

# SINS OF THE PAST

A ROMANTIC SUSPENSE NOVELLA COLLECTION

**MISSING** BY DEE HENDERSON

**SHADOWED** BY DANI PETTREY

**BLACKOUT** BY LYNETTE EASON



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# MISSING

DEE HENDERSON

# ONE

John Graham, police chief for Cheyenne, Wyoming, knew the value of remaining calm in a crisis. He'd learned that during the early days of his career working undercover, when often it was his own life on the line. But he could feel that control slipping now as he strode down the O'Hare Airport concourse.

His mother was missing. The last confirmed sighting of her was Monday afternoon around 4:30 p.m. at the retirement village where she lived. It was now going on 9:00 p.m. Tuesday. That was too many hours for a son to take without it causing a great deal of internal turmoil.

People moved out of his way, either the grim set to his face or the pace of his stride making it clear he wasn't a man they wanted to slow down.

"Chief Graham."

He spotted a dark-haired slender woman in a police jacket aiming in his direction, and he moved across the traffic flow to meet her, accepting her handshake. Her fingers were chilled.

He wondered briefly where her gloves were on a cold December evening in Chicago.

“I’m Lieutenant Sharon Noble with the Riverside PD. I’m very sorry about your mother,” she said, sounding genuinely concerned. “I’m primary on the case. I figured it would be faster to fill you in on the drive than have you face a fifty-person search and try to get an orderly sense of what is happening. Do you have checked bags?”

He tipped his head toward his carry-on. “This is it.”

“I’ve got a squad car waiting.”

She sounded competent, and he felt just a bit of the stress lift.

She aimed for the terminal entrance without more than a pause in her stride. “I’ve got a concealed-carry permit if you require it,” she said over her shoulder.

She was skirting TSA flight regulations and indirectly asking if he’d brought a gun with him while smoothly indicating she wasn’t going to slap his wrist for the infraction. He appreciated her even more. He’d left his duty weapon along with his badge with his deputy chief. “We don’t have her back in a few hours, I’ll take you up on that and will be carrying.”

“With what I’ve already learned about Martha Graham, I’m guessing she raised a smart son.”

“Smart enough.”

“While you were in the air I confirmed your alibi for the last forty-eight hours.”

He narrowed his eyes but nodded. “You didn’t make lieutenant by not checking the obvious. Dad left her comfortably well-off. I’ll inherit, but I don’t plan on doing so for another twenty years.”

“I got that impression when I saw the list of phone calls between Chicago and Cheyenne. I’m told you two are close. All right, continuing to rule out family, she has a sister in Boulder,

Colorado, and a cousin in Wichita, Kansas. Your late father has a younger brother and sister living in Boston, Massachusetts. Anybody significant I'm missing?"

"That's the list."

They stepped out into a below-freezing night, and a car's lights in the pick-up lane flashed. John wore a sheep's-wool-lined coat, heavy gloves, and boots that could handle whatever snow was on the ground. She was in a lined police jacket with freezing hands and uncovered hair, wearing tennis shoes and hoping for traction. He'd like to at least offer the gloves, but she was already headed toward the Riverside Police squad car. She opened the rear door for him, grabbed his duffel bag and dropped it into the trunk, then circled the car to the other side. He ducked his head and climbed in while she also settled into the backseat.

"Officer Jefferies," she said, leaning forward, "this is John Graham, the police chief for Cheyenne, Wyoming."

"Nice to meet you, sir." The driver handed back a drink carrier. Sharon accepted it and the sack that followed. "We have hot coffee and a mega sub sandwich for you, John, while you listen for the next twenty minutes."

Officer Jefferies turned on the overhead lights for the backseat and quickly cut through the airport traffic. Sharon handed over a hot coffee and took the other for herself, wrapping both hands around it. Though John wasn't hungry, he took the sandwich from the sack, knowing food made it possible to run longer and harder on this job. "I'll listen without interrupting."

