

Chapter Three



Liesl Schrader

As Pastor Greg Woodson concluded the sermon, Liesl's purse vibrated against her leg. Her phone, set on "stun," was the guilty party, causing her purse to quiver.

Who'd call her on Sunday morning? They should know she was in church. She vowed to ignore the impolite person.

When the vibrations returned, moments later, she frowned. Might not be a rude person. Could be important.

Joey Bauer sat on the pew next to her. He turned his watery blue eyes toward her and raised his eyebrows in a "do something" gesture. Joey was elderly and mentally impaired. He lived in Liesl's garage apartment. She'd brought him to church this morning, which was their usual routine.

The congregation rose for the final hymn. Liesl grabbed her purse and fumbled in it until she pulled out her phone. Three missed calls. All from Kurt.

Kurt Hunter was a detective with the Mexico Public Safety

Department. He was also the *former* love of her life. He was well aware she'd be in church now. An internal debate ensued. Something had to be wrong.

She hunched over to hide her movements and typed a text. By the time the congregation finished the hymn and resumed their seats, she had a reply.

She leaned toward Joey and whispered, "I need to call Kurt. Something has happened. Can you catch a ride home with someone?"

Joey nodded, unconcerned now the vibrating had stopped. He turned his focus back to Pastor Woodson.

Liesl half walked, half crawled to the aisle, excusing herself past the other occupants of the pew. She made her way at a snail's pace, restricted by the snug, A-line skirt she wore. At the aisle, she hiked the skirt high enough to allow her to quickstep toward the exit. Although many eyes followed her departure, only old Mrs. Franklin showed her disapproval. It was surprising to receive such an angry expression from a fellow parishioner.

She shrugged at Mrs. Franklin with an apologetic glance she hoped conveyed her regret for the disruption. Mrs. Franklin could use some work on her ability to forgive.

In the vestibule, Liesl shrugged into her hooded raincoat and stepped outside in the light drizzle. More April showers. Hadn't there been enough?

She called Kurt as she walked to her car. He answered on the first ring.

"Liesl. We need you."

He spoke in what she called "cop tone," which meant all business. "Your text said that. What's wrong?"

"You're on the board of the Audrain County Agricultural Museum, right?"

"Yes."

“Please come to the museum. I’ll explain once you get here.” Then he ended the call.

She frowned at her phone and quickened her steps toward her car. That man was so aggravating. Would it hurt to give her a hint about what was going on? Especially since he’d dragged her out of church?

* * *

Liesl worried for the full five minutes it took to drive across town to the western city limits on Highway 22. The rain remained a steady drizzle. As she neared the museum, she spotted the parking lot, full of emergency vehicles. Instead of fighting her way into the lot, she parked her red Trailblazer along the edge of the highway.

She grabbed her umbrella from the backseat pocket. Under the minute protection provided by her open umbrella, she tiptoed through the mud and gravel of the roadside. With gritted teeth, she vowed to make Kurt suffer if this expedition ruined her good high heels.

After scaling the long driveway, she spotted crime scene tape circling the entire exterior of the refurbished barn. She searched for a tall, brown-haired detective, but the only person in the parking area was Officer Howard. He wore a yellow slicker and had a plastic rain cap over his uniform hat.

Normally, she would pity him for being in the rain, but not today. Mrs. Howard frequently complained that he worked on Sunday mornings to skip church.

As he approached, Liesl smiled. “Morning, Officer Howard. Kurt called me out of church. He confirmed my being a board member of this museum, but he didn’t explain anything.”

The stocky officer maintained a neutral face. “I’m sorry to

meet under sad circumstances, but I'm glad you and my wife are keeping in good with God."

Liesl raised her eyebrows. "We try."

He cleared his throat. "You said Kurt asked you here?"

"He did."

"I wouldn't want to throw you off the property as if you were some curious lookie-loo. Let me enter your arrival, and I'll get you past this barrier and out of the rain."

He pulled a small notebook out of his breast pocket and glanced at his watch before scribbling in it. Then he held up the yellow tape for Liesl to limbo. "Better hope they don't want to show you the crime scene. It's grizzly. I'll take you into the lobby. You can wait there while I get Kurt. Don't touch anything."

