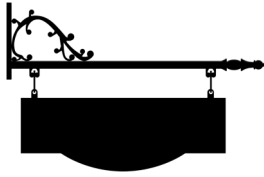


2



Rick Gage shoved open the door to the Book Rack. His sister Jillian was sitting behind the store's counter, talking to Officer Dave Hall, who'd beaten him to the scene. Dave frantically jotted notes as Rick approached.

"Jillian, are you okay?" Rick asked.

"Yeah, I ..." She stopped talking and looked to her right, deeper into the store.

Rick followed her gaze. He took a few steps and found the body. The dispatcher had told him someone had been killed in the store but hadn't identified the victim. He stared down at the older clerk. He'd expected to see the owner lying there, but this was definitely not Carl Roofner. Kneeling carefully to avoid the blood that had seeped from the body, he put his hand to the man's throat. As he'd feared, nothing.

He sensed movement and turned his head. Jillian and Dave stood beside him.

"It's Stanley." Jillian's voice had a husky note.

"Yeah. What's his last name?" Rick asked.

"Chappell. Stan Chappell. He's worked here a long time."

“Where’s Carl?” Rick didn’t visit the bookstore often, but he made a point of knowing the business owners in town.

“I don’t know. The store was empty when I came in. Except ...” She stared bleakly at the body.

Rick looked at Dave. “Get a number for Carl Roofner and call him.”

As Dave stepped away, the door opened and another uniformed officer, Geordie Kraus, came in.

“Call Sgt. Watkins first,” Rick told Dave. “Tell him the team is you, me, and Geordie. We don’t want to take the rest of the officers away from crowd duty.” Since the first policeman on the scene was their rookie, Rick had no qualms about taking charge. Dave did his bidding without a blink.

“Hey, Geordie,” he said as the other officer drew close. He and Geordie had worked together for several years. They understood each other’s methods and made a good team. “This is a store employee.”

Geordie looked down at the deceased man. “I know him. Stan Chappell.”

“Right.” Rick looked up at Jillian. “You found him just like this?”

She nodded.

“Did you touch him?”

“No. Well ... just his wrist. I couldn’t ...”

“It’s okay.” Rick stood and patted her shoulder. “Why don’t you go sit down where you were. I’ll come over there if I need to ask you anything.” He turned to the rookie. “Officer Hall, is there any sign of tampering with the cash register?”

Dave snapped to attention, accepting his cue for a little more formality than usual. “I don’t think so. I inspected around the counter area before you arrived. It didn’t look like a robbery.”

“Okay.” As Jillian made her way to the counter, Rick did

another visual sweep of the space. He spotted a camera above the street door, aimed toward the counter, and tucked the information away.

Dave came to his side. "I checked the body when I first got here. No question he was dead, so I didn't call an ambulance."

"Did you call the medical examiner?" Rick asked.

"No, there wasn't time before you came in, but I just told the sergeant that we need him."

"Good. What else can you tell me?"

"Well, it looks like a gunshot wound."

Rick nodded. "The M.E. will have to say for sure."

"I spotted a shell casing over there." Dave pointed.

Squinting at the floor, Rick saw the shell lying about eight feet away, in the shadow of a row of shelving. The shooter hadn't polished his brass. That might be helpful.

"Good job. Put out a marker and bag it."

Dave nodded. "I was on foot this afternoon, patrolling the downtown."

Rick tossed Geordie his car keys. "Go out to my SUV and get some evidence markers and bags. Gloves. Whatever else we need. It's all in the back."

"Sure thing."

Turning back to Dave, Rick said, "Why didn't it smell like a robbery to you?"

Dave gritted his teeth and slowly shook his head. "Honestly, there didn't seem to be anything wrong near the cash register. And Mr. Chappell still has his wallet in his pocket. It's almost like somebody came in, shot him, and ran out."

"What about Roofner? Did you get him on the phone?"

"Not yet. They're working on it at the station. Oh, and Rick, Sgt. Watkins said we'll have to call the S.P. in."

Rick scowled and clamped his jaws tight. It was standard

procedure in Maine to let the state police handle murders outside the two biggest cities, Portland and Bangor. He didn't like it—by the time an S.P. detective got there, valuable evidence could be lost. He decided to keep on the way he would if the case wasn't about to be yanked away from him. When the detective arrived, he would hand over what he'd learned. In the meantime, he'd make sure they weren't sloppy.

From her post a few yards away, Jillian said hesitantly, "Rick, I have Carl's number. Do you want me to call him?"

Rick walked toward her frowning. "You have his personal number, not just the store?"

"Yes, we've gotten quite chummy." She shrugged. "I'm a book lover."

That was true. Jillian was a former English teacher. Rick couldn't remember a time, even when they were kids, when she didn't have her nose in a book.

"Don't call him, but give me the number."