"Appreciate it. Here's what I know, in contrast to what I suspect. Your mother played bridge Monday afternoon at the home of a Mrs. Emily Chestnut—a nice name for the Christmas season," she mentioned with a smile. "Martha left there shortly after 4:30 p.m. Your mother's car is presently in the parking

lot of the Riverside Retirement Village, in her normal parking place in front of Building Number One. The security gate for the complex is closed at 10:00 p.m., and a guard clears traffic in after that hour. The man on the gate remembers your mom's car being parked there when he went on duty Monday night.

"Friends stopped by your mother's apartment this morning for their usual 'Tuesday Tea at Ten' gathering she hosts every week. Martha didn't answer their knock. They called her apartment phone, got no answer. They called her cell phone, could hear it ring inside, but also got no answer. They assumed your mother had stepped out momentarily to get something and would be right back.

"At 10:12 a.m., with growing concern, Mrs. Heather Jome—who states she's one of your mother's closest friends in the complex—called the staff desk."

He nodded, confirming the ladies' friendship.

"The manager for the Riverside Retirement Village, a lady named Theresa Herth, arrived and unlocked the apartment to conduct a wellness check on the resident. She found the apartment empty. Your mother's purse is sitting on the chair inside the door, cell phone inside, keys missing. It appears she stepped out of her apartment, keys in hand, assuming she would be gone no more than a moment. After that—" she paused—"we don't know."

And the son in him wanted to shudder at those words. He felt his muscles tighten, but only nodded.

Sharon paused to drink more coffee before flipping open a folder. She held out a stack of photos. "Photos of your mother's apartment. There are no obvious signs of a struggle or accident, a rug she might have tripped on, no smear of blood in the shower, nothing disorderly among things on a table, no noticeable items missing from the dresser or desk. The apart-



ment is being printed so we can tell who's been inside. But to me it looks like she had her keys in her hand, stepped out, and whatever's occurred didn't happen there."

He sorted slowly through the photos—the purse on a chair, pillows neat on the couch, mail on the counter, hairbrush on the bathroom sink, jewelry box still full. His heart twisted at all the familiar items from his mother's life. Was this all he'd have left of her? He stopped the thought and wouldn't allow himself to go any further down that road.

Sharon was saying, "The women's bridge group agrees that on Monday afternoon Martha was wearing a red dress with small white dots, black leather shoes, open-circle one-inch earrings, long black dress coat, patterned scarf, and black gloves. I didn't find those items in the apartment."

That was useful information. John flipped rapidly through the photos again.

"It's possible Martha came home Monday and changed, that the dress is already at the dry cleaner," Sharon offered. "Or she may still be wearing the dress. One possibility suggests she stepped out of her apartment Monday evening, the other that she stepped out early this morning. The fact she grabbed her coat and keys suggests she wasn't just going down the hall."

He studied the photo of his mother's bedroom. "She makes her bed as soon as she rises. She always has."

"That's what her friends said. So . . . it could be this morning when she stepped out. I asked if she had a habit of walking over to the commons building to retrieve a newspaper, but the responses were mixed. I didn't find the dress in her closet or a dry-cleaner pickup stub in her purse, which pushes me toward her leaving the apartment Monday evening."

"If that's the case, she was gone twelve hours before someone noticed," he said heavily, wishing he had someone to blame for

that so he would have somewhere to put this pain. Blame himself. He hadn't called to say good-night, which he sometimes did.

Sharon reached over and lightly rested a hand on his arm, extending a small slice of comfort for that pain. "Keys in her hand, she pulls on her coat, leaves her purse and phone, steps out thinking she'd be gone just a moment. And *something* happened. Nobody noticed her absence until midmorning tea."

He knew his mom. She would have returned, been in touch somehow, if it were in her ability to do so. He took a deep breath and let it out. "Keep going," he requested softly.

