

Missing Evidence

Kimber Davis

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Chapter One

“Now, you remind that husband of yours that he’s an elected official and that he needs to listen to the voters.”

Marion McCormick nodded slowly, hoping she didn’t look too bored. She hadn’t planned on getting a lecture in the produce department of the Jackpot grocery store. All she’d wanted to do was come in and buy a few vegetables she could use to make stir-fry for dinner tonight.

She’d expected the trip to take about ten minutes. She hadn’t had a chance to check her watch, but she was pretty sure Mrs. Gates had been harping on her subject for at least fifteen minutes. She couldn’t just walk away, though. Mrs. Gates attended every commission meeting. Marion knew that because she went herself.

When your husband was the County Judge it was prudent to pay attention to things that were happening in the county in case someone ever jumped you in the grocery store...which was exactly what was happening right now.

“Mrs. Gates, the commissioners are going to look at this situation long and hard before they make a decision. As always, they consider all the sides. You know that.”

“Do they? Widening that road up to the Oklahoma border would be a huge mistake. It would be a huge waste of money. It would be a huge burden on the taxpayers.”

I’m getting a *huge* headache listening to you complain, Marion wanted to scream at her.

“Just the same, that road is used by local residents, and it is in disrepair,” Marion said. “And it’s a country road, not a state one, which means the county is responsible for the upkeep. We have to consider all things, including how the county would be liable if there were an accident there.”

“Hogwash.” Mrs. Gates snorted. “People need to be responsible for themselves. If they’re driving that way they need to watch out for the potholes and go ‘round them.”

Marion fought back the urge to remind the woman that some of the potholes on that road were the size of small cars. That road hadn’t been repaired in years. She also wanted to remind her that just two months ago, the older woman had been involved in a fender-bender and had blamed it on a faulty traffic light and threatened to sue the city of Belle’s Gap.

“Remind your husband that the county hasn’t taken action on our request for funds for the botanical gardens, which would include a community gardens for people to gather food. Of course they’d have to work it in order to be able to harvest there, but it will still help feed some of our county residents.”

“Yes, it would.” This time, Marion did glance at her watch. She had less than an hour before Dallas would be home, and she liked to be there when he arrived, that is if she wasn’t working a shift at the Sheriff’s Department. Right now she was on four days off, though, with three left. She had things she needed to get done today, and a proposal of her own that she wanted to put to her husband.

“I realize you have things to do,” Mrs. Gates said. “Just remind your husband that I vote in every election.”

“I certainly will.” Marion gave her a sweet smile. “You have a good day, Mrs. Gates.”

“You also, Mrs. McCormick.” She wheeled her cart away and Marion fought back laughter. She had to hand it to the woman, she had spunk. Marion hoped that when she was Mrs. Gates’ age that she was still going and blowing and threatening to not vote for a candidate unless he did she wanted.

Not that the threat would change Dallas’s mind. He’d told her just last night that the road was in such disrepair that they were considering closing it off until the repairs could be started. There was no way the commissioners would divert funds from there to the gardening project; no matter how much Mrs. Gates complained.

Marion made her way to the zucchini and summer squash stacked side by side on a case against the wall. She picked up several of each, knowing how much her husband loved stir-fry. After that she grabbed up some onions and peppers. She was just heading toward the mushrooms when her cell phone rang.

She checked the read out and grinned. “Hello, Judge.”

“Mrs. McCormick, how are you?” Without waiting for an answer he continued, “Imagine my surprise when I came home, early, expecting to find my beautiful wife and all I find is an empty house.”

“You’re at home?” She grabbed a package of pre-sliced mushrooms. She always tried to take shortcuts when she could.

“I snuck out.” She imagined him in the living room of their newly-remodeled home, kicking back on the couch. In the year and a half since they’d been married she’d learned his habits well. His favorite place to sit after work was not the recliner, but the couch. He said it was because there was room for both of them on there, and they’d made it a favorite spot for making out.

It was also a great spot to use for spanking. After the room had been fully remodeled that was the first activity that had taken place in there. Dallas had sat down in the middle of the couch and patted his knee.

“Let’s break it in right,” he’d said. “Come over here and let me spank that fantastic bottom of yours.”

She’d given him a flirtatious look, and then wiggled her hips as she walked to him. That particular spanking had been incredible, his hand slapping down on just the right spot, the mixture of pain and pleasure making her quiver with need. And he’d taken her right there, on the new couch, in the newly finished room.

Over the next few months they’d finished every room in the house, tearing down walls and replacing sheetrock, painting, putting up molding and refinishing floors. They’d completely gutted the kitchen, knocking out the wall between it and the utility room, making a huge kitchen that contained all the newest appliances.

They’d also widened the backdoor entrance, making a hallway that led to three more rooms, including what Marion referred to as a “wickedly large master bedroom,” that had a huge bay window that overlooked the wooded area behind the house.

It was one of her favorite places in the house, and one of her favorite places to be spanked.

Now that the house was finished, though, they had nothing to take up their weekends except each other. Dallas’s sons were on a two-month trip to the Caribbean, staying in a house owned by their mother and her new husband. Marion knew he’d wanted them to stay with him this summer, but they’d been excited about the trip, so he hadn’t raised any objections.

They were supposed to be back in August, and they’d set up a two-week visit with her father. Marion knew it didn’t make up for the two-months they were supposed to spend here for the summer, but she didn’t say anything to Dallas about it. She knew that if he wanted to talk to her about his feelings he would.

In the meantime she made sure he was never bored in the evenings.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there,” she said softly, putting a few apples in her cart. “I’m getting some food to cook for dinner tonight, stir fry.”

“Sounds delicious,” he said.

“Yes, I was waylaid by Mrs. Gates in the produce department. I’m supposed to remind you that she votes in every election.”

He chuckled. “She’s probably not going to vote for me in the next election. We’re going to go ahead with the road improvement project. It’s long overdue, and I’m not really sure why. Not many people use the road because it’s in such bad shape, true, we’re going to change all that. There are still funds for her gardening project, just not the amount that she wants.”

“She’s going to be one pissed-off woman,” Marion said with a laugh. She looked around the store, and then decided to get a loaf of French bread so she could make French toast in the morning. Dallas loved it, along with a few links of sausage.

As she made her way to the bakery, Marion thought about what was in the freezer, trying to remember if there was sausage up there. She didn’t want to ask him because she wanted breakfast to be a surprise. After she picked up the bread, she turned the cart toward the meat section, deciding it was better to buy it and have extra than to have none at all.

She’d just rounded the end of an aisle when she saw Mrs. Gates. The woman’s voice carried. She was touting her gardening project to Mrs. Murphy, who was nodding even though from the look on the other woman’s face, Marion was pretty sure she was experiencing the same feelings Marion had just a little while ago while Mrs. Gates was talking to her.

The section with the sausage products was behind Mrs. Gates. Leaving her cart in the aisle, Marion went over and grabbed a package of the turkey links that Dallas liked. She hurried back to her cart and turned it toward the checkout counter as soon as she could. She didn’t want Mrs. Gates to see her again. Even though she’d let her out of the conversation earlier, Marion was pretty sure she’d grab her again and restate her case.

And Marion had better things to do, like go home to her husband, cook dinner and cuddle in his arms. And maybe, just maybe, she’d get a spanking tonight, too.

“When are they going to start on the project?” Marion took Dallas’s dirty plate from in front of him and headed toward the sink. When they’d gotten married she didn’t think she would enjoy housewifely chores, like doing the dishes while he sat there and talked about his work.

But she loved it, every minute of it. Watching him lean back in his chair, his stomach full from the meal they’d cooked together, was one of the things she enjoyed most. They cleaned the house together, traded laundry chores and even traded turns on the riding lawn mower.

But for some reason doing the dishes after dinner was something she wasn’t ready to let go of. She wasn’t sure what it meant. Of course she didn’t do many of the dishes, since the dishwasher did all the work.

All she had to do was load and unload.

