily. Chet was just about finished with the revision. He was going to join her in a day or two, whenever he was done. She drove back to get their apartment in order."

"Why didn't he keep the car?"

Wes chuckled. "He didn't drive. Can you believe that?"

Having lived in New York City for a decade, I could, in fact, believe it. "Yes," I said. "So, Dahlia and Chester are an item?"

"Yup. They've been living together for more than a year. They're checking whether he was screwing around."

"I heard he was quite a playboy," I commented, curious about Wes's take on the subject.

"That's not even the half of it—are you ready for an info-bomb? The police have proof that he and Shannon McIver were having an affair this fall."

"You're kidding!" I exclaimed, astounded, then not. I recalled Shannon's red eyes. "Why would they think that?"

"They found evidence at Macon Cleaners—a dirty sheet from Shannon's room. Val gave them permission to search the B&B and Shannon gave them permission to search her room, apparently not thinking that the police would track down soiled sheets. There was no question about which inn the sheets came from—Macon kept each client's linens separate; nor was there any question about which room the sheet came from—only Shannon's room had twin beds. The tests showed that Shannon and Chet had sex."

"I can't believe it! He was sleeping with Shannon *while* he was there with Dahlia?"

"Yup. There's more! The test also showed that the blood and tissue found under Chet's fingernails *didn't* belong to Shannon."

My brain was reeling. "What do they think happened?" I asked.

"They think that maybe Dahlia killed him. She left that morning, then came back. What if Dahlia walked in while he and Shannon were having a lunchtime canoodle? Maybe Dahlia went nuts."

I thought about it. Shannon's car was there at twelve thirty when I saw Dahlia pull out and head south. "It's possible," I acknowledged, and told Wes about the sequence I'd observed.

"Yeah, maybe, but Dahlia denies everything. She's sticking to it that the police tests are wrong, that Chet wasn't having an affair with Shannon, and that his playing around was a thing of the past."

"What does she think happened?" I asked.

"She thinks that he was killed during a robbery—after all, his laptop and wallet are gone. She figures the thief didn't steal the pocket watch only because it fell under the bedside table—he missed it. She said that Valerie left the inn unlocked during the day, which is true, so anyone could just walk in. But when she was asked why a thief would choose the one occupied room to ransack, you know what she said? That thieves are often irrational." He chuckled again. "She's refusing to give a DNA sample too. But they can't find evidence of a fight or anything else relevant, so they can't get a court order."

I paused for a long moment, trying to assimilate everything Wes just told me, then asked, "Wes, there's something I don't understand. If it *wasn't* robbery—where are the laptop and wallet?"



The next morning, I woke up with a conviction and an idea about how to prove it.

At ten, I walked into Blackmore's Jewelers on the Green in Rocky Point Village, the finest jewelry store on the coast, in business for eighty-seven years. A handsome man close to retirement age wearing a well-tailored suit approached me as soon as I entered.

"May I help you?" he asked.

"I hope so. I'm Josie Prescott. I own Prescott's Antiques and Auctions."

"Of course, of course, a pleasure. I'm Morton Blackmore."

We shook. "Wow. I knew you'd been in business for a long time, but I had no idea it was still family run. This has to be some kind of record."

He smiled. "Not really, but when my grandson takes over, then maybe we can talk about setting records. What can I do for you today?"

"Is there somewhere we can talk?"

His eyes narrowed appraisingly, but with a gracious sweep of his hand, he indicated that I should accompany him to the rear. He led me into a private office. He sat behind a mahogany desk, pointed toward a guest chair, and waited for me to speak.

I extracted the onyx fob from the satin jewelry case I'd stored it in, and laid it on the desk. "Am I right that you sold this?"

He glanced at the piece, then at me. "May I?" he asked, before picking it up.

"Please."

"Why do you want to know whether we sold it?" he asked, turning the fob over.

"It belonged to a murder victim and I think knowing who bought it will help the police catch his killer."

Morton looked at me straight on. "That man at the bed and breakfast?"

"Yes."

He slid the fob toward me. "Yes, we sold it. Two weeks ago. It was a birthday present."

"Valerie Lane bought it, right?"

"Yes," he replied.

Ten minutes later, after avoiding answering any of Morton's other questions, I called Detective Brownley.

At Detective Brownley's request, I drove to police headquarters and gave a formal statement. I recounted my conversation with

Mr. Blackmore, and as I reported his acknowledgment that Valerie bought the fob, unexpectedly my voice cracked and my eyes filled with tears. I stopped speaking and took a deep breath, willing the upset to pass. Detective Brownley sat watching me, her expression unchanged.

"Sorry," I said, once I could speak again. "I just can't believe it, you know? I had no idea about what she was going through. Forget that she never said anything . . . she never even hinted anything. She never once revealed her true feelings. It's just so shocking and . . . I don't know . . . you think you know someone, and then you realize that you don't. You don't know anything."

"Most murders involve some measure of deception."

I nodded, thinking about it. "One person might kill to preserve a secret. Another person might kill because someone refused to reveal it."

Detective Brownley nodded, then after a pause, asked, "Anything else about Mr. Blackmore?"

