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Gwen Dunbar sat on the floor of the downstairs bathroom, glaring at the shredded strips of daisy patterned wallpaper and chunks of smashed drywall lying about her. Gray dust coated the vanity, the mirror, the cupboards, and her clothes, and irritated her eyes.

In an attempt to save Miss Ada money in the remodeling of her bathrooms, Gwen had undertaken to do the preliminary work herself. In her zeal, she had dismissed the fact that she had entered her forties a few years back. Every muscle ached.

She scowled at the maze of copper pipes that, she assumed, connected to the pipes of the second-story bathroom of the three-story Victorian.

Janet, Ada's cook and housekeeper and Gwen's nemesis, paused outside the door with a dust rag and a can of furniture polish. Her large brown eyes scanned the walls and the floor. "Mm-mm-mm. Miss Ada will not be happy." She shook her head and moved on.

Gwen crawled to her feet with a groan and brushed the

drywall dust out of her frizzy red hair. She acknowledged her defeat and mumbled, "Okay, not my most brilliant idea." She needed a contractor. Now.

Dread gnawed at her stomach while she dragged herself to the telephone. The crew that could start immediately, she remembered, had submitted the highest bid.

The day after the tragedy, Leo Meriday sat on the edge of a chair in the living room of Duncan and Miriam Kroft. Deputy Bidwell took up his position near the door. The overstuffed room felt suffocating.

They had entered a rainforest. Chairs upholstered with garish, exotic flower and bird patterns sat amid a forest of artificial bamboo and palm trees. Bamboo side tables presented a glut of glass lovebirds and budgies. A large porcelain peacock posed on each side of the fireplace, while an exhibit of colorful parrots lined the mantle. Framed paintings of macaws and cockatoos overwhelmed the green walls.

Meriday pulled his notepad from his shirt pocket. "I understand, Mr. Kroft, you reached Mrs. Beavers first and pulled her out of the lake."

The coroner's report that morning revealed Nita Beavers hit the water alive, but Fred could not determine conclusively if the blow to her skull occurred just prior to or after she entered the lake. Either way, something caused the victim to plunge into Lake Ontario, where she drowned.

Meriday had no choice but to look deeper.

"Yes, that's right." Duncan Kroft looked mid-seventies. A full, eggshell-colored mustache skirted his large nose.

"How long have you and your wife been residents at Willowdell?"

Kroft leaned back on the sofa and pressed his lips in thought. “Well ... I guess about—”

“Two years and six months,” Mrs. Kroft said. She sat beside him with her red-rimmed smile, a black bouffant hairdo, and a loud, gaudy blouse over orange slacks. There was nothing vanilla about Miriam Kroft.

Mr. Kroft cocked an eye at his wife and scowled, then looked back at the sheriff.

“Yeah, around that.” He straightened and shifted his position.

“What can you tell me about Nita Beavers?” Meriday looked to both of them for an answer.

Miriam waved her hands while she talked. “The woman meant well, always trying to encourage the residents to make healthier choices at the café. Telling everyone they should be more active, and how they could improve the quality and length of their lives.”

Duncan Kroft mumbled, “Lot of good it did her,” and leaned back and crossed his long legs.

Meriday found the man’s constant fidgeting distracting. “Something bothering you, Mr. Kroft?”

“I think my sugar’s dropping.”

“Well, Dunc, why didn’t you say so?” Miriam edged off the sofa and trekked through the jungle toward the kitchen.

The clock cuckooed, and a blue budgie peeked out a tiny open window ten times then retreated.

Meriday glanced at his deputy. Bidwell maintained his wooden stance.

“Miriam had to have that stupid clock,” Duncan Kroft griped. “Spends money like it grows on the stupid forestry around here.” He lowered his head. “Sorry. I get a little irritable when the sugar’s low.”

Meriday sniffed and tapped his fingers on his notebook.

Miriam Kroft returned with a glass of orange juice, and after drinking the juice, Mr. Kroft seemed to relax.

His wife rejoined him, and Meriday continued the interview. “How is it, Mr. Kroft, you happened to be the first to arrive at the lake? Did you see Mrs. Beavers fall in?”