“We’re set for them to start as soon as we vote, and that’s on Monday,” he said. “I’m sure Mrs. Gates will be there to call us all morons, but we have a responsibility to the residents to protect them and keeping the roads safe is one way to do it. I may not be able to vote, as the county judge, but I sit in with the commission and give them my opinion, and that will be to go ahead with the project. I’m pretty sure the commissioners will agree with me.”

She went back over to the table and straddled the chair he was sitting in. She sat down on his thighs and interlocked her fingers behind his neck. "They'll believe you because you're the best county judge in the history of Coldwater County."

He pulled her down for a kiss, taking her lips like he was a commando on a mission. Desire rushed through her. Of course it was this way every time he kissed her, every time he took her in his arms.

"I'm sorry you had to put up with Mrs. Gates," he said when the kiss broke. "How can I make it up to you?"

"Oh I don't know..." she toyed with the buttons on his shirt. "You could spank me."

Marion wiggled her eyebrows at him, savoring the dark, seductive look that came over his face.

"Shall I spank you, or someone else?"

Oh man, if she wasn't careful she was going to lose it. Role playing during spanking was one of his more colorful suggestions. The first time she's resisted, saying it sounded too strange. But she'd come to love it. They did it once or twice a month, and it was usually something he surprised her with, setting it into motion by saying something off the wall that confused her for a few moments, until she realized what he was doing.

This was the first time since they'd started the practice that he'd asked her if she wanted to play.

She didn't answer him at first, and he winked at her, then a stern look came over his face.

"Are you the manager of this restaurant?"

Butterflies took flight in her belly. "Yes, I am."

"Well, I have a complaint." He pulled her hands away from where she continued toying with his buttons. "You were my waitress, and as my waitress you started coming on to me." He looked down to where the top few buttons were undone on his shirt.

"So?" She shrugged. "You liked it."

"You are awfully fresh. What made you think you could get away with it?"

"I repeat, you liked it." She struggled against where he held her hands in his. "Let me go and I'll show you exactly how much you like it."

"I don't think so." He glared at her, and if she didn't know he was kidding she might think he was actually angry with her. She supposed that's what people saw in his courtroom

when they came in to contest a ticket from either herself or one of the other deputies. She knew he didn't give in to people when they tried to get out of things, just like he didn't give in to Mrs. Gates.

"I think your fresh behavior deserves punishment." He pushed on her slightly, trying to get her to stand. Marion held her ground, pushing her thighs against his.

"No way, buster. What needs to happen here is a good, old-fashioned seduction, instigated by me."

She leaned down and kissed him, not surprised when he responded with heat, his tongue pressing against her lips. She didn't open for him, though, instead pulling away. "I thought I said I wanted to be one the one doing the seducing."

"And I thought I said you needed a spanking." This time when he tried to dislodge her from his lap he succeeded. He kept hold of her, though, so she didn't lose her balance. He kissed her again, and then he moved toward the drawers.

Anticipation raced through her, because she knew what was coming now. He was going to spank her with a wooden spoon. She rather enjoyed the spankings he gave with wooden spoons. Something about being spanked in the kitchen excited her. Maybe that's why she enjoyed doing dishes while he sat at the table, because there was a huge chance it could turn into a spanking.

"What do you think you're doing?" she asked in a voice full of fake fear. "I'll...I'll...I'll call the police, I swear I will."

"Go right ahead and try it," he said as he pulled open a drawer. He rummaged through it, the sound of utensils clinking together the only sound until he said, "Here we go." He held up a wooden spoon. "What do you think of this little jewel?"

"I think I'm going to scream!" She opened her mouth, and then shut it as he waved the spoon in front of her nose. "I mean it when I said I'm going to call the cops!"

"Go ahead," he said. "I'll just explain to them that your bottom needs to be red, because you're a naughty waitress who tries to seduce her customers."

"They'll never believe you," she said. "They eat in here all the time and I never try to come on to them. Of course, none of them are as handsome as you are."

"Don't try to flirt your way out of this." He let go of her hand. "Undo your jeans and take them, and your panties, down to your knees."

"And if I say no?"

“Then the spanking will be harder than I’d originally planned.” He glared at her and she thought once again that she was glad he wasn’t really mad. “Do as I said.”

For a minute she thought about saying no. But she didn’t really want to drag this out. She undid her jeans and peeled off slowly, almost moving them past her knees until she remembered his command.

She looked him in the eye as she stopped, and she could see it was a good thing she remembered to stop. If she’d taken them farther down it wouldn’t be a good thing. When she stood she put her thumbs into the waistband of her panties.

“Can’t we leave these on,” she said sweetly.

“You need to learn to follow directions. Do as I said.”

She shrugged and pulled down her panties. After that it didn’t take him long to sit down in the chair and pull her across his lap. Of course she was putting up minimal resistance. She didn’t mind a little bit, to go along with the game, but she had no desire to prolong the suspense.

She wanted spanked.

Now.

He rubbed the spoon against her bottom and she bit back a moan. It wouldn’t do for a horny waitress to act like she was enjoying the spanking she was about to receive, since she’d put up a fuss beforehand.

The spoon slapped down on her bottom and her body jerked, and then the spanking started in earnest, the spoon slapping her, the sting seeping through to her bones. Marion closed her eyes and relaxed into the spanking. She never counted the amount that he gave her, because he always seemed to know exactly how many to give, exactly where to swat, and exactly how to turn her on.

“Not only are you a fresh young woman but you don’t listen, do you?”

Thwack. That one was harder than the rest and Marion exhaled in surprise.

“Excuse me?”

“I asked you a question and you ignored me. I wanted to know if the owner of this fine establishment knew what naughty waitresses he’d hired.”

She pushed away from him and stood, backing up, or rather waddling back since it was hard to move with her jeans around her knees.

“I am the owner.” She put her hands on her hips. “What do you think about that?”

“Oh, I think it’s definitely time to turn things up a bit.” He stood and advanced on her, moving the spoon from side to side like the hand in a metronome.

“Well, you have to...” she stopped speaking as the thought of what she was going to say made her laugh. She was going to tell him he had to catch her, but it wouldn’t be hard since she was hindered by her jeans. She turned and started to hop toward the living room. She’d barely made it two steps when Dallas grabbed her around the waist and lifted her in his arms. Before she knew it she was bent over the end of the couch, and the spanking started again.

She kicked her feet and squealed, holding back laughter as Dallas revealed plans for him to “come into her restaurant every night to see if his spanking made a difference, and if it didn’t, then he was going to spank her again, and again, and again.”

When he stopped she sighed and wiggled her behind, hoping he would take the invitation. Not all of their spankings ended in sex, but the sex that followed one was always incredible.

He was rubbing the spoon against her ass, which throbbed and burned. “Are you going to behave?”

“Maybe.” She cocked her head in his direction. “Maybe not; I guess you’ll just have to wait and see the next time you come in here for dinner.”

“I guess so.” He helped her to stand and then he cupped her face in his hands and kissed her. She felt as if he’d opened her entire soul to him, joining theirs together until she couldn’t tell where one started, and where the other began.

“Are you going to make love to me?”

“Later, yes.” He kissed each cheek. “Right now I want you to pull up those jeans, to feel your bottom throbbing against the material; to let the burn seep into you even deeper as we watch TV, cuddle. You know what happens when we wait.”

Oh yes, she knew. Anticipation made her want him more, made them tear at each other like it was the first time.

She pulled up her jeans as he lay down on the couch. When she was fully dressed he patted the couch next to him. She lay down so that her back was to his chest. He wrapped her tightly in his arms and then kissed her neck. When he picked up the remote and turned on the TV she closed her eyes and settled into him. This was the comfortable feeling about being married that she loved.

It wasn’t that they watched TV each night. They varied their routine, sometimes vegging out like they were doing right now, sometimes playing cards or board games. Both of them agreed that it really didn’t matter what they were doing, as long as they were doing it together.

They watched a crime show, and then a few sitcoms before the early news came on. As the items played she shook her head.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s sad, really, all the things that can go wrong in large cities. When I first moved here I worried that I would be bored, that I couldn’t stand small town life. I told you that, before I met you, I was ready to start looking for a job in a bigger city, where there were things happening. Now I’m content to be here where the only thing I have to worry about is writing speeding tickets.”