He entered the number Jillian read him into his phone and stepped aside to make the call. After five rings, he heard a gruff "Hello?"

"Mr. Roofner?" Rick asked.

"Yes."

"This is Officer Rick Gage. Can you come to your store right away, please? There's been an incident."

"What—what kind of an incident?"

"Just please get here as soon as you can."

"All right. I had run up to Bangor for a book fair, but I'm nearly home now. I should be there in about fifteen minutes."

"That's fine. Thank you." Rick closed the connection.

"Now you've got him all upset," Jillian said. "He'll probably have a heart attack before he gets here."

Rick shot her a dark look. "You sound just like Mom."

When Jillian's face quivered, his conscience berated him.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

She swiped at a tear that ran willy-nilly down her cheek.

“No, I just—”

Rick went to her and slipped an arm around her shoulders.

“I’m sorry, sis. This has been a shock for you.”

With a sniff, she burrowed her face into his shoulder for a moment then pulled away. “I’m okay. Really.”

He gazed keenly into her eyes for a moment. Jillian was the strong one, the one who’d held the family together since their parents died. She didn’t crack unless something really bad happened.

Brushing her cheek with his knuckles, he whispered, “I’m sorry.” His common sense told him that repeating the words wouldn’t make them more powerful.

“Hey, Rick?”

He turned. Geordie had brought in his fingerprint kit and a canvas bag of miscellaneous equipment. Dave was placing a yellow plastic marker with a 1 on it precisely where the shell casing had fallen.

“There should be video,” Geordie said.

“Right. Mr. Roofner’s on his way in. I’ll ask him about it. Look around and see if you find any other cameras besides that one.” Rick pointed to the one over the door. “There may be one outside too.”

The door opened, and a woman started to enter then stopped when she saw the uniformed officers. Rick recognized the woman who owned his favorite seafood restaurant with her husband and hastily stepped forward.

“Hello, Mrs. Sheldon. I’m afraid the store is closed at the moment. You’ll have to come back tomorrow.”

“Is something wrong?”

He hesitated. “Well, yes, but please don’t broadcast it.”

“Carl—” She stood on tiptoe, trying to see past him into the store.

“Carl’s fine,” Rick said as gently as he was able. “He’s on his way here now. It’s best if you leave and let us do our job.”

Her gaze met his. She drew in a deep breath and nodded. “All right, Rick. I’ll send up a prayer.”

“Thanks.” He closed the door and turned the metal lock knob. A small CLOSED sign hung inside the other half of the double panel. He flipped it to face outward and glared toward the two oblivious officers. “We need to keep customers out.”

“Right,” Geordie said evenly, though he was the last man to use the door.

Dave opened his mouth then closed it.

Jillian stirred. “Rick, what about Stan’s family?”

“Do you know them?”

She shook her head. “I know Stan’s married. I’m not sure about children.”

“Okay, we’ll see if we can get an address.”

“If not, Carl will be able to tell you,” she said. “Somebody should go and tell Mrs. Chappell in person.”

“Of course.”

The officers continued to search the floor, from the front door on back. After a few minutes, Rick found himself near Jillian again.

“Am I in your way?” She stood and moved aside. “I’m sure you want to look at everything back here, behind the counter.”

“Why don’t you go home, Jill? I can come by the inn later and tell you what progress we’ve made.”

“I thought I’d stay until—”

At that moment Carl appeared at the door. He gave it a futile tug then fumbled with his key ring. Dave hurried to let him in.

“Mr. Roofner.” Rick strode toward him. “I’m Officer Rick Gage, and this is Officer David Hall.”

“What’s going on?” Carl looked from Rick to Dave and back. “What happened?”

“I’m sorry to tell you, sir, Stanley Chappell is dead,” Rick replied.

Carl’s face went white. He staggered to the counter and leaned on it.

From behind it, Jillian reached a hand toward him. “Carl, I’m so sorry.”

“What happened? Was it a heart attack? I thought Stan was in pretty good shape.”

Jillian looked to Rick, and he stepped forward. “No, Mr. Roofner, it wasn’t a heart attack. Maybe you can sit down for a minute on the stool where Jillian is sitting. I have a few questions I want to ask you.”

Jillian moved aside as the older man walked slowly around the end of the counter, his face ashen. When Carl was seated, she laid a hand on his shoulder.

“I’m so sorry, Carl.”

Rick considered telling her flatly to leave, but Mr. Roofner was about to go through a harrowing time. It might be better to have someone he considered a friend near at hand.

“Geordie,” he murmured, and the patrolman understood and moved closer with his notebook and pen out.

“Mr. Roofner, what time did you leave the store today?” Rick asked.

“It was ... about eleven thirty, I think. I opened the store and was here alone for a couple of hours.” Carl glanced up at Jillian. “I called Jillian this morning.”

She nodded.