“No. Miriam and I were sitting at the kitchen table having our morning coffee when we heard Samantha—”

“Samantha Milsap, the property manager,” his wife said.

Kroft briefly closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “As I was saying, we heard Samantha yelling for help. I ran outside and saw her plodding toward the lake, screaming something about someone falling in.”

Meriday frowned. “You reached the lake before Miss Milsap?”

“Of course,” Kroft said matter-of-factly. “Sam’s so portly, a one-legged dog could outrun her.”

Miriam playfully swatted her husband’s knee and chuckled. “Dunc thinks anyone with a BMI over twenty-four is portly. But he is correct about Samantha.”

“When you arrived at the lake, what did you see?”

“Stanley, at first, which told me if someone fell in the lake, it’d be Nita. Sure enough, that’s when I saw her body in the water.”

“Was the victim struggling in any way? Trapped in an undercurrent, perhaps?”

Duncan Kroft scoffed. “No. Not a kick. Not a scream. Just floating. Facedown.”

Meriday placed a fist on his hip. “Did you see anyone else near the lake at that time?”

“No one. Except Sam. She came up behind me, puffing like a bellows. Once I dragged the old girl to the shore, Samantha helped me pull her out.”

“Did you move anything? A fallen branch. A rock. Something that may have been in the way of you reaching Mrs. Beavers? Did you touch anything?”

The old man paled. “You sound like the guys on *NCIS*. You asking if I tampered with a crime scene?”

“Oh, Dunc, don’t be dramatic.” Miriam Kroft rolled her eyes and shook her head. “The sheriff wants to know if Nita could have tripped over something.”

Blood flow returned to the old man’s face. “You stopped my heart, Sheriff. There’s enough of us dropping dead around here without having a murderer in our midst.”

Later that afternoon, Meriday entered the Willowdell lobby to interview Samantha Milsap. In the small office of the absent owner, she sat in a hard-backed chair positioned against a wall, rubbing her palms over her ankle-length print skirt. Duncan Kroft had accurately described the property manager.

“Tell me about the call that came in.” Meriday took out his notebook.

Samantha shifted in the chair and made a noise with her throat. “The phone at the front desk rang, and when I answered—”

“At what time?”

“Before nine. Possibly closer to eight thirty.”

“Were you here alone?”

“Yes. Simon had been in earlier but left before the phone call.”

“Simon Hilton is the owner of Willowdell?”

“Yes.”

Meriday gave the little room a once-over. File cabinets. A

small desk. A bookshelf. One framed snapshot of Hilton—he recognized him from the political posters—his parents, and a sister, perhaps. “Is Simon Hilton married?”

“I don’t think he has ever been married.”

Meriday settled into the desk chair. “Tell me about that call.”

“Mrs. Ferrell rang the front desk. She told me Nita Beavers may have fallen into the lake, and she wanted someone to check immediately.”

“May have fallen? Those were her words?”

“I don’t know. Maybe she said ‘pushed into the lake.’ I don’t—”

“You called 911?”

“No. Not until Mr. Kroft and I pulled Nita out of the water.”

“Why not? Why didn’t you call 911 on your cell phone while you rushed to the lake?”

Samantha Milsap blew out of the side of her mouth. “Because if anyone could get themselves out of the lake, Nita Beavers could.”

“Yet, you ran to the lake and yelled for someone to help you.”

“Of course. We couldn’t risk liability.”

“When you arrived at the lake, what did you see?”

“Mr. Kroft taking off his shoes.”

Meriday glanced at the clock.

“He jumped in and grabbed her.” Samantha Milsap gave a slight groan and held her hand to her stomach. “It makes me kind of sick to think about.”

He understood. “Did Mrs. Beavers respond in any way?”

Samantha dipped her head and shook it side to side.

“Tell me your opinion of Nita Beavers.”

Her jaw stiffened. “She was rude.” Samantha swiped her palms on her skirt and lifted her shoulders in a quick shrug. “I

don't know, maybe she did care about my health, but she didn't care about me. So, I didn't care about her. I mean, I didn't want her to drown, but ..."

"But it's okay that she did?"

The young woman jutted her chin and looked away.