Sweet Ginger Poison
Coreyville Coffee Cakes
Ginger Lightley
Mystery Series
Robert Burton Robinson
Synopsis

Virginia “Ginger” Lightley is the owner of Coreyville Coffee Cakes, a popular bakery in East Texas. Customers drive from miles away to visit the little shop for a taste of her original creations.

It’s a shock to the whole community when a young man drops dead across town after eating one of her famous cakes.

The newly appointed police chief promises to solve the case quickly. And Ginger wants to help him—until he accuses one of her employees of murder.

She rejects the crime scenario laid out by the young police chief and secretly determines to solve the crime herself.
Chapter 1

“Here it is.” Navy threw it on the desk. “Now give me my money.”
“I don’t have it right now.”

Navy’s headache began to pound. It was only 7:15 a.m., but his brain cells were already screaming for caffeine. His eyes grew unnaturally large as his hands morphed into fists.

“Look, five thousand is a lot of money.”
“If you couldn’t pay it, you shouldn’t have promised it. That was the deal. And I’m gonna get my money one way or another—even if I have to beat it out of you.”
“No, no. Look, I didn’t know when you’d come. I don’t keep that much cash on hand. I’ll have to go to the bank. Come back at ten.”
“You better not be lying to me,” he said, beginning to grit his teeth.
“I’ll have the money for you at ten.”

Navy turned and stormed toward the door.

“Whoa. Settle down. How about a cup of coffee for the road?”

Navy stopped at the door and looked back. It would save him a trip to McDonalds. “Sure.” He took a deep breath. The money would solve all his problems. It would only be a temporary fix. But at least he wouldn’t lose his car. And he could take Kayla out for an expensive dinner tonight.

“Here you go. You need cream or sugar?”
“No.” Navy grabbed the Styrofoam cup. “See you at ten.” He walked out.

The alley was pitch black. How fortunate that the overhead light was burned out. He stood for a moment as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. Gradually the black Corvette began to materialize in the faint moonlight. He made his way around to the driver’s side and got in. Sunrise would come at any moment. He started the engine and carefully eased up on the clutch. The powerful automobile crept slowly through the alley.

Navy held his breath as he pulled onto the road. He looked around. No witnesses. He turned on his headlights.

Coreyville Country Home was two miles north of town. He hated the place. The name implied a peaceful setting with fresh air, colorful butterflies and shady trees. And it did have all those things. Much like a cemetery. It was really just a place you go to die.

Navy Newcomb was born into money. Big money. Not that his mother had ever shared much of it with him. She had paid him to do well in high school. He’d never amount to anything, she always said, unless he got a good education. After graduating near the top of his class, he had no problem getting admission to University of Texas.

But the summer after his freshman year he overhead his mother talking to the family lawyer. There was a trust fund waiting for him to turn twenty-one. His father had set it up before he was born. So, his sophomore year was all about partying. What was the point of a college degree anyway? Navy would never have to work.

After flunking out of college and goofing off for a couple more years, he turned twenty-one and took possession of his two million dollars. He had been disappointed that it wasn’t more.

That was nearly four years ago, before the sports cars, boats, hookers, gambling, and drugs. All he had left was the Corvette. And it was the only thing that made him feel cool. And even that wasn’t really his. Not until he paid off the bank.

But things were looking up. Now he’d have the money to pay off the loan. And sooner or later his mother would start to believe that he had changed. This volunteer work would convince the crazy old woman to give him more money so he could rebuild his life.

It was a little creepy though. Taking over the delivery job. The old man had been doing it for a couple of years. Then one morning as he was dropping off a tray of coffee cakes, he had a stroke. Right there in the kitchen. They rushed him to the hospital. A week later he was back at the nursing home—as a resident.

Navy took a sip of his coffee. Then he reached for one of the small coffee cakes on the tray that was sitting in the passenger seat. It was a Sweet Ginger Cake—his favorite. There was only one today. He unwrapped it and wolfed it down in ten seconds. Delicious. He wished the cakes were normal size rather than personal sized, as they called them. On the other hand, somebody might notice if a regular size cake went missing.

When he arrived at the nursing home, he drove around back to the kitchen entrance and got out with the tray.

He rang the bell, and one of the cooks let him in. She took the tray from Navy and began to move the little cakes from the tray to the counter. “You ate some of them didn’t you?”
“No, of course not. They’re for the residents.”
“Look, I understand. You’re a growing boy.”
“I’m not a boy.”
She eyed him as though he was still wealthy, and that maybe he would be interested in an older woman like her.
She was sort of sexy—in a cafeteria-lady-with-a-hairnet kind of way.
She handed him the empty tray. “Before you go—you wanna taste one of my cherry tarts?”
He wasn’t absolutely sure she talking about food, but he was still starving. “Sure. Why not.”
She went to get one and brought it back to him, smiling. “Hope you like it.”
He set down the tray and took the tart.
“Be careful—it might be hot.”
He took a bite. “Good.”
She smiled.
He stuffed the rest of it in his mouth and mumbled, “Very good.”
Her smile broadened. “Thanks.”
Navy began to choke.
“I’ll get you some water.” She ran to the sink.
His throat continued to tighten.
The cook returned with a glass of water, but Navy was gone.
He ran to his car and opened the passenger door. Then he popped the glove box.
It felt like there was a golf ball stuck in his throat.
Navy fumbled through the contents of the glove box. He yanked out the owner’s manual and flung it on the floorboard. Then a Dallas map, a pile of receipts and other paperwork. Finally the glove box was empty. Where is it?
Navy gasped for air. He would run back inside. They had nurses. They could help him.
He stood up and staggered toward the building. The cook ran out to help him. Everything began to swirl.
He passed out just before his face hit the pavement.
Chapter 2

Ginger Lightley walked out her front door at precisely 7:30 a.m. The chilly January breeze was stronger than usual this morning. She flipped up the collar of her wool coat and pulled the knit cap down over her ears. She enjoyed the four-block stroll to her little bakery on town square.

The old city hall sat in the middle of the inner square. The four-story red brick building and its east and west parking lots covered two city blocks.

A variety of attractive old shops occupied the outer square. The most popular destination was Coreyville Coffee Cakes. Ginger was the proud owner and creator of recipes.

Sometimes she missed the old days, when she used to fire up the ovens at 6:00 a.m., mix the ingredients, and bake dozens of cakes, alongside her dear friend and hard worker, Addie Barneswaller. Nowadays Ginger had several employees. Her only job was to create a new recipe each month.

Coreyville Coffee Cakes would not have been a success without Addie. She was black, six-foot-two, and weighed around 190 pounds—every ounce of it muscle. She looked more like a pro basketball player than a 61-year-old cake baker. Ginger had a hard time believing that they were the same age.

One time Ginger demanded to see Addie’s birth certificate. She just laughed it off as a nice compliment. Addie had eight siblings. That was a lot of kids for her parents to keep up with. Ginger wondered if the parents had lost track of some of their ages.

She would never forget the day they met. Addie had just started working in the cafeteria at the elementary school where Ginger was teaching second grade. That was twenty-nine years ago—right before the bakery was opened.

The first week of school, Ginger was escorting her class through the lunch line when one of the boys looked up at Addie and made an ugly remark about the chicken fried steak. Some of the other children started laughing. Addie slowly leaned over the counter and peered directly into the boy’s eyes with such intensity that Ginger half expected the kid to burst into flames.

Ginger considered intervening to save the boy, but the little brat had been driving her up the wall all morning. So, she hesitated. Then she saw the puddle which was beginning to form on the floor, between the boy’s shoes.

Addie told Ginger later that she felt bad about what happened. But from then on the children knew better than to smart off to the big scary cafeteria lady.

That afternoon Ginger overheard a boy warning his friends. “Don’t say anything to her. Don’t even look at her. ‘Cause if she gives you the evil eye, you’re gonna wet your pants.” His buddies began to laugh. But the boy was insistent. “I’m not kidding. That’s what she did to Billy Jones. He wet his pants and started crying—right in front of the whole class.” The other boys suddenly quit laughing. The fear spread like a virus throughout the school. And that’s how Addie became a legend.

Ginger opened the door, anticipating the glorious aroma of freshly baked coffee cakes and perked coffee. There was nothing quite like that first whiff in the morning.

And there it was. It seemed even more intoxicating than usual.

All they had to do was get people into the shop. Once inside, it was nearly impossible for them to walk away without making a purchase. It wasn’t fair, really. Ginger almost felt like a drug dealer.

By the time the shop opened at 7:30, Addie and her new assistant, Lacey Greendale, had already baked dozens of the little cakes.

Ginger’s husband, Lester, God rest his soul, had never cared much for cakes. They were too sweet—especially the ones with icing. But then, as his 30th birthday approached, she had made up her mind to create a cake he’d love. She started with a basic coffee cake recipe and then tried to improve on it.

After throwing away several nine-inch round failures, she came up with the idea of mini-cakes. She ordered a special mini-loaf pan that was actually a set of six 4½-inch by 2½-inch individual pans connected by rods. It worked out great, allowing her to test six recipes at once.

Finally, after eighteen tries, Ginger had a masterpiece. She named it Sweet Ginger Cake. How could Lester resist a cake with that name? She wanted it to be a surprise. But what if he hated it—in front of all their friends? She decided to let him sample it early. He could still pretend that it was a surprise.

She held her breath as he took that first bite. To her, the cake was perfect. But she was still nervous about what he’d think. She couldn’t tell at first. He appeared to be trying to determine each and every ingredient. “Well?”

“Amazing,” he replied. “How did you do it?”

And that was how it all started. Ginger never had any formal training as a baker. Her only tools were a keen sense of taste and smell. She just kept experimenting until she got it right. That’s how she created all of her original recipes.
She closed the door behind her. There was already a line at the counter. Cheryl Iper was hurriedly accepting cash, checks, and credit cards. At the time they opened, most of the customers were on the way to work. Cheryl was doing her best to get them in and out as quickly as possible.

Ginger had never known anybody who could at the same time be so frantic yet cheerful, while spouting one-liners so fast that you’d never guess she’s a native East Texan.

“Good morning, Cheryl.”
“Morning, Ginger.”

Ginger walked around behind the counter and leaned in close to Cheryl. “Where’s Danny?”
Cheryl blushed. Danny was her twenty-one year old son. “He overslept. I’m sorry, Ginger. But don’t worry. I’ve got everything under control. I can manage until he gets here. And, of course, I’ll dock his pay.”

“That’s fine. I know you can handle it.” Ginger would have offered to pitch in, but she knew that would only make Cheryl feel more guilty about Danny being late.

Ginger walked over to the reduced price rack. Obviously, Navy Newcomb had already come by to pick up the three-day-old cakes for the nursing home.

She gave a twenty-five percent discount on day-old cakes, and a fifty-percent discount on two-day olds. Even after three days, the cakes were still perfectly good, but she just couldn’t bring herself to reduce the price further, so she gave them away to the Coreyville Country Home. The cafeteria would cut them into slices to serve with lunch. The residents loved them.

Ginger walked into the kitchen. “Good morning, Addie. How’s it going?”
Addie was busy removing freshly baked cakes from their pans. She stopped and turned around. “Good morning. It’s going fine.”

As usual, Addie had smudges of flour all over her. Ginger nearly giggled when she noticed the perfectly round white circle on each of Addie’s dark cheeks. It looked like the work of a powder puff in the hands of a color-blind Avon lady.

“How many three-day-olds went out today?”
She thought for a moment. “About twenty.”

“How’s Lacey?”
“She went out for a smoke break. Second one this morning.”
Ginger shook her head. Lacey Greendale was a beautiful five-foot-ten twenty-one year old with blue eyes and long dark hair. Her ivory skin was silky smooth. She was a sweet young lady, but very naïve. And you could break her heart just by looking at her with disappointed eyes.

Lacey opened the back door and walked into the kitchen. “Good morning, Mrs. Lightley.”
“Please—call me ‘Ginger.’”
“Sorry.”
She walked over and put her arm around Lacey, who towered over her. Ginger looked up at her and pointed to her own mouth. “Reason Five to stop smoking?”
Lacey cover her mouth with her hand. “Sorry.”
“No, don’t worry about me. But what about boys? I mean, men?”
“Well—”
“I know. If the guy’s a smoker, he doesn’t even smell it on you. But do you really want to get involved with a smoker? First thing you know, you’ll marry him and start having kids. And then your kids will have to live in all that smoke. Surely you don’t want that.”
Lacey was embarrassed. “Oh, no. Of course not.”
“Good.” Ginger released her and smiled at her. She was proud of Lacey. She was beginning to take her little speeches to heart. “Okay. Danny’s running late, so you’d better go out front and help Cheryl until he gets here.”
Lacey seemed slightly annoyed. “Yes, Ma’am.”
Ginger was surprised by her attitude. Lacey usually did whatever she was told with a smile.
After she walked out, Ginger turned to Addie. “What’s wrong with her?”
“I don’t know. She’s been acting kinda funny this morning.”
“I’ll talk to her later.”
Addie noticed something on the counter. “Uh-oh.”
“What is it?” Please don’t let it be a roach.
“The recipe book. It’s gone.”
“Was it there this morning when you came in?”
“Yes.”
“Are you sure, Addie?”
“Yes. I always check. It was definitely sitting right there.”
“So, you think Lacey took it?”
“Had to be her.”
“No, I can’t believe she would steal from me.”
“It’s worth thousands of dollars.”
Ginger shook her head. “I guess I shouldn’t have tempted her.”
“Why are you going easy on her? Nobody else who’s ever worked here has stolen it. And don’t you think they were tempted?”
“I guess so. But now I wish I’d never started leaving it out like that. Are you absolutely sure that it couldn’t have been somebody else?”
“Like who?” Then Addie’s expression changed in a flash.
“What?”
“Navy. He waited here in the kitchen while I went out front to make sure Lacey had picked up all the three-day-olds.”
“Where was Lacey?”
“She went out back for a smoke break right when he came in. I asked her to check out front for me before she took her break, but she ignored me and went out anyway. So, I had to do it myself.”
“So, Navy could have grabbed the recipe book while he was in here alone.”
“He could have. It was either him or Lacey. One of them stole it.”
Ginger knew that Navy Newcomb had blown his trust fund, and that he was flat broke. The whole town knew it. But she didn’t think he would stoop this low.
And if he did steal it, who would he sell it to?
Chapter 3

Lacey stuck her head in the kitchen and said, “Brother Bideman is here.”

Ginger was still in deep thought, trying to come to terms with the fact that either Lacey or Navy had stolen her recipe book. “Oh. He’s a little early this morning.”

She went out to the dining area and spotted him sitting at their usual table. All the locals knew better than to take the table in the back corner. She and the reverend had their morning coffee together at that table every day—except on Sundays, of course.

Coreyville Coffee Cakes was closed on the Sabbath. But Ginger still got to see him. Elijah Bideman was the pastor of Corey Acres Baptist Church. On any given Sunday, she could be found in her favorite pew, listening to Elijah’s sermon.

There were whisperings around town that Ginger and the good reverend were much more than just friends. After all, Ginger’s husband, Lester, had died two years earlier, and Elijah’s wife had left him four years ago. Many folks figured it was about time the two admitted they were in love.

But Ginger was not in love with Elijah. She would not allow herself to fall in love again. Lester had been her one true love. There could never be another. That’s the way it was meant to be.

She picked up two ceramic coffee cups and filled them. Elijah took his coffee black, and so did she.

He was scanning the front page of the local newspaper, The Coreyville Courier. The Saturday edition was so thin and lightweight that paperboys had to worry about it blowing right out of a customer’s yard.

The Sweet Ginger Cake sitting in front him had not been touched. He knew his breakfast partner would be arriving at any moment.

“Would you like some coffee to go with that cake, Sir?”

He looked at Ginger and smiled broadly. A salesman could only wish to have such a smile. His dimples alone could make a woman dizzy. “Why, yes, I would, Ma’am.” He folded the newspaper and set it on the back edge of the table, against the wall.

Ginger placed the two cups on the small table and sat down across from him. “Got your sermon all ready to go?” Elijah was notorious for waiting until the last minute.

“I’m close.”

“What’s the subject?”

“Uh…I’d rather not say. Let it be a surprise.”

“You don’t even know, do you?”

“Sure I do. I mean—I’ve got it down to three possibilities.”

Ginger shook her head. “I don’t know how you do it.”

“But I do it. That’s the important thing. I always get it done.”

“Yes, you do. And your sermons are always great. Inspiring.”

“Thanks.”

“I guess it doesn’t really matter that you’re the world’s worst procrastinator.”

“No, Ginger. I’m the world’s greatest procrastinator.”

She smiled. “Well, I guess it just depends on how you look at it.”

“That’s right. I’m a cup-half-full kind of guy.”

“Well, right now you’re a cup-getting-cold kind of guy.”

Elijah looked down at this coffee cup. “Not at all.” He picked it up and took a sip.

Ginger watched him as she sipped from hers. She always loved watching him—even when he was doing something as mundane as drinking coffee.

“Ginger, I’d like to bounce something off you, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure. Go ahead.”

“It’s about the parsonage. It’s been a wonderful place to live all these years. And I appreciate the church providing it for me, of course. But…”

“What?”

“Well, I’m 63 years old, and—“

“—you’re not thinking about retiring.” Ginger couldn’t bear the thought.

“No. It’s not that. I mean, sure, I’ll retire someday. But not anytime soon.”

“Good.”

“But, I need my own place. The parsonage belongs to the church. When I retire I’ll have to move out. Then where
am I going to live? In a retirement home?"

“I don’t know.” Thirty-two years ago, Ginger had been on the church committee that recommended the house to be purchased by the church and used as a parsonage. Usually, a pastor would stay a few years and then move on. She had never considered what would happen if a pastor retired from the church.

“I’m thankful for what the church has done—giving me a place to live, at no charge. But I need a home of my own.”

“So, what are you thinking?”

“Well, I’ve managed to save a little money over the years. And I found a spot just outside of town.”

“But that house is eaten up with termites. It needs to be torn down.”

“I know. The house is no good. But I’d buy the land now. Then I’d save up for materials and build my own house.”

“With your own hands? You’re not a carpenter.” She took his hands and turned them over to the palms. They were as smooth as a newborn baby. “Your hands would be bleeding in less than an hour. Have you ever even used a hammer?”

“No lately. But I know I can do this.”

“But I hope you change your mind.”

“Okay, fine.”

“Thank you.”

They sipped their coffee in silence for a few seconds.

Ginger pointed to the newspaper. The headline read, King of the Kassle. Kipford Houston Kassle had recently been elected mayor of Coreyville. “What do you think about our new mayor?”

“I think he’s…awfully young.”

“Twenty-seven, I believe. The kids used to call him ‘Kippy.’”

“Well, he doesn’t like that anymore. Not since he graduated from that Ivy League business school. Now he’s ‘K. Houston Kassle,’ or simply ‘Mayor Kassle.’”

“I’m sure he’ll do a fine job.”

Really? Why? Because of his brand new MBA? Or because of his wealthy family? I can’t think of any other qualifications.”

“He’s bright.”

“I suppose.”

“Well, he was smart enough to earn a master’s degree and to get himself elected.”

“Or rich enough. But the first thing he did was to get his good buddy appointed as chief of police. And you know that Daniel Foenapper was not the most qualified candidate.”

“Probably not.”

The bell on the front door jingled as someone walked in.

Elijah looked to see who it was.

“Speak of the devil…”

“Our new chief of police?”

“Yep.”

Ginger sighed. “I guess I might as well get used to it. Excuse me.”

She got up and walked over to Daniel Foenapper, who was now standing in line. Daniel was only five-foot-nine, but his thin frame made him look taller. He was quite impressive in his new uniform.

“Good morning, Chief.”
He seemed surprised, yet pleased that she had addressed him in the proper manner. “Good morning, Mrs. Lightley.” His voice cracked, sounding exactly like it did in junior high.

No, please call me ‘Ginger.’ She thought it, but couldn’t bring herself to say it.

“Drop by anytime, Chief. It’s ‘on the house.’”

“No, Ma’am. I couldn’t do that—accept gifts, that is. It wouldn’t be right. I’ll pay—just like everybody else.”

Okay. Maybe he’s not so bad, she thought. “Suit yourself. But do come by often.”

He grinned. “I will. Your cakes are delicious.”

“Thanks. Well, have a nice day.”

Ginger stepped away, and was about to go back to Elijah when she heard the phone behind the counter begin to ring. She saw Lacey answer it. Ginger waited to see if the call was for her.

Lacey talked for a few seconds and then took the phone away from her ear and began to survey the dining area. She looked at Ginger and pointed to the chief.

“This looks like we have a phone call for you, Chief.”

“Really?” Daniel looked down at his police radio. He had forgotten to turn it on.

Ginger led him to the phone and Lacey handed it to him.

“This is Chief Foenapper…yeah, I forgot to turn it on. Sorry about that…I see…okay, I’m on my way.” He hung up the phone.

Ginger deliberately blocked his path. “Something wrong?”

“Yes. It’s Navy Newcomb.”

“What kind of trouble did he get into this time?”

“Did you send him out to the nursing home?”

“Yes. Well, no—I didn’t send him. He’s been volunteering—taking cakes out there every morning.”

“That’s it? He just picks up some cakes and delivers them to the nursing home?”

“Yes. The three-day-old cakes.”

He seemed disappointed.

“They’re still good. They’re perfectly good. I don’t give them stale cakes.”

“I see.”

“So, what did Navy do? You understand that he’s not an employee. He just volunteers.”

“I understand.” He tried to walk around Ginger, but she blocked him again.

“So, what’s the problem?”

“The problem is that Navy Newcomb…is dead.”
Chapter 4

Ginger stood there watching as Chief Foenapper rushed out of Coreyville Coffee Cakes, jumped into his car, turned on his flashing light, and sped away.

When she turned around, Elijah was walking toward her.

“What’s going on?”

“Navy Newcomb is dead.”

“What happened?”

“Daniel—I mean the chief—wouldn’t tell me. All I know is that he took my cakes out to the nursing home and now he’s dead. I want to go out there.”

“I’ll drive you.”

“Thanks.” She walked over to Cheryl Iper, at the cash register. “I’ll be back in a little while.” Ginger walked away before Cheryl had a chance to ask any questions.

Elijah had parked halfway down the block. In the early morning hours, Ginger’s customers took up more than her share of parallel parking slots. But most of the other shops were not open that early anyway.

Elijah’s old Ford sedan was roomy and comfortable. Pastors of small congregations learn how to live on meager salaries. One of the ways Elijah stretched his income was to buy his cars at auctions. This particular one had been a police cruiser in its previous life.

There was no way to know how many times the engine had been revved up for a high-speed chase. Or how many perps had ridden handcuffed in the back seat. None of that matter to Elijah. After a thorough cleaning and a new paint job, he considered the vehicle ‘born again.’

They got in and Elijah backed out and drove toward the nursing home.

“I hope this isn’t my fault,” said Ginger, more to herself than to Elijah.

“What do you mean? How could it be your fault?”

“I think Navy stole my recipe book this morning.”

Elijah looked puzzled.

“What if somebody knew he was going to steal it? They might have tried to take it away from him. Maybe they fought, and—”

“—just how much is this recipe book worth?”

“Some other bakery might be willing to pay thousands for it. I don’t know. We get business from all over the area.” People travelling down Interstate 20 often made a detour through Coreyville just to get some of Ginger’s famous cakes.

“Okay. I can understand how valuable the book is. But I can’t believe people would kill for it.”

“I hope you’re right.”

When they arrived at Coreyville Country Home, Ginger asked Elijah to drive around to the back. They saw the chief talking to Justice of the Peace Harvey ‘Boot’ Hornamer. Two paramedics were loading a body into the ambulance in no particular hurry.

Ginger and Elijah got out of the car and walked up behind the chief just in time to hear the end of the conversation.

At 77, Boot was a product of his long-term habits. Sixty years of chewing tobacco had created a permanent protrusion in his left cheek. And these days, it never went away—whether the wad of chew was there or not. His love of the sun had turned his arms more leathery than his cowhide belt. The excruciating pain in his feet and back was exasperated by the cowboy boots. But he just wouldn’t be ‘Boot’ without them.