He laughed and started to caress her thigh. “There’s more going on here, you know that. But I am happy we don’t have to worry about murders and robberies, although there’s no absolute certainty that they would never happen, just that the probability is less.”

Dallas moved his hand up her body, moving her hair away from her neck when he got there. He kissed her neck, sending shivers of delight through her.

“You’re right, there is less chance. I rather enjoy the quiet life we have here.”

He stood suddenly and she fell back into the spot he’d just vacated. He held out his hand and she took it. He led her toward the bedroom, leaving the TV and all the lights on.

Once they were in the bedroom he stripped her slowly, unbuttoning her blouse slowly, and his hands caressing her at every opportunity. When she was naked he gently lowered her to the bed and she watched as he stripped his movements quick and efficient.

She held her arms out and he came to her. They caressed and stroked each other, and when his mouth moved to her breasts she closed her eyes and savored the contact. Feeling his mouth on her always made her quake with need.

When he slipped inside her, Marion closed her eyes and thanked the heavens above that she’d found the one person in life who made her feel whole, that they lived a nice, quiet life where they could continually express how much they cared and loved each other.

She realized he wasn’t moving, and she opened her eyes and gazed up at him.

“I love you,” he whispered as he leaned down to kiss her. “So very much.”

“I love you, too,” she replied. He started to thrust again and she held him close, wanting nothing more than to stay here with him and enjoy the life they had built together.

Chapter Two

One month later

Marion finished the last of her daily report, tagging the amount of speeding tickets she'd given that day: one, and the number of written and verbal warnings: fifteen. The only time she usually wrote a ticket was when someone had been warned more than a few times, as in the case of Phillip Hall.

She'd written him a ticket today for going twenty miles over the speed limit. She'd told him the last time she'd stopped him, just the day before, that the next time she caught him he would get a ticket. She guessed he didn't believe her, because he'd gritched and moaned before finally signing his name.

Hopefully this would make him slow down, just a little. She glanced at her watch. It was almost three in the afternoon. She was almost off duty for the day, and she could go home and spend time with her wonderfully hubby.

She'd made up lasagna a few weeks ago and frozen it. She'd taken it out this morning with the express intent of baking it tonight. They would have leftovers for during the week, too, which cut down on cooking time. Sometimes she wanted to kiss whoever invented the freezer and the conveniences it brought about.

Marion checked her report one more time, and then hit send. She had another hour or so to drive around, see what was happening in the county, but so far the day had been very quiet. That's why she'd worked on her report early.

She was just about to leave again when Sheriff Duncan Travis stuck his head around the corner of the door. "There you are. We have a problem."

Oh crap, she said to herself. "What sort of problem?"

At one point her problem had been someone suing her because he'd said she'd hit him. Dallas had defended her. She'd hated the charge, but she'd been thrilled that it had introduced her to her husband.

"Well, it's at the road construction site." Marion bit back a groan. Poor Dallas; this project had been nothing but trouble for him.

"What's the problem?"

"They found a car."

“Abandoned?”

“Buried.”

Her eyes widened. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me, buried. One of the construction guys is big on using his metal detector at sites. He was running it over the nearby field when it went off. The group started to dig and they found a car.”

Dread ran through her. “Please don’t tell me there’s a body inside.”

“We’re not sure what’s inside. The construction foreman made them stop and they called Dallas, and he called me. Come on; let’s go see what’s what. We should take both cars, though, in case something else comes up.”

Marion laughed. “This is the first big thing to come up in ages.”

“True, but you know what they say; bad things come up in threes.”

“Bite your tongue, Duncan.” She stood and adjusted her utility belt, then picked up her hat. “Let’s go.”

Once they were in their cars she let him take the lead. After all, he was the sheriff. She resisted the urge to call her husband and ask exactly what was going on. There was a chain of command to follow, and it would be best if she let things go through the proper channels.

Duncan followed the proper speed limit as they traveled. The farm to market road they were heading toward wasn’t that far out of Belle’s Gap and it wasn’t that well traveled. If someone wanted to hide a body, burying it in a car would be the perfect way to do it. Except digging a hole that size would take time. Surely someone would have seen something.

She made a mental list of questions to ask.

What type of car was it? Did the plates yield any information about who the owners were? How long had the car been buried? Was there anything inside it? Would there be any fingerprints left on it?

“Please, please, please Lord don’t let there be a body inside. She hated the thought of someone being buried there for years with no one knowing about it. She and Dallas had driven out there just a few nights ago, and everything seemed fine. She didn’t recall seeing any huge mounds of dirt, which probably meant the car had been there for a while.

She wondered how deeply it was buried. How strong the metal detector was, she wondered. Would it be able to detect things that were far underground?

Duncan was slowing down, preparing to turn onto the farm to market road. As they neared the road construction site she could see a great number of cars parked nearby. She supposed that most of the workers had called friends or family and told them about what they'd found.

Everyone had come out to see what was happening. It was the most exciting thing to happen in the county in ages.

She followed Duncan up the road and parked in the middle, next to a huge piece of equipment that dwarfed her car. She got out and trotted up to where Duncan now stood talking to Dallas.

Her husband greeted her with a wink, and then indicated the group of people gathered around a place not far from the road.

"I tried to keep them back, in case this turns out to be a crime scene, but nobody wanted to listen."

"What sort of car is it?" Duncan asked him.

"Well, the workers say it's an older car, something that's very large. When they realized what they'd found they stopped digging, though, so we don't know the exact model yet. I figured you would want to examine it, decide where to go from here."

"Sounds good." Duncan crooked his finger at her. "Let's go, Deputy McCormick, see what's what."

They started toward the crowd, which parted as they neared. When they got to the edge they stopped. Marion looked down. A small hole had been dug, and it had definitely uncovered the hood of a car. The hood looked like it had a long indentation on it, and she knew it wasn't something new. This was an old car and had probably been here for quite some time.

"What are the odds that this car was abandoned out here and covered in dirt?" someone from the crowd asked. Marion turned to see the local newspaper editor, Tom Strickland, watching. He had a camera around his neck and a notepad in his hand.

This was definitely going to sell newspapers.

"There's no telling how long it's been there," Duncan said. "We can't say for certain what happened until we do some sort of an investigation, and the first thing we're going to have to do, of course, is dig it up."

Tom was frantically scribbling on his notepad. Marion watched him for a few minutes, and then turned to Dallas. He was looking down into the small pit.

“This could be bad,” he whispered.

“No kidding,” she said as Duncan stepped closer to them. “We need to get these people out of here, declare this a crime scene, Duncan. Set up a perimeter that keeps them on the other side of the road, or something. There’s no telling what we’re going to find down there.”

“You’re right,” Duncan said. “I’ll call Toby and Jeff and get them out here. Then we need to get a backhoe in here...” he paused, “...or maybe we should dig by hand. Using the machine could damage any evidence of what actually happened here.”

They decided to dig by hand, and as they discussed bringing in lights, county workers and how long this was going to take, Marion could see Dallas mentally calculating how much it was going to cost the county.

She wanted to tell him how sorry she was, how this wasn’t something any of them wanted. Instead she kept a professional demeanor about herself, knowing that the crowd noticed everything that happened. They would call their friends as soon as they got home, and their friends would call their friends, and they would call their friends.

By eight o’clock tonight the rumor mill would say that they’d not only found a car they’d found a body, no, she amended, a dozen bodies. Small town rumors had a habit of growing as if they were in a garden.

She looked over to where Duncan was now on the phone, calling Toby and Jeff, she was sure. The other deputies would be here pretty quick. When she’d started working for the county there had been five deputies, but budget cuts had taken it down to three. When two of the deputies had quit they’d simply not been replaced.

That meant the four “man” department, Duncan, herself, Toby and Jeff would have to work this scene, and to make sure things were done by the book.

It was definitely going to be a long night.

“Are you sure that’s what it is?” Marion leaned down to where a county worker, whose name she couldn’t remember, stood on the hood of the car, shovels in hand. It was just after two in the morning. Lights had been set up to illuminate the area, but there was a scary, dark feeling around what was happening.

