
Chapter 3



Darcy stood next to the ancient metal shelving in the basement, frowning at the somewhat large, footprint-sized shape of dried mud on the floor.

She shook her head. *No, I'm being paranoid.*

But am I?

It hadn't been there the day before when she'd come down to retrieve cornmeal from the walk-in freezer. She knew she was particular about cleanliness, but that wasn't the point. Not only was there dirt on the floor, but there was also no reason for it to be there.

She'd been the last person in the basement last night, and it wasn't there, then. The stair steps from outside came in a door where three staircases met: the apartment, the kitchen, and the basement. They came out on the sidewalk around the corner from the front door, which was adjacent to the paved street. No mud to be found.

A prickle of fear worked its way from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. Someone had been down here, and it chilled her to the bone.

This could explain a lot.

Over the last few weeks, she'd noticed that things in the café dining room had been moved around. She hadn't told anyone. It was simply stress, lack of sleep, and raising twins. Wasn't it?

But now...

Darcy bit her lip. She didn't want to alarm her employees and she certainly didn't want to call Mom. She'd just worry herself to death. Besides, Darcy was in charge.

Nick and Lisa had gone out to the house to meet the FBI agents.

Del is upstairs.

Thinking about it made her stomach flutter a little. She felt safer knowing he was there. Should she go upstairs and get him? No, he might be in the middle of something.

Be sensible, Darcy.

This part of the basement had the least bit of light, so she got closer. She couldn't see it clearly, but the shape was there. A flashlight would be helpful.

She'd go upstairs, grab a flashlight, and see if Del could come down and check this out. She could be reasonable when she had to be.

When she got to the main level, she locked the basement door behind herself and pocketed the key. She usually left it unlocked, open to the stairwell and the apartment. Fear, and a remnant of anger, swept through her. If Justin hadn't been killed, she wouldn't be here to be afraid. She'd be safe and sound in base housing somewhere in the world, raising her kids and waiting for her husband to come home.

But that was neither here nor there.

Climbing the second set of stairs to the apartment, she talked herself down, almost to the point of turning around and going back to the kitchen. She probably would have if the

door hadn't swung open, and if Del hadn't met her on the landing. It seemed like he was always standing where she was going.

"Hey, Darcy. Did you want to look at countertop samples now?"

He was right there in front of her, and her mind seemed to go blank. Why was she here again?

Oh, right. Dirt. Basement.

She swallowed thickly.

"Are you okay?" Del bent, frowning.

She shook her head and closed her eyes for a second to regroup. "I'm fine. I just..."

She looked him in the eye. "Would you come to the basement with me?"

Del cocked his head. "Something wrong?"

She hesitated as she turned to go down the stairs, Del following close behind. "I'm not sure."

They got to the landing between the two sets of stairs and she pulled the key from her apron pocket to open the door.

"You locked it?" He seemed puzzled. Of course he was. She usually left it unlocked so they could get in and out of the basement where the electrical panel and HVAC systems were located.

She closed her eyes for a second. "I think someone has been in the building, and I think they were in the basement."



DEL FROZE. "WHAT ABOUT THE APARTMENT?"

"No, I've not noticed anything out of place upstairs." She looked down, then back up to him, eyes widening in fear. "I have noticed some things moved around in the café kitchen and dining room."

“What?” He knew he was staring, but he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “And you haven’t said anything?”

She shrugged and looked at him, tears standing on her lashes. “I thought I just forgot. People are in and out of the kitchen and dining room constantly, but not the basement.” Her lips clamped shut for a moment. “I did notice the box of receipts had been moved from where I put it inside the desk. When I came down the next day, it was on top.” Her face was a picture of humiliation and fear. What he wouldn’t give to wipe that look off her face for good.

But for now, the idea of someone in the building without her knowledge made his blood run cold. “So you think somebody that isn’t supposed to be in the basement, has pilfered around in the kitchen and dining room, and you didn’t tell anybody?”

She narrowed her eyes, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “I wouldn’t have come to you for backup if I thought it was Jimmy, would I?” She paused, taking a deep breath. “Wait here. I need to get a flashlight.”

“Something wrong with the lights down there?” He was thoroughly confused.

She sighed. “Just wait here.”

He held his hands up. “Want me to go on down?”

“No, you might step on the evidence.” Her hand was on the doorknob at the entry to the kitchen.

He blinked. “Evidence?”

She looked up into his eyes. He could tell she was worried. “There’s dirt on the floor.”

He frowned. “I know you run a clean ship, but is a little dirt cause for alarm?”

“It is when it wasn’t there yesterday, and when there’s no place for dirt to come from.” She glared at him. “Will you please wait here while I get the flashlight?”

“I’ll be here.” He put his hands in his pockets and stood there.

It took her about thirty seconds to retrieve the flashlight and lead him down the steps to the basement. “The place where I found the dirt is in the back, where the lights aren’t as bright.”

When he got down there, he realized that his dealings with this particular basement had been on the other side of the room, not the side to which Darcy was leading him. “You’re right. It’s darker over here.”

She gave him a look that said, “See, I told you.”

“Here it is.” She shone the light on it.

He crouched, carefully touching the edge of the dirt. “It looks like dried mud.” He peered up at her. “And this wasn’t here yesterday?”

“No. This is where I keep the to-go containers and glasses, cleaning supplies, and stuff I don’t use often. I just happened to need a bag of cornmeal yesterday and a stack of containers today.”