“Why did you leave?” Rick asked.

“There was a book fair in Bangor this weekend. They had a

lot of authors there, and we can go in as buyers and meet them. They give away samples of new books and ... well, anyway, I thought I was going to miss it, but business was slow here. Stan assured me he could handle things alone if I wanted to run up there for an hour or so.”

“So Stanley was in charge here while you were gone?”

Carl nodded.

“Where was the book fair held?”

“At the high school gymnasium, on Broadway.”

“What time did you get there?”

“I stopped for a sandwich. I guess it was maybe a quarter past twelve.”

Rick didn’t like the slight wiggle room in the timeline. “Did someone see you come in?”

“Yes, they give you a ticket.” Carl fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a small piece of card stock.

Rick took it and studied it. Good. It was time-stamped. “May I keep this, Mr. Roofner?”

“Of course.”

“Did you see people you knew at the book fair?”

“Sure.” Carl named off a few. Most were owners of other independent bookstores.

“Do you live alone, Mr. Roofner?”

“No, I live with my son, Eric.”

Rick nodded.

“My wife passed away,” Carl added.

“Were you on your way home when I phoned you?”

“Yes, I’d started out about fifteen minutes earlier. I had stopped for gas when you called.”

“Where was that?”

He gave Rick the exact location of the fuel station and pulled a receipt from his pocket.

“I—Please, what happened to Stan?”

Rick hesitated, but he couldn't see much point in delaying any longer. Carl's movements accounted for the time span within ten or fifteen minutes, and the sandwich took care of that. "Do you have a receipt for the lunch you bought on the way?"

Carl gulped. "I guess I threw it away with the bag. But there's a paper cup from the Wendy's in my car's cup holder."

"Is your car locked now?"

"Yes."

"May we borrow your keys for just a minute?"

Carl stared at him, obviously baffled, but handed over a key ring.

Rick turned and placed it in Dave's hand, murmuring, "Go check on the drink."

Dave asked Carl what his car looked like and where it was parked. Carl started to rise, but Rick held out a hand.

"It's all right, Mr. Roofner. Just sit still. We'll take care of it."

Carl looked anxiously up at Jillian.

She patted his shoulder. "It's okay, Carl. They're just making sure."

"I—it's right out front. I usually park in the alley, but—" He shook his head and described the car.

Rick nodded at Dave, and the patrolman hurried outside.

Rick turned back to the old man. "I'll tell you what we know so far. It appears someone came into the store with a gun and shot Stan."

With a moan, Carl crumpled and leaned heavily on the counter. "I don't understand. Who would ...?" He looked around. "Where is he? Did an ambulance come?"

"No," Rick said gently. "He was already dead when he was found. He's still here, and the medical examiner is on his way."

He should be here very soon. Is there a better place where we can talk quietly?"

"I—yes. Out back. I have a desk out there and a couple of chairs."

Rick nodded. "Let's go back there and continue this. But first, could you give us Stanley's address and home number? I'd like to send an officer there to break the news to Mrs. Chappell. We don't want her to hear it from someone else."

"Oh, no, of course not. Maybe I should go along when they tell her."

"I need to get some more information from you first." Rick glanced at Jillian. "Why don't you go on home, Jill? You can tell Kate, but other than that, please keep this to yourself. It will be public knowledge by tonight's newscasts, I'm sure."

She nodded, and his confidence ticked up just a notch. Jillian was dependable. She and Kate had gotten a little excited last summer and started questioning people connected to his case before the police could get to them, but she knew better now.

Dave came in through the front door and held it for Jillian. When she was out, he relocked it and nodded at Rick. "The cup's there with some ice still in it, and the receipt was in the cup holder, sticking out from under the cup." He held out a slip of paper encased in a plastic bag.

"Thanks." Rick touched Carl's arm and led him toward the back of the store. He was nearly certain that Carl had told the truth about his activity that day. He made sure the older man was on the side of the aisle farthest from the body. As they passed it, Carl caught his breath, and his step faltered.

"Easy," Rick murmured. "Let's go sit down."

Soon they were settled in a crowded stockroom. Carl sat at the untidy desk, and Rick took the only available side chair, after Carl moved a stack of books off it.

“I want you to think about Stanley’s acquaintances,” Rick said. “Do you know of anyone who was angry with Stanley or held a grudge against him?”

“No. Everyone liked Stan. He ... he was easygoing, very likeable. Always on time for work, and he’d fill in for me whenever I needed him.” Carl ran a hand through his hair. “I’d have been here today—well, I *was* here this morning—except for the book fair. I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to get away, with the carnival and all, but it wasn’t too busy this morning.”

“Yeah, it’s okay,” Rick said. “You couldn’t have known. And I’m told your son also works here?”