Even though it was late, there was still a huge crowd standing behind the tape the deputies had put up to keep gawkers from getting into the way.

“I’d stake my life on it,” he said. “My father’s a car enthusiast, and he’s got a Packard. I’d say this one is a 1948 or ’49. From how hard it’s been to dig, I’m pretty sure it’s been here for a while.”

Marion glanced over at Duncan. “Can you see inside the windshield? Is there anything in there?”

The worker grimaced and bent down. “I can’t see anything, but that doesn’t mean there’s not something in there. We’ve almost got it cleared. We’ll have to either dig a ramp for a truck to pull it out or get some sort of crane in here.”

“Ramp,” Duncan and Dallas said almost at the same time.

“It will cost less money that way,” Dallas put in. “We can dig a ramp using a backhoe, and it can wait until morning. That way we’re not paying out overtime.”

Marion glanced at her husband. They were all tired, but he had the added burden of worrying about the cost of this project.

“Sounds good,” Duncan said. “Okay, everyone, keep digging until the car is pretty much freed, and then go home. Good work.”

The diggers went back to work, and Marion smiled as the workers talked. Despite the lateness they were excited about what they were doing. There was talk about treasure, about the car being full of money. Not a one of them seemed worried about there being a body, except for the man who’d looked through the windshield.

“I want to go down there and look inside,” Marion said. “Call them up.”

At first it seemed like Duncan would object. He sighed as he considered her request, and then he nodded. “Everybody out,” he said loudly. The crowd made noise as excitement coursed through them. Something besides digging was about to happen.

Marion took off her utility belt and handed it to Duncan. The workers climbed out of the hole using the ladders they’d set on the sides. She asked one of them to hold it still while she climbed down. Before she put her foot on the first rung she looked at her husband.

He looked concerned and she gave him a smile. He frowned and she knew that, as her husband, he didn’t want her to go down. As the county judge he knew it was part of her job.

She went down the ladder and put her foot on the hood of the car. Down here the noise was somewhat muted, but she could still hear the excitement of the crowd. She had no doubt that, if she moved, they would want to crowd around and watch her examine the vehicle.

She knelt down and looked through the windshield. It was clouded and she couldn't really see inside. A small trench had been dug next to the door and she stepped off the hood into it so she could peer into the side windows.

"Be careful," Dallas's voice boomed out. "Get back on the car."

"I'm fine," she assured him as she gingerly made her way toward the back of the two-door vehicle. "There's a lot of rust on it, but I don't see any bodies inside. We'll have to wait until we get it up there to pop the trunk. Hopefully there's nothing inside there."

"Marion," Dallas called out. "Come up here. Let's get back to work so we can get it out."

"Give me a minute." She pulled a tissue from her pants pocket and rubbed it against the window. It didn't really help her to see anything.

"Marion!" Dallas's voice was low, and he sounded very angry. "Get up here."

"I'm fine," she said as she scrambled back onto the hood. "Relax, will you?"

"No, I won't." She looked up at him. He was scowling down at her. "There's no telling what's down there. I don't like you exploring it at night. Come back up."

"I'm just doing my job," she said as she moved toward the ladder. She grasped it and started to climb. Dallas was holding on to the top, and when she reached him he helped her to get off.

"You should have waited until it was up here to do that."

"This gives us a better idea of what we're dealing with," she said.

"How is that? You didn't see anything the workers didn't see," he replied. "Don't go down there again, please. Let Jeff go, or Toby, or even Duncan."

Anger flooded her. "Oh, so they can do their jobs but I can't? Are you saying this as the county judge?"

"I'm saying this as your husband. I don't want you going back down there again."

The anger turned into rage but she bit down on it, keeping it in check. "Thanks for the vote of confidence," she growled out, keeping her voice low. "I really appreciate it."

"I know you're competent," he said. "I don't like to see you put yourself in danger, though."

"I'm fine," she said, keeping her voice level. "Shall we get everyone back to work, or should we continue to fight so they can stare at us?"

She saw the surprise as it came over his face, and then he nodded. "Sorry, I just..."

"Later," she said. "Let's get back to work so we can get that thing out of there and figure out who it belongs to."

Marion was tired, so tired she felt it deep into her bones. Once they'd started digging the ramp to pull the car out, she'd slipped away to her car to take a catnap. The deputies had done it in shifts, so there were always two of them there to keep watch on the crowd. The number of people watching had dwindled during the night, but as morning neared it was growing again.

Marion closed her eyes and tried not to think about the fight she'd had with Dallas. It upset her that he didn't want her to do her job, but he had no problem with the male deputies exploring the scene.

This was the first time he'd ever voiced any objection to her job since they got married, and she wasn't sure what had brought it about.

Sleep was just beginning to take over when the front door of the car opened. She looked up to where she'd stretched out in the back seat to see Dallas leaning over.

"Hey."

"Hey," she responded. "How's it going?"

"We've got about an hour before we pull it out. Is there going to be an ID number on there?"

"Other than a license plate; I don't know? VINs weren't used until 1980. There was no universal system until then. I doubt there was a car dealership around here in the late 1940s, which means the car was probably bought in Dallas, or in Oklahoma City. Who knows if any of the dealerships still have records from back then?"

He nodded, and then he leaned over the seat and grabbed her hand. "I'm sorry for what I said earlier. Seeing you down there made me nervous. I kept expecting the walls to cave in and I worried that something would happen to you."

She smiled at him. "Would have you have been that worried if one of the guys were done there?"

"I would have been concerned, yes. I've been worried that one of the workers would be injured during the digging. But seeing you down there was worse."

She squeezed his hand. "Thanks for the apology. I was afraid you thought I was an idiot who would do something to get herself injured."

“No, I just didn’t want to see my beautiful wife buried in the dirt.”

There was a knock on the window and Marion knew she would be getting no sleep right now. She looked up just as Duncan opened the door and peered into the back seat. “We’re about to pull her out, now that it’s light outside. I figured you two would want to be there for it.”

Marion sat up and scooted toward the open door. She got out just as Dallas opened the front door and came outside. They all walked to the hole and Duncan nodded at a truck driver. They’d brought in a tow truck that could be used on semi trucks, and it had already been hooked up to the car in the hole.

The driver responded with a wave, and then he climbed into the cab. The ground seemed to shake as he started the car and worked to pull the old vehicle from its grave. Marion imagined that the dirt had been home to the car for so long that it didn’t want to give it up.

It seemed to take forever, but soon the car appeared, springing out of the ground like a behemoth. When it was all the way out the crowd clapped, and Marion glanced at Duncan. He stood there for a few minutes, looking it over, and then he jerked his head toward it.

“Let’s see what’s inside. Toby and I’ll take the driver’s door; you and Jeff take the passenger’s side. We’ll do the trunk together.”

Toby and Jeff were already standing at the vehicle, waiting for instructions from their boss. Duncan and Marion joined them, and Dallas moved toward the group as if he were not sure what he was supposed to do.

Technically this was a sheriff’s department operation, but he was the county judge. When they started to open the doors, Duncan motioned him closer. The door was pretty much sealed shut, and it took the two deputies on each side to pull them open. The sound of grinding metal filled the area, much to the amusement of the crowd, their laughter and talking increasing.

There was the stench of dirt and stale air, but there was no smell that would indicate a decomposing body. Marion was very grateful for that. There was nothing on the leather seats, no papers, books, purses...nothing. She reached past Duncan and twisted the handle on the glove box. It popped open and revealed...nothing.

“Damn it,” Duncan said as they stepped away from the car. “I had hoped to find something, anything that might give us a clue as to who owned this car, and why it’s buried out here.”

“Let’s try the trunk,” Marion said. “Hopefully it will give us something.”

The four of them moved to the back and Marion watched Dallas come along, too. She looked down and saw there was no license plate on the car. They had no way to trace its owner.

Toby tried the latch, but the door to the back wouldn't budge. Jeff went and got a crowbar from the tow truck driver. Someone from the crowd screamed at him not to damage the car, since it was a classic. Everyone laughed; as Toby and Jeff worked to pry open the trunk.