“So, I’m gonna order an autopsy.” Boot turned to the side and spit. The bullet stream of tobacco juice nailed a bullfrog right between the eyes.

“Okay,” said the young chief.

Boot walked over to his pickup and climbed in.

“Chief? ” said Ginger.

He turned around.

“Y’all don’t have any idea what killed him?”

“I can’t discuss the case.”

“Why?”

Elijah jumped in. “So, you think it was murder?”

“I didn’t say that.”
“Well, what are you saying?” Ginger was getting annoyed.
“I’m not saying anything.”
Ginger noticed a woman standing near the back door of the building. Judging by the white outfit and apron, she figured the woman to be a cook. Perhaps she had seen or heard something. She would talk to her after she finished with the chief.
“Have you contacted his family?” said Elijah.
“I’m about to drive out to his mother’s house,” said the chief.
“What about his girlfriend?” said Ginger.
“I’ll go talk to her,” said Elijah.
“Thanks.” The chief walked to his car, got in, and drove away.
Two deputies watched as a tow truck drove away with Navy’s Corvette. Then they got into their car and left.
Ginger looked over at the building. The cook had apparently gone back inside.
“I’ll bet somebody in there saw what happened.” She began walking up the sidewalk, toward the kitchen door.
Elijah followed her.
Ginger knocked.
One of the cooks opened the door. It was the woman Ginger had seen standing outside.
“Yes?”
“Could we come in for a minute? I’d like to ask you a few questions.”
The woman hesitated.
“I’m Ginger Lightley.” She smiled and held out her hand.
The woman’s apprehension was suddenly gone. “Oh, Mrs. Lightley. I’m so happy to meet you.” She shook Ginger’s hand. “Your cakes are amazing. I’m a big fan.”
Ginger knew that people loved her coffee cakes, but she didn’t know she had fans.
The woman became even more excited. “Oh, would you mind tasting one of my cherry tarts. It’s my own recipe.”
She rushed to the stove to get one.
Ginger looked at Elijah and shrugged. Then she saw her coffee cakes sitting on the counter. One of her trays was sitting beside them.
The woman came back with a tart and handed it to Ginger.
Ginger took a sniff and nodded. Then she bit off a small portion and chewed it carefully as she analyzed it with her tongue. She was like a professional wine taster—except for the spitting.
“I love the delicate flakiness. The cherries are almost too sweet—but they’re not. Ooh. And there’s a magnificent aftertaste. How did you do that?”
The woman grinned. “It’s a secret.”
“Well, of course it is,” said Ginger. “And don’t you tell a soul.”
“I won’t. Thanks, Ma’am.”
“You’re very welcome.” She handed Elijah what was left of the tart. “Try it. You’ll love it.”
Without waiting for Elijah’s verdict, Ginger turned back to the woman. “Are those the coffee cakes Navy delivered this morning?”
“Yes, Ma’am.”
“Were you the one who let him in?”
“Yes. And he seemed fine. Then I got him to taste one of my cherry tarts and he started choking.”
Ginger glanced back at Elijah, who had just put the last bite of the tart into his mouth. He stopped chewing, and seemed to be wondering whether he should spit it out. But he was not choking.
“So, do you think the tart made him sick?”
“No,” said the woman. “I mean—I hope not. Oh, God. What do you think?”
“I doubt it.” She looked back at Elijah, who had finished his tart.
“I feel fine,” he said.
“Maybe it was the way he ate it,” said the woman. “He stuffed it in his mouth all at once.”
“That could be it,” said Ginger. “So, he started choking and then he just passed out?”
“No, Ma’am. I ran to get him a glass of water. But by the time I got back he had gone out the door. I went out to see if he was okay. He was in his car doing something. Then he got out and started walking back toward the building. So, I ran out to meet him. But before I could get to him, he fell down. I checked his pulse, but I couldn’t feel anything.”
“Then you called 9-1-1?”
“Yes. And I got one of our nurses to come out. She said he was already dead.”
Elijah said, “What do you think he was doing in his car? Was he looking for something?”
“He must have been. While I was waiting for the ambulance I went over and looked in the car. The glove compartment was open and everything had been pulled out and thrown on the floorboard.”
“Did he have anything in his hands when he got back out of the car?”
“No. So, I guess he couldn’t find whatever he was looking for.”
“Did you hear anything the justice of the peace and the chief were saying?” said Ginger.
“Yes. The justice of the peace said that he thinks Navy’s head hitting the sidewalk is what killed him. His head was bleeding. But he didn’t want to say for sure since Navy had been choking right before that.”
“So, they questioned you,” said Elijah.
“Yes.”
“Did they say anything else?” said Ginger.
“That’s about it, I think.”
Ginger looked at Elijah. He didn’t seem to have any other questions. “Okay, then. Thanks. We appreciate it.”
Ginger and Elijah walked to the door and started to step out.
“Oh,” said the woman. “There was one other thing. I don’t know whether it’s important or not though.”
“What?” said Ginger.
“When the deputies were searching his car they found something under the front seat. They were joking around about it until the chief yelled at them.”
“Did you see it?”
“Yes. It was a pair of panties.”
Ginger was not at all surprised. Navy was known to be a swinging bachelor. Although she thought he had finally settled down. “Wonder why the deputies thought it was funny?”
“Probably because they were that kind that lace up on the sides. You know—kinda sexy. And they had lettering across the front of them.”
“What did it say?”
“Unlace Me.”
Ginger suddenly felt ill. She knew who the panties belonged to.
Chapter 5

Ginger and Elijah got into his car and drove away from the nursing home. He had offered to break the sad news to Navy’s girlfriend, Kayla. Ginger asked to go along.

“Navy’s house is on the south side of town,” said Ginger. “The reason I know is because I’ve heard Lacey Greendale talk about that ‘crummy little rent house’ he lives in. She and Navy used to be a couple.”

“What broke them up?”

“Kayla.”

“Oh.”

“Well, in all fairness, it was really more about the drinking and the gambling, and wasting his trust fund.”

“It was a big mistake to give it to him all at once. I don’t know many twenty-one year olds who could handle that kind of money.”

“He didn’t stick around here for long. Remember? I guess he just couldn’t spend the money fast enough in Coreyville. So, he moved to Dallas. Lacey was a senior in high school. She didn’t even say goodbye to her parents. But according to her, they didn’t care what she did anyway.”

“I would have driven to Dallas and given that boy a piece of my mind. My daughter would have been back in her own bed that very first night.”

Unfortunately, Elijah didn’t have a daughter. Or a son. His ex-wife had deprived him of children. Not because she couldn’t have them—but because she didn’t want the responsibility. It would have been nice if she’d shared her true feelings with him before they got married. Once he had said ‘I do,’ it was too late. A divorce would have ended his career in the ministry—or at least he thought.

Clara divorced him four years ago, saying she was sick of being a pastor’s wife—having to act a certain way around church members, leading the women’s group, and always having to put on a Christian face for everybody. She had drudged her way through it for thirty years. Now she wanted to be herself—whatever that meant. It seemed like a mid-life crisis to Elijah. But he couldn’t talk any sense into her.

He knew he would have to resign. At the time, he was fifty-nine years old. What jobs would be open to him at that age—with his background? Bosses don’t like to hire a former minister. They figure he’ll make the other employees uncomfortable. Or scare off customers.

But he could not go on as though nothing had happened. Being divorced and being a Southern Baptist minister were incompatibilities—like a staunch vegetarian participating in a hot dog eating contest. At least the vegetarian could puke up the hot dogs and repent. Elijah wished he had such an option.

He had prepared his resignation for the monthly deacons meeting on that Monday night. But the deacons were wise to his plans. And they surprised him with a show of overwhelming support. Nobody in the church wanted him to leave. He must stay. They would not accept his resignation.

So, by a unanimous vote of the deacons of Corey Acres Baptist Church that night, Elijah was allowed to continue the work he so loved. Too bad his childlessness could not also be fixed by a roomful of raised hands. Maybe Elijah wouldn’t have been a great dad. Perhaps his ministry would have suffered due to the strain of raising teenagers. He would never get a chance to find out—thanks to Clara.

“Lacey admitted that she enjoyed it at first,” said Ginger. “Who wouldn’t? Navy was buying her all kinds of jewelry and clothes—anything she wanted. He was taking her out to fancy restaurants and clubs. Navy’s the one who got her smoking. She was only sixteen when they started dating, and he was this cool college guy who smoked cigars and drove like a maniac.”

“Didn’t he flunk out of college?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Technically he wasn’t a college student when they started dating—but he wasn’t working either. He was just kinda bumming around.”

“Waiting for his trust fund.”

“And getting into trouble. But his mother always bailed him out.”

“She should have let him spend a little time in jail. That might have helped.”

“Yeah, maybe. But Lacey thought he could do no wrong. She finally began to wake up after they had been in Dallas for a year or so. She said he was spending the money so fast that she began to worry about their future. When were they going to settle down and buy a house? And what about kids? She decided to force him to do the right thing. She got on a bus and came home to Coreyville, thinking he would come after her. Then he would get his act together and they could live happily ever after. But her plan backfired.”

“Uh-oh.”
“Yeah. He got mad and found himself a hooker. I guess that was his way of paying her back for leaving him.”
“And then he came to his senses, but she wouldn’t take him back after she found out what he’d done?”
“No. He fell in love with the hooker, and the two of them spent the rest of the money. Then he tried to get more money from his mother. But she wouldn’t give him any.”
“I’m confused. When did Kayla come into the picture?”
Ginger raised her left eyebrow and waited.
“Kayla is the hooker?”
“Yes. Former hooker. But let’s try not to call her that.”
“This should be interesting.”
“There it is—that blue house on the right.”
Elijah pulled into the driveway and parked behind the cherry red Miata. They walked up the stairs, onto the porch and Elijah knocked.
After a few seconds, a woman yelled, “Just a minute.” Finally the door opened.
“Yeah?”
She was wearing a robe and her hair was a mess. Ginger figured she must have just gotten out of bed. But then she noticed the socks and tennis shoes.
“Are you Kayla,” said Elijah.
“Yes.”
“Hi. I’m Elijah Bideman, pastor of Corey Acres Baptist Church, and this is Ginger Lightley. I’m afraid we have some bad news. Would you mind if we came in?”
“Can’t you just tell me? As you can see, I’m not dressed for company. I just got out of bed. I like to sleep in on Saturdays.”
“Sure, I understand,” said Elijah. “It’s about Navy.”
“Yeah?”
She seemed curious, but not particularly concerned.
“This morning he was out at the nursing home and he fell down and…he died.”
“What? He just fell down?”
“The police think the fall is what killed him. But they’re not sure. They’ll know more after the autopsy.”
Kayla contorted her face. Ginger couldn’t tell if it was because Navy was dead and now they were going to cut him up, or because the thought of autopsy in general made her sick.
“Well…thanks for coming to tell me. Goodbye.”
She closed the door. They could hear her walking away, toward the back of the house.
Elijah looked at Ginger.
“That was kind of a weird reaction,” said Ginger.
“People react differently to the loss of a loved one,” he said, as they walked down the stairs. “Five minutes from now she’ll probably be crying her eyes out.”
Ginger walked to the front of the Miata and felt the hood.
“What are you doing?” said Elijah.
“It’s still warm.”
They got into his car. He started the engine. “So? What are trying to say?”
“Why did she lie? She told us she just got out of bed. Yet her car engine is still warm. And she was wearing tennis shoes.”
He pulled out of the driveway. “Okay, I’ll admit—it does seem strange.” He drove toward town.
“Not just strange. Her boyfriend died mysteriously—”
“—well, I wouldn’t say mysteriously. We’ll know exactly what killed him after the autopsy.”
“Maybe the reason Kayla wasn’t torn up about Navy’s death…is that she had something to do with it.”
“Who are you—Jessica Fletcher?”
“No. But think about it. It’s possible. A big-city hooker probably knows all kinds of ways to kill a person.”
“Okay, stop. Your imagination is starting to run wild. The police will solve this thing. Just leave it up to them.”
“You’re right, Elijah. That’s what I need to do.”
But somehow she knew it wouldn’t be that easy.
Chapter 6

Daniel Foenapper sat down at his desk. The twin gold-plated pens stood at attention on their marble base at the sides of the little clock. It had been a thoughtful gift from his mother in celebration of his promotion to Chief of Police. Nine-fifteen. Had it really only been ninety minutes ago that he got the call about Navy Newcomb?

Kip had assured him the job would be a cakewalk. Nothing much ever happens in Coreyville. Yet he’d only been chief for six days, and was already having to deal with a suspicious death. But maybe it was accidental. If the medical examiner determined that Navy simply fell down and busted his head open and died, all Daniel’s worrying would have been for nothing. He just needed to chill.

His desk phone rang. Who would be calling him at his office on Saturday? And when were they going to upgrade the phones? Caller ID would come in handy.

“Chief Foenapper.”

“Hi, Chief. This is Ginger Lightley. The dispatcher put me through. She said she really wasn’t supposed to, but I told her I had important information regarding the Navy Newcomb case.”

He cleared his throat, and tried to sound authoritative. “It’s not really a case. It was probably just an accident.”

“I don’t know, Chief. When Reverend Bideman and I dropped by to tell Kayla Hanker about Navy, she was acting strangely.”

“Well, I imagine so—after you told her that her boyfriend was dead.”

“But that’s just it. She didn’t seem very upset about it. She told us she’d just gotten out of bed, yet she was wearing tennis shoes. And her car engine was still warm. She’d apparently just come home from somewhere.”

“Maybe she made a quick trip to a convenience store for a pack of cigarettes.”

“And she was embarrassed for us to find out that she smokes? I don’t think she’s the type of person that cares what people think about her.”

“Who knows? It could be anything. And I certainly don’t see how any of this is relevant to Navy’s death.”

“But—”

“I appreciate you trying to help, but this is my job. So, please—just let me do it.”

“I didn’t mean to imply… I’m sorry. But please let me know what you find out. Navy was delivering cakes for me when he died. I want to know what happened to him.”

“I’ll let you know. And thanks again, Mrs. Lightley. Goodbye.”

That was all he needed—some amateur crime dog sniffing around for clues. He was the chief of police. He was in charge.

Sure—every other man on the Coreyville police force had more years of experience than he did. But his Masters in Criminal Justice had given him the advantage. Nobody else had a masters. It didn’t matter that he had graduated near the bottom of his class.

The chief leaned back in the plush leather chair and admired his wall of educational accomplishments. The massive walnut frames made even his Coreyville High School diploma look like something from Harvard.

The phone rang.

It better not be Mrs. Lightley calling back with another ‘clue.’

“Chief Foenapper.”

“Daniel, come up to my office.” The mayor hung up.

What was he upset about today? The mayor had called Daniel to his office every day this week.

The first floor of the courthouse was occupied by the Justice of the Peace Courtroom, the water department, and various other offices. The police department was located on the second floor. The mayor’s office and other city administrator offices were on the third floor. The entire fourth floor was the city jail.

Daniel pushed the elevator button, and immediately became impatient. He took the stairs, two at a time, up to the third floor and walked quickly to the mayor’s office. He knocked timidly.

“Come in, Daniel.” said the mayor.

Daniel walked in and shut the door behind him.

“What’s going on, Daniel? I understand you may have a murder on your hands.”

“Murder? No, I don’t think so. And how did you find out? It just happened a couple of hours ago.”

“Murder is big news in a small town, Chief.”

“But I don’t believe it was murder. I think he just tripped and fell.”

“Well, whatever it is, I want this thing put to bed in a hurry. That’s the way we do it here in Coreyville now, right? Now that we’re in charge.”
“Right, Kip.”

The mayor jumped to his feet, and was instantly in Daniel’s face. “Don’t you EVER call me that again. My name is Houston Kassle. There is no Kipford, Kip, or Kippy anymore. You know that.”

Yes. And Daniel also knew that his old buddy would like him to quit being two inches taller than Kip. But at five-foot-seven, almost every man in town was taller than the mayor. That really irked him. He didn’t seem to mind tall women. Probably because he felt most of them would love to go out with him.

The two twenty-seven year olds had been best friends since elementary school. Even back then, Kip was shorter than everybody else in his class. It was actually the thing that brought the two boys together.

One day during recess, three bullies pinned Kip against a wall. They took turns punching him in the stomach and laughing. Daniel saw what was happening and went over to stop it. Kip was not even defending himself. The only thing he was fighting off was his own tears.

Daniel grabbed one of the boys by the shoulders and pulled him backward and tripped him. He dared the boy to get up and fight him. But the kid was afraid of the taller, stronger Daniel. He crawled away on hands and knees. Daniel spun around to dispense with the other two boys, but they were already gone. That was the beginning of Kip and Daniel’s long friendship.

Later that year, after watching *The Karate Kid*, Kip begged his mother to let him enroll in karate lessons. She was worried that her undersized son would get hurt, but she finally relented. Coreyville’s version of Mr. Miyagi taught his pupil well. The only thing that Kip had a problem with was controlling his aggression. Even now it seemed like Kip was on the verge of taking Daniel’s head off.

After a few months of training, Kip didn’t need Daniel’s protection anymore. But he still valued his friendship. And he never forgot about the way Daniel had stood up for him when he needed it most.

The mayor took a deep breath, and then walked back around his desk and sat down. “What’s the status?”

“The Justice of the Peace agrees with me. We think Navy just fell and hit his head on the concrete.”

“Then why the autopsy?”

Typical, thought Daniel. Kip already knows everything. He just likes to hear me fumble around trying to explain it.

Like the time in high school when Kip broke up with Sara Sue. Daniel had wanted to date her, but hadn’t yet worked up the nerve to ask her out. And before he could, Kip did.

They dated for three months. It was killing Daniel every time he saw her with Kip.

Then Kip dumped her one night at a party, and left her crying. Daniel went over to comfort her.

The next day Kip confronted his friend.

“How’d you like the party last night?”

“It was okay.”

“What did you do after I left? I figured you’d come by the house.”

“No. I was kinda tired after the party.”

“So, you just went straight home?”

Daniel just stared at Kip. Not again.

“You didn’t give anybody a ride home?”

“Well…yeah.”

“One of the guys?”

Daniel blew up. “You know what I did, so why are you asking me all these questions?”

“I heard about it. But I couldn’t believe that my best friend would betray me like that.”

“I didn’t betray you. You broke her heart, Man. I just tried to make her feel better.”

“Really? So, just how good did you make her feel, huh, Buddy? How good?”

“Shut up! I just held her in my arms. That’s all.”

“You didn’t even give her a nighty-night kiss at the door?”

“That’s none of your business.”

They beat each other up pretty good that time.

Daniel never did ask Sara Sue for a date.

“Boot ordered the autopsy—just to be sure.”

“Good idea. We’ve got to get it right.”

And you don’t think I can get it right, do you, Kip? “We will.”

“Okay. Keep me updated.” The mayor turned his chair to the side and began to type on his computer.

Daniel took that as a signal that he should leave. So he did.
As he walked down the stairs, he began to hope that Navy had not died from an accident—that it had been murder. And if it was, he would singlehandedly solve the crime.
Chapter 7

Ginger walked into the living room and sat down in her favorite old rocking chair with a hot cup of green tea. Drinking it from her fine china always made it taste better somehow.

People tend to save the good china for special occasions—like Thanksgiving and Christmas. But Ginger had decided some years ago that every day should be a special occasion. Although the hope of a long life wasn’t quite as appealing as it used to be.

She looked over at his recliner in the corner. She had not moved it since he died two years ago. She smiled, remembering how he had insisted that it stay at that exact angle in reference to the position of the TV.

And oh how Lester loved his TV shows. Ginger didn’t care for some of them, but she usually watched anyway—just to be in the room with him. Occasionally he would return the favor and suffer through one of her beloved cooking shows.

It was after one o’clock and she had not eaten lunch. On those days when she was creating a new recipe, she never bothered to eat lunch, since she would spend the afternoon tasting all her little trials. The second batch of six mini-cakes was in the oven.

Ginger held the dainty gold-rimmed cup under her nose and slowly inhaled the steamy aroma. As she sipped on it, she began to think about Navy.

It wasn’t an accident—it was murder. She could just feel it. But what did she know about murders, investigations, autopsies, and the like? Probably no more than anyone else who had watched a lot of TV.

Actually, she did have something most people don’t have—a keen set of senses. She wondered what percentage of the population had the ability to walk into a house and immediately know whether there was a dog or cat inside, whether anyone had ever smoked in the house, and exactly what food had been set out on the dinner table.

One time she had nearly blurted out, “Oh, Phyllis, there’s way too much garlic in that meatloaf.” It would have only been to help her do better next time. But women don’t appreciate being helped in that manner—especially in front of several other guests.

Ginger had known from a young age that her sense of smell and taste were highly sensitive. She later realized that her other senses were quite powerful as well. But she had certainly never used them to solve a crime.

That morning, after calling the chief at his office, she began to work out her own timeline of the murder. She called him back, but got no answer. And when she called the third time a few minutes later, he was quite rude to her.

Ginger wished she had asked the nursing home cook for the information when she and Elijah questioned her. But at least the chief answered her question. According to his notes, the cook said that Navy had arrived at the nursing home a little before 7:30 a.m.

Ginger had written it down in a small spiral notebook, and then questioned Addie as to what time he left the bakery. Addie told her it was about ten after seven.

She picked up the notebook and opened it. So, Navy had driven away from the bakery at 7:10 a.m. and arrived at the nursing home at approximately 7:25 a.m. Ginger stared at her notes. Why had it taken Navy fifteen minutes to make a five-minute trip?

The oven timer buzzer went off. Ginger sat the cup and the notebook on the lamp table next to her chair, hopped up, and went into the kitchen.

She put on the oven mitts and took the mini-cake tray out of the oven.

Her cell phone rang. She removed the mitts and took the phone out of her pocket. The caller ID said ‘Jane Appletree.’

“Hi, Jane.”
“Hey, Ginger. Are we still on for tonight?”

Saturday nights and Tuesday nights at 6:00 p.m. were the regular meeting times for The Domino Girls Club: Ginger, Jane, Barb, and Ethel.

“Sure. Why wouldn’t we be?”
“Because of the murder.”
Ginger hesitated. “Who said it was a murder?”
“It’s all over town.”

Ginger knew what that meant. Jane was telling everybody who came into her diner. The woman just loved to gossip. And if there was nothing to gossip about then she’d just blab about anything. To make matters worse, she was a ‘loud talker.’ She had never learned how to hold her voice down. And it wasn’t that she was hard of hearing—not by any means. She could hear whispering from across a crowded room.
Occasionally a customer would take offense to her loud mouth. One time, a man who just wanted to eat his meal in peace got tired of hearing Jane go on and on, complaining about her high electric bills. He finally stormed out in disgust—but not before yelling, “Why don’t you just strap a little windmill on that mouth of yours and generate your own electricity?” Oddly, it didn’t seem to bother her at all. She just went right on talking.

“Who told you he was murdered, Jane?”

“So, I’m right?”

“No. I’m not saying he was murdered. Don’t put words in my mouth.”

“Well, what about the panties? Who do think they belong to?”

“You’ve been talking to a deputy, haven’t you, Jane?”

“Oh, I never reveal my sources,” said Jane, with a sly smile in her voice.

“Well, I need to go. I’m working on a new recipe.”

“Are we gonna get a sample tonight?”

She knew that Jane would tell everybody about the new cake. She always did. Luckily, so far at least, Jane had always given glowing reviews. By the first of the next month, folks would be waiting in line to get a taste of the new one they had heard so much about.

“Yes, assuming I get it perfected by then.”

“Oh, I’m sure you will, Ginger. You always do.”

“Thanks. See you tonight.”

“See ya.”

Ginger looked at the six cakes. Which one should she try first?

It was not easy to come up with a unique, new recipe each and every month. Sometimes she wished she had never started this cake of the month thing. Although, she knew she could begin to recycle old ones if necessary. She doubted that people would remember one from a year ago.