He stood and took the flashlight from her, shining it around the area, and then back at the object in question, noting the definite detail of the sole of a boot. “It’s a footprint.”

She rubbed her arms nervously and glanced up at him, grimacing. “I thought so, but I didn’t want to say it and make it so.”

Del looked down at the shoe-shaped impression and then back at her, his lips twisted in a grin. “Saying it doesn’t make it so. Being here does.”

“I know.”

He didn’t want to irritate her, but it was humorous. Not the situation, of course. Just her.

He turned the flashlight to the floor around the shelving.

“Look at this.” He pointed to the second site of dried mud halfway under the shelf. “How is that possible?”

Darcy put her hand on her mouth. “Del, the shelf has been moved. Look at the floor.”

He turned the flashlight beam onto scrapes on the vinyl flooring where someone had moved the unit away from the wall and later returned it to its place.

He turned off the flashlight and looked at her grimly. “Is Clay still in the dining room?”



“AND YOU HAVEN'T HEARD anything, or had anything go missing?”

Darcy had been relieved when she'd entered the café to see young Sheriff Clay Lacey at the counter, paying his bill and flirting with his girlfriend, Mandy. She'd wasted no time in asking him to follow her to the basement, and once she mentioned what she'd found, he was all business.

“No.” She paused a moment, thinking. “Now that you mention it, Jimmy told me yesterday that we were out of bleach.” She looked from Clay to Del. “We should have had plenty.”

The two men looked at one another. Clay cleared his throat. “Darcy, I'm going to need to fill out a report on this.”

“Good.” She laughed nervously. “I mean, somebody has been here, while we've been here, and nobody knew it, and... I'm a little freaked out by this.” If she wasn't careful, she'd work herself into a lather. The more nervous she was, the more her sentences became stream-of-conscious.

“I'm sure you are.” Clay took pictures with his phone, making note of the measurement of the footprint. He looked at the shelving unit, glanced at Del, and back at her. “Can we

move this out from the wall and see why it was moved to begin with?”

“Of course. Whatever you need to do.” She stepped back, hugging her arms around her waist, feeling chilled.

The two men carefully shifted the storage piece, and when it was moved out from the wall, a piece of plywood, painted the same color as the walls, fell forward, toward the shelf. Del shoved it out of the way and looked at Clay, and then at Darcy.

“Houston, we have a problem.”



THE GAPING hole in the wall had been well hidden.

“Darcy, do you know how long this shelf has been here?” Del inspected the unit, old by any standards. It wasn’t used for food storage, so the rusty spots hadn’t been a problem.

“No clue.” Darcy shivered visibly. “Honestly? It may have been here when we moved in fifteen years ago.”

“The hole looks pretty old, but the plywood looks new.” Clay pointed out the raw, freshly cut edges, shining his flashlight into the hole, the damp smell indicating that the heavy rains of the last few weeks had percolated down to the tunnel. “I’m thinking this is where your muddy footprint came from.”

“It’s the north side of the building, Clay.” Del stared at Clay until he finally looked at him, confirming he’d thought of the same thing.

Clay nodded, shining his flashlight into the dark interior. “Toward the river.” He put the light down.

Del removed his cap and raked his fingers through his hair, then replaced it. It was what he did when he was thinking. Lately, he’d been thinking a lot.

“Well?” Darcy looked from one to the other, impatience at their lack of motion evident on her face.

“Looks like Nick’s not the only one in town with a secret tunnel.” Del gave Darcy a sideways glance. “What do you think, Clay?”

“I think the FBI agents out at Nick’s place will want to see this.”

“You’re not going to cordon it off as a crime scene, are you?” Darcy was worried, he could tell. “I mean, I have a restaurant to run, and if we can’t get to our supplies...”

“I don’t think closing down will be necessary.” Clay glanced at Del.

“I’m taking you at your word.” She pointed a finger at the two men. “I’ll go up top and see if I can get Lisa on the phone.” Darcy pulled out her phone and, as she walked up the stairs, began scrolling through her “recents.”

“When are you going to ask that girl out?” Clay stood, hands in the pockets of his tan uniform, studying Del closely.

Del shook his head, his eyes still following the direction Darcy had been traveling. “Waiting for the right time, I guess.”

The sheriff sighed. “Del, did I tell you what Mandy told me at Christmas?”

Del laughed. “No, what words of wisdom did my baby cousin have for you?”

“She said we’d both grow old before I ever got around to asking her out on a date.” Clay’s face twisted. “She was probably right. If she hadn’t said it, I don’t know if we’d be dating now.”

Del snorted. “Mandy doesn’t come with as much baggage as Darcy.”

“You mean the kids?” Clay frowned.

The idea of Benji and Ali as a discouragement to anyone

pursuing a relationship with Darcy was beyond wrong. Dead wrong. “Good grief, no.”

“Then, what?” Clay shook his head, confused.

Del looked Clay in the eye. It wasn’t his place to discuss Darcy’s personal and spiritual life with anyone but her. “I’ve been praying about it.”

Clay’s gaze was direct. “Best thing you can do. I won’t ask, but I’ll pray with you, brother.” Clay clapped a hand on Del’s shoulder. “Or maybe I should say, ‘cousin’?”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.” Del sent his friend a glare and then softened it with a shaking head.