When it was open, Marion bit back a gasp. The trunk was full of cash.

Duncan lowered the lid quickly, and then whispered, "Eyes only." The meaning was clear. He didn't want anyone but the five of them to know about the money. There was every chance that whoever had buried this car was still hanging around. If someone mentioned the cash before the word got out, they would know that person had knowledge of the car, and it's burial.

"Where do we go from here?" Marion asked.

"This is one cold case," Jeff put in. "That car didn't bury itself, and that money isn't legal money. Nobody would hide that much money for no reason."

"Okay," Duncan said, taking a deep breath. "The first thing we do is go back through old newspapers, see if there's record of a bank robbery from 1949 on. This car may be a '49, but it could have been buried anytime after that. From the shape it's in, I would say it was before 1970, at least."

"I'll do that," Marion said. "I don't mind going through old records."

"We're going to have to call the feds," Duncan said. "They can help us determine if the money is real, or fake. I'll do that."

He thought for a few more minutes, and then clicked his tongue over his teeth. "Toby, you and Jeff interview longtime residents. See if they know any folk tales about missing people, or anything else that might help us figure out what the hell is going on."

"Judge," Duncan said to Dallas. Marion lowered her head to hide a laugh. Dallas and Duncan had been friends in high school, and she knew that when they addressed each other in their official capacities that it made them laugh. "Could you get one of your clerks to go through old records and see if there's anything to indicate something that might have happened?"

"Yes, we'll get started on it right away."

"Remember, don't say a word about the money," Duncan said. "And let's all go get some rest before we start. This can wait until the afternoon, or the morning, even. It's been a long night. I'll have the car towed to the county barn."

They broke up except for Dallas and Marion. He came over and put his arm around her. "Let's go take a long nap," he said. "I want to call the courthouse first, and have a clerk get started on a search to see if court cases might list a 1949 Packard."

“I’ve got my car, so I’ll meet you at the house.”

“Sounds good.” He didn’t kiss her, and as much as she wanted him to, she knew it was better if he didn’t. The people around them might think less of the deputy if the judge kissed her in public. Everyone knew they were married, but a public display of affection wouldn’t be a good thing.

Marion turned toward the crowd, scanning it as she did so. Most of the people here hadn’t been born when the car was made, but Duncan was right about the fact that it could have been buried at any time.

She looked them over one more time, and standing toward the end of the crowd she saw someone she hadn’t expected to see.

Mrs. Gates stood there. She was looking not at Marion, but at the car. Marion’s cop instincts told her that the woman knew something about the vehicle in front of them. And that something was what had caused her to oppose the work on the county road.

Yes, from the way she was studying the car, Mrs. Gates knew everything about it. But getting her to tell what she knew would be another matter.

Chapter Three

“Tell me again why you think Mrs. Gates knows something about that car.” They were in the shower, and Dallas was washing her hair. It had been a little more than twenty-four hours since the car had been pulled from the ground, since Duncan had told everyone to go home and rest, and that’s exactly what they’d done, falling into bed and going to sleep almost instantly.

When she’d woken up around four that afternoon, Dallas had been gone. He’d been back in bed at seven when she woke up again, and he told her he’d gone to work to do paperwork on something unrelated to the car. Then he’d promptly fallen asleep again.

They’d both woken up around ten that evening and fixed some bacon and eggs, and that was the first time she’d told him her idea that Mrs. Gates knew something about the uncovered Packard.

He’d looked confused, and the look had told her that he didn’t believe what she was saying. She hadn’t gone into it then, but now that they were both awake and it was morning, time to begin a new day, and she was ready to make her case.

“Fact number one,” she said as she tilted her head from side to side, “she’s lived here for ages. Fact number two, that time frame includes the production time for the car, which means her family could have very well owned it.”

“Her family and any of the other ones who lived around here,” Dallas said as he scrubbed. “Turn your back to the spray.”

She turned around and he held her neck as she leaned into the water, letting it wash the shampoo from her hair. “You may not believe me, but I’m going to ask her about it.”

His snort of laughter made her want to stomp her foot right into his. “You go right ahead,” he said, “since that’s your job. But I can assure you that she’s going to tell you to take a flying leap. Then she’s going to complain to Duncan that you’re targeting her because of her objection to the project.”

He was putting rinse in her hair now, and she put her hands on her hips. “That was part of her plan, I’m sure. She didn’t want us out there because there was every chance the car would be found. I’m telling you, it’s hers.”

“Want to make a small wager?” He was rinsing the last of the cream rinse from her hair.

“What do you have in mind?” She stood on her tiptoes and planted a kiss on his chin.

“You know what I have in mind.” He looked down at her, their gazes locking. Full-bodied shivers ran through her and Marion shook her head. “No.”

“Yes.” He thumbed her nose with his thumb. “It will be fun. You’ve got too many hang-ups, and

this will help rid you of some of them.”

Marion looked away, her tongue sliding over her lower lip. “You know, I find the idea of dressing up in a French maid’s uniform and...well, the rest of it, a little...nerve-wracking.”

“It will be fun. I fulfilled one of your fantasies, didn’t I?”

Her cheeks turned bright red. “Um, yes, you did.” And she had to admit that it had been one where they might get caught, too. They’d pretended that she’d stopped him for speeding, and he’d gotten fresh with her. She’d pulled him from the car but before she could cuff him he’d turned the tables on her and spanked her, bending her over the hood of her patrol car.

Of course the patrol car had been parked in their back yard at the time, and it had been dark. The chances of being caught had been slim. The chances of being caught while acting out his fantasy were a little more, since he wanted it done in his courtroom.

“You’re terrible, you know that?”

“Am I?” He glared at her. “Someone needs a few swats, I think. Her attitude is a little iffy.”

“Excuse me?” She tried to look upset when every inch of her body was screaming yes, yes, yes, she wanted swats. She wanted to release some of the tension that had built up inside her, that was still roaming around despite the fact that she’d slept for so long.

“You heard me. Turn around and bend over.”

How she loved hearing those words come from his lips. She tossed aside her fake objection to the idea of being spanked and turned around. The shower they’d built was rather large, and they’d designed it for this specific purpose. The contractor had questioned the side, and the number of jets they’d put in the walls. They’d told him that they wanted it so they could shower together and not worry about running out of room.

He’d given Dallas a knowing look and had not put up any more questions. Now they had a shower where she could put her hands on the wall and bend over so she could be spanked. The floor was made of tiles, so the chances of slipping were less than if it was made of porcelain.

Dallas put his arm under her body, keeping her in place. The water was hitting her back, and he rubbed her bottom, and then started to spank her. As always, she let herself melt into his arm, relishing the feel of the swats. The water increased the intensity she felt, thus making the shower another of her favorite places to be spanked.

She almost laughed as the thought passed through her mind. It seemed as if the entire house was her favorite place to be spanked. And Dallas knew it. He spanked her hard, his hand helping to relax her.

But with each swat she thought about everything there was to do.

Swat, swat, swat.

She needed to go over the...oh damn, what was her job?

Swat, swat, swat.

Oh yes, she had to...oh damn that felt so good!

Swat, swat, swat.

She was supposed to...swat, swat, swat...go through...swat, swat, swat...the...swat, swat, swat.

“Stop!” She took a step away, her chest heaving. “I can’t...it feels too good, and we have too much to do. If you keep going I will want to do nothing more than get spanked and make love all day.”

Dallas laughed and stroked her cheek. “You’re right.” He leaned down to kiss her just as the doorbell rang.

“Well, someone has sucky timing,” he said. “I’ll answer it. You towel off and get dressed.”

She hurried to the bedroom after she’d dried off, putting on clothes as fast as she could. She could hear Dallas in the other room, talking to a man, although she couldn’t quite place the voice.

It was someone she’d heard before, but who could it...she snapped her fingers. Tom Strickland, the newspaper editor. What was he doing here? She couldn’t give him any information. All she would do was turn him in Duncan’s direction.