Ginger often named the new cake before she even began to experiment with the ingredients. She found that an interesting or unusual name inspired her to do her best work. This one would be called ‘Firecraker Cocoa Cake.’

She used a spatula to remove one of the cakes from its pan. The color looked about right. A small amount of paprika, along with the cocoa, had given it a reddish-brown hue.

Ginger took pride in making her cakes as nutritious as possible. After all, folks were eating them for breakfast. Most all of the recipes included whole wheat flour and oatmeal. And instead of vegetable oil, she substituted either applesauce or avocado.

She was really sticking her neck out on this one though. Could she really get away with adding cayenne pepper and crushed jalapeño? Yes—if they were in the proper amounts.

One of her best-sellers contained mustard powder. But nobody had ever been able to determine the mystery ingredient that gave them that wonderful tangy flavor. It was fun to watch them try.

Ginger took a knife and cut off a small corner of the cake. She put it into her mouth and let her taste buds go to work.

“Too peppery.” She spit it into the trash.

The next one she tasted was better—just the right amount of burn on the tongue to let you know it’s supposed to be spicy, but not enough to make you want to spit it out.

Ginger took a second bite to make sure. No. She had missed it on the first pass. By concentrating so hard on the level of pepper she missed the fact that the cocoa was too weak.

Four more possibilities, she thought. The third one tasted perfect—everything she had imagined it would be. And it smelled magnificent. She made note of the winner. Now she would make up a larger batch and bake them for tonight.

She stood at the kitchen window for a minute, remembering what Jane had said. Apparently at least one deputy believed Navy had been murdered. Did he know something Ginger didn’t know?

She wondered if the police had their own timeline for that morning. Had they noticed how long it had taken Navy to get to the nursing home?

Maybe the police did have some details that Ginger was unaware of. But she knew some things they didn’t know. Like the fact that her recipe book had been stolen.

If Navy was the one who had taken it, perhaps he had dropped it off somewhere before going to the nursing home. Assuming he was murdered, could the recipe book have anything to do it?

And why was Kayla Hanker not more upset about the death of her boyfriend?

When Elijah had dropped Ginger off at the bakery after their visit with Kayla, she noticed that Lacey was being
unusually quiet. She couldn’t tell whether she was mad at somebody or upset about Navy. She considered taking her aside and having a talk with her. But Lacey could be moody—even on a *good* day. Ginger decided to leave her alone.

Lacey had reason to be upset about Navy. The two had dated for a long time. And even though they were no longer together, Ginger had the impression that Lacey still had feelings for him.

She had often wished that Lacey would just get over him, once and for all. Ginger wanted to see Lacey move on with her life—and allow herself to be happy. The young woman was special to Ginger—almost like the daughter she never had.

There were several things Ginger would need to share with the police—if Navy’s death was ruled a murder. She would be obligated to tell everything she knew.

And the thing that bothered her the most was the panties the deputies found under the front seat of Navy’s car. She was fairly certain that they weren’t Kayla’s. Could they be the murderer’s?

Ginger prayed that she was wrong, but she was almost sure the panties belonged to Lacey.
Coreyville Coffee Cakes was open Monday through Saturday, 7:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Most of the customers came early in the morning or for a coffee break at around 10:00 a.m. or 2:00 p.m. Ginger had learned through trial and error that staying open past 3:30 was not profitable.

This particular Saturday had been filled with all the talk of Navy Newcomb. Every customer had an opinion. Some said he had it coming. Folks debated what had really happened to him. Was it accidental or murder?

The last customer walked out at 3:28, and Cheryl locked the front door and flipped the sign to ‘Closed.’ Lacey began to scrub each table with a hot, soapy dishcloth while Danny swept and mopped the floors. Cheryl went into the office to do her bookwork and prepare the checks and cash for bank deposit.

At about 4:00, Cheryl walked out of the office. Lacey and Danny were sitting in the dining area, several tables apart, ignoring each other.

“Ready to go?” Cheryl always insisted that they wait for her. She wasn’t comfortable going out into the alley by herself carrying a bag full of money—even in a law abiding town like Coreyville.

“Yeah,” said Danny.

Danny and Lacey stood up.

“What’s the matter with you two?” said Cheryl, in her usual rapid-fire style. “You look like you just missed the last bus to Christmas.”

“Nothing,” said Lacey.

“Look,” said Cheryl, “I’m tired of lying to Ginger. What do you care if she knows you’re living together? If you’re so ashamed of it, you shouldn’t be doing it.”

“Ask her,” said Danny.

Cheryl looked at Lacey. “Well?”

“Because she’ll be disappointed in me,” said Lacey with her head hung low.

“Why?” said Danny. “Because I’m not good enough for you?”

“I didn’t say that,” said Lacey.

“Never mind,” said Cheryl. “Let’s go. If I don’t get home soon and get out of these shoes, my feet are gonna kick my butt to sorry-ville.”

The three walked to the back kitchen door. Danny followed Lacey to her car as Cheryl locked up. They waited for Cheryl to drive away first.

On the way to Lacey’s apartment, neither she nor Danny said a word. Once they were inside, Danny let loose.

“I’m sick of this!” He snatched a ceramic coffee cup off the top of a bookshelf and threw it down. It hit the edge of the coffee table and exploded into dozens of pieces that flew all over the living room.

Lacey broke down. She collapsed onto the couch, crying aloud.

Suddenly Danny felt like a creep. He rushed to her side. “I’m sorry, Lacey. Please forgive me.” Why had he done that? He’d never gotten violent around Lacey before. He’d always been able to control his rage in her presence. “I’m sorry I was late this morning.”

“You promised you’d be on time.”

“I know. But I fell back asleep.”

“That’s no excuse.”

“I know. It was stupid. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again—I promise.”

“No. Don’t promise. Don’t promise me anything. Just say what you’re gonna do, and then do it. I need to know I can depend on you.”

“You can. Honeypie. You definitely can depend on me.”

But the truth was that Danny Iper never had much of a reputation for being dependable. A few months earlier, his dad had thought that his son was finally ready to be responsible. So, he pulled some strings to get him a job. Phillip had been so proud that he and his son would be working for the same construction company.

But Danny didn’t like construction. There was too much sweating and too many bosses. One day Danny’s foreman caught him sleeping on the job, so he filled a paper cup with cold water and threw in Danny’s face. The other men thought it was hilarious. Danny jumped to his feet, ready to fight somebody—only to be laughed into embarrassment.

But that afternoon, Danny took his revenge on the foreman. He sneaked up behind him and dumped a keg of ice water onto the foreman’s head—the way football players sometimes do to their coach after winning a big game. It was Danny’s turn to laugh—and get fired.
Phillip did not say anything to his son about getting fired—even when they got into the pickup to go home. But once they were on the freeway, he unleashed a tirade upon the boy about how stupid, foolish, brain-dead, and irresponsible he was—over and over, in every possible combination of degrading adverbs and adjectives.

Danny’s gripped the door handle so tightly that his hand turned blue. His only way out would have been to fling the door open and jump. He pictured his banged-up body, covered in blood—just another dead skunk on the side of the highway. He had come very close to yanking that door handle.

He gently lifted Lacey’s chin and looked straight into her moist blue eyes. “You believe me, don’t you, Lacey? You really can depend on me.”

She stood up, but didn’t answer him.

What did she want from him? How could he make her feel better? “Is there something else bothering you?”

“No. I’m fine.” She walked into the kitchen.

Danny got up from the couch and went after her. “Well, you don’t seem fine.”

She stood at the kitchen sink looking out the window. “Just…drop it. Okay?”

“Wait a second.” He walked up beside her. “This doesn’t have anything to do with him, does it?”

She began to whimper.

“You’re kidding. This is ridiculous. You said you were over him.”

“I thought I was.”

“Hey, we’re all sorry he’s dead. But you shouldn’t be crying over him—unless you were still in love with him!”

Lacey broke down.

Danny stepped back. “I can’t believe this.” He began to walk around in a small circle faster and faster as he talked. “You said you loved me, and we were going to get married and have kids. And now I find out you’re still in love with Navy Newcomb. How do you think that makes me feel?”

She turned around. “I’m sorry, Danny. It’s not really that I still loved him. It’s just that we dated for a long time and—”

“—I know, I know. But you were supposed to be completely over him by now.” Danny continued to walk the circle, continued to gain speed.

“I am. I really am.” She stepped forward and grabbed his arm to stop him. “I love you, Danny.” She moved in close to him. “Only you.”

As soon as their lips touched their bodies began to catch fire. They started taking off each other’s clothes as they moved in an awkward, twirling, out of control motion toward the bedroom. Whatever each of them had been thinking a minute earlier was now irrelevant.

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When Danny opened his eyes he was on his side, facing her. She was just a few inches away. He lifted his head off the pillow slightly to check the alarm clock on her nightstand. Less than an hour had passed since they had come home.

He admired her milky-smooth skin, the way her lips curled up slightly at the edges, and her long eye lashes. And her hair. How he loved to bury his head in her long, thick, dark brown hair.

Danny knew how lucky he was to have Lacey. The only problem had been getting her to forget about Navy. When Danny first started dating her, it was always ‘Navy did this and Navy said that.’ And just when he would think she was finally over him, Danny would see him there in her eyes again.

In some ways, Danny had been a little envious of Navy. The guy was one reckless, womanizing, cool son of a millionaire. And if you were his girlfriend, you got everything your little heart desired—until he went broke. But even then, he was somehow still cool.

Danny knew he could never compete with the legend in Lacey’s mind. He needed to somehow remove Navy from her mind. That had proved to be much harder than he expected.

But now it was different. Now that Navy was dead, Lacey could finally begin to forget about him. The tiny ember of hope that she would someday get back together with him had gone cold.

I’m not such a bad guy, thought Danny. I’ll learn to control my temper. And I’ll be a wonderful husband and father.

Danny continued to adore Lacey’s sleeping face.

He smiled. Too bad Navy died. Too bad.
The Domino Girls Club met every Tuesday and Saturday night, around the oak table in Ginger’s breakfast nook. Their potluck dinners were made up of whatever each woman had cooked that day, plus a pan of hot, buttery rolls and a never-ending supply of iced tea. Usually Ginger provided dessert.

The meal would be followed by a seven-round game of Chickenfoot dominos, which could get pretty rowdy, especially with Jane mouthing off and Barb wise cracking.

“Oh, Ethel, I love this casserole,” said Ginger. “Could I get your recipe?”

Barb grabbed Ethel’s arm. “Don’t do it, Ethel. Not unless she’ll swap it for one of her secret coffee cake recipes.”

Ethel Eggly and Barb Omatta, 67 and 66, respectively, had been best friends for many years. And they had grown closer than ever since their husbands, Earl and Henry, were killed in a horrific speedboat accident three years ago.

“I’ll tell you what’s in it,” said Jane.

“No, you won’t,” said Barb. “This ain’t some Betty Crocker concoction, Jane. It’s Ethel’s own recipe.”

“I know that,” said Jane. “But I can tell you the ingredients just by tasting it.” She took a bite and chewed slowly and thoughtfully. She closed her eyes as though she were meditating.

“What’s the verdict, Jane?” said Ginger.

“You really think she can do it?” said Ethel.

Ginger smiled and shrugged.

“Well?” said Barb. “Wait—let me guess. You have determined that Ethel’s tuna casserole contains…tuna!”

Ginger and Ethel snickered.

Almost everything that came out of Barb’s mouth had a sarcastic ring to it. Sometimes she grated on Ginger’s nerves. But other times she was laugh-out-loud funny.

“Well, that’s a given,” said Jane. “Of course it has tuna.”

Ethel and Barb looked at each other and started laughing. Ginger tried not to laugh, but couldn’t help herself.

“What so funny?” said Jane. “I’m just getting started. Be patient. I’ll tell you what the rest of the ingredients are.”

“You’ve already blown it, Honey, and you don’t even know it,” said Barb.

“Huh?” said Jane.

“It’s not tuna,” said Ginger. “It’s chicken.”

Jane didn’t have an acute sense of taste like Ginger. Thankfully, it wasn’t a problem in her line of work. Jane’s Diner offered plain old country cooking. It was delicious food—but it wasn’t fancy.

For example, breakfast at Jane’s consisted of bacon, ham, sausage, eggs, grits, pancakes, biscuits and gravy. Once in a while an out-of-towner would wander in and ask for something not on the menu—like Eggs Benedict.

That was enough to get you branded a ‘city slicker.’ Jane would delight in putting a hand on one hip and saying, “I’m sorry, Sir, but we don’t have those here. In fact, nobody in town does. You might want to try McDonalds. I understand they’ve got something called an Egg McMuffin.” Jane wasn’t normally a smart aleck. But she just couldn’t tolerate uppity people.


Barb looked at Ginger. “So, Ginge, I hear you had quite a morning.”

Virginia is my real name, thought Ginger. Why can’t Barb either use that or ‘Ginge,’ like everybody else? It reminded her of the old Andy Griffith Show—the way Barney used to call Andy ‘Ange.’ Ginger wondered if it irritated Andy.

“Yeah,” said Ginger. “And we still don’t know what really happened to him.”

“We?” said Barb. “You mean you and the police?”

“The police think it’s murder,” said Jane, almost gleefully.

“No. They don’t know yet,” said Ginger.

“So, now we’ve got a major crime being investigated by a chief of police who couldn’t shoot his way out of a box of corn flakes,” said Barb.

“It could have been just an accident,” said Ginger.

“I don’t buy it,” said Barb. “A healthy, sober 24-year-old doesn’t just fall down on the sidewalk and die.”

“How do you know he was sober?” said Ethel.

“Well, it was early in the morning, so I assume...,” Barb looked at Ginger. “Was he sober?”

“I think so,” said Ginger. “Addie didn’t notice anything unusual about him when he came by the bakery.”

“I heard that he dropped off the coffee cakes and then ran out to his car and started tearing out the interior,” said Ethel. “Somebody said it looked like a wild raccoon had ripped the dashboard to shreds.”
“Where did you hear that? No. That’s wrong,” said Ginger. “He was apparently trying to find something in his
glove box, and just pulled everything out and threw it on the floorboard.”
“What do the police think he was looking for?” said Barb.
Before Ginger could speak, Jane said, “They don’t know. But once they figure that out, they’ll understand what
happened to him.”
“Who told you that, Jane?” said Barb. “One of your ‘horny hobblers?’
“No,” shouted Jane. “I mean—they didn’t tell me that. And they’re not horny and they don’t hobble.”
Barb loved to needle Jane about two seventy-something year-old deputies who often came around flirting with
Jane at the diner.
“Well,” said Barb, “if you ever decide to go out with one of them, you’d better hope they’re still horny.”
“Barb,” said Ethel, “quit picking on her.”
“I’m not interested in that,” said Jane. “I just love a man in uniform.”
“Yeah, uniforms are great,” said Barb. “You can hide a whole lotta ugly inside one of those things.”
“Well, that was just rude, Barb,” said Ethel.
“I call ‘em like I see ‘em,” said Barb. She threw back her tea glass and gulped down half of it.
“Well, not that it matters, but I got my information from two fine, young deputies,” said Jane proudly.
“Those boys are greener than Foenapper,” said Barb. “What we need around here are more veteran officers—men
who can command some respect. All we’ve got is a couple of over-the-hillers and a pack of skinny-butt pimple-
poppers.”
“Well, I’m sure our new mayor will try to get higher salaries for our deputies,” said Ethel. “Then maybe we can
get some men with more experience.”
“If y’all will allow me to speak,” said Jane, “I’ll tell you what I found out.” She cleared her throat for the big
pronouncement, and then waited until all eyes were on her. “They found a pair of panties under his front seat.”
“So? They were probably his,” said Barb.
Ethel giggled.
“No, no,” said Jane. “They were sexy. Like something you’d get from Victoria’s Secret.”
“Still could have been his,” said Barb.
“I don’t think so,” said Ginger.
“Why? What do you know?” said Jane.
“Probably nothing,” said Ginger. “Anyway, I don’t want to talk about it. Let’s change the subject.”
“I’m all for that,” said Ethel. “What’s for dessert?”
Jane jumped in before Ginger could answer. “Coffee Cake of the Month.”
“Oh, wonderful,” said Ethel.
“Bring it on,” said Barb.
“Okay.” Ginger got up and went into the kitchen.
“What’s it called?” yelled Jane from the breakfast nook.
“Firecracker Cocoa Cake,” said Ginger.
Ginger would not answer anymore yells. She uncovered the serving dish and carried it back out to the table, along
with four dessert plates and forks. “It’s called Firecracker Cocoa Cake.”
“Ooh—sounds hot,” said Ethel. “So, it tastes like hot cocoa?”
“No,” said Ginger, “not at all.”
“Come on, Ethel,” said Barb, “that would be too easy.”
Ginger sat the serving dish in the center of the table and then placed a dessert plate and fork in front of each of the
women. She had pre-sliced two of the mini-cakes.
They each took a slice and began to eat it.
“It’s not really that hot,” said Ethel. “Oh—I take that back. It’s getting hotter. In fact, I don’t know if I can—”
“—yes, you can, Ethel,” said Ginger. “Hang on.”
“Okay,” said Ethel. “I see what you mean. It almost got too hot for me. But not quite. Then it cooled back down a
little. How unusual.”
“And delicious,” said Jane.
“ Weird combination of flavors,” said Barb. “But I really like it.”
“Thanks.” Ginger smiled. Her new recipe had passed the ultimate test.
Ginger’s cell phone rang. She couldn’t imagine who would be calling her at 6:30 p.m. She took it out of her pocket and checked the caller ID. It was an unknown caller.

“Hello? (pause) Oh, hi, Chief.”

The other three women watched with great curiosity.

Jane motioned for Ginger to put him on speakerphone.

Ginger clicked the button. “So, what did you find out from the medical examiner?”

“He’s not finished. They apparently had a rash of suspicious deaths in Longview last night. So, Navy’s been waiting his turn. I’ve got one of my deputies down there. He was supposed to call me when they were getting close to Navy. But he took a quick dinner break, and when he got back they were almost done with him.”

“I see. Well, do you know anything yet?”

“Yeah. Are you at home?”

Ginger was puzzled. “Yes.”

“Good. I want you to ride down to Longview with me.”

“Right now?” She looked at her guests.

“Yes. I’m on my way.”

Was he coming from his office? If so, he would be there in less than a minute. “Why do you want me to go? What did you find out?”

“Well, from what my deputy told me, it sounds like they found some kind of poison in Navy’s body. And we know he ate one of your coffee cakes, so—”

“—how do you know that?”

“We found a cellophane wrapper on the front seat of his car. The label said ‘Sweet Ginger Cake.’”

Ethel stared at her empty dessert dish and gulped. She looked at Barb and then at Jane. Clearly, they were all having the same thoughts: (1) There was no way that their dear friend would try to poison them (2) But under the circumstances, would it be considered bad manners to barf up their dessert?
Chapter 10

“You’re way over the speed limit.” Ginger glared at Chief Foenapper.
He glanced to the right and caught a glimpse of her steely eyes in the light of an oncoming car. “Afraid I’ll get a
ticket? Not gonna happen in this car.”
If it hadn’t been for the seat belt restraining her, she would have slapped him upside his smart aleck head and
stomped on the brake. This couldn’t be good for her blood pressure.
Ginger took a slow deep breath, and then spoke calmly. “It’s only a twenty-minute drive at normal speed. What’s
the big rush? He’s already dead.”
“The mayor wants this case solved quickly,” he blurted out, and then looked as if he wished he hadn’t said it.
“Oh. The mayor it solved quickly.” Now she understood perfectly. This is why Mayor Kassle wanted his old
buddy for chief of police—to be his lap dog. “So, what are you thinking—that I put poison in my coffee cakes?
That’s crazy.”
“No, of course not. You wouldn’t stay in business long if you started poisoning your customers,” he chuckled.
“Then could you please tell me why you interrupted my evening for this? You know I had nothing to do with
Navy’s death, so why do need me to go with you to see the medical examiner?”
“I thought you were interested in this case.”
“I was hoping it was just an accident.”
“And I didn’t say that I thought you had nothing to do with Navy’s death. I said that I don’t believe you poison
your customers. Navy wasn’t a customer.”
“With all due respect, Chief, you’re being ridiculous.”
“Hear me out. Suppose one of your employees wanted Navy dead.”
“Come on, really.”
“And that they knew he would be picking up that tray of coffee cakes. And, just for the sake of argument, let’s say
they knew that Navy had a habit of eating a cake or two en route to the nursing home.”
Ginger could well imagine that Navy was helping himself to cakes from the tray each morning.
“And let’s further suppose that this particular employee of yours had a vendetta against Navy. They could have
poisoned a cake they knew Navy would eat.”
“Come on now, Chief, is that the best theory you can come up with? You’re just making this up out of thin air.
You’ve got nothing to base any of it on.”
“Oh really? What about the panties?”
Ginger suddenly realized she had been tricked. Perhaps the young chief was smarter than she thought. He had
lured her into this conversation, and now she couldn’t just abruptly pull out of it. That would be a dead giveaway
that she knew something she didn’t want to tell. “What?”
“You know what I’m talking about. I went back this afternoon and re-interviewed the cook at the nursing home.
She told you about the panties we found under the front seat of Navy’s car, and she saw how you reacted. You know
who they belong to.”
“I don’t remember reacting at all.”
“Now Mrs. Lightley, if you have information that pertains to this case, you are obligated by law to tell me.
Otherwise, you’re obstructing justice. And I don’t think I have to tell you where that could lead.”
“I don’t have any information, Chief. I really don’t know anything.”
“But you have a hunch.”
This was the reason he wanted her to come with him—not so she could hear what the M.E. had to say, but to
squeeze her brain and see what popped out. “Okay, fine. But I’m really not sure at all.”
“So?”
“I think the panties might belong to Lacey Greendale. But I really don’t know for sure. It’s just a guess.”
The chief grinned. “Good.”
What had she just done? Ginger wished she hadn’t asked the cook so many questions. If she had not been aware
of the panties, she couldn’t have thought of Lacey. And right now the chief wouldn’t be about ready to arrest her
dear, sweet friend. She pictured Lacey being handcuffed, dragged up to the fourth floor of the courthouse, and
thrown into a jail cell with some drug dealer or hooker.
When they arrived at the hospital and got out of the car, the chief rushed Ginger inside the building.
The deputy was waiting in the hallway. “I’ll let the M.E. know you’re here.”
The chief paced the floor.
Ginger felt dizzy—her ultra-sensitive nose overwhelmed by the thick odor that permeated the hallway. She tried breathing through her mouth. But that was even worse—she could taste the stench. Was it chemicals or dead bodies or a combination? Ginger wouldn’t allow herself to analyze it. She just prayed Ethel’s casserole would stay in her stomach where it belonged.

After a few minutes, the medical examiner came out of the lab and took them into his office. Ginger and the chief sat down in the two seats in front of his desk.

“I understand you found poison in his stomach,” said the chief.
“No, said the M.E., “I didn’t find any poison.”

The chief and Ginger looked at each other in surprise.

“What I found was fish oil.”

“Fish oil? How did that kill him?” said the chief.

“Anaphylactic shock. Apparently he was highly allergic.”

Ginger sighed in relief. It couldn’t have been her coffee cake. She used some unusual ingredients—but never fish oil.

“Or it could have been the peanut flour,” said the medical examiner.

Ginger cringed. Sweet Ginger Cake did contain peanut flour.

The chief glanced over at her with an ‘ah-ha’ look in his eyes.

“But I really think it was the fish oil,” said the M.E.

“Why?” said the chief.

“Because the peanut flour made sense, considering that I also found oatmeal, sugar, and eggs.”

“But couldn’t the fish oil just been from a capsule—you know, a supplement?” said the chief. “I take one every morning.”

“A lot of people do. But not in this. And not in liquid form.”

“You mean the fish oil wasn’t in capsules?” said Ginger.

“No,” said the M.E. “There was no gelatin. So, it had to have been in his food, or in the coffee he drank. Although, I doubt it was in the coffee. He would have noticed it. Can you imagine drinking coffee with a fourth cup of oil in it?”