"My read on the Village manager, Theresa Herth—thirties, competent, organized, well-liked. She doesn't miss much among her staff or among those who live in the Village. Theresa doesn't know of any romantic interests in your mother's life—at least not within the Village community—or of any neighbor disputes, or even something where your mother was trying to mediate a concern among her friends. Affairs happen, there have been divorces in the complex, and a few residents don't speak to one another. But it seems your mother was remarkably free and clear of any social drama going on."

"She's more a live-and-let-live kind of lady," John said. "Well, that's not entirely true," he added. "She loves to help when someone will let her."

Sharon nodded. "That could be useful. Her friends checked your mother's phone for messages and calls, yet didn't see anything useful. I've been through them and agree. Still, I've got an officer re-creating message and phone traffic as far back as we can go for a deeper assessment. You want the tick-tock or the overview?"

"Give me the tick-tock."

"At 10:45 a.m. Theresa put out a 'locate resident' call to her staff. It sends a photo of your mom to every staff member, and

they have assigned areas they are to visually check—the commons rooms, the bike path, the pool and garden, the parking lots. Staff weren't able to locate Martha and saw no signs of anything amiss. They then started a phone chain, calling her friends, people in her building, looking for someone who had last seen her.

“At 1:00 p.m. the staff began an official walk-through, working off blueprints, initialing where they checked. They called the hospitals in the area. Volunteers began to pass out her photo around the complex and at stores within walking distance of the Village.

“At 4:00 p.m., six hours after they knew Martha was missing, Theresa called the cops. That six-hour time window is the agreed protocol between the police department and the Village.

“We wouldn't normally work a missing adult in the first forty-eight hours unless there's evidence of suspicious circumstances. I don't like what I see here, but I don't have evidence that points to foul play. So officially we're treating this case as an elderly missing medical. It lets me bring in uniforms before those forty-eight hours have passed.”

“I appreciate that. Just out of curiosity, why the six-hour protocol?”

“At under four hours we 'locate' too many seniors taking a nap. At eight hours we've probably lost whatever daylight is left, any eyewitnesses, and so forth. There aren't enough cops to handle all the alerts, but six hours tends to put us on the cases we should be working. This one is a suspicious missing, even if we're calling it something else. A cop's mom is a unique case. Not simply that you are one of us,” she added, “but you're high profile in law enforcement. We'll get to that later.”

“Having manpower on it early may be the difference.”

“Let's hope that proves true. What we've done since the call

came in: we're interviewing people, trying to fill in and tighten the timeline, and we're doing a systematic sweep of the property. The Riverside Retirement Village is a complex of six apartment buildings and has—" she pulled a sheet of notes from her folder—"two hundred forty-two residents, fifty-one full- and part-time staff, a commons building, spacious gardens, bike path, enclosed pool, and miscellaneous support buildings. All this spread across forty-one acres. We're not going to complete that sweep tonight. We've got fifty people working on the search—half are cops, half volunteers. I pulled in those from the community who have helped before, and I've got a number of cops on their own time since this is a cop's mom. But it's a lot of area to recheck."

"To do it right, it's going to take time," he agreed, already feeling that duration rest heavily on him.

"We have uniforms knocking on doors and asking for permission to do visual checks inside apartments, focusing first on your mother's building and the adjoining one. The residents are mostly mid-sixties to mid-eighties, and I've agreed to stop knocking on the oldest residents' doors at 9:00 p.m., 10:00 p.m. for the younger ones. We'll start again first thing in the morning.

"We're pulling security-camera footage—there's surprisingly little of it within the complex, I'm sorry to say—from the Village and from businesses within the immediate area. We've locked down the place for outgoing traffic, and cops are checking any vehicles before they exit. Background checks on staff and those we can identify who have been on the property are under way."

"You're really moving on this."

"I'm treating it like it's my mother."

He appreciated the sentiment. "Her car?"