“That’s right.” Carl threw anxious glances toward the interior of the store. “He would have been here today, but he wanted to go to some snowmobile rally in Clifton. He’s part time. I can’t force him to work when he doesn’t want to. I tried to talk him out of the rally, in case Stan needed help, but ... well, he insisted.” Carl shook his head. “I wish he cared more about the store.”

“I see.” Rick pulled out his pocket notebook and made a note to verify Eric Roofner’s whereabouts. “Do you have other family?”

“Not close. Eric was our only child.”

Rick nodded. “Now, tell me about the security camera over the door. Is that the only one?”

“Yes. It covers the checkout area. I figured that’s most important.”

“All right, we’re going to need access to the video from that.”

“Of course. But Anita—Mrs. Chappell. We really should tell her.”

Rick sighed. “I need you here for a little while longer, Mr. Roofner. Let me send Officer Kraus to her house. You can go

when we're done here." Carl's jaw tensed, and he added quickly, "I promise I won't keep you more than half an hour."

"I ... all right."

After issuing instructions to Geordie, Rick touched base with Dave, who had found nothing else suspicious so far. He returned to the back room and sat down.

"Now, about that video, Mr. Roofner. Do you access it here at the desk?"

Carl showed him the system and transferred a copy of that afternoon's camera video to the police station's network.

"I'm sorry, Officer Gage, I should have offered you coffee." Carl waved vaguely toward a coffeemaker on a side table.

"Don't worry about me," Rick said, "but if you want some, go ahead."

"No, no."

"Just a few more questions. I wondered if you could give me your son Eric's phone number."

"Sure, but he might not hear his phone ring if he's off on a snowmobile trail."

Carl wrote the number on a slip of paper and handed it to him.

Rick punched in the digits on his cell phone and waited. After several rings, he got a voice mail message.

"This is Officer Rick Gage, in Skirmish Cove. Could you please return this call as soon as possible? Thank you." He closed the connection.

Who would want to do this to Stan?" Carl asked. The tragedy was sinking in, and the older man's face was ashen.

"That's what we need to find out," Rick said. "Are you sure you don't want that coffee?"

The desk phone rang, and Carl snatched it up. "Eric? Is that you? Yes, that was Officer Gage. He's right here with me, at the

store. We've had a—" He paused and looked at Rick. "We've had an ... incident here at the store."

Rick gritted his teeth, wishing Eric had followed instructions and called him, not his father.

Carl threw him a nervous glance. After a short pause, he went on, "The police are here."

"May I speak to him?" Rick reached for the receiver.

Carl handed it to him with a shaking hand.

"Eric? This is Officer Rick Gage. I think we've met before."

"Sure," Eric said. "What's going on there? Is my dad okay?"

"He's a little shaken, but he's fine."

"Should I come home? Does he need me to stay at the store?"

"Uh, he'll probably close the store for the rest of the day while we do our job here. But it might be good if you were close by for your father."

"What happened?"

"I need to speak to you in person. Can you come to the store right away?"

"Uh ... it will take me a while to get there. I had some engine trouble with my machine. A buddy's helping me with it, but it might take a while to load it."

"How long do you think it will take you to get here?" Rick asked.

"Oh, let's see, an hour and a half, maybe? Two hours."

"All right. Come straight to the Book Rack, and I'll see you here."

Eric swore. "Are you sure my dad's okay?"

"I'm sure. See you later." Rick ended the call. It would be good for Carl if his son was close by until he got over the shock of losing his friend in such a grisly manner. But he didn't like Eric's fuzzy timeline. He might be in Clifton, or he might not.

“Do you know who organized the snowmobile rally your son’s at?”

Carl looked at him blankly. “I’m not sure. Probably some local sled club.”

“Okay.” Rick took a business card from his pocket and laid it on the desk. “My cell number’s on here. You can go to Stan’s house now if you want, but please let me know if you go home. We need for you to stay where we can find you for the rest of the day.”

“Thank you. You understand, Stan was much more than an employee. He was my best friend.” Carl pocketed the card and stood unsteadily.

“Are you okay to drive?” Rick asked. “We can have someone take you there.”

“I’ll be all right.” Carl walked slowly to the doorway and turned. “The store ...”

“We’ll keep the doors locked while we work,” Rick assured him. “You won’t be able to reopen today, but we should be able to wrap up before tomorrow.”

“We’re closed Sundays.”

“You can reopen Monday then. I’ll let you know if it’s not all right.”

“Thank you. I may just stay closed until after ... I’ll see what Anita wants for arrangements.”

“I’m sure Officer Kraus has explained to her that the body might not be released right away.”

With tear-filled eyes, Carl nodded and went out the door. He moved like a ninety-year-old, Rick thought, though he couldn’t be much over sixty-five. This was the hardest part of his job—dealing with the people who suffered after a crime. He turned with relief to the part he liked best—putting the pieces together to find out who caused all that pain.