“That much?” said Ginger. “But wouldn’t have noticed it in food too? Wouldn’t it have tasted fishy?”

“Actually, no,” said the medical examiner. “They use purified fish oil in supplements. It has no taste or odor.”

“But you said there was no evidence of capsules,” said the chief.

“That’s right,” said the M.E. “But someone could have cut open a handful of capsules.”

“So, the fish oil that killed him was in the coffee cake,” said the chief.

“Wait. What about the cherry tart?” said Ginger. “Couldn’t the fish oil have been in that?”

“No,” said the M.E. “Some of the tart was still stuck in his throat. And it did not contain fish oil.”

The chief was obviously satisfied. He stood up. “Thanks so much.”

Ginger and the medical examiner got up.

“By the way,” said the M.E., “did you find his Epi-Pen?”

“What’s that?” said the chief.

“It’s a little medical device the size of a magic marker that’s used to inject epinephrine into your bloodstream when you’re having an allergic reaction. Anybody who is highly allergic would probably be carrying one.”

“No,” said the chief, “we didn’t find anything like that at the scene.”

After the chief and Ginger left the medical examiner’s office and walked to his car, it suddenly hit him. “The glove box. That’s what Navy was frantically searching for—his Epi-Pen.”

They got into the car.

He continued. “So, what do we know so far? Somebody baked Navy a special cake with fish oil in it. Then they stole the Epi-Pen from his glove box. And Lacey Greendale’s panties were under his car seat.”

Ginger didn’t speak.

“So, just what was Lacey’s relationship with Navy?”

Ginger wished she didn’t know. But she did. “They used to date.”

“They used to date. And now he has that new girlfriend. What’s her name?”

“Kayla Hanker.”

The chief smiled slyly. “So, that’s it. Lacey was mad at Navy for dumping her, and she just happens to work at your bakery. So, she baked him a nice little fish oil cake and stole the Epi-Pen out of his glove box. Oh, what sweet revenge. I bet we’ll find her fingerprints on the glove box.”
“No, Chief, I really think you’re on the wrong track. I know Lacey well. And I can tell you that she would never do anything like this. I’m sure of it.” It was a lie. She wasn’t sure—she just hoped.

“Sometimes you don’t know people as well as you think you do. Jealousy can make people do horrible things.”

The chief started the engine and drove out of the parking lot, and headed back to Coreyville.

“Time to pay a visit to Miss Greendale,” said the chief. “You want to come along?”

Ginger figured the chief was planning to use her again. He probably thought Lacey would be more open to answering questions if her friend and employer were in the room. But still—she wanted to be there to support Lacey in whatever way she could. “I guess so.”

“Good. I thank you for your help, Mrs. Lightley. Navy’s family and the City of Coreyville thank you too.”

What had she done? This could destroy Lacey’s life—and she probably wasn’t even guilty. If Ginger had not gone out to the nursing home to satisfy her own curiosity, would Lacey’s freedom now be in jeopardy?

The chief was wrong about Lacey, Ginger reassured herself. Lacey had truth on her side, and truth would win the day.

Then she thought about a story she had recently read in the newspaper. A man had spent twenty years in prison, and then been released after some new evidence finally proved his innocence.

Could that happen to a sweet, trusting young woman like Lacey?
Chapter 11

Lacey had slept for nearly three hours after making love to Danny. She didn’t know how long he had been awake or what he had been doing. But now he wanted to drive down to Longview and party at his favorite dance club. Lacey would have preferred to sleep until morning. But she wanted to please Danny, so she got up.

The warm spray of the shower and the lathery soap refreshed her skin. But it couldn’t erase bad memories or wash away guilt.

Was she making another mistake? Did Danny really love her, or was he just using her like Navy did?

She had been so in love with Navy. They would be together forever. That was the plan. So, when she realized he was on a path to self-destruction, she tried to save him. But Navy didn’t want to be saved. Who did she think she was, telling him what to do? He didn’t need her. There were plenty of other women ready to jump in his bed. So, that’s all she was to him?

Danny might prove no more reliable than Navy, she thought. And this time she couldn’t run home to Grandma Greendale. Her grandmother had been the one person she could always count on in times of trouble.

Lacey and her parents had lived with her grandmother from the time Lacey was fifteen. They had moved in shortly after Lacey’s grandfather died. Lacey’s father said he didn’t want his mother living all alone. They would take care of her.

The truth was that Gabe Greendale was a bum. Lacey finally understood that. Her dad was not a good father, or a good husband, or even a good son. And her mother, Marika, was no better. All either of them ever thought about was themselves. Somehow that was their bond. They enabled each other’s selfishness.

When Lacey told her parents she was moving to Dallas with Navy during her senior year in high school, they did nothing to stop her—probably because they didn’t care about her. She was just a bother to them, just another responsibility—like a collection agency nagging you every month. You just want it to go away.

By the time Lacey’s grandmother found out what was going on, Lacey was already in Dallas. This led to a huge fight between her grandmother and her parents, resulting in an ultimatum: either Lacey’s parents would drive to Dallas and bring Lacey back home, or they could find somewhere else to live.

They moved out.

Gabe and Marika had been planning to relocate to California. They both wanted to make it in the movie industry: Marika as an actress, Gabe as a screenwriter. They would never fulfill their dreams unless they moved to L.A. So, Gabe figured that being thrown out of his mother’s house was just the ‘kick in the butt’ they needed.

Lacey’s grandmother had gladly welcomed her back into her home when Lacey left Navy in Dallas and returned to Coreyville. Lacey had not heard from either of her parents since her mother called over a year ago begging for money. She sounded like she was either drunk or doped up. Lacey didn’t have any money to send. And her grandmother refused to help. Lacey understood why.

After Grandma Greendale’s funeral, Lacey was more lost than ever before. She went home to her grandmother’s house and curled up in bed to die.

But Ginger Lightley had been a long-time friend of her grandmother, and must have been keeping an eye on Lacey to make sure she was okay. Ginger dropped by the house with a home-cooked meal the day after the funeral. She knocked on the door and then on Lacey’s bedroom window to get her attention. Lacey dragged herself to the door and let Ginger in with the tray of food.

Lacey would not have eaten the meal. She would have gone back to bed as soon as Ginger left. But Ginger wouldn’t leave. She insisted on staying until Lacey had eaten every bite. And she offered Lacey a job at her bakery. Lacey didn’t think she was up to it. She needed more time to get over her grandmother’s death. But Ginger told her that she knew Lacey’s grandmother would agree that Lacey should get out and get to work right away—be out there among other people. It would do her a world of good.

Lacey knew Ginger was right. It was exactly what her grandmother would have told her. And besides, Ginger had just lost her Baker Trainee. Lacey was doing her a favor by agreeing to start on Monday.

That was five weeks ago. And things had been going well. She loved the people she was working with—especially Ginger—even though at times Ginger could be such a perfectionist that it got on Lacey’s nerves. She sometimes reminded her of her grandmother—who was more of a mom than her than her real mother had ever been.

Two weeks ago, she had hooked up with Danny. She was drawn to his sense of humor. Then she had discovered his temper. But they were in love, weren’t they?

She turned off the water, stepped out of the shower, and began to towel off.

The doorbell rang. Who could that be? she wondered. Pizza. Danny must gotten too hungry to wait until they got to the club.
“Danny, can you get that?” she yelled to the living room over the blaring TV.
The TV sound went dead.
“Yeah, I’ve got it.”
She could barely hear the conversation at the door.
“Good evening, Sir. I’m Chief of Police Daniel Foenapper, and this is Mrs. Virginia Lightley. I’m sorry to disturb
you at this hour, but I need to speak to Lacey Greendale. Is she here?”
“Uh, yes,” said Danny. “Come in.”
Lacey wrapped a towel around her wet hair and quickly put on her underwear. She could only imagine the look on
Ginger’s face. This wasn’t the way she had wanted Ginger to find out that she and Danny were dating. She slipped
into her bathrobe and walked out to the living room.
“Hi, Lacey,” said Ginger.
“Please, y’all have a seat,” said Lacey.
The chief and Ginger sat down in the chairs on opposite sides of the TV.
Lacey and Danny sat on the couch.
“What’s this about?” said Lacey.
“Well, as I’m sure you know,” said the chief, “Navy Newcomb died this morning.”
“Yes,” said Lacey.
“And the medical examiner has finished his autopsy,” said the chief. “We just came from his office.”
Lacey felt sick at the thought of Navy’s body stretched out across a cold, metal table, being butchered like a slab
of beef.
“And he has determined that Navy was poisoned. That’s what killed him—anaphylactic shock.”
“So, it was murder?” said Danny.
“More than likely,” said the chief. “He was apparently allergic to fish oil.”
“Shell fish,” offered Lacey. “He was **highly** allergic to it.”
“The chief thinks somebody put it in his food,” said Ginger.
“Specifically,” said the chief, “a coffee cake.”
“One of our coffee cakes?” said Danny.
“I’m afraid so,” said Ginger.
“He loved Ginger’s coffee cakes, didn’t he, Lacey?” said the chief.
“Well...,” she glanced at Danny. She didn’t like being the expert on Navy’s likes and dislikes. “…yes, he did.”
“Did he have a favorite?” said the chief.
“Sweet Ginger Cake,” said Lacey. “That was his favorite.”
“I see,” said the chief. “Okay, thanks.” He stood up. “That’s it for now. But I may some more questions for you
later.”
“Sure,” said Lacey, “no problem.”
Ginger stood up, and she and the chief walked toward the door. Lacey and Danny followed them.
Then the chief turned around. “Oh, yes—I knew I was forgetting something. And you might find this particularly
interesting, Lacey.”
“What’s that?”
“He didn’t have an Epi-Pen with him,” said the chief. “Wonder why?”
“Oh, I don’t know. He used to carry one around in his car.”
“In the glove compartment?” said the chief.
“Yes, that’s right.”
“We didn’t find it. And obviously he didn’t find it either—otherwise he’d still be alive.”
Lacey didn’t know what to say.
“No Epi-Pen,” said the chief. “But we did find something interesting under the front seat of his car.”
Lacey felt her face quickly turning red, but she couldn’t stop it. “What?”
“A pair of panties,” said the chief.
Lacey could feel Danny staring at her, waiting to hear her response.
The chief added, “They’re kind of unusual. They lace up on the sides.”
Lacey hoped Ginger would tell the chief to stop making these ridiculous innuendos.
The chief went on. “And there were two words printed on the front of them—‘Unlace Me.’
“I’ve never seen any like that,” said Lacey. Then she saw the disappointment in Ginger’s eyes—as though she
didn’t believe her.

“Well, I guess that’s it,” said the chief, opening the door. “Thanks again. Goodnight.”

Ginger said goodnight to Danny and Lacey as she followed the chief out the door.

Danny locked the door and then spun around. “What was that about?”

“Navy was murdered,” said Lacey.

“I know that—but why did they want to talk to you?”

“Probably just wanted to talk to somebody who knew about his allergy.”

“Yeah, but what’s this about the panties?”

“How should I know? I guess they belong to his girlfriend. Who knows?”

“I saw those exact panties in your little lingerie catalog.”

“What are doing looking through my catalog—checking out all the half-naked women?”

“They were just like the ones the chief was talking about.”

“The panties they found in Navy’s car are not mine.” She wondered whether she had stated it forcefully enough.

Danny didn’t say a word. He just stormed off into the bedroom.

She waited a minute and then went after him.

He was sitting on the other side of the bed, with his back to her. She walked around to face him—and wished she hadn’t.

“What are you doing with that thing?”

He held up the pistol. “This thing?”

“Be careful.”

“I think you’re lying about the panties.”

Lacey was about to start telling him he had it all wrong and to beg him to get rid of the gun. But then something snapped.

She snatched the pistol out of his hands. He was so surprised that he didn’t have time to react.

Lacey stepped back with the gun and pointed at him. “Get out of my home. Now!”

“I’m sorry, Lacey. I should have believed you. I do believe you, Honeypie.”

“No, you don’t! Get out of here now before I do something we’re both gonna regret.”

He eased his hands into the air. “Okay. Take it easy. I’m going.”

She followed him to the door. Once he had closed it and walked away, she locked it.

Lacey didn’t need a man in her life. Not one who didn’t trust her. But on the other hand—why should he? Especially since...she was lying.
Chapter 12

Cash and Carry Donuts was a very popular shop, sitting just around the corner from town square. Cash Crawley, 34, was determined to make his business more successful than his older brother’s restaurant, Bull Crawley’s Bar and Grill. Bull had the advantage of a prime location on The Square. Plus, Bull’s full-service restaurant could pull in heavy traffic at all three mealtimes.

Cash had always conceded the lunch and dinner crowd to his brother. And Bull knew that Cash’s donuts were preferred over his apple pie for coffee breaks. But breakfast was war. Sure, everybody knew donuts were a poor nutritional choice. But it was difficult to drive by Cash and Carry Donuts without stopping—especially early in the morning. And particularly since Cash had installed the fan.

He had discovered that on mild weather days when he could turn off the air conditioning and leave the front door open he got a lot more business—particularly in the morning. Then he realized it wasn’t the fresh air dining that brought in the people. It was the fragrance of fresh, hot donuts wafting out into the street, creating an invisible wall of temptation, diverting Bull’s bacon and egg eaters into Cash’s sticky-sweet den of donuts.

Cash wished he could leave the door open year-round. But that would make the temperature very uncomfortable inside on most days. So, he removed one of his front windows and installed a huge exhaust fan. His electric bill went up a bit—but not near as much as his profit.

Then a couple of months ago he had another idea: What would happen if he extended his hours until 10:00 p.m.? And instead of offering donuts that had been made that morning, what if he fried up a fresh batch at around 7:00 p.m. He knew he would still get almost no business at dinner time. But what about right after dinner, and then close to bedtime when people got the munchies? What did those folks normally do—go out for ice cream? Why not a box of hot, fresh donuts? It was worth a try.

Once the word got out, his evening traffic began to grow. Now his second-busiest time of day was between 9:30 and 10:00 p.m. His store was becoming the destination for a late night sugar fix.

And he had learned to have the coffee brewing right up until closing. His coffee was always fresh—anytime of the day or night. But you paid for it. A cup of Cash and Carry coffee cost fifty percent more than anywhere else in town—but the cups were twice as big. And his coffee cups were not the environmentally-friendly ones made out of recycled paper. Cash hated those things. He served piping hot, I-dare-you-to-sue-me-for-burning-yourself, coffee in heavy duty Styrofoam cups.

A drive-through window would have brought in even more business. But because his shop was located between two other stores, there was no way to add one. Cash had briefly wondered about the possibility of a drive-through window at the back of the building. But the City Council never would have approved it. His neighboring shop owners would have thrown a fit over the idea of Cash’s customers driving through their alley all day long.

Silvy Knox had only been working at the donut shop for a few weeks. The young blonde had landed the job soon after moving to Coreyville. She had lied about being nineteen, calculating that Cash would be more likely to sleep with a twenty-one year-old.

“It’s almost closing time, Boys.”

The two young cops looked up from their coffee and donuts. Silvy could tell they wanted her body. Otherwise, one or both of them would have made some remark about how she should show more respect to the police. A young woman like her had no right to refer to Coreyville’s Finest as ‘boys.’ She knew how hot she was, and enjoyed using it to the max.

“We need nourishment so we’ll have plenty of energy to serve and protect,” said Officer #1.

“Yeah,” said Officer #2, “without us out there to protect you, you’d feel…naked.” He did a slow scan of her body—as though he had X-ray vision.

“Ooh,” said Silvy, “I guess I would.” She covered herself with both hands, as though she were naked. The cops seemed to lose their appetite—for donuts. She loved it. “So, what’s happening around town—anything new?”

“Well, I guess you heard about Navy Newcomb,” said Officer #1. “Sure,” said Silvy. “Everybody’s heard about that.”

“He was poisoned,” said Officer #2. “But I’ll bet you didn’t know….,” lowering his voice, “…that it was murder.”

“Really?” said Silvy. “I thought he just tripped and hit his head.”

“Yeah,” said Officer #2, “but I’ll bet you didn’t know….,” lowering his voice, “…that it was murder.”

She pumped them for more details, but soon realized they didn’t have any.

After the cops left and the dining area had been cleaned up for the next day, the other workers took off and Silvy locked the front door.
She walked into the kitchen and saw Cash organizing an array of ingredients on the counter. His brand new ovens were preheating.

Up until now, the only food items Cash sold were donuts: glazed, powered, filled, twisted, puffed, rolled—every imaginable type. He dominated the donut market in Coreyville. Now he wanted to branch out. He wanted a business like Ginger Lightley’s. People came from all over, just to purchase her famous baked money-makers.

But he would go further than Ginger had. She refused to pursue an internet business. Cash figured she was just too old to understand the opportunities—the fortune to be made through online sales. He wouldn’t be so foolish. His new cakes would one day be even more famous than Ginger’s.

“Everybody’s gone and we’re all locked up,” said Silvy.

“Check out these jumbo muffin pans,” said Cash. “Wait until people get a taste of my new Cash and Carry Cupcakes.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to call them muffins? Cupcakes are usually kinda small.”

“No. I’m calling them cupcakes because it goes better with Cash and Carry. Besides, a lot of restaurants sell muffins. I’m gonna offer people a new vision of what a cupcake can be.”

“Big?”

“Yeah—and amazingly delicious. But I need to come up with a cool name for each flavor—like Ginger Lightley does. She’s got the Carrot Orange Blossom, the Pineapple Doozie, the Veggie Lightley, and names like that.”

“And don’t forget the Sweet Ginger Cake.”

“Yeah. I should have a cupcake with my name on it. Like…the CashCake or something.”

“What kind of flavor would that be? Would it taste like money?”

“Very funny. I don’t know yet. I’ll think of something.”

Silvy slithered in between Cash and the counter and looked up at him with her ultra-seductive eyes. “I’d like to taste your flavor right now, Baby.”

Normally, this would have been enough to make the ambitious entrepreneur forget all about work. But not tonight. He stepped to the side, picked up the black book and began to thumb through it.

“I can’t believe you’re already using it,” said Silvy.

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“Because he just died this morning.”

“That wasn’t my fault,” said Cash, flipping another page.

“Don’t you feel bad that you didn’t even pay him for it?”

“I would have—if he had lived long enough.” He set the book down, opened, and checked the items on the counter against the recipe. “Good. I’ve got everything I need. Might as well get started.”

Silvy wondered why Cash couldn’t have just created his own recipes instead of stealing them. But she knew the answer: Cash had a dull sense of taste. He did know a good donut when he tasted it. But beyond dough and icing, he was lost.

“I’ve got some bad news,” said Silvy.

“What’s that?”

“A couple of cops came in just before closing.”

“Cops love their coffee and donuts, don’t they? It’s a stereotype—but it’s true.”

“Yeah.” She just stood there waiting for him to take her seriously.

Cash stopped what he was doing and looked at her. “What?”

“Navy was murdered.”

“Murdered? I though he just tripped and busted his head open.”

“They did an autopsy. He was poisoned.”

“Well, I had nothing to do with it. Why is it bad news for me?”

“Because apparently the poison was in something he ate or drank this morning. And I remember you coming out of your office to get him a cup of coffee.”

“Navy was murdered.”

“Yes, that’s right. They can test the Cash and Carry coffee cup.”

“Murdered? I though he just tripped and busted his head open.”

“They did an autopsy. He was poisoned.”

“Well, I had nothing to do with it. Why is it bad news for me?”

“Because apparently the poison was in something he ate or drank this morning. And I remember you coming out of your office to get him a cup of coffee.”

“Well, yeah. But I sure didn’t put anything in it. They can test the cup and see for themselves.”

“Yes, that’s right. They can test the Cash and Carry coffee cup.”

“Oh, I get what you’re saying. The police are going to wonder what time he came by here.”

“And Ginger Lightley’s probably already reported that her recipe book was stolen.”

“But they have no proof of anything.” His tense face began to relax. “Navy’s dead. And the only other people who knew about the book were you and me.”

“Right.”
“You didn’t tell anybody, did you?”

She stepped in close and wrapped her arms around him and looked up into his eyes, smiling. “Of course not. You know you can trust me, Baby.” She reached up and pulled his head down to her and began to give him a long, steamy kiss.
Chapter 13

Ginger was sitting in the living room in her robe with the Saturday edition of the Coreyville Courier in one hand and a pencil in the other. It was nearly her bedtime, but she was determined to get the crossword puzzle finished. In tomorrow’s paper there would be another one, and she hated to fall behind.

She glanced up at the TV occasionally, when a story caught her interest. But Channel 7 News made no mention of Navy. When the sports segment came on, she clicked the remote to turn off the TV.

She stood up and was about to turn off the lamp and go to her bedroom when she heard a faint tapping sound. Then she realized someone was at the front door.

Ginger tiptoed over to the door and looked through the peephole. Who could it be at this hour? It was Lacey, bundled up in a furry hooded coat. Ginger opened the door.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Lightley. I hate to bother you so late.”
“Don’t be silly, Lacey. Come on in here and get out of the cold.”

Lacey stepped inside and Ginger closed the door.

“Here, let me take your coat.”
“No, that’s okay. I’m not staying long.”
“Well, okay. Have a seat.”

Lacey sat down on the couch.

Ginger sat in her chair.

“And quit calling me Mrs. Lightley,” said Ginger, in a harsher tone than she had intended. She smiled and spoke gently. “Please. My friends call me Ginger.”

“So…we’re friends?”

“Of course,” said Ginger. “Now what can I do for you?”

“Well, I’m worried about what the police chief said.”

“You should’ve. It was obvious that you were lying.”

“So, you knew? I was afraid of that. I guess the chief could tell too.”

“Probably. Although I didn’t share my feelings with him.”

Lacey looked surprised. “You didn’t?”

“No. And he didn’t tell me what he was thinking either. I didn’t say anything because I don’t believe for one second that you’re capable of killing somebody—even Navy. I mean, I know you had strong feelings for him. Sometimes I wasn’t sure whether you loved him or hated him. But clearly, you weren’t over him.”

“I didn’t realize I was so transparent.”

“Honey, it’s written all over your face. You’re so easy to read.”

Lacey blushed and lowered her head.

“So, what’s the deal with the panties?” said Ginger, without emotion.

Lacey jerked as if she’d accidentally touched a hot stove. “They’re mine.”

“I was pretty sure they belonged to you.”

“Why?”

“I overheard you talking to a young woman in the bakery one day. You were on a break and the two of you were looking through a catalog. You thought they were sexy, and your friend was encouraging you to buy them.”

“I can’t believe you heard us. But anybody with that catalog could have bought those panties.”

“I know. It was just a theory—until I saw the look on your face tonight when the chief mentioned them. That gave it away.”

“But it’s not what you’re thinking.”

“How do you know? I haven’t told you what I’m thinking.”

“You’re thinking I had sex with Navy in his car.”

“Well, let’s not worry so much about what I. The important thing is what the police think,” said Ginger. “Let me play devil’s advocate for a minute. You could have seduced Navy into having sex with you, and then left the panties under his car seat, hoping Kayla would find them. Then perhaps she would confront him, they’d fight over it, and she would leave him. Then he would come back to you.”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

“Then why were your panties in his car?”