"They moved from the apartment to the car for prints and photographs. I don't have those yet. We need to know who

was in your mother's life, and the more prints, photos, phone calls and the like I can gather means that people we interview can't lie to me."

She was taking the right steps. He just wished for a solid lead, that he could be out there *doing something*.

"If we don't have her located by morning, we'll release her photo to the media in time for the 7:00 a.m. newscasts," Sharon continued. "Police will handle the early-morning interviews, but if we don't have solid info by noon, we'll talk about you doing interviews to increase media coverage."

"Agreed."

She nodded ahead at the snarled traffic. "We're about to arrive at the Village complex. Any questions at this point?"

"I can stick with you?"

She smiled. "I'm mostly accommodating. It's not often I get to direct around a chief of police. I'll employ you where I can."

"Thanks."

"If you need to go somewhere during the next forty-eight hours, Officer Jefferies here—or his partner—will be your driver. I want to be able to locate you quickly if necessary."

Jefferies cleared the front-gate security and parked. John started to get out when Sharon put her hand on his arm. "Give us a minute, Jefferies."

"Sure, Lieutenant." The officer stepped out and closed the door.

"You know the most logical answer to this, John. A cop's mother has disappeared. I'm going to assume you're willing to consider this a kidnapping for ransom, and you're prepared to get a phone call."

He'd made that assumption before he boarded the flight out of Cheyenne. "My phone is being tapped, traced, and recorded. Anything to my private line back in Cheyenne, home or office,

they'll reroute to this cell. The phone in my mother's apartment is now being monitored?"

"Routed to me."

He sighed. "If that's what this is about, I should have gotten that call by now."

"Or they're waiting for your face to appear on screen." She pushed open her door. "Command center first, then I walk you around—to her car, her apartment, and put you to work. You know her better than any of us. Maybe you'll notice something we've missed."



The commotion was more than a low buzz. That was his first impression as he followed Sharon into the commons building. In the lobby, tables had been set up, and volunteers supervised by officers studied maps and marked them up, talking about locations where they had already given out flyers and places they had checked. The smell of coffee and hot chocolate mingled with woodsmoke from the fireplace now burning brightly to counter the chill from the constantly opening doors.

A woman barreled into John for a tight hug that stopped him in his tracks. He recognized her when he could see more than the top of her silvery head. "Annabelle, you know my mother well," he said. "We'll find her."

"We're mostly filling coffeepots for the searchers and calling people."

"It's help and it all matters," he assured with another hug.

He followed Sharon to the conference room where the police had set up shop. Sixteen people were working the room, a tight fit. The walls were taped with street maps, blueprints of the buildings, large sheets of butcher paper in place of a

whiteboard, lists of names being marked off, checklists running down assignments. This room was about organizing what was happening in the lobby area and beyond.

But it was a cop-driven search center, and when John read *morgue, homicide desk, sex registry, accident calls*, he felt his chest tighten. But he would have put them on the list himself. He moved on to more positive items, such as the timeline. A snowflake sketch showing Martha's links to various people, including her friends here and a few from the past, neighbors, former co-workers. He didn't see anybody who was even close to being an enemy; he didn't think she had one. His snowflake would not be so tidy. Those who might harm her would come at her because of him.

He spotted an item written in blue marker on the lead board. "Gray van?"

An officer leaning over a table turned at the question. "Pulled through the parking lot Monday evening at dusk, slow-rolled, didn't stop. Noticed by two residents walking back from the commons building. They thought it was a delivery van, but there was no logo on its side."

Sharon nodded toward the officer. "John, this is Detective Bryon Slate. He's coordinating matters. Bryon, Martha's son, John Graham. Tell me you've got the van on some camera footage."

"We're looking. I don't think it's going to be our answer, Lieutenant. The couple who described it were walking to Martha's building. They swear no one exited or entered the van. It simply circled and left. They would have seen Martha if she'd been outside or just coming out. I've got two people looking for some other video on it, but the van didn't come around again that I can pinpoint. We'll nail this down. For right now though, it's an anomaly."