Then she mentally slapped herself. He wasn’t here to talk to her. He was here to talk to Dallas, the county judge, about what the car could mean for the county, both in terms of loss and in terms of treasure. She was sure her husband would not let go of any of the information about the money. He was too good for that.

When she was dressed she headed toward the living room. She found the two men there, sitting in the recliners. Tom had his reporter’s pad out, but he wasn’t making any notes. Marion was sure that was because Dallas wasn’t giving him any good quotes.

“Deputy McCormick,” Tom said as she came into the room. He stood and inclined his head toward her. “What can you tell me about the car y’all dug up yesterday?”

“Not a thing,” she said. “You’re going to have to talk to the sheriff about it.”

“I tried that,” Tom said as he sat back down. “He’s not talking. Nobody’s talking except to say a 1949 Packard two-door sedan was dug up and there was no body inside.”

“Yeah, except I’m afraid the Dallas stations are going to get hold of this and get information before I do.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Marion said. “I promise you if we find out anything we’ll tell you first.”

Tom pursed his lips, and she could tell that he wasn’t sure he believed her.

“I have to come down to your offices today. I want to look back through some old editions, and you’re the only place that has them. We really need a better library here.” She turned to Dallas. “Maybe I should talk to the county judge about that.”

“Catch me next budget session,” Dallas said with a laugh.

Marion looked over at Tom, who was putting his pad into his pocket. “I’ll tell you what, Tom, I’d rather you get the scoop on anything first, too. Let me talk to Duncan. If he says it’s okay, I’ll have you sit with me and go through the old records, looking for anything we think might be related to the story. That way you’ve got firsthand knowledge and I’m not giving you anything. But I have to get approval for it first, okay?”

“Great.” He perked up. “Do you think he’ll approve it?”

“I think he might.” She stood. “I’m going to go make some coffee, and I’ll call him right now.”

“How far back do you think we should go?” Tom glanced at her as he posed the question. She was glad to have help in going through the newspapers, especially when she’d seen the huge books stacked in the bookshelves. She hadn’t expected them to be that large. The County News only came out once a week.

“We should start in 1949,” she replied. “And then we go forward until we find something that might prove interesting.”

Marion opened the big book in front of her, and started to search. She tried not to get caught up in what she was seeing, but it was hard not to. Noticing the ads from the 1950s was interesting, seeing how much soap cost and food, and the differences in how things were portrayed.

Most ads centered on how a woman could please her husband. Marion wondered how the feminists of today would pitch a fit if they’d read the article about “How to have dinner on the table for your man when he comes home.”

Of course she wouldn’t be one of them. She loved taking care of her husband, loved cooking for him every day.

They fell into silence as they read, and they were not into the books for 1955 when Marion sat up and said, “Jackpot!”

Tom rose from his chair and hurried over to her side of the table. She pointed at the headline,

about a bank that had been robbed in Dallas. It was in the local paper because this had been the fourth one robbed in as many days in the Dallas area, and the authorities were sure they were all related.

“The suspects were seen leaving the last robbery in a dark-colored Packard 2-door sedan, blue in color.” She pulled out her cell phone and hit the speed dial for Duncan. Then she winked at Tom.

“Now you can say that your research showed the car was involved in a bank robbery in Dallas.”

“Yes, I can,” he said. “When the feds get here they might be willing to give some information, too. We’re thinking about putting out a special edition, a small one, of course, because people are so excited about this.”

He leaned toward her. “Do you think the bank robbers were from Belle’s Gap, or Jackpot?”

She didn’t want to say that yes, she thought they were, and that she might have a clue as to who it might be. Instead she just shrugged. “It’s only an hour and a half from Dallas, you know, but that doesn’t mean that they came up this way, buried the car and expected to come back for it later.”

What she didn’t say was that only a local resident would know that that area of the county was seldom used, that the road hardly ever saw any traffic. The car had been buried on county land, because nobody had farmed in that area for years, not since the Dust Bowl.

“Who are you talking to, because it’s certainly not me?” Hearing Duncan’s voice made her eyes widen. How long had she been holding the phone, with him on the other end?

“Sorry, Duncan, Tom and I were chatting. We found an interesting article in the paper. I’ll make a copy of it and come and see you.”

“Good. The feds are on their way this afternoon and I’d like to have a few answers for them. The money is old, from before--”

“From before 1955?”

“Yes, it is.” He chuckled. “The money is all smaller bills, and I’m pretty sure if it’s something to do with a bank robbery or something the feds are going to take it away from us, even if it is an extremely cold case.”

“Yes,” she whispered. She knew she should mention her suspicions about Mrs. Gates, but she wasn’t exactly sure how to approach the subject.

She didn’t think it would be good to say, “So, Duncan, can I go question the richest woman in town? Can I ask her how she got all her money? I’m thinking she might be involved in all this.”

“McCormick!” Duncan’s voice pulled her from her thoughts.

“I’m sorry, I’m just...”

“Is this a cop’s intuition? Do you know something you want to tell me?”

“No, sir,” she said out loud, while inside she said, “Yes, there is something, but I’m afraid you’d be pissed at me for going after the rich lady.”

“I know you well enough to realize when something’s going on,” he said. “I expect you back here in ten minutes, article in hand. And be prepared to spill whatever it is you’re thinking about.”

“Yes, sir.” She clicked the phone shut, then stood. “I need to make a copy of this. Do you have a machine large enough to fit this book?”

“We do.” Tom took it from her. “Let me do it for you.”

She knew he would be making himself one, too, and that okay. He’d helped her search, and that had cut down on her time. And if he were going to put out a special edition he needed to gather information fast, so he could get it done before the Dallas stations picked up on the story.

When he handed her the copy she thanked him and went out to her car. It wouldn’t take her long to get to the station, and she decided she would take a little detour, past Mrs. Gates’ house to see if the older woman was home. It wouldn’t be good for her to stop by unannounced, since that would get the woman riled before she got there.

Yet she didn’t want to announce her visit either. That would give her a chance to prepare her answers. But if Marion could catch her out somewhere, like at the grocery store that would be good.

If her car wasn’t at home she could drive around town and look for it. The town was small enough that it wouldn’t be tough to find it, and then she could just say, “Fancy meeting you here. So, Mrs. Gates did you and your husband ever own a Packard? Was that your car we dug up? Did you husband steal that money in the trunk, or did you do it together?”

Why was living in a small town so difficult? If this were a larger city she would just pull the woman in and say, “I know you know something about this, and I demand you tell me.” She could sweat her for a while and see what sort of answers she got. But in a town this size you had to worry about running into people everywhere you went. You had to worry about what people said, and how they would treat you.

And, truthfully, she had to worry about who would vote for her husband in the next election.

She started the car and put it into gear, mentally mapping out the easiest way to get to Mrs. Gates’ house. She did a u-turn, then went down to Third and turned right. Mrs. Gates lived in Bluebonnet Drive, with her other rich neighbors. The houses were not that close together, and nobody seemed to be outside at any of the homes.

Except for one.

Marion slowed her cruiser as she approached her destination. Mrs. Gates stood in the front door, talking to two men. One of them Marion recognized as Shane Boyd. He was also a richer neighbor, a well known person around Coldwater County who owned a successful drilling business that did lots of business around this area. He was about five years younger than Mrs. Gates, which would make him around seventy, she thought.

The other man was a stranger to her. He looked to be about Shane's age, maybe a few years younger. And he looked angry.

Marion could see that Mrs. Gates was not going to budge, even though the unknown man was pulling on her door as if to say he wanted to go inside. Marion pulled the cruiser up to the curb and shut off the engine.

Everyone in the front yard turned to look at her. The unknown man let go of the door and turned and started for his car. Marion thought about stopping him, but she had no reason to, really. She couldn't ask him questions about something until she was certain he was involved in it.

Marion got out of the car and headed across the grass just as the newcomer pulled out of the driveway and took off.

"Afternoon," she said to the two people standing there. "How's everything going?"

"Just fine, Marion," Shane replied. "You've had a busy last few days, haven't you?"

"Yes, we have." She gave him a bright smile, and then turned to Mrs. Gates. "How are you doing today, Mrs. Gates?"

"Fine, thank you Deputy; would you like some tea?"