Lacey took a deep breath. “Okay. What you said is half. I did put the panties in his car.” She quickly added, “But I didn’t have sex with him.”
“When did you put them in the car?”
“Today. While Navy was in the kitchen picking up the three-day-olds, I went out for a smoke.”
“Addie mentioned that. She was upset that you took a break when she had asked you to check out front to see if there were any more cakes that needed to go.”
“Yeah, I felt bad about that. But I couldn’t stand it any longer. I had to do it today. Navy always kept his car locked at night. And he had a car alarm. But he never locked it when he made a quickstop—for example, at a convenience store. So, I knew it would be unlocked.”
“You put them under his car seat to make Kayla jealous.”
“Yes.”
“Well, that makes you look kinda desperate—but it doesn’t make you look like a killer. So, you need to go tell the police your story.”
“But there’s one problem,” said Lacey.
“What?”
“The Epi-Pen.”
Ginger’s heart sank. “Please tell me you didn’t take it out of his car.”
“I didn’t. I promise. But the police are not going to believe me.”
“Why not? They’ll check for fingerprints and they’ll find yours on the door and maybe on the seat—but not on the glove box. Right?”
Lacey sighed. “That’s the problem. I did touch the glove box. My fingerprints might even be on the inside of it.”
“Oh, no, Honey. You opened it? Why did you do that?”
“Because I had planned to put the panties in there. Then I realized that Navy might find them before Kayla did. But I knew that he never looks under the seats. When we were together, I always cleaned out the car for him. He didn’t the trust the car wash bozos.’ He preferred doing it himself—at least the outside. Cleaning the interior was woman’s work, he used to say. So, I figured Kayla would be cleaning out the car one day and find them under the seat.”
“Then she would suspect him of cheating on her—“
“—and hopefully think the panties were mine since they had the words ‘Unlace Me’ on them.”
“Oh, Lacey. This is not good.”
“I know.”
“The thing with the panties is bad enough. But you knew which coffee cake was Navy’s favorite. And you could have injected fish oil into the cake early this morning when you first got to work. When Addie went out to check to see if there were any other three-day-old cakes, she found one or two. I wonder if either of them was a Sweet Ginger Cake.”
“But I didn’t do that.”
“I know. But think about how it looks. You knew the cake would seem extra moist, but it wouldn’t taste funny, because purified fish oil doesn’t have a smell or taste. And if anyone else ate the cake they wouldn’t be harmed. It would only hurt Navy, because of his allergy.”
“But, Ginger—“
“—and the only other thing you had to do was remove the Epi-Pen from his glove box. And that glove box door has your fingerprints on it.”
“Are you going to tell the police about all this?”
Ginger studied Lacey’s face. She looked fragile, like a young child.
“No,” said Ginger. “Not until I absolutely have to.”
Lacey smiled. “Thanks, Ginger.”
“But I hope you know that we may both end up in jail.”
“Oh, no. I don’t want you to go to jail for me. Maybe I should go turn myself in right now.”
“No. I’m sorry, Honey, I shouldn’t have said that. I was just kidding. I’ll protect myself. If they put me under oath, I’ll tell the truth. In the meantime I’ll try to be legally…evasive.” Ginger wondered if there was such a thing.
“So, just go home and try to get some rest. And enjoy your day off tomorrow.”
Lacey and Ginger stood up.
“Oh,” said Lacey, “there’s one other thing. I think it may have been a mistake to put my grandmother’s house up for sale.”
“Really? Well, maybe you should quit referring to it as your grandmother’s house. She left it to you because she wanted you to have it. It’s your house. And you can do whatever you want with it.” Lacey had told Ginger that her
grandmother had left everything to Lacey when she died. But it was only the house and a few thousand dollars. The money had been just enough to pay for the funeral.

“I know. But you were nice enough to set me up with your realtor friend. So, I hate to back out. She’s already spent a couple of weeks trying to sell it.”

“Don’t worry about that, Lacey. Just give her a call. She’ll understand.”

“Okay. I’ll call her. I thought I wouldn’t be able to handle it—that I’d see my grandmother in every room. I’d just start crying all over again. But now I want to see her there. I want to remember the good times we had in that house.”

Ginger smiled. “I understand, Honey. Then do it. Call Peggy tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

Ginger followed Lacey to the front door.

Lacey turned back around. “I’m sorry, but there’s one other thing.”

“Yes?”

“Well, it’s kinda bad. But it’s not what it looks like.”

Ginger braced for the worst.

Lacey reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a pistol.

Ginger jumped back. “What are you doing?”

Lacey was holding the gun as though she was planning to shoot it. “Oh, I’m sorry.” She repositioned her grip to the tip of the handle, letting the gun dangle between her thumb and index finger. “I need to get rid of this thing.”

“Lacey.” Ginger was afraid to ask. “You didn’t… shoot anybody, did you?”

“No, no—of course not. It’s not even my gun. It’s Danny’s.”

“Danny’s?”

“Yes. I don’t know where or why he got it, but I don’t want it in my apartment. What can I do with it? I can’t just throw it in the trash. And I sure don’t want to turn it in to the police.”

“No, you surely don’t.” Ginger inched her way closer. “Let me take it.” She reached out and carefully took the gun from Lacey.

“What are you going to do with it?”

“I’ll figure out something. But you can’t tell anybody you gave it to me.”

“I won’t. Don’t worry.”

But Ginger was worried. A few minutes earlier she had joked about going to jail with Lacey. Now it didn’t seem so funny.
Chapter 14

The auditorium of Corey Acres Baptist Church was packed on this cool, crisp Sunday morning. Ginger hadn’t seen some of these faces in church since last Easter. Their little town had been sobered by the murder of Navy Newcomb, making it a little harder to sleep in on the Lord’s Day.

Ginger was sitting in her usual spot next to the other three Domino Girls. They always made a point of getting into the auditorium right after Sunday School to secure their section of pew number seven, left side—next to the center aisle. The seating order had been established years ago: Ginger on the aisle, then Jane, Ethel, and Barb.

Sometimes it was all Ginger and Ethel could do to keep Jane’s loud mouth in check. Jane had never mastered the art of whispering. She apparently had been sick the week they taught it in elementary school.

Elijah stepped to the podium to deliver his sermon. Ginger thought he looked very handsome in his Oyster poplin suit. She could remember when such attire would have been considered almost blasphemous. Those were the days when the deacons expected to see their pastor in a dark suit every Sunday morning.

Times had changed. And Ginger was all for it. But maybe her feelings were more about the man than the suit.

She opened her Bible to the fifth chapter of Matthew. Elijah had been preaching a series of messages based on Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. This morning he read a short passage, beginning at Verse 21.

“Ye have heard that it was said of them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment.”

Elijah looked up and paused, as his words continued to reverberate throughout the auditorium.

Ginger sensed that everyone was thinking about Navy’s killer. Was it possible that he was sitting in this very auditorium? People seemed to be eyeing each other, considering anyone and everyone. Some had a smug look on their faces, as though they were thinking: the judgment means you’re gonna burn, Buddy.

Elijah went on.

“But I say unto you, that whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment.”

Ouch. Suddenly everyone in the congregation seemed to realize that the sermon was about them. In God’s eyes, they were no better than the killer. They could rationalize their anger—convincing themselves that it was with just cause. But was it?

Ginger marveled at how quickly Elijah had changed the people’s focus from hate toward the vicious murderer—whoever he was—to dealing with their own demons. Now they were ready to hear the sermon.

Off the top of her head, Ginger couldn’t think of anybody she was angry with. Not that she thought she was perfect. She had just learned not to hold a grudge. It wasn’t worth it. She’d found that when she did, she was only hurting herself.

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Ginger and company praised Elijah for his powerful message as they shook his hand and hurried out the door to Barb’s car. It was important to make it to Luby’s before the line got too long.

Barb always insisted on driving since she had the biggest car. Her old Cadillac was in pristine condition. Parking was sometimes an issue. But the thing sailed down the road like a battleship. It was almost like riding in a limo.

“Great sermon, huh?” said Jane from the back seat.

The others agreed.

Ginger was in the front with Barb. Was it just her imagination, or did it seem like Elijah wanted to ask her something as they were going through the handshake line? Surely he didn’t want to have lunch with her—not that she wouldn’t be interested. Or would she?

Would that be starting something—like dating? She didn’t want to rush into anything. Besides—Sunday lunch at Luby’s Cafeteria with the girls had become a tradition.

“Was the sermon longer than usual?” said Barb.

Ethel checked her watch. “I don’t think so.”

“Well, just look at that line,” said Barb.

“First Baptist must have let out early,” said Jane.

“And the Catholic and Methodist churches too,” said Barb. “This is ridiculous.” She pulled into a parking spot, but left the engine running.

“We can’t always be at the front of the line,” said Ginger. “It’s only fair that other people get their turn.”

“Well, I think we should just go somewhere else,” said Barb in a huff.

“We could go to your house, Barb,” said Ginger. “When’s the last time you cooked us a meal?”

“I’ve got a better idea, Ginge,” said Barb with a sly smile. “Let’s go over to the parsonage.”
“The parsonage?” said Jane.

“Yeah,” said Barb. “I got the distinct impression that the good reverend was just itching to invite our Ginger over for a nice cozy lunch. Didn’t y’all notice?”

“Well...now that you mention it,” said Ethel.

“Really?” said Jane. “I didn’t notice. But I have seen the way he looks at her.”

“Jane!” said Ginger. “Don’t you dare talk about our pastor that way.”

“I’m sorry, Ginger,” said Jane, “I didn’t mean for it to sound crude. I just think he really likes you. And, yeah, I think he’d like to ask you out.”

“I think he’d like to jump her bones,” said Barb.

“Barb!” said Ginger, giggling, “that was terrible. I can’t believe you said that.”

“Well, somebody needed to say it,” said Barb. “Just to wake Ginger up and get her back into the game.”

“Maybe I don’t want to be in the game right now,” said Ginger. “But I’m not stopping the rest of you. Go for it.”

“Good—because I’m ready to go,” said Jane. “But the coach won’t send me in.”

“What coach?” said Ethel. “There’s a coach?”

“No,” said Jane. “There’s no coach. In fact, in my case, there’s no game.”

“Yeah, Ginge,” said Barb, “at least you’ve got a game.”

“What are we doing?” said Ginger.

“We’re discussing your love life,” said Ethel. “Even I knew that.”

“I mean—what are we doing for lunch? We’re just sitting here.”

“Let’s go to Sonic,” said Jane.

“Sonic?” said Barb. “I wanted meatloaf.”

“I don’t mind eating a hamburger in the car,” said Jane.

“Me either,” said Ethel.

“Fine with me,” said Ginger.

“Well, okay,” said Barb. She backed out of the parking spot and drove away. “But I don’t want to see any crumbs in my cars.”

“We’ll be careful,” said Jane.

“And absolutely no ketchup!” said Barb.

“Yes, Mother,” said Ethel.

In less than five minutes they had driven to Sonic and ordered their food.

“Now Ginger can give us the rest of the details about last night,” said Jane.

“I’ve already told you everything I can,” said Ginger.

“Right,” said Barb. “Now tell us everything you can’t.”

“Yeah,” said Ethel, “give us the dirt.”

“There is no dirt,” said Ginger. “Not really.”

“‘Not really’ means there more,” said Jane. “Come on—you know you can’t keep a secret from us.”

“Spit it out,” said Barb.

“Look,” said Ginger, “I told you that somebody put fish oil in the coffee cake. Obviously, they knew about Navy’s allergy. And they knew he kept his Epi-Pen in his glove box.”

“Yeah,” said Jane. “We know that. What else?”

“That’s about it,” said Ginger.

“Any suspects?” said Barb.

Ginger hesitated.

Barb jumped on it. “Who is it? Anybody we know?”

“Yes,” said Ginger, quickly adding, “but she didn’t do it.”

“She?” said Jane. “Now we’re getting somewhere.”

“A woman killed him?” said Ethel, as though no woman had ever killed a man in the history of the world.

“Wise up, Ethel,” said Barb. “Women can be a heck of a lot meaner than men—if you really tick ‘em off.”

“Yeah,” said Ethel, “but here in Coreyville? I can’t imagine.”

“What’s her name?” said Jane.

“Lacey Greendale,” said Ginger.

“But Lacey works for you, doesn’t she?” said Ethel.
“Yes,” said Ginger. “But, like I said: there’s no way she did it.”
“I wouldn’t be so sure,” said Jane.
“Why?” said Barb. “What do you know?”
“I don’t know if it really means anything,” said Jane, “but the other day I was walking out of Wal-Mart and I saw Lacey standing in the parking lot, yelling at some guy in a black car. I couldn’t see who he was.”
“Was he in a Corvette?” said Ginger.
“I don’t know,” said Jane. “Could have been. And then the guy just peeled out and drove away, leaving her standing there.”
“They used to date,” said Ginger. “And since they broke up, they haven’t been on very good terms. But she’s no killer. I’m sure of that.”
Was Ginger just kidding herself? Was she so determined to prove Lacey’s innocence that she couldn’t see the obvious? She had stashed the pistol in Lester’s old safe in the basement to protect Lacey. It was Danny’s gun. Or was it? What if Lacey bought the gun to take revenge on Navy? Ginger felt a chill run up her spine.
Lacey could have planned to shoot Navy, and then thought of a neater, cleaner way—with less risk. After all, it wasn’t really poison. It was just a dietary supplement. Lots of people take them all the time.
Sure, she spiked his coffee cake. But it was just to make him sick, just to get back at him—not to kill him. Was it her fault that he had misplaced his Epi-Pen? She couldn’t be blamed for his carelessness.
Ginger needed to either come up with an alternate suspect or face the reality that Lacey might indeed be the killer.
Chapter 15

Early Monday, Silvy quietly slipped in the back door from the alley and walked down the hallway to his office. Bull Crawley looked up from his computer. The forty-year-old bald head, along with the six-foot tall, double-wide frame made him look like a washed up pro wrestler. “Morning, Honeysuckle.”

Silvy was not fond of the nickname he had given her. But she was in no position to complain. “Good morning, Bull.”

“So, what’s my pain-in-the-butt brother up to this morning?”
“He’s already selling coffee cakes. Actually, they’re jumbo muffins. But he’s calling them cupcakes.”
“Really? Good. He’ll be out of business soon—and in jail, where he belongs.”
“I’m not so sure,” said Silvy.
“How long you think it’s gonna take for somebody to realize that his cupcakes taste just like Ginger’s coffee cakes?”
“But that’s just it—they don’t.”
“Why not? Didn’t he follow the recipe?”
“Yes. And I helped him. We started with the Sweet Ginger Cake. He wanted to try just one recipe at first to see how it goes over. And we followed the recipe very carefully. I don’t know what went wrong.”
“Maybe you baked them too long, or at the wrong temperature,” said Bull.
“No. We did everything exactly according to the recipe.”
“Well, if they don’t taste right then why is he trying to sell them? That’s crazy.”
“Because Cash can’t tell the difference. He thinks they’re fine. He has no sense of taste.”
“That’s true.” He grinned. “Except in women.” He got up from his chair and walked around to her.
“How about working me into your busy schedule today?” he said, putting his big, hairy arms around her.
“I could probably take a break at around 3:30.”
“You work way too hard for that putz.”
She smiled. “Well, this afternoon when I come back I’ll work hard for you.”
“Yeah, but you’ll only stay ten minutes. He gets you all night long.”
She faked a pout. “Don’t blame me. This is what you wanted.”
“No, not really. But it’s the only way I knew to keep up with what he’s doing. Cash is determined to steal all my customers.”
“Oh, come on now, Bull. He’s nowhere close to doing that.”
“Well, I just don’t trust him.”
“You’ve got nothing to worry about, Baby.” She nearly choked on the word ‘Baby.’ “I’ve got everything under control.”
“That’s what I love about you, Honeysuckle.” He pulled her small, firm body close and kissed her hard.
She nearly gagged. How much longer would she have to endure this nasty little charade?

Lacey delivered two cups of coffee to Ginger and Elijah’s table.
“Thank you, Lacey,” said Ginger.
“Yes, Ma’am. You’re welcome.” She smiled politely and walked away.
“Things are pretty tense around here, I guess,” said Elijah.
“Yeah,” said Ginger. “And I just don’t know what to do about it. I tossed and turned all night trying to think of who else might have wanted to kill Navy.”
“Maybe it’s some other ex-girlfriend—could be somebody from Dallas. Who knows what all he was into over there. Maybe he owed money to a loan shark.”
“You’re right. It could be somebody from out of town. All I’m thinking about is the people here in Coreyville.”
“You can’t let it make you crazy, Ginger.”
“I know. But look at her.”
Elijah glanced over at the counter where Lacey was waiting on a customer.
“Do you really think she’s capable of murder?” said Ginger.
“You can’t always go by looks. Think about Judas. The other eleven didn’t think he looked like a traitor.”
“You’re not helping. Judas committed suicide. I love that girl. I can’t stand the thought of her being hurt.” She paused. “No. I will not accept it. She is not the one.”
“Well, maybe Chief Foenapper has some new leads. He might already have another suspect or two.”
“But if he did, wouldn’t he have let me know about it?”
“Honestly, I doubt it. My impression is that he wants to solve this crime all by himself. I remember how tight-lipped he was out at the nursing home. He didn’t want to tell us anything.”
A woman rushed inside and went straight to Ginger.
“T’m sorry, Ginger.”
“For what?”
“I was picking up some donuts for Henry over at Cash’s place and I saw that he’s started selling muffins. And I thought I’d try one. I love your coffee cakes, Ginger. But I was in a hurry, and I thought I could save some time.”
“I understand. It’s okay, Phyllis. It doesn’t hurt my feelings.”
“But it’s just not as good as yours.”
Ginger tried not to gloat. “I see.”
“So, even though Henry’s waiting for his donuts, and he’s got to get to work, I just had to get me a Sweet Ginger Cake.”
“Well, you’d better hurry then. No hard feelings.”
“Thanks, Ginger.” She rushed to the end of the line.”
“Looks like you’ve got some competition,” said Elijah.
“Yes. But apparently it’s not very strong competition,” said Ginger. Then she had a thought. “Excuse me just a moment.”
She got up and walked over to Phyllis, who was standing in line. “Phyllis, I know you’re in a hurry, but could I ask you a question?”
“Sure.”
“You said you didn’t like the muffin you got at Cash’s. Did you eat it all, or do you still have some of it left?”
“I was going to eat it on my way home, but it just wasn’t very good, so I only ate a couple of bites. It’s in the car.”
“I’ll make you a deal. If you’ll let me have whatever’s left of it, I’ll buy your coffee cake this morning.”
“You will?”
“Yes. What kind do you want?”
“Sweet Ginger Cake.”
“I’ll bag it up while you run out to your car. What do you say?”
Phyllis grinned. “It’s a deal.”
When she came back with the partially eaten muffin, Ginger handed her the bag. “Thanks, Phyllis.”
“No, thank you, Ginger.”
Ginger watched her hurry out the door, and then went back to sit down at the table with Elijah.
“What was that all about?” said Elijah.
“Cash Crawley has started selling these. She showed it to him. “They’re muffins, but he calls them cupcakes.”
“I thought cupcakes were usually kinda small.”
“They are.” Then she read the label. “C & C Cupcakes: SweetCake.”
“Wonder if it’s supposed to taste like your Sweet Ginger Cake?”
“Let’s see,” said Ginger, unwrapping it. She held it up to her nose and inhaled slowly and deeply. “Hmm.”
“What?”
She pinched off a small piece and tasted it. “You’re kidding me.”
“What?”
“I need to talk to Addie.”
“Addie? Why? What is it?”
“I’m sorry,” said Ginger, getting up. “I’ll see you later.” She walked to the kitchen.
Addie was sitting in her chair daydreaming, waiting to take the next batch of coffee cakes out of the oven.
“Got a minute?”
Addie checked the timer. “I’ve got eight minutes.”
Ginger motioned for Addie to come with her. She led her into the office and closed the door.
Addie took a chair in front of the desk.
Ginger handed her what was left of the muffin.
“What’s this?” said Addie.
“It’s a product of Cash and Carry Donuts,” said Ginger.
“Couldn’t be. He only makes donuts.”
“Not anymore. Look at the label.”
“Why is he calling it a cupcake? It’s too big to be a cupcake.”
“I know. Taste it,” said Ginger.
“Somebody’s been eating on it. What’s this about, Ginger?”
“You’ll know as soon as you taste it.”
Addie pulled a chunk off of the side that hadn’t been bitten and put it into her mouth. Almost immediately her eyes widened. “This is—”
“—right.” Ginger smiled.
“So, he’s the one.”
“Yeah. Pretty stupid, huh?”
“But I don’t get it. Couldn’t he tell that it didn’t taste right?”
“Apparently not. Or he just didn’t care,” said Ginger.
“No. He had to care. Otherwise, why pay for the recipe?”
Only Ginger and Addie knew that the stolen recipe book was a fake. Not even Cheryl knew. All the talk about it being worth thousands of dollars was just a ruse, intended to tempt baker trainees. A baker trainee eventually learned the real recipes. And Ginger didn’t trust them with just anybody.
“I wish I had never started the whole fake recipe book thing. It may be the very reason Navy’s dead.”
“No, Ginger. If he stole it and then somebody killed him for it, that’s not your fault. That boy was a good-for-nothing anyway. I can’t say I’m all that sorry to see him go.”
Ginger was shocked. “Addie, how can you say that? He didn’t deserve to die.”
“No, of course not. You’re right.”
But Ginger didn’t believe her old friend. She could see it in Addie’s eyes: she was glad Navy was dead. Ginger had been praying for another suspect. Be careful what you pray for.
Chapter 16

At about 10:30 a.m., Ginger walked down to Scissy’s Beauty Shop. Sissy Gossett had earned the nickname ‘Scissy’ in beauty school, twenty-seven years ago. People were amazed at how fast she could work a pair of scissors. She zigged and zagged and hovered above your head like a hummingbird. You didn’t dare move an inch while her scissors were in motion.

When Scissy finished with you, your hair was a work of art. And no two looked the same. Women quickly learned not to ask for their hair to be styled like so-and-so’s. That was an insult. Each head was intended to be a unique masterpiece.

Ginger wasn’t surprised to see Scissy idling in her stylist chair, flipping through a magazine she’d probably already read a dozen times. Business was slow on Mondays. Most women came in toward the end of the week so their hair would look its best for Sunday morning services.

The other salons in town were closed on Mondays. But Scissy got too lonely at home while her husband was at work. She had no hobbies, no other interests. So, she opened her place on Mondays, just hoping somebody would come in. She gave her other stylists the day off.

She smiled broadly when Ginger walked through the door. “Hey, Ginger, come on in.”

“Hi, Scissy.”

“You didn’t have an appointment today, did you?” She jumped up and scurried to the desk to check her appointment book.

“No. I’m scheduled for Friday afternoon—as usual.”

“I thought so. Well, what can I do for you? Need some more of that new conditioner?”

“No, I’ve still got plenty. Thanks. I just wanted to ask you a couple of questions.”

“Oh, okay. Have a seat.” If there was anything Scissy was more accomplished at than styling hair, it was talking—or more precisely, gossiping. She hopped back up in her stylist chair. “Shoot.”

“What do you know about Cash Crawley?”

“The Donut King?”

“Yeah. Have you heard anything new lately?”

“Only that he’s started selling muffins. But I understand they’re nothing to write home about.”

Unbelievable, thought Ginger. Cash had just started selling the muffins that morning. “How did you hear about it?”

“I had a customer early this morning who told me she tried one. He’s only got one kind apparently. She said it wasn’t bad. It was just kinda bland.”

“I see.”

“You think Cash is trying to compete with you?”

“Maybe.”

“Well, I don’t think he’d stand much of a chance, Ginger. Nobody can top your coffee cakes.”

Ginger smiled. “Thanks.”

“The only business Cash usually tries to compete with is his brother’s.”

“Really? I’ve never thought of them as being in competition with each other. All Cash sells is donuts. Bull’s place has grown into a full-service restaurant. I wouldn’t think there would be much fighting over customers except at breakfast.”

“Yeah, but for the Crawley boys, everything is a competition. Remember what a great football player Bull was in high school? He was huge even back then—thanks to the steroids.”

“Really? He took steroids back in high school?”

“Oh, yes. Everybody figured he’d get a full-ride scholarship to wherever he wanted to go. But then he broke his ankle in the state game. He never fully recovered from it. Never even went to college.”

“Yeah, I remember that. It was a shame.”

“Then little brother, Cash, came along five or six years later and became the star quarterback. He seemed unstoppable. Until one night after a big game when Bull took him to a club over in Shreveport to celebrate. They got drunk and started fighting. One of Cash’s fingers got broken—on his throwing hand. It healed, but he never threw the football quite as well after that. Cash never forgave his brother for it.”

“So, they’re still fighting it out—in the business world.”

“That’s right. But so far Bull is winning.”