“Okay. What else?”

“Officer Martinez, run that video you found for the lieutenant.”

A uniformed woman headed over to the laptop feeding the large wall screen. She typed, and soon grainy security-camera footage appeared on-screen. John walked with Sharon across the room to better see it.

“The Sonic Restaurant at the end of the block has a camera facing south,” the officer explained. “This is today, 6:19 a.m.” She pressed pause. “That stone pillar at the edge of the image, that’s the front gate to this property. You can see the security gate arm is up—they open the drive at 6:00 a.m.” She restarted the video. “Normal street traffic going by. That white van entering is the newspaper delivery truck. Next a smaller cargo van, that’s the bakery delivery. Nothing for three minutes, then this.” She stopped the video on a dark-blue sedan, its driver’s door displaying a taxi logo.

“We called the company to see about the pickup. They had no pickup on the books for the Village. We can’t see the cab medallion number from the angles we have. It could be a driver making some extra money off the books, but a 6:30 a.m. pickup seems like something scheduled. Cabs are a common sight here, since a third of the residents no longer drive. The thing is, we can’t find a resident who’s currently out of town, or one who left early this morning and came back later.” She ran forward the tape. “The cab leaves twelve minutes later. It’s an anomaly, like the gray van.”

“If you’re looking for inconspicuous, a taxi would do that for you,” Sharon said.

“I’ll find more footage, get a medallion number. They’ve got questions about taxis on the interview list. Hopefully we’ll find someone who saw this one.”



“Good. Any video of Martha’s car returning from her bridge game on Monday?”

“Maybe.”

“Explain.”

Officer Martinez cued up another piece of video. “The same Sonic Restaurant security-camera footage. Unfortunately, that view frequently gets blocked. This is Monday at 4:30 p.m.” They watched the street traffic. Cars regularly came and went through the Village gate. The image abruptly became gray metal with a sliver on the right of continuing street traffic. “A semitruck is unloading at the restaurant for twenty-two minutes,” she said.

She fast-forwarded. The obstruction was gone, the image back to street traffic moving by, the occasional car entering or exiting the front gate.

“I’ve been through the footage between 4:30 and 10:00 p.m.,” Officer Martinez said, “when the security guard says he knows Martha’s car was in her parking space. Since I never see her car enter, I can assume she turned into the front gate during a period when this camera view was blocked. I can give you six windows of time, fifty-seven minutes total, when the view was blocked. That’s a lot of traffic coming and going that I can’t see. And once it gets past dusk, the lighting becomes a problem.” Now on fast-forward again, the streetlights were coming on, and the ability to distinguish vehicles dwindled to shapes seen only by their headlights. “The most I can give you after dusk is that a car entered, and a rough idea of its model by the type of headlights.”

“You have those blocked times written out?”

“I have them as Post-it notes on the timeline. We need to find another video source. Her car six blocks away coming this direction, something like that, will give us the correct time window for her return. I’ll find something to tighten it down, Lieutenant.”

“Anything that refines our timeline will be a great help.” Sharon scanned the room and the boards. “Bryon, what do you want to work next?”

“Felons in the area. Turns out three with records work here on staff.”

“I’ll be back to help on that.” Sharon turned to John. “We’re good at this part of the job. I’d like to take you over to your mother’s apartment. You’ll be more useful to me there. You know her best, and that matters when assessing what’s there and what’s not.”

“Let’s go,” he said.

She led the way out. He glanced at his watch and saw it was nearing 10:30 p.m. “Lieutenant, I’d like to speak briefly with Annabelle and the other friends of Mom’s who are here—try to convince them to get some sleep for a few hours, if nothing else.”

“Check the library down the hall on the left. They were holding vigil for her there earlier this evening.”