I took another deep breath and pushed my disappointment and shock aside. "I bet he has the receipt," I said.

"How did you know it was Ms. Lane?"

"Well . . . I didn't know . . . not for certain. There were a lot of things. When I walked into the bed and breakfast that day, Valerie was clutching a dressing gown to her chest. I think I interrupted her, that she'd just killed Chet. Her sash was still around his neck, that's why she was holding the dressing gown closed by gripping the fabric." I shook my head. "She panicked—she just wanted to retrieve her sash, scoop up the laptop and wallet, and get out of there. The next day, when I was in the kitchen having tea, Valerie was doing laundry. Watching her toss the sash in made me wonder where it was the day before. She wasn't wearing it. Taken alone, it didn't mean anything, but it got me thinking."

"Why would she have waited until then to wash it?"

I shrugged. "Probably she didn't. I bet this was the second or third time—just in case something didn't wash out the first time around."

Detective Brownley nodded. "What else?"

"Valerie wore a scarf and a turtleneck. It was too warm to be so bundled up! It occurred to me that she might have some scratches she was hiding."

She nodded again. "What made you go to that jeweler in particular?" she asked.

"Blackmore's a wonderful shop. They carry unusual things, very high end. And it's local. Valerie works hard. She wouldn't take the time to traipse to the mall or anything. Plus, you wouldn't find

something like a watch fob at a regular jewelry store.”

“But what made you think you’d find it in any jewelry store? It looked like an antique to me.”

“The onyx circle sits in a gold ring—it’s marked fourteen karat. Most fine antique jewelry is eighteen karat.” I shrugged. “I thought it was worth a shot.”

She smiled at me, a rare sight for the normally serious detective. “Thanks, Josie.”

Before I headed back to Prescott’s, I crossed the street and climbed a dune. I stood for several minutes. When I felt more composed, I headed up Ocean Avenue.

My route back to work took me directly past the Rocky Point Bed and Breakfast, and as I drove by, I saw Detective Brownley walking up the front path.

I pulled off to the side of the road a hundred yards away and watched as she knocked on the front door. When Valerie answered, the detective said something and Valerie stepped onto the porch. Detective Brownley spoke again. Valerie replied, her eyes big with dismay. Detective Brownley nodded, then followed Valerie back inside. When they returned to the porch moments later, Valerie had her purse. She locked the door. Then Detective Brownley handcuffed her and led her to the waiting vehicle.

I called Wes and gave him the details, then stopped at the grocery store to pick up the ingredients for my mother’s thyme chicken.

Later, I stood at the range, mixing the glaze while Ty leaned against the wall keeping me company, drinking Smuttynose from the bottle.

“Where did they find the laptop and wallet?” he asked.

“In the grocery store dumpster. She double-bagged them and tossed them in.”

“Jeez. Why did the police search there?”

“There was nowhere else the laptop and wallet could be. Timing-wise, I mean. I saw Valerie at twelve thirty when she was upstairs, not even dressed. And she got back from shopping at two with about a gazillion grocery bags. It’s a twenty-minute drive from the inn to the store. So even if she got dressed in a flash—five or ten minutes—she couldn’t have gotten to the store much before one. Wes told me that the butcher recalls her asking him to cut her a certain cut of beef just after one. He remembers specifically because he just got back from lunch. Valerie used her debit card to pay at one thirty-two. She got back to the inn about thirty minutes

later—which means she loaded the van and drove straight back. The timing doesn’t allow for many other options.”

Ty nodded. “So the disposal had to be at the store or on her route.”

“Exactly. And they found them in the dumpster.”

“Why did she steal them?”

“I don’t think she intended to. She planned on checking them out to see if they contained any references to her. A phone number tucked in his wallet, for instance, or notes that he saved on his computer. But the time got away from her and she decided just to get rid of them.”

Ty got another beer from the fridge. “Why did she kill him?”

I peeked over my shoulder at him and smiled impishly. “A perfectly understandable motive—she caught him in bed with another woman.”

Ty grinned. “I’ll keep that in mind.” He shook his head. “You’re talking about Shannon?”

“Yeah. I gather from what Valerie has told the police that she thought her romance with Chet was the real deal—a grand passion. She understood that Chet was in a quote-committed-end quote relationship with Dahlia, and that was regrettable, but correctable, but when she learned about Shannon, she went ballistic.”

“How did she find out?”

“I don’t know. Probably she caught them in the act during their noontime quickie.”

“What about Shannon? Didn’t she resent the hell out of his screwing around?”

“No. Wes quoted her as saying that Chet was a fun fling—that she was single and having a good time. Shannon said the person she felt sorry for was Dahlia.”

“Do you?” Ty asked.

“No. My dad once told me that in job searches, resumés are used to eliminate people—the lowest risk hire is the person who’s already succeeded at what you’re looking for. I figure the same applies in relationships. If someone screwed around on their last mate, what makes you think they won’t do the same to you? Dahlia knew what she was getting.”

“That’s cold.”

“I’m a realist,” I said, then turned full around and smiled at him. “A realist who’s wildly in love. Come here, big fella, and kiss the cook.” 🐾