“I would think so.”
“But did you hear about Cash dumping a box of mice into Bull’s restaurant.”
“What? No.”
“I’m not surprised. Bull did everything he could to keep it quiet. Even I haven’t told anybody.”
“Until now.”
“Well, yeah. But I know you’ll keep it a secret.”
“So, what happened?”
“One of the cooks spotted several mice in the kitchen during the lunch rush, so he ran into the dining room to get Bull. When he pulled him aside and told him about the mice, Bull began to usher his customers out of the restaurant.”
“He told them about the mice?”
“Oh, no. He said he suspected a gas leak. He apologized and told them their next meal was free—including dessert.”
“Wow. That was close.”
“Yeah. If anybody had seen a mouse run across the floor, Bull would have been out of business.”
“How did he figure out it was Cash?”
“He doesn’t know for sure. But he can’t imagine who else would do that to him.”
“That’s so unethical.”
“Yeah, but it’s no big shock to me. Neither one of them have any scruples.”
Scissy had confirmed Ginger’s suspicions. Cash was indeed the kind of man who would have paid Navy to steal her recipe book.
But would Cash then kill Navy—just to cover up the theft?

Danny walked into the kitchen. “Have you seen Lacey?”
Addie pointed to the back door.
He went outside and saw Lacey with her back and one foot against the wall, taking a drag from her Virginia Slim.
“Those things will kill you,” he said as he put a Marlboro between his lips.
She continued to look straight ahead. “Not as fast as a gun.”
He took out his lighter, flipped it open, and lit his cigarette. “Look, I’m sorry. I was stupid. I shouldn’t have had the gun in the apartment.” He put the lighter back in his pocket and took a long drag.
She turned to him. “You shouldn’t have had a gun—period.”
“I know.”
Lacey punched him in the arm. “Stupid.”
He hesitated to ask. “What did you do with it?”
“What does it matter? You don’t need a gun.”
“Yes, but you can’t just throw it away. Where is it?”
“I’ve got it in a safe place. Don’t worry about it.”
Maybe she had it on her—perhaps it was strapped inside her thigh. Or maybe he’d seen too many B movies. He scanned her body, from head to toe, and got distracted on the way down. Danny never got tired of staring at her long, sexy legs.
She didn’t seem to notice he was ogling her. “I think I convinced Ginger that I had nothing to do with Navy’s death. Hopefully she’ll convince the police.”
“Good. What about the panties? They really are yours, aren’t they?”
Lacey threw her cigarette down in disgust and snuffed it out with a violent twist of her shoe. “I’ve got to get back to work.”
He grabbed her by the arm. “I want to know.”
She just stared at him.
“I deserve to know.”
“Okay, yes—they’re mine,” she said.
“I knew.”
“I put them in his car to make Kayla jealous. It was a stupid thing to do.”
“So, you still have a thing for him.”
“Not anymore.”
“Not anymore.” He said calmly. Then he yelled, “You mean since he’s dead?”
“I’m sorry. It’s not that I don’t love you. I was just confused about my feelings.”
Danny was so angry he didn’t know what to say. He was about to blurt out something he’d probably regret.
“But I know you’ll forgive me—just like I’ll forgive you…for the gun.”
“It’s not the same thing.”
“Do you want me to forgive you?”
“Yes, but—”
“—no ‘buts.’ Do you want me to forgive you or not?”
“Yes.”
“Then you have to forgive me.”
“Fine. I forgive you.”
“Good.” She gave him a peck on the cheek, took his hand, and led him back inside.
Danny wondered if he would get paid for the job. His secret employer had provided the gun. His instructions were to hide in the bushes along the back parking lot of the nursing home on Saturday morning and wait for Navy to arrive with the coffee cakes. When Navy stepped out of his car, Danny was to shoot and kill him.
But Danny didn’t like the idea of using a gun. And what did it matter now? His employer had gotten the result he wanted. Navy was dead.
Danny should get paid.
Chapter 17

Almando Monet sat in his small, but plush upstairs office waiting on a client who was late for his appointment. Almando was a self-made man, and had no patience for those who didn’t understand that time is money.

Manny, as he liked to be called, looked like a thirty-year-old Antonio Banderas. He had legally changed his last name ten years ago to that of his idol, Claude Monet. Manny had rejected the family grocery business to become an artist—just as the famous French impressionist painter had done many decades before him.

Even at the age of twenty, Manny’s oil paintings were magnificent. But nobody was willing to pay hundreds of dollars to a poor Hispanic kid. He dreamed of the day when the wealthy would commission him to paint great works of art that would be passed down from one generation to the next.

Manny had been desperate to get away from his overbearing father. So, he had written to a distant cousin who operated a small business in an East Texas town named Coreyville. He boldly asked Cousin Hosea for a job and a temporary place to live. Manny told him he would work hard and help pay the rent.

To his surprise, Hosea replied that he would be happy to give him a job, and that Manny could live with him until he could afford his own place. He even said he would hang Manny’s paintings on the walls of his business and sell them to customers.

Manny was so excited he couldn’t sleep. He spent his last few dollars on a one-way bus ticket to Coreyville.

Hosea’s business was a tiny shoe repair shop, located on town square. Manny’s job would be to shine each pair of shoes that Hosea repaired.

What would be Manny’s hourly rate of pay? Zero, his cousin told him. He would only get paid if a customer decided to tip him in response to a particularly impressive shoe shine job.

But there was more. Hosea had recently purchased a shoe shine stand at an auction. He would charge five dollars per shine, which he would keep. But Manny could pocket any tip money. And assuming he could keep the chair occupied for much of the day, he could make a living. Of course, Manny would have to buy his own supplies. Hosea would loan him the money to get started.

But at least he would have free room and board, right? Yes, for the first two months. After that, he’d have to fork over money for half of the rent and groceries. He would live with Hosea in the efficiency apartment above the shop. There was only one bed. Manny would sleep on the floor.

What about the promised walls for his paintings? Hosea was a man of his word—and then some. Manny could indeed cover the walls with his works of art. But the previously undisclosed stipulation was that Hosea would get fifty percent of the sales price of each painting.

Manny decided to go back to El Paso immediately. But he couldn’t. First he’d have to earn some money. It would be hard enough to go home and admit that his father had been right. He just couldn’t bring himself to call and beg for a bus ticket.

He worked diligently at his shoe shining, figuring the better the shine, the higher the tip. And it paid off. Before long, the word had spread all over town. Manny was swamped with customers, while Hosea sat idle.

Then Manny began to dream. Maybe he could go out on his own. Then he could keep the five-dollar fee as well as the tips. And if he sold any paintings, all the money would be his. He would just need to save up enough to get his own place.

But then Hosea got even greedier. One night after dinner, he told Manny that he must start giving him fifty percent of his tip money. That wasn’t fair, said Manny. He had just started paying for half the rent and food. He would not give up any of his tip money.

They got into a violent argument that ended when Hosea fell down the stairs. Manny grabbed Hosea’s car keys and carried his unconscious cousin to the car. The hospital was less than one mile away. But Manny forgot to buckle Hosea’s seat belt. And somehow, as Manny sped around a corner, the passenger door swung open and Hosea fell out. A police car happened by at that moment and saw Manny trying to pick up Hosea and put him back in the car. But he was already dead.

Nobody knew Hosea had been treating his twenty year-old cousin like a slave. So they had no reason to suspect foul play. Manny was only known to the men whose shoes he shined. And to them, he was a fine, hard-working young man.

After the funeral, he took over Hosea’s lease and eventually renovated the shop—transforming the little dump of a shoe repair shop into an upscale shoe shine boutique. His oil paintings were on the walls, but they weren’t for sale. He refused to sell them to anyone for any price. In his mind, this made them priceless.

He did away with the shoe repair business altogether, and concentrated on building his brand name: Monet’s MasterShine. Before long, he had more business than he could handle, so he hired two employees and let them do all
the labor. He kept the shoe shine fee at five dollars and paid his workers minimum wage. But they got to keep all their tips.

The income from the shoe shines paid the rent. But the real money was in the extras—like the latest must-have electronic gadgets that men love. They would come in planning to spend a few bucks on the best shoe shine in town, and walk out fifty dollars poorer, with their shiny shoes and their new GPS system with built-in metal detector.

But Manny had not been content to sit back and enjoy the success of his little shop. He sought more lucrative endeavors.

There was a knock at the door.
“Come in,” said Manny. He stood up.

A man in his mid-twenties walked in and closed the door. “I’m sorry I’m late, Mr. Monet. I’m Will J—”
“—I know who you are, Will. And call me Manny.”
“Yes, Sir.”
“Have a seat.”

They both sat down.

“So, what can I do for you, Will?”
“I understand that you make loans.”
“Yes. Sometimes. But if you need money, why don’t you just go to a bank?”
“I tried that.”
“Or get a credit card. They’re pretty easy to get these days.”
“Not for me.”
“Credit problems?”
“Yes, Sir.”
“How much do you need?”
“Uh…it’s a lot.”
“How much?”
“Ten-thousand.”
“That is a lot,” said Manny.
“I’m sorry,” said Will, standing up, “this is crazy for me to be—”
“—sit down, Will. I can do it.”

Will sat down, grinning. “You can? Great.” Suddenly his smile went away. “What’s the interest rate?”
“Twenty percent.”
“Oh, that’s not too bad. So, twenty percent APR.”
“No. Twenty percent per month,” said Manny.
“Whoa.”
“Change your mind? Don’t need the money so bad after all?”
“No—I really done it.”
“Okay, then. And just so we’re clear: in thirty days your first payment of one-thousand dollars will be due.”

Will’s eyes got big.
“Sit down, Will. I can do it.”
“—sit down, Will. I can do it.”

Will sat down, grinning. “You can? Great.” Suddenly his smile went away. “What’s the interest rate?”
“Twenty percent.”
“Oh, that’s not too bad. So, twenty percent APR.”
“No. Twenty percent per month,” said Manny.
“Whoa.”
“Change your mind? Don’t need the money so bad after all?”
“No—I really done it.”
“Okay, then. And just so we’re clear: in thirty days your first payment of one-thousand dollars will be due.”

Will’s eyes got big.
“So, you still want the money?”
“Yes, Sir. Where do I sign?”
“Why’s no paperwork. But just so you know,” said Manny, looking directly into Will’s eyes, “nobody’s ever defaulted on me—and lived to tell about it.”
Will’s chin began to quiver.
Manny grinned. “Come back at Noon and I’ll have your cash.”

Mayor Kassle sat up in his oversized leather chair and reached for his desk phone.
“Melissa?”
“It’s Monica, Sir. Melissa was your last secretary.”
“Have you finished typing those letters?”
“Yes, Sir, I have. Are you ready to sign them?”
Duh. “Yes.”
He hung up the phone.
Monica hurried through the door and shut it behind her. Then she quickly baby-stepped over to the mayor’s desk.
The five-inch heels and ultra-tight skirt precluded a normal stride.

“Here we go,” she said, handing him the two letters.

“Thank you.”

She turned and started walking away.


She came back to his desk.

He signed the letters and held them out.

She leaned over his desk to take them.

He could see way down her dress. “That dress is too short and too low-cut.”

Monica stood up and covered her cleavage with her hands. “I’m sorry, Sir.”

“You’re fired.”

“But, Sir, it’s my first day. Please give me another chance.”

“I’ll need you to finish out the day. Hire me another secretary.”

“But, Sir. Please.”

“And I’ll pick you up tonight at around seven.”

“But, Sir, I—what?”

“You like seafood?”

“Uh, sure.”

“And feel free to wear that dress.”

“Yes, Sir.” She grinned. “Thank you, Sir.” She took the letters, spun around, and scurried happily out the door.

The mayor smiled. It was amazing what you could get away with if you had power. He’d grown up with the advantages of wealth. But add power to it, and wow. He loved his life.

The intercom on his phone beeped.

“Yes, Melissa—I mean, Monica?”

“The chief is here to see you.”

“Send him in.”

“Good Morning, Mayor.” Chief Foenapper came in and sat down.

“That’s good, Daniel. Let’s keep it formal. I’ll try to remember to only call you ‘Chief’ from now on. So, how’s your murder investigation going, Chief?”

“It’s going fine, Mayor. Our prime suspect is Lacey Greendale, the young woman I told you about. She works for Ginger Lightley.”

“So, you’ve brought her in for questioning?”

“Not yet. But, as I told you on the phone Saturday night, when I talked to her at her apartment she seemed very suspicious—especially when I asked about the panties we found in Navy’s car.”

“So, charge her.”

“I’ve been looking at other possible suspects.”

“You’re just wasting time, Chief. If she looks like a killer and smells like a killer then she’s probably your killer. You’d better lock her up before she skips town.”

“I know what I’m doing.”

“Sure, you do. I wasn’t saying that you didn’t. But you’re dragging your feet. Let’s get it done.”

“I’ve been doing research on everyone who had the opportunity to poison him. I particularly wanted to see if any of them had any prior arrests.”

“And did they?”

“No.”

“What’d I tell you? A waste of time,” said the mayor.

“No prior arrests. But I did find something else. And now I have a second suspect with both motive and opportunity.”

“Who?”

“Addie Barneswaller.”
Chapter 18

Ginger’s 2002 Buick LeSabre had less than 20,000 miles on it. She’d averaged about 50 miles per week over the past six years. At that rate, she figured the car would last longer than she would.

It took ten minutes to drive out to Ellegora Newcomb’s estate, and another minute or so to make it up the long, winding driveway after being buzzed in at the security gate.

Ginger thought it was a shame that the family’s riches had done Navy more harm than good. But some people just can’t handle being wealthy.

She didn’t know exactly what she hoped to learn by talking to Navy’s mother. But she was pleasantly surprised that she had been granted access. The few folks that knew anything about Ellegora had portrayed her as mysterious and eerily reclusive.

Lacey had still not been charged with Navy’s murder—which was good, but puzzling. Had the chief found a better suspect, or was he just incompetent? Ginger could only guess, since he refused to share any information with her.

She parked her car, walked to the door and rang the bell. A full sixty seconds passed. What was taking so long? The servants knew she was there. One of them had let her through the gate. Finally the door opened.

“Mrs. Lightley?”
“Yes. And you’re Mrs. Newcomb?”
“Oh, no, Ma’am.”
The servant was probably in her mid-fifties—about the age of Navy’s mother.
“Please come in, Ma’am.”
Ginger followed her to a small, formal room with a couch, several chairs, and a fireplace.
“Please have a seat.”
“Thank you.”
“And would like a cup of tea or coffee?”
“No, thanks. I’m fine.”
The servant walked out of the room.
Ginger looked around and wondered how long it had been since someone had used this room.

After a few minutes the servant came back with Mrs. Newcomb—who had a large glass of red wine in her left hand.

“Mrs. Lightley?” she slurred.
Ginger stood up. “Yes. And you’re Mrs. Newcomb?”
“Ellegora.” She couldn’t even pronounce her own name properly, thanks to the alcohol. She held out her hand and Ginger took it.
“Ginger.” She was secretly repulsed by the cold, limp hand. It felt like what you would expect to find in a coffin.
The other hand was somehow strong enough to hold a glass of wine. It probably got a lot of exercise holding up that glass all day.

“Would you like a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon?” said Ellegora. “It’s my favorite.”
“No, thanks.”
The two women sat down, and the servant left.
“First of all,” said Ginger, “I’m so sorry for your loss.”
“Thanks.” She took a sip of her wine. “It’s my second time to lose him. When he turned twenty-one and got his trust fund money he just went crazy—wouldn’t listen to reason.”
“He might have come around eventually.”
“I’d like to think so.” She took another sip. “Did you ever wonder about his name?”
“I’m sorry?”
“His name: Navy. Kind of a weird name, huh?”
“I suppose. But these days it seems like anything goes. More and more parents want something original. I can understand that, I guess.”
“Do you have kids, Ginger?”
“No, sadly, I don’t. Lester and I couldn’t have children of our own. We talked about adopting. But we just kept putting it off.”
“Did you ever wonder about his name?”
Ginger just stared at her. Hadn’t Ellegora already asked that question?
“It was his father’s idea,” said Ellegora. “Nigel was half drunk when he saw Navy for the first time in the hospital. He said, *Look at the kid’s huge belly button. Let’s name him Navy.* He laughed out loud about it. I tried to tell him that it wasn’t a big navel—it was just a birth mark around his navel. But he insisted that his son’s name would be Navy. End of discussion.”

She took a sip from her wine. “I hated the name. And as soon as Nigel left the hospital that night I started trying to think of some other name he would like better than Navy.”

“But apparently you weren’t able to talk him out of it.”

Ellegora’s eyes welled up. “When he left the hospital and was walking across the street, a Greyhound bus hit him and killed him. The driver said he was only going 30 mph, but he still killed my Nigel.”

“Oh, yes, I remember when that happened.”

“I couldn’t bring myself to deny my husband’s last request. Of course, he didn’t *know* it would be his last request. And he might have changed his mind when he sobered up, but…”

“Well, there was nothing wrong with the name. It was a perfectly good name,” said Ginger.

“I got used to it.” She took another sip. “And now I’ll have to get used to seeing it on his headstone.”

Ginger thought she would start crying, but she didn’t.

“So, what was it that you wanted to see me about?”

“Well, I hope this won’t upset you…but one of my employees has been accused of killing Navy.” She quickly added, “But she didn’t do it. And I’m trying to prove it by figuring out who *did* kill him.”

“I’ve already told the police everything I know, but I’ll be glad to answer your questions too.”

“Thank you. What can you tell me about his allergy.”

“He was highly allergic to shellfish. Although I didn’t realize that fish oil supplements would be a problem for him.”

“So, did he carry an Epi-Pen around with him?”

“Yes—always. He kept it in the glove compartment of his car. I told him he should carry one in his pocket as well, but I don’t think he ever did. He said he didn’t like shirts with pockets, and he would break it if he carried it in his pants pocket. He wore jeans a lot.”

“So, it’s pretty likely that he had an Epi-Pen in his car on Saturday morning. Or at least that he *thought* he had one in there.”

“Well, I haven’t seen him much over the past few years. But I’m sure it would have been in his car. He knew how dangerous it was to be without it. One time in high school he nearly died after eating a crab cake at a friend’s house. The Epi-Pen saved him. You know how kids are—they think they’re invulnerable. But he took it a lot more seriously after that.”

“I can imagine.”

“What else?”

Ginger couldn’t think of any other questions. She should have written them down. “Uh…”

“Would you like to see his room?”

“He still has a room here?”

“It’s his *old* room. He hasn’t spent a night in it since his twenty-first birthday.”

“Sure. I’d like to see it.” Although Ginger couldn’t imagine how it would help.

She followed her staggering host down the long hallway.

“Here it is.”

“Wow. He sure won a lot of trophies.”

“Yes. Navy was quite the athlete.”

Ginger spotted his collection of high school yearbooks on the shelf. She walked over to them and pointed.

“Would you mind if I look through these?”

“Help yourself,” she said. “I’ll be back in a minute.” She nodded to her empty wine glass.

Ginger picked up Navy’s senior yearbook. She thumbed through it and found his picture. He was a very handsome young man, she thought, except the cocky expression on his face.

She decided to check for an index to find his sports pictures. But the pages slipped through her fingers and she was suddenly looking at the inside of the back cover. It was filled with comments from his friends. She began to read them.

*We were the best football team in the history of Coreyville High School, Dude. There will never be another team like us!* – signed Bill.

*I’m gonna miss cheering for the mighty Coreyville Cougars. Y’all were the greatest, Navy. Especially you! And*
thanks for that night under the stands! You blew me away! – signed Cindy.

It didn’t sound like something a girl would write. Ginger wondered if some boy had forged Cindy’s signature. *Great party, Man. Good thing your old lady was drunk out of her mind. Hope you enjoyed taking your Castor Oil! You’re the man!*

It wasn’t signed. Ginger assumed that by ‘old lady’ the author meant Ellegora. But what was the deal with the Castor oil? Doesn’t it give you diarrhea? She wondered if one of the boys had pulled a trick on Navy. Typical teenage boy behavior, she thought.

“Find anything helpful?” Ellegora had refilled her glass.
“Not really. But thanks for letting me look.”

Ginger would not realize until later that she had just picked up an important clue.

**********

Coreyville Coffee Cakes was nearly empty at 1:30 p.m. The coffee break traffic would not start rolling in for at least another hour.

Danny Iper was cleaning tables when his cell phone began to buzz in his pocket.

“Hang on just a second. I need to go outside.”

He walked through the kitchen and out the back door into the alley.

“Okay,” said Danny. “You got my money?”

“One of my employees told me you came around earlier looking for me.”

“Yeah. I came to pick up my money.”

“I told you not to ever come to my place of business. And, besides, I don’t owe you anything. You didn’t do the job.”

“Yes, I did—not the way you told me to. But I did it. Now I want to get paid.”

No response.

“Well?” said Danny.

“Fair enough. But we can’t be seen together in public.”

“I understand.”

“There’s an illegal dump site three miles south of town.”

“Yeah, I know where it is. About a quarter mile off the highway, right?”

“Right. Eleven o’clock tonight. Don’t be late. And don’t tell anybody where you’re going.”

“Hey, I’m not stupid.”

The caller hung up.
Chapter 19

As Ginger was leaving Ellegora Newcomb’s house, she asked when Navy’s funeral would be held, and was surprised to find out that it would be the next morning, at ten. That didn’t allow much time to get the word out. Ellegora told her she had left the planning up to their family attorney, Carl Vittleman.

Ginger parked her car and walked into Mr. Vittleman’s office. Perhaps he knew of someone who had made threats against Navy. She had wanted to ask Ellegora about it. But, after seeing her condition, she decided not to bring it up.

“I’m here to see Mr. Vittleman.”

The young woman at the receptionist desk glanced up from her magazine. “And your name?” She laid down the magazine.

“Ginger Lightley.”

The woman checked her computer. “Do you have an appointment?”

“No, I don’t. But I just came from the Newcomb Estate, and—”

“I’ll let him know you’re here.” She picked up the phone and pressed the intercom button. “You have a visitor.” The young receptionist talked to him in a tone that made Ginger wonder if the two were lovers. She didn’t really know Carl Vittleman, but she was sure he was close to her own age.

“Her name is Ginger…” She looked to Ginger for help.

“Lightley,” said Ginger.

“Ginger Lightley. She doesn’t have an appointment, but she just came from Mrs. Newcomb’s house.”

Before the receptionist could hang up the phone, Ginger heard a door open, and a man walked out. He was too young to be Carl Vittleman.

“Hello, Mrs. Lightley. I’m Cray Vittleman.”

“Oh—you’re Carl’s son.” He was a very handsome young man, about 30, Ginger figured. But he seemed too smooth—sort of sleazy.

“Yes. Please come into my office.”

She followed him down the hall. They walked in and he closed the door.

“Please have a seat.”

“So, where is your father?”

“He’s ill. I’m handling his clients.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. How long has he been ill?”

“Oh…for a little while. The doctor says he needs a lot of rest. He’s going to be fine.”

“Well, I’m not sure whether you can help me with this.”

“I can assure you, Mrs. Lightley, that anything my father could do for you, I can do even better.” He smiled slyly.

“I see. Well, then, what do you know about Navy Newcomb? Do you know if anybody had been threatening him?”

Cray began to squirm. “Oh. I thought you needed legal advice. I’m afraid I can’t help you with this.” He stood up and walked to the door.

Ginger stood up. “Well, I’m sorry to have wasted your time, Cray. I hope your father gets well soon.” She walked out.

“Thanks. Goodbye.” He closed his door.

“Well, that was quick,” said the receptionist, scarcely looking up from her magazine.

Ginger wondered how much the young woman knew, and how difficult it would be to get it out of her. “It’s such a shame what happened to Navy Newcomb.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Especially when he was just about to get all that money.”

“Yeah. If he’d only known it was just a few days away.”

A few days away? Wasn’t Navy’s birthday next week? Perhaps Ellegora had planned to give her son a large birthday gift. Or maybe there was a second trust fund. That would explain why the family lawyer would be involved.

“Well, thanks. And have a nice day,” said Ginger.

“You too. Bye.”