He nodded, skirted the other volunteers, and went to locate Annabelle. Five of his mother’s friends waited together. They turned his direction as he walked over. “Thanks for being here, ladies,” he began as he sat down. “I understand Mom stood you up for Tuesday Tea at Ten.” The lighthearted comment was just the right touch for the moment.

“Oh, she would have hated to be the center of all this attention,” Annabelle told him, looking around the group at their nods of agreement. “Do they know anything, John? Anything they aren’t telling us yet?”

“She came home from bridge. What happened after that is simply conjecture. She has her coat, so I don’t think she’s cold. She must have her keys since they haven’t been found. In the next twenty-four hours the cops are going to cover a lot of ground, and that should answer some questions. I expect Mom will be

home by then.” They blinked at that reassurance, and he saw a measure of hope return to their weary faces.

“Can we do anything to help?” several of them asked.

“Coffee for the searchers, prayers for my mother’s safe return, a sympathetic smile when I sit down to wait with you awhile. It all matters. You keep us going; you remind the volunteers by the simple fact of your presence how important Martha is.” He scanned the circle of faces and knew his mother had been right to stay in Chicago in the years since his father passed away. She had good friends here.

He saw Sharon in the doorway. “Please, head back to your apartments now,” he suggested as he stood, “get some sleep, come back in the morning to help keep the volunteers organized. It’s likely going to be double the number of volunteers tomorrow, and what might seem like small acts of service do matter. I’ll be around until Mom is safely home. If you need me, a message at the front desk will get to me.” He paused to hug Annabelle, said his goodbyes to the others.

Sharon handed him a coffee mug. “You called friends in to help before you left Wyoming?”

He wasn’t expecting the question, and it took a second. He smiled. “It’s what a smart man does when his mother goes missing.”

“I’ve got two from FBI now in the conference room, and a Chicago PD captain who says you used to work for him unloading heat-detection equipment. He plans to sweep the bike path and surrounding landscape when the night is the coldest.”

He hated the reality of it, but was glad that would be done. “It needs to be cleared off the list.”

“Agreed. And I’m accepting all help,” Sharon mentioned, “wherever it comes from. How many more friends should I expect?”

“By morning or in the next hour?”

She smiled. “I’ll take them as surprises then when they arrive.” She nodded to the side door. “Let’s slip out this way.”

She still didn’t have any gloves. He held out his hand for the binder she carried and tucked it under his arm, and she shoved her hands in her pockets.

“How are you holding up?” she asked.

“A long plane ride with nothing to do but think the worst, followed by the reality of this—I’m glad I’m not in charge. It’s different when it’s personal. The assignment at her apartment will help. I’ve got a few good hours in me yet tonight.”

Sharon nodded. “It’s hard leaving family to others, but Bryon is good, and I’ve been doing missing-persons cases for seven years. We’re going to make a lot more headway over the next hours.”

She pointed out his mother’s car as they approached Building One. “Would you like an officer to open the car for you to take a look?”

“Got photos of the interior?”

“Yes.”

“It’ll be easier to work from photos on a cold night.”

He counted windows to the second floor, fourth window . . . the lights were on in his mother’s apartment. “Do you think she’s outside in this cold?” he asked.

Sharon removed her hand from her pocket to squeeze his arm. She didn’t try to answer.



They bypassed the elevator and walked up the stairs to the second floor. Wide hallways, carpet barely showing wear, good lighting, neat apartment numbers and traditional doorbells—he’d approved when his mother decided to move here. The officer

outside the apartment nodded to the lieutenant, then looked over at him. “I’m sorry about your mother, Chief Graham.”

He heard the sincerity in the comment and nodded as he read the uniform tag. “Thank you, Stephens.”

Sharon opened the apartment door and stepped back for him. All the lights were on, even the tiny canister lights shining down in the glass display cases. In preparation for Christmas, his mom had laced a strand of white lights around her kitchen window curtains, and they blinked off and on.

It was all so *normal*. His mother’s purse still on the chair inside the door, its contents now neatly set out on the side table.