"Of course not."

Under the roof of the covered entry, Liesl shook out her umbrella. She hesitated to lean it up against the building if this was now a crime scene.

Officer Howard pointed to one of the two farthest columns from the door. "It's out of the way there."

Inside, the officer motioned for her to stay. He turned and disappeared into the display room on the right.

As she stood waiting, Liesl spotted a lanky man and a tiny woman, both decked out in jumpsuits identifying them as investigators with the State Police. They scurried around gathering and dusting things inside the gift shop.

Their presence gave her pause. Crime scene techs from the State Police? Officer Howard calling the crime scene grizzly? Something awful happened here.

Then it hit her. The museum board's chairman was out of the country for at least another week. Dr. Charles Barnes and his wife were gadding about in Europe to celebrate their

fortieth wedding anniversary. They'd been planning this trip for over a year.

Kurt must be aware Dr. Barnes was unavailable, so he'd called her. She was on the museum's board of directors, currently in town, and a phone call away.

Officer Howard, as good as his word, produced Kurt, then tipped his hat to her and exited.

Kurt pulled off plastic gloves as he approached and placed them in his sport coat pocket. His face showed nothing but business.

"Thank you for coming, Liesl. It was a bother, but we need you." He reached inside his coat and withdrew a notebook and pen, flipping to a certain page on the pad.

She accepted his cop face—expected it under these circumstances. "I'm happy to help. What's happened?"

Avoiding eye contact, he hesitated before answering. "I'm going to ask some questions first, if you don't mind."

"I do mind." Liesl crossed her arms. In silence, she tossed him the best stink eye she could muster.

"I don't want to discuss the details we've found so far, as those details might influence your answers."

"I tell the truth. I can't imagine any circumstance that would cause me to alter my answers."

Kurt drew in a slow breath. "I'm sorry. I'm not trying to make you mad. Allow me some grace this Sunday. Please. This is a mess."

After a moment's hesitation, she took pity on him. She disarmed her stink eye glare and uncrossed her arms. "Okay."

"Who are members of the board of directors, besides you and Dr. Barnes?"

Her stomach turned. "Oh, no! Has one of the board members been hurt?"

"No. Nothing like that."

She relaxed and ticked them off with her fingers. “Patricia Sizemore, Paul Duck, Barbara Burson, Dr. Johnson, Mr. Van de Berg, Mrs. Whats-her-name from California—and Mr. Hardesty.”

Kurt scribbled in his pad for a moment and then asked, “Which Hardesty?”

Considering the passel of Hardestys in town, Kurt’s question was reasonable. “Thomas. He was a classmate of Aunt Suzanne’s. He’s the local farmers’ representative for the board, even though he’s mostly retired. His son Freddy handles most work on their place.”

“That’s a lot of people on the board.”

“Nine. Not really, considering the average board size. Many boards have more, some who contribute a lot of money. On this one, Mr. Van de Berg and Paul Duck are generous patrons. Patricia Sizemore too.”

“And your Aunt Suzanne?”

“I’m sure she was when she was alive. It was nice of them to ask me to fill her position.”

“Who runs the day-to-day operations of the museum?”

She fought to contain her exasperation. “You already know the answer to that. Mark Detmeier.”

Kurt ignored her annoyance. “Any idea how long he’s been the curator?”

“Five, maybe six years.”

“Has the board had any issues with him?”

“What issues are you talking about?”

“Misbehavior? Questionable accounting? Display items missing after inventory?”

Liesl frowned. “No. I’ve only heard compliments about his work. The museum keeps growing, getting donations, and has more visitors each year. He’s doing his job well.”

She studied Kurt briefly, checking that his hazel eyes were

directed at her. "Mark's mother was one of Aunt Suzanne's best friends. I've been acquainted with the family since I was a child. Never hear any gossip about them."

Kurt chuckled. "Except that old Mrs. Detmeier had her car and keys taken away."