As Ginger walked out to her car, she wondered who would stand to gain by Navy dying before he could collect? A red car in the parking lot caught her eye. She looked more closely. Why did it seem familiar? Then she recognized the woman sitting in the driver’s seat. It was Kayla—Navy’s girlfriend. Ginger smiled and waved at her.
Kayla suddenly turned her head the opposite direction.

What was Kayla doing there? Did she and Navy have some unfinished business with the Vittleman law firm? But why would it involve Kayla? If they had been married she could lay claim to the second trust fund—if there was one. But they weren’t. They hadn’t even been together long enough to establish a common law marriage.

**********

Bull Crawley checked his watch. Where was Silvy? She had promised to come back at 3:30. He heard somebody come in the back door and walk down the hallway toward his office.

“Silvy? Is that you?”

“Yes, it is.” She appeared in his doorway carrying a very large potted plant. “Can you give me a hand with this thing?”

“What is it?” He got up from his desk and went to help her.

“It’s a gift—for you, Baby. For your office.”

“But it so…big. I don’t have any place to put it.”

“Sure you do,” she said. “Right over here in this corner.”

He helped her carry it.

“See?” she said. “Now every time you look up, you’ll see it and think of me.”

“Okay.”

“Let me explain. See these white flowers?”

“Yeah.”

“They are the males.”

“Huh?”

“Yeah. And these pretty pink flowers are the females.”

“Okay.”

“Think of it as a love plant. One of those white flowers is you and one of the pink ones is me.”

“A love plant?” He grabbed her and pulled her close. “I’d rather think of it as a sexplant.”

“You would, huh?” She punched him playfully. “That’ll work. It can be loving and sexy. But it’s dangerous—like me.”

“I like danger. And I know how to handle it.” He pulled her body in tighter.

“Can you?”

**********

The Domino Girls were at Ginger’s, about to eat Jane’s birthday cake.

“I shouldn’t be drinking coffee this late,” said Jane.

“Late?” said Barb. “It’s seven o’clock.”

“Now that you’re 61, I think you can handle a little late-night caffeine,” said Ethel. “Like the rest of us.”

“But can you handle the sugar?” said Ginger, grinning as she cut large pieces and placed them on plates.


“Oh, I don’t know,” said Barb, tilting her head to check Jane’s body. “Have you looked in the mirror and done a butt check lately?”

“Look who’s talking,” said Jane.

“No, no,” said Ethel. “Barb doesn’t have a juicy caboosey.”

“Thank you, Ethel,” said Barb.

“I’m sorry,” said Jane. “You’re absolutely right. Barb’s caboose is just fine. It’s the saddlebags that are the problem.”

“Hey!” said Barb.

“Hold on,” said Ginger. “I can’t keep up. Are we talking in terms of trains or horses?”

“Huh?” said Ethel.

“Cabooses and saddlebags don’t really go together,” said Ginger, passing a piece of cake around to each woman, “unless we’re talking about an old Western.”

“Now, why did you go and do that, Ginger?” said Barb.

“What?” said Ginger.

“You do it every time. Just when I’m about to really go off on somebody—usually Jane—you throw a monkey wrench into the thing. I had a killer comeback to what Jane said. But now you’ve made me forget it.”

“Good,” said Ginger, “because I need y’all’s help with something.”
“Okay,” said Ethel.
“Yeah, we’ll help you,” said Jane, taking a bite of cake.
“Well, you know I’ve been trying to help Lacey out of the mess she’s in.”
“Have the police thrown her in jail?” said Barb.
“No. Surprisingly they haven’t, and I don’t know why. They haven’t even charged her yet.”
“Maybe they found the real killer,” said Jane.
“I wish,” said Ginger. “But I doubt it. The chief is not sharing information with me, but if somebody had been charged, he couldn’t keep that a secret.”
“Yeah,” said Ethel, “the whole town would know about it.
“So,” said Ginger, “I’m trying to come up with other possibilities for suspects. And I think I have one. Maybe two.”
“Who?” said Jane, suspending her next bite of cake until she got an answer.
“Kayla Hanker.”
“Who?” said Ethel.
“Navy’s girlfriend,” said Barb.
“Right,” said Ginger. “And possibly Cray Vittleman.”
“Cray Vittleman’s son—the lawyer?”
“Yes,” said Ginger.
“Why would they want to kill Navy?” said Jane.
“I’m not exactly sure,” said Ginger.
“Oh, you’ve really gotten desperate, Ginge,” said Barb. “You’re grasping at straws.”
“Not totally,” said Ginger. “I went to visit Ellegora Newcomb this morning. That didn’t help much. By the way, Navy’s funeral is tomorrow at ten. Y’all want to go with me?”
The other women nodded.
Ginger went on. “But then I dropped by Carl Vittleman’s office. He’s the Newcomb’s attorney. But he wasn’t there. Instead I met with his son, Cray—who I wasn’t impressed with at all. Then, on the way out, I got his receptionist to spill the beans.”
“What?” said Jane. “What beans?” She could barely contain her excitement. Ginger sensed that the sugar from the cake was beginning to kick in.
“From what she said, it made me think there was a second trust fund. You know that Navy blew the first one—all two million of it. So, I’m thinking there was a second one that he was unaware of, and that he was due to get it on his twenty-fifth birthday. Remember: he got the first one when he turned 21.”
“Yeah,” said Jane. “His dad had set up the trust fund before Navy was born.”
“I didn’t know that,” said Ginger.
“So, you think his father may have set up two trust funds?” said Ethel. “The second one being a backup in case he squandered the first one?”
“If so,” said Barb, “the dad was a pretty smart cookie.”
“Yeah,” said Ginger, “except when he walked out in front of that bus and got himself run over.”
“Oh, yeah,” said Ethel, cringing.
“But how would it profit Cray Vittleman for Navy to die?” said Barb. “That doesn’t add up.”
“Don’t be so sure,” said Ginger, “Guess who I saw in the parking lot when I came out of his office?”
“Kayla.” said Jane.
Ginger nodded.
“I get it,” said Ethel. “The two of them are having an affair, and Cray tells her about the secret trust fund, so they plot to kill Navy.”
“She collects the money,” said Jane.
“And they ride off into the sunset,” said Ethel.
“But Ginger, I thought you said Kayla was Navy’s girlfriend—not his wife,” said Jane.
“Yeah,” said Ginger. “That’s the one hole in my theory.”
“And it’s a big, gaping hole,” said Barb. “Better keep looking, Honey. This theory ain’t gonna fly.”
“What if they really were married, but they didn’t want anybody to know?” said Jane.
“Look—Navy never spent one second worrying about what other people thought,” said Barb. “So, why would he hide the fact that he was married? It makes no sense.”
What Barb had said was perfectly logical. But Ginger still wasn’t ready to give up on her theory.
Chapter 20

It was too late to knock on Ginger’s door. He knew that. The porch was dark, but there was light coming from the living room. It was 10:45 p.m., so she was probably dressed for bed. He pulled the car over anyway. What would the neighbors think?
He got out of his car, walked to the door, and knocked. Ginger seemed tired, but happy to see him. “Elijah?”
“So sorry to bother you so late, Ginger.”
“It’s no bother. Come on in.”
She took his coat and draped it across a chair. They sat down in the living room.
“So, what brings you out this time of night?”
“Well, I know you’ve been trying to think of other suspects for Navy’s murder.”
She perked up. “You’ve got one for me?”
“Maybe. But I’m not sure I should be telling you.”
“Why not?”
“I learned this information during a counseling session tonight.”
“Well, it’s not like you’re a Catholic priest.”
What was he doing here? “I shouldn’t have come. I’m sorry, Ginger.” He stood up.
“No, wait. You don’t have to mention the name of the person you counseled,” said Ginger. “Unless, of course, that person is the suspect.”
He hesitated.
“Elijah, please. What will it hurt?”
“Manny Monet.”
“The shoe shine guy?”
“Yeah. What I found out is that he has a side business: loan sharking.”
“You’re kidding. I wouldn’t have thought he had much money to loan.”
“According to…my Mr. X, Manny started out small, making payday loans.”
“I hate those. They’re such a rip-off.”
“I’m guessing that these days he makes way more money with his illegal banking than he does on shoe shines.”
“So, you think Navy borrowed money from Manny?”
“That’s what I’m wondering.”
“Navy was getting desperate. He didn’t have a paying job. I think he was just holding out for help from his mother.”
“And something tells me that if he did borrow money from Mr. Monet, it was a lot more than a couple hundred dollars.”
“Let’s say it was several thousand. Then Navy couldn’t pay it back. And maybe he even thumbed his nose at Manny, thinking there was nothing he could do about it.”
“Yeah. But Manny couldn’t let him get away with that. What if word got around? Maybe I’ve seen too many movies, but wouldn’t Manny feel he had to go break Navy’s legs or something?”
“Yeah—so people would be afraid of him. Very good, Elijah. I think you’ve come up with a solid suspect.”
There was a loud crack of thunder.
Elijah grimaced. “I hope that’s not God’s way of saying he’s mad at me.”
Ginger laughed. “No, I think he’s just telling us there’s a storm coming.”
“Well, I’d better go.”
Ginger stood up and walked him to the door. “Thank you so much, Elijah.” She hugged him.
Just stay right here in my arms, thought Elijah. When Ginger released him, she looked up into his eyes. It was all he could do to keep himself from kissing her on the lips. But he feared that if he did the next lightning strike would rip through the ceiling and strike him dead. Why, Lord? Why can’t I show this marvelous woman how I feel about her?
“Goodnight, Elijah. Drive carefully.” She picked up his coat and handed to him.
He opened the door. “Goodnight, Ginger.”

**********

Danny could hardly wait to get his money. He would take the five thousand to Shreveport and turn it into fifty
thousand in one night. He loved gambling. But he wasn’t like most of the chumps who think they can beat the house. He really could.

As he pulled off the highway onto the dirt road, it began to drizzle. Danny wasn’t crazy about doing business in the freezing rain and lightning, but it wouldn’t take long.

He drove until he reached the illegal dump site. It was mounds of the type stuff you can’t give away or leave out for the city to pick up. The pile was more rusty than stinky—made up of things like TVs, refrigerators, bicycles, mattresses, etc.

Danny checked his watch. It was 10:57 p.m. He expected to see headlights in his rearview mirror at any minute.

A pop in his left ear made him jump. Then he realized somebody was knocking on the window. He rolled it down.

“Get out.”

Danny opened the door and stepped out. He began to shiver almost immediately, and regretted coming without a coat. The half-frozen raindrop pellets began to strike his head. It seemed like his thick hair was the only thing keeping the little ice missiles from penetrating his skull.

“Just give me my cash, so I can get out of here,” said Danny.

“Give me my gun.”

“I don’t have it.”

“Where is it?”

“I don’t know.”

The rain began to pour down. Suddenly there was a pistol jammed into Danny’s left cheek.

“Whoa. What are you doing?”

“Tell me what you did with the gun.”

“My girlfriend took it. And I don’t know what she did with it.”

“Lacey Greendale?”

“Yes.”

“Looks like I’ll have to get it from her myself. Maybe I’ll take a little sugar while I’m at it.”

“Don’t you touch her!”

“You’re in no position to give me orders.”

“Well…then just give me my money.”

“So, you’re going to stand there and tell me you killed Navy.”

“Yes.”

“You chickened out on shooting him, so you laced his coffee cake with fish oil.”

“Right.”

“Do you have any idea how much I hate being lied to?”

“I’m not lying!”

“I followed you Saturday morning. I watched you park your car down the road and then walk back and hide in the woods. So, you couldn’t have been the one who put the fish oil in his coffee cake since you were nowhere near the bakery Saturday morning until after he died.”

“Uh…”

“I suppose you could have gotten your girlfriend to do it for you.”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“But if she was going to poison his coffee cake, why would you bother to drive out to the nursing home?”

“I…uh…don’t know.”

“In fact, I would think you would have wanted to stay as far away from there as possible.”

Danny didn’t have a response. The rain was now coming down in sheets rather than drops. He was standing in two inches of water, about to be shot in the head—if the lightning didn’t get him first.

“I don’t allow people to cheat me out of my money.”

“I wasn’t trying to.”

“Yes, you were. You expected me to pay you for a job you didn’t do.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I don’t accept your apology. Goodbye, Danny.”

“No, no.” Danny held his hands in front of his face and closed his eyes.

A deafening boom of thunder shook the ground. It was more than enough to mask the gunshot. But how was he able to still think with a bullet in his brain? He opened his eyes. He was standing alone in the rain.
Then he felt something and looked down. There was a bird pecking at his stomach. He tried to shoo it away. Then he realized it wasn’t a bird—it was the handle of knife.

He pulled downward and outward with both hands and it came out two inches. He pulled again and now he could see four inches of steel. One last yank, and it was completely out. He held it up and stared at the seven-inch blade in disbelief.

Blood gushed down the front of his pants. His knees gave way and his body began to topple.

“I'm so sorry, Lacey.”

He hit the ground face first. Mud squished into his mouth and up his nostrils. It would have been enough to suffocate him if his heart had not already stopped beating.
“Looks like Navy had a lot of friends,” said Ethel.
“They’re not friends,” said Barb. “They’re just curious.”
“Like us,” said Jane, surveying the room.

Ginger was curious too. But she had a legitimate reason to attend Navy’s funeral: one of her coffee cakes had killed him.

She spotted Bull Crawley way in the back left corner, sitting by himself. Then his brother, Cash, walked in with a beautiful young busty blonde. Bull stared at them. The blonde returned Bull’s stare. Cash ignored Bull altogether. They sat on the right side.

“It’s almost time for it to start. We’d better go sit down,” said Ginger.

Just as the women started to move, Ginger said, “Wait just a second.”

Manny Monet had walked into the room. He sauntered up the aisle to the casket and peered in.

Ginger thought surely he wouldn’t come to Navy’s funeral if he had been the one who killed him. She saw Manny give Navy’s corpse the once-over, and then almost start to cry—before quickly regained his composure.

But wait. She replayed it in her mind. She had thought she’d seen him almost cry because that’s what would have made sense to her. But that’s not what he did. It hadn’t been a cry that Manny had stifled—it had been a laugh. He thought it was funny that Navy was dead.

Perhaps Elijah was right in thinking that Navy borrowed money from Manny and didn’t pay it back. Now Manny was having the last laugh. Ginger would look into it. But she’d have to proceed with caution. He looked dangerous.

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Ginger heard a door open in the front, and then saw Ellegora and another woman being escorted to the seats located to the right of the podium. It was the area reserved for family members. Ginger recognized the woman as the servant she’d met at Ellegora’s house. Apparently Navy had no other family. Or maybe they just didn’t care enough to show up.

“Let’s go,” said Ginger. She led her friends to the pew where Addie and Cheryl were sitting. Ginger had decided at the last minute that Coreyville Coffee Cakes would close for the funeral. Lacey, the prime suspect for Navy’s murder, had understandably decided to skip it.

Ginger was not surprised that Danny was also absent. Yesterday he had asked to be off today. He had not told Cheryl why he needed the day off. But everybody knew it certainly wasn’t so he could attend Navy’s funeral.

No sooner than they sat down, Elijah walked out to the podium. Ginger knew that neither Navy nor Ellegora were members of Corey Acres Baptist Church. But she wasn’t surprised that Elijah had been asked to officiate. Some ministers try to use the death of a man like Navy as a lesson to everyone in the congregation. Get right with God or you’ll end up where Navy is—in Hell.

Ginger thought those ministers were way out of line. How much could they really know about a person’s relationship with God? Elijah wouldn’t do that. He had told Ginger that when he led a funeral service his job was to comfort the family and say something positive about the deceased.

Ginger knew it would be a struggle to find something good to say about the man in that casket. But Elijah managed to put a positive spin on Navy’s life. Ellegora seemed to appreciate it.

After the service, as Ginger and the other women were getting up to leave, she saw Chief Foenapper walk in through the family entrance and start talking to Ellegora. What was so important that it couldn’t wait until a more appropriate time?

Ginger said goodbye to her fellow Domino Girls and told Addie and Cheryl she would see them at the bakery in a little while. Then she got into her car and drove to Cash & Carry Donuts.

It was time to confront Cash Crawley. Ginger was fairly certain that he was in possession of her fake coffee cake recipe book, and that Navy was the one who stole it for him.

She parked her car and walked into the store. It appeared there was only one employee on the job. There weren’t many donut customers at 11:00 a.m.

As she approached the woman standing behind the counter, the blonde from the funeral home walked out from the back hallway, saw Ginger, and said, “May I help you?”

“Yes, I hope so. I’m Ginger Lightley, and—”

“—glad to meet you, Ginger. I’m Silvy Knox. I’ve heard great things about your coffee cakes.”

Ginger smiled. “Thanks. You should try one.”

“I want to. I just haven’t got around to it yet. I’ve only been living here in Coreyville for a couple of months.”

“I see. Well, come by and have your first coffee cake on me.”
Silvy smiled warmly. “Oh, that’s so sweet of you, Ginger.”
“Just tell them I sent you.”
“Great. I’ll do that,” said Silvy. “Now, what can I do for you?”
“Well, I was hoping to speak with Cash.”
“Are you two friends?”
“No. Actually, we’ve never been formally introduced.”
“I can take care of that. Follow me.”
Silvy led her up the hallway to Cash’s office.
“You have a visitor,” said Silvy.
Cash looked up from the paperwork on his desk. “Oh, uh—”
“—this is Ginger Lightley,” said Silvy. “Ginger, meet Cash Crawley.”
Cash stood up and hurried around the desk to shake her hand. “So glad to finally meet you, Ginger,” he said, and then quickly added, “Is it okay if I call you ‘Ginger’?”
Ginger smiled politely. “Oh course.”
“And you can call me ‘Cash.’”
Silvy walked away.
“Please have a seat.” Cash closed the door and walked back to his desk and sat down. “I have to say that I’m a long-time admirer of your work.”
“Well, thank you.” Should she jump right in, or make some more small talk first? She noticed the potted plant in the corner. “What a beautiful plant. I don’t think I’ve ever seen one of those before. What is it?”
“I really don’t know. Silvy gave it to me. She’s the blonde who introduced us.”
“Yes. Nice young lady,” said Ginger. “I notice you’ve started selling muffins.” Here we go.
“I call them cupcakes, but yes, I just added them to the menu yesterday.”
“One of my regulars tried one, and then shared a bite with me.”
“Oh, really?” He looked worried.
“Yes. It was…interesting.”
“You didn’t like it.”
“It tasted…fine.”
“Great.” He grinned.
“But there was something that bothered me about it.”
“Too much cinnamon?”
“No. I’m not sure whether you’re aware of this, Cash, but I have a keen sense of taste and smell.”
“I guess you’d have to—or you couldn’t create such wonderful recipes.”
“Yes, that’s true.”
“So, I’ll bet you found something about my cupcake that could be improved with a few tweaks. Please—tell me what I need to change.”
“No, the real issue is that I recognized the recipe.”
“You mean it was similar to one you’ve tasted before?”
“No. I mean it was a recipe I created.”
“Oh, that couldn’t be.”
“Where did you get your recipe, Cash?”
“I made it up myself.”
“No, you didn’t. You got it out of my book, didn’t you?” What was she doing? Did she really expect him to just admit it?
He hesitated, bit his lower lip, and then said, “Yes, you’re right—it was your recipe. I’m sorry.”
“And it came out of my stolen recipe book.”
“Yes. But I didn’t steal it.”
“I know. Navy Newcomb stole it for you.”
“No. I got it from him. But he just gave it to me. I didn’t pay him for it.”
“Let me guess. You didn’t pay him because he was already dead.”
“Okay, Lady, I’ve tried to be nice. I’ve been honest with you. I’ve apologized. You can have the stupid recipe book. I don’t want it. But if you think I had anything to do with Navy Newcomb’s death, then you’re just crazy.” He stood up. “I’m through talking. Goodbye.”
“Keep the book. Those are not my real recipes anyway.” Ginger got up and left. On the way out of the store she passed Silvy, who smiled at her.

By admitting he had the recipe book Cash had convinced Ginger that he was not the murderer.

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Chief Foenapper appeared in the doorway of the kitchen. “Addie Barneswaller, I need you to come with me to the station.”

“What for?” said Addie.

“I need to ask you a few questions.”

“Well, can’t you do it here? I’m working.”

“Oh, you don’t want that—believe me.”

Addie turned to Lacey. “Honey, you’re gonna have to take over.”

“But—”

“—I’ll be back in a little while—hopefully.”

“Let’s go,” said the chief.

Lacey was nervous about taking over. But she had trained long enough. She knew what to do.

It would be a few more minutes before the next batch of coffee cakes was ready to come out of the oven. She took out her cell phone and called Danny’s number again. Yesterday, when Lacey had asked why he was taking off today, he wouldn’t tell her.

They would never make it as a couple until he was willing to be open up and honest with her. Why won’t he answer his phone?
Chapter 22

When Addie got back from the police station, Ginger called her into the office.
“I don’t want to talk about it, Ginger.”
“Come on, Addie. How long have we been friends? You know you can tell me anything. I won’t judge you. Now what’s going on?”
“You can’t say a word about this to anyone.”
“I won’t,” said Ginger. “You know I won’t.”
“Okay.” Addie took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. “It happened when Navy was 15 years old. Bobbie was at the movies with a couple of girlfriends.”
“Your granddaughter?”
“Yes. She was 12. And halfway through the movie she had to go to the bathroom. Navy saw her in the hallway and followed her into the restroom. He threatened to hurt her if she screamed. But when he pulled down his pants and grabbed her, she screamed anyway. He got out of there before anybody else saw him.”
“That’s awful. Why didn’t you ever tell me about this, Addie?”
“Bobbie didn’t want anybody to know. She was embarrassed. And she was afraid to tell her momma because she had been told to stay with the other girls at all times. But they didn’t want to miss any of the movie. And she couldn’t wait.”
“Poor thing.”
“We explained to her that we needed to tell the police about it so Navy couldn’t do it to any other girls. They took her statement. But nothing ever came of it. I always wondered if Ellegora paid somebody to make the whole thing go away.”
“So the chief thinks you poisoned Navy?”
“Ellegora thinks I did. I had motive—or least I used to. At the time he did that to Bobbie I wanted to kill him. I don’t know whether I really could have. I hated him.”
“But you got over it.”
“Not completely. I could hardly stand to be in the same room with him. But I wouldn’t have killed him.”
“The chief has apparently been looking through old records.”
“Yeah.”
“Okay, so you had motive and opportunity. You could have put fish oil in that coffee cake. But what about the Epi-Pen? What did the chief say about that?”
“He didn’t have anything to say about it. As soon as I brought it up, he told me he was done.”
“Good. Hopefully he’ll move on now.”
“He’ll probably go right back to Lacey.”
“Actually, I have a few suggestions for him.”
“Other suspects?”
“Yes. For example: Manny Monet. I’ve been told that he does loan sharking on the side.”
“I’ve heard that.”
“And I was thinking that if Navy had borrowed money from him and couldn’t pay it back—”
“—Manny would kill him? I don’t know. It’s a possibility.”
“And Cash Crawley. Oh—I haven’t had a chance to tell you: Cash is the one who has the fake recipe book. He must have hired Navy to steal it.”
“I’m not surprised.”
“He admitted it to me.”
“That does surprise me.”
“Yeah. I was shocked. But he says Navy gave it to him. And that he had nothing to do with Navy’s death.”
“Well of course he’s going to deny killing him.”
“But I believe him. I can’t really see a motive. But I’m wondering about his brother, Bull, because from what I understand, Bull and Cash hate each other.”
“Always have.”
“So, suppose Bull somehow found out that Navy was stealing the recipe book for Cash. He might have figured that once the police discovered that Cash hired Navy to steal the book, they might think Cash killed him to cover up the theft. If anybody ever learned that his new cupcake recipes were really mine, his business would be ruined.”
“Boy, you’ve really put a lot of thought into this, haven’t you?”
“I’m just trying to keep Lacey, or you, or some other innocent person from going to prison.”
“When are you going to share your ideas with the police?”
“When I’m sure.”
“You know, Ginger, I was thinking... if the coffee cake wasn’t poisoned until after Navy left here with it, how did the killer get the fish oil into it? You couldn’t just pour it on top. Do you suppose they used a hypodermic needle?”
“They must have,” said Ginger.
“You don’t think the killer would have been stupid enough—”
“—to buy it at Coreyville Pharmacy? Who knows? Sometimes criminals do really dumb things,” said Ginger.
“I’m gonna find out.”