He walked slowly around. The pillows, magazines fanned neatly on the coffee table, her music selections. The faint smell of lilac, no doubt from the sachets she tucked in drawers to scent her world.

He saw the wall of photos, and a wave of emotion came over him. His father, family vacations, his own face looking back with a wide grin and a baseball bat slung over his shoulder, his mother with friends here in the retirement village—all capturing rich memories. He blinked hard, and his hand fisted. She’d had a good life here. And it seemed likely she’d never walk into this apartment again. . . .

Sharon silently stepped past him. A stray coil of red yarn from his mom’s needlework lay half hidden beneath the couch. She bent, picked it up, set it on the desk. “Your mom loves life.”

He nodded, not trusting his voice, but appreciating the present-tense statement.

“We’re going to give this back to her, John. This place and her friends.”

“Yes.” He took a deep breath. “Where should I start?”

She came to stand beside him. “Give yourself a minute first.”

“I’m okay. It caught me hard, but I’m okay.”

She studied his face, and nodded. “Hang up your coat. I’ll start some coffee.”

He opened the closet and did so.

It was a spacious apartment, but not too large: a nice-sized living room, small kitchen, two bedrooms, bath, stacked laundry machines. His mother had filled the space with comfortable furniture, and everything he saw told him she enjoyed living here among her friends, her things. He walked into the kitchen and accepted the cup of coffee Sharon offered. “What do you need from me here?”

“What is here that doesn’t fit your mom? She strikes me as a lady who loves to entertain. Tuesday Tea at Ten is like a calling card for her personality. Whomever she went to meet has likely been here as her guest. Find me a guest I can define by a type of flavored coffee they like, the type of candy they prefer, the type of cheese in the fridge, something that says ‘not my mom.’ I’m thinking if a woman as vibrant as your mother had a man in her life or wanted to have a male someone in her life, she would make him welcome here with what she kept on hand.”

“She would have mentioned to me if she was seeing someone. Or considering it.”

Sharon tilted her head and smiled. “Maybe she is the one woman who actually would confide in her son. But speaking as a female, I can dream and hope for a lot of things before I’m ready to tell family about it.”

He smiled back. “Point taken. I’ll look. She did have strong preferences for many things, so it shouldn’t be hard to spot what doesn’t fit.”

“I also need you to build me a bio of your mom. I can read her calendar, look at names in her address book, but I don’t have the context of *knowing her*. Look at her receipts, her checkbook, her credit-card bills, her phone records. That folder I brought

over has the printout for her phone—the messages and calls for as far back as we could go, copies of her calendar and address book we’ve been working from. What was Martha doing, who was she talking with? We fill in enough of the blanks, we’ll see the answer to why she went out.”

John could see what she was after. “I’ll dig and pull together that information.”

Sharon finished her coffee, set aside the mug. “I’m going to leave you here and go work with Bryon on the felon list. Call me if you find something we can help you pursue.”

“Got a card?”

She pulled out a business card, motioned him to turn, and used his shoulder to write a number on the back. “Don’t lose that card. It’s like the holy grail of private numbers around here.”

He memorized the number, smiled at her, and slid the card into an inside pocket. “Thanks.”

“We’re going to find her, John.”

“Yes, we will.”

She patted his arm. “I’ll be back in an hour plus.”

Sharon closed the door behind her. John stood in his mother’s apartment, alone for the first time since the call had come in to the Cheyenne Police Department telling him his mother was missing.

He felt cold, overwhelmed, and growing sadder with each hour that passed. He’d fall apart when this was finished, even if they found her, and that reality pressed on him like a mountain. But he wasn’t going to break before it was over. “I’m coming, Mom,” he whispered. “Wherever you are right now, hang on.”