"True that. Some of Aunt Suzanne's landscaping was a victim of her unfortunate driving. I believe Nicole contacted her son after that incident." Liesl smiled. "I don't feel guilty, though. Mrs. Detmeier no longer had any business behind the wheel of any moving vehicle."

"Okay." He flipped a page on his pad. "Tell me about the security system."

Liesl gathered her thoughts. "Donnie Davis's business is the provider. The museum has alarms and heat sensors. The doors and windows should be armed. You're aware of those large carport-type buildings outside?"

"Yes."

"Well, they house the hefty antique farming equipment, but I don't believe they're wired. However, the expensive, sizable pieces of equipment have alarms. Something to keep thieves from loading them up and carrying them away."

"No cameras? Inside or outside?"

"I'm not aware of any. You'll have to verify that with Donnie."

"Who has a code to the alarm system?"

"You mean to get in after hours?"

"Yes," Kurt said. "After hours."

"Not me," Liesl said. "I doubt any of the board has that access, except Dr. Barnes. Again, you'd have to verify that."

"I will when he returns from his trip." He made more notes. "So you doubt any board member has a key, except Dr. Barnes."

"That's correct."

“Same with the alarm code?”

“Right. This is merely a museum. There would be no reason for anyone on the board to be here after hours. The curator should have access, but that’s it, in my opinion.”

“So, how does the cleaning crew get in?”

Liesl hesitated. “I didn’t consider them. They must have a key and access to the alarm system. Unless there is some way they can disarm the system for cleaning without knowing the passcode.”

“They may have issued her a separate code for one entrance. I’ll check with the security company about that. What’s their cleaning schedule?”

“Don’t know, but I’ve never seen them during regular business hours. Mr. Detmeier will know.”

They were both distracted for a moment as the crime scene crew moved from the gift shop to the reception area. Kurt waved Liesl away from the counter.

As she moved, she put her hand on his arm. “Please tell me what’s happened.”

He held up one finger. “One more area to discuss, then I will. Promise.” He gave her a pleading glance before proceeding with his question. “What is valuable inside this museum?”

“You mean in historical significance? Or worth a lot of money?” She pointed at the brass register. “That beautiful cash register is worth a lot as an antique, but it could be worth more melted down for the brass.”

His eyebrows rose. “You’re thinking like a thief. The register is too massive for a simple ‘smash and grab’ theft. It would require at least two people to lift it. Also, you’d want a wheelbarrow or dolly to load it on before taking it to a waiting van or truck.”

“It’s heavy.” She eyed the register. “You’re right. Two people, minimum.”

“Considering either historical or monetary value, what are the most valuable pieces?”

“Several of those antique tractors and combines outside. The ones with alarms.”

He scribbled on his notepad. “And inside?”

She considered for a second. “My guess will be the Civil War items recovered from area farms. There are coins, buttons, belt buckles, sabers, ammunition—so many items. I can’t list them all.”

“Where are they housed?”

Liesl turned toward the display room. “They’re in the shelves in there.” She waved her hand toward the threshold. “The bookshelf-cabinet combination.”

“On the north wall? With five or six levels of shelves and glass doors?”

“Yeah. They’re antique, or nearly. They’re called barrister’s bookcases. In those really old ones, each shelf is a separate wooden piece with a glass front that opens. They stack on top of each other. Civil War memorabilia is kept in the locking shelves.”

“So, if someone were to break the glass and climb on the shelves to get to the upper levels?”

She gasped. “The shelves aren’t attached. They’d slide right off if you pulled on them. Did one of the cleaning people do that and get hurt?”

“Well, someone got hurt, but it wasn’t anyone from the cleaning service. A cleaner came this morning and found a dead man. He was most likely a thief and appears to have died from a fall.”

Kurt turned to face her, his eyes searching hers. “I’m not

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trying to give the impression that his possible criminal intention here allows us to take this matter lightly. As a detective, I speak for the dead, no matter their motives or their occupation.”

His need to explain this warmed her heart. “I understand. That’s why they picked you to be a detective. You care about the victims. All victims.”

“Exactly. You may have solved why he fell. If he was climbing up those shelves in the belief they were one bookcase, that would explain how he pulled a section down on himself.”