Ginger had gone by Bull Crawley’s Bar & Grill after her trip to Coreyville Pharmacy. The cashier told her Bull was gone and would not be back until 4:30. Ginger wanted to have a private conversation with him, so she decided to come back after the dinner rush.

It was nearly 7:00 p.m. when she left her house to walk down to the square. She heard several police sirens and possibly an ambulance. Must be a bad wreck, she thought.

Only three tables were occupied in Bull’s place. Two men sat at the bar drinking and watching the TV.

“Is Bull here?”
“Yes. Oh, you came by this afternoon looking for him, didn’t you?”
“Yes.”
“He’s in his office. I’ll take you back.”
“Thanks.”

“Hang on. Let me check the restroom.”

When Ginger had gone to Coreyville Pharmacy that afternoon Sherry, the pharmacy assistant, had checked their records for purchases of latex gloves and syringes over the past few weeks. Sherry was an old friend.

Ginger had been shocked to discover that Bull Crawley had used his company credit card to buy syringes and latex gloves. Perhaps he had some legitimate purpose for them. Was he diabetic? Not according to their records, Sherry told her.

Ginger stepped into Bull’s office and looked around. Did she really think he was stupid enough to leave a syringe lying around? Maybe.

Then she saw a potted plant in the corner of the room—just like the unusual one she’d seen in Cash’s office. Weird.

“I’m sorry. It looks like he’s already taken off.”

“That’s okay. Thanks anyway.” Ginger walked out of the restaurant. Activity on the square was almost nil at this time of night. Most of the shops closed by 6:00 p.m.

Ginger walked down the sidewalk until she got to the corner. After checking to make sure nobody was watching her, she stepped off the sidewalk, out of the light, and went through the narrow passageway to the alley. She prayed there were no muggers or mean dogs waiting to pounce.

She stepped out, and looked down the alley, locating the back of Bull’s restaurant. It would take less than a minute to walk from his place, go around the corner and get to the back of Cash & Carry Donuts.

If Bull had somehow known that Navy would be stopping at Cash’s on the way to the nursing home Saturday morning, he could have been hiding there with his syringe of fish oil. As soon as Navy went inside, he could have unwrapped the coffee cake, injected the fish oil at several spots, rewrapped the cake, and stolen the Epi-Pen from the glove box. It wouldn’t have been that difficult. And his employees probably wouldn’t have even missed him. They would have thought he was in his office or in the restroom.

Ginger walked back through the eerie passageway. Just as she stepped out, someone called her name and she jumped.

“I’m sorry, Ginger. It’s me—Elijah.” He stepped out of the shadows.

“You startled me.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I drove by your house, but you weren’t home. Then I spotted you over here. What were you doing?”

“Uh, let’s get out of here first,” said Ginger. “I’ve got the creeps.”
They got into his car.
“What were you coming to see me about?” said Ginger.
“I couldn’t get you on the phone.”
She felt her pockets. “Oops. I must have left my phone at the house.”
“I’ve got bad news.”
“What?”
“Cheryl Iper called me. Danny is dead.”
“What happened?”
“Apparently somebody murdered him.”
“Oh, no. Poor Lacey. Do you know if Cheryl called her?”
“Yes, she did. So, I thought you might want to go check on her.”
“Yes, please.”
Elijah started the car to make the short drive to Lacey’s apartment. “Some guy found his body out at that illegal dump south of town. At first he just saw his car. Then he grabbed a flashlight to look around. Danny was lying face down in the dirt.”
“When did it happen?”
“They’re not sure. Probably last night. The guy found his body less than an hour ago.”
“That’s what the sirens were.”
Elijah pulled into the apartment parking lot and they went inside.
When Lacey opened the door and saw Ginger, she hugged her with both arms, laid her head on Ginger’s shoulder, and cried like a baby.
“I’m so sorry, Sweetie,” said Ginger.
“Why do people keep killing the men I love?”
“I don’t know, Honey.”
“I’m a curse to all mankind.”
“No, you’re not. Don’t say that. What happened to them was not your fault.”
Ginger finally got Lacey calmed down. She and Elijah talked to her for nearly two hours. Finally, Ginger suggested that Lacey go to bed for the night. She tucked her in, and then she and Elijah left.
Elijah drove Ginger to her house and walked her to the door.
“You’re a great friend to her,” said Elijah.
“Sometimes I think I’m her only friend,” said Ginger. “I’ve got to figure out who this killer is before he kills somebody else.”
“But not tonight. Worry about it tomorrow. You need rest.”
“Okay.”
He stepped closer and took her head in his hands.
Whatever he was about to give her, she was ready to receive.
Elijah kissed her gently on the forehead. “Goodnight, Ginger.”
He turned and walked down the porch steps.
“Goodnight.”
The afterglow of Elijah’s kiss to her forehead was just beginning to wear off when Ginger remembered the gun. Danny was dead, but she still had his pistol locked away downstairs in the basement.

She wondered if Danny would be alive right now if he’d had his gun for protection. What was he doing at that illegal dump site in the middle of a storm? Dropping off a load of garbage? Not likely. He must have gone there to meet someone.

Ginger remembered that on Saturday morning Danny had been late for work. He said he’d overslept. But couldn’t he have been waiting in the alley behind Cash & Carry Donuts when Navy dropped off the stolen recipe book?

He would have had enough time to inject the fish oil and steal the Epi-Pen. But how would he have even known about the Epi-Pen? Perhaps Lacey had mentioned it. But he would have also had to somehow know that Navy would be stopping by to see Cash.

And what was Danny’s motive? Jealousy? Ginger had witnessed Danny’s temper tantrums first hand. But they never lasted very long. She didn’t believe he could sustain his anger long enough to carry out such a murder plot.

Maybe somebody hired Danny to kill Navy. That seemed more plausible. Danny was always looking to make the easy buck. Although Ginger doubted he could actually murder someone—even for money. But what if he agreed to kill Navy and then backed out? Perhaps whoever offered Danny the money was afraid he would give away their identity.

Ginger picked up the phone and called the chief.

“Chief Foenapper.”

“Chief, this is Ginger Lightley.”

He sounded as though he wished he hadn’t taken the call. “Hello, Mrs. Lightley.”

“I hate bother you so late, Chief. In fact, I’m surprised you’re still in the office. It’s nearly 10:00.”

“Yes, I know.”

“But I have something I need to give you.”

“Can’t it wait until Monday?”

“I don’t think so. It’s a gun.”

His voice perked up. “A gun?”

“Yes. It’s some sort of pistol. It belongs to Danny Iper.”

“He’s dead, you know.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Well, how did you come into possession of his gun?”

“Lacey Greendale took it from him the other night and—”

“—Lacey Greendale. I should have known.”

“Well, yes. She didn’t want it in her apartment, so she brought it to me and I put it in my safe.”

“You didn’t clean it or wipe it off, did you?”

“No. I barely touched the thing. I don’t like guns.”

“I’ll come pick it up right now.”

“Okay. But there’s something else, Chief.”

“What?”

Ginger explained her theory about Danny being paid to kill Navy, and how she thought the person who hired Danny might have been the one who killed him tonight.

“That’s not a bad theory,” he said.

“But since Lacey was Danny’s girlfriend, I’m afraid she’s in danger too.”

“That’s true.”

“So, I really wish you would send an officer over to her apartment to keep watch.”

“I’ll do that right now. See you in five minutes.”

“Thanks so much, Chief.”

Ginger woke up the next morning to bright sunlight in her eyes. She checked her alarm clock. It was nearly 8:30. She had forgotten to set the alarm. Usually it didn’t matter—she was awake by 6:30, with or without the alarm.

Last night she had tossed and turned for hours worrying about Lacey and trying to unravel the mystery of the two murders.
As she sat up and looked directly into the blinding sun coming through her windows, a revelation struck her. What if Navy’s murder had nothing to do with the recipe book? What if it had nothing to do with jealousy or money?

But if those motives were eliminated, what was left? Something in Navy’s past? The only suspect Ginger knew of with that kind of motive was Addie. Her dear friend couldn’t have done it.

One of the comments in Navy’s senior yearbook had continued to nag at Ginger. But since it was clear now that Ellegora thought Addie had killed her son, Ginger would not feel comfortable going back to the house for another look at the yearbook. She wished she had spent more time studying it.

She took a shower, got dressed and walked to the public library, which was located a couple of blocks west of the square. On her way, she called the bakery. Ginger was surprised when Lacey answered. She decided she’d rather come to work than lay around all day feeling sorry for herself. And, yes, there was a police officer hanging around to protect her.

Cheryl Iper had taken the day off. Ginger made a mental note to check on Cheryl later. She couldn’t imagine what Cheryl must be going through, having just lost her son.

The library had a copy of the Coreyville High School yearbook for each year of the school’s long history. Ginger grabbed the one for Navy’s senior year and sat down at a table. She didn’t know what she was looking for. Maybe there would be a picture of the football team with one of the players staring at Navy as though he hated him. Anything. She knew she was grasping at straws.

She studied the pictures of every student in Navy’s graduating class. Then she decided to look through all the other classes as well, starting with the freshman.

She came across a girl who seemed oddly familiar. Yet she didn’t recognize the name: Molly Castorside. She started to flip to the next page, but stopped. She couldn’t take her eyes off Molly. She told herself that it wasn’t that unusual to see a picture of a stranger and think you might know them.

Ginger tried to imagine how the girl might look six years later. Then she pictured her with different hair and no glasses. No—it couldn’t be her. Or could it?

Ginger had assumed that any motive for Bull or Cash would have been related to the stolen recipe book. Cash might have decided he couldn’t trust Navy to keep quiet about stealing it. Bull could have killed Navy thinking that police would pin it on his brother—once they discovered Cash had paid Navy to steal the recipe book.

But it might not have been about the recipe book at all. What if one of the brothers had held an old grudge against Navy? After Ginger had learned what Navy had done to Addie’s granddaughter, she didn’t put anything past him.

Another thing that was bugging Ginger was the matching potted plants in Cash and Bull’s offices. Cash told her that Silvy had given him the plant. Yet Bull had one just like it. He must have had some type of relationship with Silvy. Did his brother know about it?

Then she remembered what she had seen at the funeral: Bull and Silvy had made eye contact in such a way that they seemed to know each other well. And since Bull and Cash hated each other, that seemed odd—especially since Silvy had only been in town a few weeks.

Ginger had hoped to walk out of the library with the name of the killer. How naïve, she thought. She had accomplished nothing. She might as well walk to the bakery and have her breakfast coffee and cake. She was really starting to need that cup of coffee.

She was about to leave when she thought of something else she just had to look up. What were those unusual-looking potted plants in Bull and Cash’s offices? She went to the gardening section. She’d wait a few minutes longer for her caffeine fix.

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When Ginger finished at the library, she hurried over to Bull Crawley’s Bar & Grill.

“I need to speak with Bull. It’s urgent.”

“Bull just left for the emergency room.”

“What happened?”

The waitress leaned in, lowering her voice. “He had diarrhea most of the night. He thought he was over it this morning, but then it hit him again. He looked very pale and weak. We made him go to the hospital.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Ginger. “Look, I know you’re busy, but could I ask you one more thing?”

“Sure.”

“Do you know Silvy Knox?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“She’s young, blonde—very attractive.”
“Oh.” She leaned in closer and whispered. “That might be the woman I saw in Bull’s office the other day. I knocked on his door and went in. He was in the middle of something, if you know what I mean. She was a beautiful young blonde. Way too young for him, if you ask me.”
“I see.”
“But please don’t tell anybody I said that. I need this job.”
“I won’t say a word.”
Chapter 24

Ginger left Bull’s and quickly walked around the corner to Cash & Carry Donuts. She went directly to Cash’s office. He was slumped over in his chair, obviously in great pain.

“Where is she?” said Ginger.

Cash could barely speak. “Who?”

“Silvy.”

He jumped up from his chair and hurried around the desk and out into the hallway, pointing to the back door as he ran into the bathroom. Judging by the sounds coming from the bathroom, he had not quite made it in time.

Ginger rushed out the back door, into the alley. She saw Silvy sitting in a Ford Ranger pickup, starting the engine. Ginger ran over to the truck.

Silvy rolled down her window and smiled. “Good morning, Ginger. How are you today?”

“I’m fine. But I can’t say the same for Cash or Bull.”

“Yeah. Must be something that’s going around.”

“So, you had nothing to do with it?”

“Well…” Silvy’s smile took on just a hint of evil. “Maybe a little bit. But they had it coming. They used me.”

“So they deserve to die?”

“Die? It’s just a strong laxative. I put it in their coffee. It won’t kill them. But hopefully it will make them wish they were dead.”

“What about Navy? What did you have against him?”

“I didn’t even know Navy.”

“Maybe you didn’t. But Molly Castorside did.”

Silvy’s smile disappeared.

“What did he do to you back in high school, Molly?”

Silvy reached for the gearshift.

“You’re just going to drive away? Come on, Molly, you know you want to get it off your chest.”

Silvy took her hand off the gearshift. “You can’t even imagine.”

“Then tell me,” said Ginger.

“My mom and I moved here the summer before my freshman year. There were only three new kids in high school that year. The other two were boys—basketball players. And they were pretty good. So kids accepted them as though they had lived here all their lives. I wasn’t so lucky.”

“They picked on you?” said Ginger.

“My hair was long and oily, and I had to wear stupid, ugly glasses. And a name like Castorside is just too easy to make fun of. Some guy called me Molly Castor Oil. The nickname stuck. I was suddenly the best known, most hideous girl in the whole high school. Even upper classmen began to recognize me in the hall and call me by name.”

“That’s awful. Kids can be so mean.”

“I started wondering what would happen if had a major makeover. Maybe then I could get rid of the nickname and people would start liking me. My mom took me to the eye doctor and got me some contacts, even though she couldn’t really afford it. Then she got my hair styled and taught me how to put on makeup.”

“Did it work?”

“Yeah—at first. I decided to try my new look at Navy’s graduation party. I wasn’t invited, but I thought if I looked pretty enough they would let me in anyway. I made up a name—I can’t even remember it now. And I couldn’t believe how nice everybody was—especially the guys. Nobody recognized me. And Navy really liked me. He took me up to his bedroom and—”

“—and raped you?”

“No. He didn’t make me do anything. I wanted it. And it was wonderful…being in his arms. He wanted me so badly. It made me feel good. But then later, one of the girls realized it was me and started telling everybody. They laughed at Navy for sleeping with Molly Castor Oil. Then he started making fun of me too. I ran out of there crying.”

Ginger shook her head.

“And that’s not all. Navy wouldn’t answer my calls. And when I went to his house they wouldn’t let me through the gate. He wanted nothing to do with me—even after I found out I was pregnant with his baby.”

“Oh, no.”
“Then I lost the baby. But I told Momma I could not go back to that school. We moved to Gilmer and she got a job working for a florist. I worked there too, part-time.”

“That’s how you knew about Castor plants.”

Silvy hesitated. “Yes.”

“And I guess that’s how you kept them alive in the winter. You had access to a greenhouse.”

“You’ve done your homework.”

“But why did you give Castor plants Cash and Bull? Were you planning to kill them?”

“Not really. But I figured they’d find out how dangerous the plants were after I’d gone, and realize how easily I could have poisoned them. Maybe they’ll think twice about how they treat women in the future.”

“But you did kill Navy.”

“It was easy. I knew about his allergy to shellfish. At his graduation party one of the kids brought crab dip. Navy’s mother freaked out when she thought he’d eaten some of it. She demanded to know where his Epi-Pens were. When he told her he only had one left, and that it was in the car, where he always kept it, she yelled at him for not having any in the house. *This is life or death stuff, Navy. And one of these days your stupidity is gonna get you killed,* she said.”

“So, you figured he still kept it in the car.”

“Yeah. I did it while he was delivering your recipe book to Cash. Once I had found the Epi-Pen in the glove compartment, all I had to do was inject the fish oil into the coffee cake.”

“And you knew if somebody else ate the cake, it wouldn’t hurt them.”

“Right. The worst thing that could have happened was some old lady at the nursing getting an extra-moist coffee cake.”

“And you figured the police would suspect Cash as the killer once they found out he had hired Navy steal my recipe book.”

“Yeah. But I never thought about Lacey getting the blame. I’ve got nothing against her. She was one of the few kids who didn’t make fun of me.”

“So, you moved here to Coreyville just to get even with Navy,” said Ginger. “Why did you wait all these years?”

“I wasn’t really waiting. I hadn’t *planned* to do it. But then after my mother died…”

“I’m sorry. What happened to her?”

“She had a brain tumor. She had been having these awful headaches. I finally talked her into going to the doctor. Two weeks later she died.”

“I’m so sorry, Silvy.”

“It’s no excuse for what I’ve done. I know that. But I had to do it.”

“The thing I don’t understand is why you killed Danny.”

“I didn’t kill Danny.” Silvy rolled up her window.

Ginger saw Silvy reach into her pocket and take out a handful of small, multi-colored jelly beans. She threw them into her mouth and began to chew.

Wait—those weren’t jelly bean, thought Ginger.

Silvy drove away.

“No,” yelled Ginger, “don’t do it, Silvy! Come back!” But she knew it was probably already too late.

Silvy drove out of the alley and onto the road.

Ginger took out her cell phone and called the chief.
Chapter 25

As Ginger was walking up to Coreyville Coffee Cakes, her cell phone rang. It was the chief.

“She’s dead.”

“From the poison?”

“What poison? She drove straight into the back of an 18-wheeler that was parked on the side of the highway. She must have been doing at least eighty.”

She felt sad about Silvy. Ginger was probably the only person in the entire world who cared that Silvy was dead. She wished the poor girl could have been helped before she went off the deep end. “Thanks for letting me know, Chief.”

“No problem. And, by the way, we were able to trace Danny’s pistol back to a gun dealer in Longview. It wasn’t Danny’s gun. And now I’m pretty sure I know who killed him.”

“Who?”

“I don’t want to say until after we pick him up. I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks.”

When Ginger walked into her bakery she saw only two customers, sitting at a table. Lacey was behind the counter. Ginger motioned for Lacey to follow her into the kitchen.

“Where have you been this morning?” said Addie.

“I slept in. But then I got busy and figured out who killed Navy.”

“Who?” Lacey and Addie said it in unison.

“Silvy Knox.”

“Who’s that?” said Addie.

“Yeah,” said Lacey, “I don’t know who that is either.”

Ginger looked at Lacey. “You might remember her as Molly Castorside from high school.”

“Oh, yeah—they called her Castor Oil.”

“Right,” said Ginger.

“I never called her that,” said Lacey. “But I wanted to after she tricked Navy into having sex with her.”

“What?” said Addie.

“She fixed herself up real pretty for Navy’s graduation party,” said Ginger. “The kids didn’t even recognize her. And Navy liked her new look so much that he took her up to his bedroom. Where were you that night, Lacey?”

“My stupid, mean parents wouldn’t let me go.”

“Anyway, Molly came up pregnant,” said Ginger.

“You’re kidding?” said Lacey. “I didn’t know about that.”

“Yeah,” said Ginger. “And Navy wouldn’t even talk to her. She ended up losing the baby.”

“So, after all these years she killed him for it?” said Addie.

“I think she would have been okay if her mother hadn’t died. After that she just kind of went over the edge. She moved here and got a job working for Cash Crawley. And she had some kind of relationship with Bull Crawley as well.”

“How did she get the fish oil into the coffee cake?” said Lacey.

“With a syringe,” said Ginger. “She knew about Navy’s allergy and the Epi-Pen. She did it while Navy was delivering my stolen recipe book to Cash Crawley.”

“So, she’s on her way to jail?” said Addie.

“No,” said Ginger. “She’s on her way to the morgue. She drove her truck into the back of a tractor-trailer rig.”

“Well, I hate to say it,” said Lacey, “but it’s what she deserved.”

“She may have already been dead when she crashed,” said Ginger. “Right before she drove away from me, she ate a handful of Castor beans.”

“What’s that?” said Addie.

“They’re seeds that are produced by the Castor plant. But they call them beans, because that’s what they look like. If you squeeze the beans you get Castor oil. It’s used in a lot of different kinds of products.”

“My momma used to give us kids Castor oil when we needed a laxative,” said Addie.

“Yeah,” said Ginger. “That’s one of the uses. But Castor beans also produce something else: ricin.”

“Ricin?” said Addie. “Isn’t that the stuff that terrorists use?”

“Yes.”
“How did you know all this?” said Lacey.
“I looked it up at the library,” said Ginger. “Silvy gave both Cash and Bull a Castor plant. She grew them at the nursery in Gilmer where she had been working. The Crawley brothers didn’t even know what it was or how dangerous it was. They didn’t know how dangerous she.”
“So, she was planning to kill the Crawley brother too?” said Addie.
“No. She just wanted to let them know that she could have killed them. Although she did spike their coffee with some kind of very strong laxative. They’re not feeling too well at the moment. But they’ll survive.”
“What about Danny?” said Lacey.
“No,” said Ginger, “she didn’t kill him.”
“Who did?” said Addie.
“Well, I—”
Ginger’s phone rang.
“Excuse me. It’s the chief.”
“Hello?…So, you picked him up?…Good…Thanks, Chief.”
“Lacey, you can relax now,” said Ginger. “I thought it was him.”
“Who?” said Lacey.
“Manny Monet,” said Ginger. “The gun you gave me to hold onto—it was not Danny’s gun. It belonged to Manny.”
“I knew Danny wasn’t a killer,” said Lacey.
“Well, I’m afraid he tried to be one,” said Ginger. “The chief thinks that Manny had hired him to shoot Navy, but Danny got cold feet. And then when Navy died, Danny tried to take credit for the murder so he could still get paid. Apparently that’s what got him killed. I’m sorry to have to tell you that, Sweetie.” Ginger hugged Lacey.
Lacey was clearly better off without Navy or Danny in her life. But it might take her a while to fully realize it. In the future, Ginger would try to steer her toward more promising husband material.

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Jane poured the box of dominos out on the table. “Well, you’ve had quite a week, Ginger.”
“I can’t believe it’s only been a week,” said Ginger.
“Yeah, talk about life in the fast lane,” said Barb.
“We have our very own Jessica Fletcher,” said Ethel.
“Coreyville is no Cabot Cove, Ethel,” said Barb.
“I don’t know,” said Jane, “we do have a dumb sheriff.”
“Chief of police,” corrected Ginger. “And he’s not dumb. He’s just a little young and bull-headed. But he’s gonna be okay.”
“Yeah—as long as you help him out,” said Barb.
“Right,” said Jane.
“No,” said Ginger. “This is it for me. I’m hanging it up. The only reason I got involved this time was because of Lacey.”
“So, what if it’s one of us next time, Ginge?” said Barb. “Suppose Ethel is suspected of robbing a liquor store?”
“Yeah,” said Ethel, “surely you’d come out of retirement to save me.”
“Let’s just try to stay out of trouble,” said Jane. “Ginger has more important things to deal with now.”
“Like what?” said Barb.
“Jane.” Ginger gave her the evil eye.
But Jane couldn’t help herself. “Ginger had a date with Elijah last night.”
“Ooh,” said Ethel.
“Details,” said Barb.
“See what you’ve done,” said Ginger, glaring at Jane.
“Well, that’s what you get for telling just one of us,” said Barb. “And why did you pick Jane instead of me?”
“I didn’t pick her,” said Ginger. “She pried it out of me.”
“So, how was it?” said Ethel.
“Yeah,” said Barb, “did you get any tongue?”
“Barb!” said Ginger.
They laughed at Ginger uncontrollably. Finally, she joined them.
She looked forward to many more Saturday nights with the Domino Girls. And many more kisses from Elijah.
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