He’d tried to pray for her safety. It wasn’t as though he had any doubt about how much God cared about his mother. Or

himself, for that matter. It was that the emotions of this, the pain of this, was too deep for words. “*Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*” The familiar refrain from the Psalm had been reassuring him since Cheyenne. He looked up with another heartfelt plea to God, then began to carefully look around.

*All right*, he thought, *this is doable*. His mom liked to keep ticket stubs from movies she had seen, restaurant menus marked with dishes she’d enjoyed, coupons for shops and businesses she frequented. He could figure out where she’d been, where she might go, if he studied the pieces closely enough.

John walked over to the desk, pulled out a pad and pen, walked back into the kitchen. He began with a systematic search through the cupboards. Sharon was right. His mother was a natural hostess, and a guest to her home would be treated to what they preferred in food and drink. What didn’t fit with her own preferences? Who else has been here, and why?



John was comparing printouts of the phone calls and messages with his mother’s calendar when he heard a soft knock at the door, and Sharon stepped in.

“Quiet in here,” she noted. “I figured you would have found music to break the silence.”

“My thoughts are busy enough to keep me occupied,” he replied, setting aside the paperwork and swinging the desk chair around to face her.

“Finding anything?”

He rubbed tired eyes. “I didn’t know she was singing in a choir, helping a florist make Christmas wreaths, going out to lunch regularly with Bobby Sail—a banker, according to his business card—and reading through all the mysteries of Sue



Grafton. My mother was an open book to me, and still I missed layers of these details.”

“That’s why a woman will always be a mystery to a man,” Sharon said with a little smile. “We do too much to ever share it all.”

“Well said.” He picked up his notes. “She’s happy,” he said, looking at the page. “That’s what a summary of her life looks like.” He shook his head. “I haven’t found any signs of her expenditures changing recently. What she was doing, who she was talking with, fit with this place and the people now around her. The phone logs show names that seem familiar to me, either from here or from our prior neighborhood. It’s going to come down to her living her life when she stepped out of this apartment with her keys in her hand.”

“A normal week.”

“It feels like it. Maybe someone in the choir was dropping by sheet music, and she ran downstairs to get it; or she had borrowed a book and went out to return it and swap for another one; or Mom walked over to the commons building to mail a letter—she still writes letters by hand. It’s going to be simple, Sharon. She left this apartment for a simple reason.”

She considered that answer. “The trouble she ran into may be unrelated to what she intended to do. It came at her from another direction. Possibly the wrong place, wrong time.”

“Or,” he suggested, “trouble from me spilled over on to her.”

Sharon nodded. “Tomorrow we’ll get into the undercover work you did here in Chicago. Your FBI friends are already digging there.”

“If someone went after my mother to get me back in Chicago . . .”

“Like I said, a topic for tomorrow,” she said briskly. “It’s too complex to move that rock tonight.” She reached into her

pocket, took out a key. “Cops will be in and out of here tonight. The manager has an empty furnished apartment one floor up, and it makes more sense than a hotel. I had your bag taken there. Bryon will call you if there’s news. I’m heading out now for a few hours of shut-eye myself.”

He didn’t protest. He knew he needed about five hours’ sleep before he tried to go another full day. Sharon without doubt also needed rest. He glanced at her left hand to see if there was a husband waiting for her.

She noticed the look. “A couple of dogs and my sister will likely be waiting up for me. If Kelly’s on her normal schedule, she turns on the lights at the bakery around two a.m. and wakes me up with fresh croissants at seven. A nice arrangement.”

“Sounds like it.” He accepted the key. “Thanks for today, Sharon. For the priority you’ve put on this.”

“You’re welcome, John. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

She disappeared, he heard a few words with the cop outside, and then her footsteps faded down the hall. He looked once more at the paperwork of his mother’s recent life and then closed the folder. He’d seen for himself the cops were good. Bryon and the others would be working through the night to find his mom.

He pushed to his feet. Her son had learned to be a good cop too. Tomorrow she’d be back to this life she loved. Another outcome didn’t bear considering.