A slight breeze would have knocked Marion off her feet. This was the nicest Mrs. Gates had ever been to her. She thought about Duncan, who had insisted that he see her in ten minutes, news article in hand. Then she thought about the man who had left just as she pulled in. If he wanted to hurt Mrs. Gates, all he had to do was wait for Marion to leave and he could come back and possibly hurt the older woman.

And that's obviously what Mrs. Gates thought, or else she wouldn't be asking Marion to stick around. It didn't take her long to make her decision.

"Why thanks, I'd love some. You've lived here so long I came by to pick your brain about old cars, from the late 1940s and early '50s. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all; let's go inside and sit, though, and have some tea, like I said. I'm a little tired today."

Marion followed the older woman into the house. Shane came in after them, shutting the screen door with a click. Once inside the house, Marion marveled at the size. It was bigger than it seemed from

out front, and it was magnificently decorated. It was also spic and span clean. Marion wondered if Mrs. Gates had a house cleaner, or if she did it herself.

When she entered the kitchen, her hostess went directly to the stove where she picked up a teakettle. She took it to the sink and started to fill it with water.

“What’s the news on the car?” Shane asked as he moved around her and slid onto a barstool. “It’s the talk of the town, you know.”

“Yes, I do. So far we don’t know anything, though. There are no identifying markings on the car, so we have no idea who it belonged to.” She let the sentence drift off, hoping they would ask about anything that might have been found there.

If one of them would slip and ask about money, then she could pull them in on suspicion of bank robbery, even if it was a very tenuous link.

Neither of them said anything, though. Shane watched her and Mrs. Gates continued to prepare for tea, taking cups out of the cupboard.

“Do you take sugar, milk, or lemon?” She looked directly at Marion, and Marion thought that she didn’t have to ask Shane how he liked his tea. It was obvious she already knew.

“Sugar and milk, please.”

Mrs. Gates nodded and went to the refrigerator. She took out a fluted bottle and set it down on the bar.

“Please sit down, Marion,” she said and she indicated the chair next to Shane. “You’ve never been to my house, have you?”

“No, ma’am.” She sat in the indicated chair and Mrs. Gates went back to making tea. Before long, Marion had a cup in front of her, and Shane had one in front of him. Mrs. Gates set her cup on the counter, and then sat down on a stool on the other side of the bar.

“Now, I’m trying to think back to the 1950s, and I don’t remember anyone who owned a Packard, do you, Shane?”

The gentleman shook his head. “I knew lots of people who had Fords, or Chevys, but no one who owned a Packard. Of course, truthfully, when I think about it, a lot is a relative term. There weren’t that many people who owned cars in this city, or this county for that matter. Most of the residents around here didn’t have a lot of money at that time. Cars were a luxury, not a necessity.”

Marion nodded slowly. Times were definitely different then; she knew that from the newspapers she’d looked at that afternoon.

She put a teaspoon of sugar into her cup, and then reached for the cream. A small splash of it

landed in her cup and she stirred.

“What bothers me is how someone could lose a car, which, like you said was a luxury at that time, and not report it.” She took a sip from her cup. “It makes you wonder, doesn’t it?”

“Maybe it was someone coming through the area on a whim,” Mrs. Gates said. “That road does run from Oklahoma to Dallas. Before the interstate was built it was the main road used.”

Marion thought about it for a few minutes. “That does give credence to the idea it could have been left by someone passing through, except for one thing. Burying a car takes time. You don’t dig a hole overnight. Someone had to use a backhoe, they had to do it at night so no one noticed them, and then they had to put the car in there and cover it up.”

The room grew silent.

“It was someone who lives around here, or someone who lived around here,” Marion said, taking another sip. “If you think of anything, or if seeing something jogs a memory, would you tell me?”

“Sure,” they both said. Marion took another sip, and then stood.

“Thank you both. I have to get back to work, but you can call me any time.” She reached into her pocket and took out two of her cards. She gave one to each of them. “Have a good day.”

They told her to do the same, and she showed herself to the door. As she walked to her car, she thought that this was the first time she’d talked to Mrs. Gates where the older woman had not been harping about something she wanted the county to do.

And she’d not once mention that, if the county had listened to her and not messed with the road, this never would have happened.

Chapter Four

“Your idea of ten minutes needs to be readjusted,” Duncan said to her as she came into the office. “In other words, you’re late.”

“Am I?” Marion glanced at her watched and pasted an innocent look on her face. “I’m sorry; I really thought I was on time.”

“Bull corn,” the sheriff said. “Where have you been?”

“I’ve been at the newspaper office.” She handed him the copy of the article about the bank robbery. “I think this is connected to our car.”

“It’s not our car anymore,” Duncan said. “The feds are officially taking over the case. They’ll use us for resource, of course, but they’ll be doing the investigating.”

“That stinks,” Marion said. “This was the first big thing to happen in ages and we lose it. Is there no way to get it back?”

“Nope; it’s been on their books as an unsolved bank robbery. They’re positive the car was used in the ones in Dallas in the 1950s.”

Marion looked toward the door. She’d heard the front door to the station open, and she waited to see who would come inside. Whoever it was must have stopped at the dispatcher’s desk, because they hadn’t come this way. After a long, moment, she said, “And I’m sure it was local residents who did it.”

Duncan sat up a little straighter. “And how do you know that?”

“She has this idea that Mrs. Gates is involved.” Marion looked back at the door. Dallas stood then, his arms crossed over his chest as he leaned against the doorjamb.

“Why do you think that?” Duncan leaned toward her, his hands clasped together on the table. “Is there evidence you’re not telling us about, something that’s missing?”

“No, she thinks Mrs. Gates objected to the construction out there because she knew the car was out there and there was a greater chance of it being discovered.”

The room grew silent. “Not a bad idea. Were you out investigating this while you were making me wait to see the newspaper article?” Duncan was giving her the “You’ve been a bad employee glare.”

“No.”

“Look at me,” Dallas said. She schooled her features, and then she turned her head in his directions. “Yeah, she’s lying. I recognize that blank stare where she’d trying to pretend that she didn’t

do what you asked about, or that she did something that she wasn't supposed to do."

"I wonder if there's any truth to the Mrs. Gates thing," Duncan said. "There's got to be someone who was around her in the 1950s who can shed some light on whether or not her family had money, or if they had a sudden windfall."

"There's one problem with that," Dallas said. He sat down next to her and rubbed his knee against hers.

"What's the problem," Marion asked him.

"How much of a windfall can you have if you've buried cash in a car in the middle of nowhere?"

"There is that," Duncan said. "They counted the cash, and it was almost a million dollars. The feds say that's about the amount that was taken in the robberies."

"So that means it was buried in the field. That also means that if the Gates had a windfall, it didn't come from the bank robberies."

"Unless they do more than just the banks in the Dallas area," Marion said, glancing at her husband. "We haven't check with Oklahoma, have we?"

The two men grew silent. "She's right, you know, we haven't," Duncan leaned back in his chair. "And the feds are not going to give that type of information up. There's every chance they could have branched out and robbed other banks. They could have been doing it for quite some time before they stopped."

"Let's do an Internet search," Marion said. "Something from the Belle's Gap newspaper wouldn't be on the Internet, but bigger cities will be on there."

"Good plan," Dallas said. "Sounds like an interesting way for us to spend our evening. Duncan, did the feds tell us anything that will send us on the right track?"

"No," Duncan replied. "They've been pretty closed lipped with us, not that I can blame them. It's obvious they used Belle's Gap as a hiding place. There's every chance all of the robbers are dead."

Marion thought about the man she'd seen talking to Mrs. Gates and Shane this afternoon. He'd been angry, that was for certain. And the minute he'd seen her pull up in her cruiser he'd taken off. He was not a dead bank robber, he was a live one, and if her cop instincts were right he'd been cheated out of his money all these years and that's why he was so pissed.

"I think we need to put a protection detail on Mrs. Gates' house," she said softly.

"Sure, I'll pull in one the many deputies I have laying around," Duncan said. "And the county won't care about the overtime, I'm sure."

“Sarcasm doesn’t become you, Duncan.” She toyed with a piece of paper that was on the desk. “I’m serious about this. I think she’s in trouble.”

“What aren’t you tell me?”

Marion grimaced. The minute she told him about the stranger, he would know what she’d been doing while he was waiting for her here. But Mrs. Gates’ security was more important than her staying out of trouble.

She told the story of driving by the woman’s house, of seeing her and Shane Boyd arguing with some unknown man.

“He ran like a turkey on the opening day of hunting season,” she said. “And then...Mrs. Gates invited me in for tea.”

Beside her, Dallas stiffened. “Something’s definitely up,” he said. “There’s no way she would do that.”

“Exactly,” Marion said.

“Just the same, you can’t make allegations based on tea,” Duncan said. “We need more.”

“Which is why we should set up surveillance,” Marion said. “She’ll make a slip somewhere and we can break this case wide open.”

“Well, my answer to that is no. No, no, and did I say no.” Duncan shook his head. “There are several problems with that idea, the first of which is it is now the feds case. The second of which is, even if she did invite you in for tea, Mrs. Gates is not on the town’s welcoming committee, as you know. She’d pitch a fit and we’d be in hot water for watching her without probable cause.”

“I don’t need probable cause,” Marion replied. “I know she did it, or if she didn’t rob the bank herself she’s involved in some way.”

Duncan sighed. “Dallas, it’s your responsibility to take her home and make sure she doesn’t do something that’s going to get us in major trouble. Stay away from Mrs. Gates, Marion. She’s the type of person who would sue the county, and probably win.”

“Don’t talk about me like I’m a five year old,” Marion said. “I can keep myself out of trouble, thank you very much.”

“Doubtful,” Duncan said, “but that’s one of the things I love about having you on staff, Marion. You’re probably right in your instincts. We just need evidence to back it up.”

He stood. “I’ve got to get home and spend some time with my family. I’ll do some searching tonight, and you two do the same and we’ll compare notes in the morning.”

They all said goodbye and Marion turned to her husband. "I haven't taken anything out for dinner, and I'm not sure the lasagna I took out the other day is still good."

"We'll figure something out," he said. "We can grill."

"Or we can have a picnic," she said. "We can pick up some chicken from the store and park, oh I don't know, a few houses from Mrs. Gates' house."

"Oh no," he said. "I'm not helping you to circumvent what Duncan just said. I'll go to the store and get the chicken, but we'll eat at our house."

"Okay." She started to move toward the door, but Dallas grabbed her around the waist.

"Go straight home, Marion." He kissed her neck. "Duncan is right, and I know you know this too, that if you bother her she could cause the county a lot of trouble."

"I know that." Damn she wished they would stop treating her like a child. It was really pissing her off. "Go and get me some food. I'll meet you at home."

"Yes, ma'am." Instead of moving, though, he stayed where he was.

"Promise me you'll go straight home."

She nodded and he shook his head. "I want to hear the words."

"Fine, I'll go straight home. Satisfied?"

"Not really." He sat down on the table. "I didn't hear the word promise."

"Fine, I promise."

"Good enough." He swatted her on the ass before he left the room and Marion knew the dispatcher had probably heard it, probably wondered what had just happened. But Marion didn't care. She was tired, and it had been a long few days. She was going to go home, after making one little stop.

She waited until Dallas had pulled out from the parking lot before she left. She turned right, as if she were headed toward their house, but when she got to the corner she turned left, moving toward Mrs. Gates' neighborhood. When she pulled up in front of the house she saw that Shane Boyd's truck was gone. The front door was closed, and she wondered if they'd left together, or if Mrs. Gates was at home.

At the front door she knocked and waited for an answer. When one didn't come she knocked again. This time she could hear someone moving around inside. There was a slight movement at the curtains in the room next to the door, and then the shuffling of feet as they moved.

The door opened slowly and Mrs. Gates appeared. "More tea, deputy? Or have you come for something else?"

In for a penny, Marion said to herself. If she was going to piss the woman off, she might as well go all in. "Tell me about the bank robberies, Mrs. Gates."

The woman's expression didn't change, and Marion wondered if she was going to tell her to get the hell off her porch. Instead she swallowed, and then ran her fingers over her hair as if she were making sure it was still in place.

Neither of them spoke, though, which in itself said volumes. Mrs. Gates wasn't screaming at her about making false accusations.

"Did you take part in the robberies? Were you the getaway driver?"

More silence.

"Or did you just know about it?"

More silence, which really seemed to drag on this time. And then, finally, Mrs. Gates pushed open the screen door.

"Come inside, Marion. I knew you'd figure it out. But you're missing a few key pieces of evidence about what really happened."

Marion stepped inside. "Perhaps you'll tell me, then."

"Yes, I will."

Mrs. Gates closed the door and leaned against the wall. "It's hard keeping a secret, you know. At first I always worried that someone was going to find out, that the authorities would show up on our doorstep and take us all to jail. Then, as the years went on, it got easier. But these last few months, it's been very difficult."

"I can imagine." Marion didn't want to push her.

"I'm so old," the woman said. "I just need...tea."

She turned toward the kitchen and Marion fell into step behind her. When they reached the kitchen, Marion stepped in front of her. "Let me make it this time."

"No, I don't want to sit." She indicated the chair. "You go there and I'll talk while I work."

Marion sat down in the same spot she'd been in just a little while ago. Mrs. Gates put on the kettle, and then turned toward her.

"My husband was a bank robber." She said it so matter-of-factly, as if she were saying, "My husband is an Aries, you know."

"Him and the gentlemen you were talking to earlier?"

“Yes. His name is Bubba. I never knew his last name, and I’m sure he has a name other than Bubba, although Mr. Gates never told me.”

Marion thought it was interesting that she referred to her husband as Mr. Gates instead of calling him by his first name.

“In those days, we...” the doorbell rang, and Mrs. Gates sighed. “I’ll be right back.”

Marion wanted to scream at the interruption. Then she wanted to run when she heard Dallas’s voice in the hallway.

He stepped into the kitchen as if he owned the place, carrying several bags. “I brought chicken for three,” he said, shooting her a “what the hell do you think you’re doing,” look.

She hadn’t expected to stay long enough for him to find out. She’d just expected to plant a few seeds for Mrs. Gates to consider, tell her it would be best if she came clean. She didn’t think the woman would do it so quickly.

“Chicken sounds good,” Mrs. Gates said. She moved toward a cabinet where she opened the door and took down three plates. “And I can tell the story to more than just one person.”

They put food on plates and took them to the table. Marion avoided looking at Dallas, who she knew was more than a little angry with her. When they were seated, Mrs. Gates took a drink of the lemonade she’d poured for them to go with their food, and then she said, “As I told your wife, Judge, my husband was a bank robber.”

Dallas didn’t react and Mrs. Gates continued to talk. “When I met him it was all very exciting. It made him seem like a romantic figure to me, when in actuality he was nothing more than a criminal. My family had money. His didn’t, and he always said this was his way of getting what he was owed.”

Marion fought back the urge to snort in derision. People always thought they were owed something.

“Anyway, he and Bubba robbed banks, in Dallas and Oklahoma City.” She toyed with the food on her plate. “They had this great idea that they would only use a little bit of money for a while, because if they used the money in small amounts, it wouldn’t call attention to themselves.”

“They hid the money in the trunk of the Packard, which sat in our backyard for years. And then suddenly, one day in 1955 the car just vanished. I had gone on a shopping trip to Dallas with my mother and sister, and when I came back it was gone. I asked Mr. Gates what had happened, but he refused to talk. Three years later he was dead.”

“How did he die?” Marion knew it was an impolite question, but her cop senses just took over sometimes.

“Bubba killed him,” Mrs. Gates said. “In those days you could buy off a doctor. He put on the death certificate that Mr. Gates died of a heart attack, that he had a condition that no one knew about. In actuality, Bubba shot him because Mr. Gates had stolen the rest of the money. I had no idea he’d hidden it.”

“When did you find out?” Dallas was sitting with his elbows on the table now. None of them were eating the food in front of them.

“About ten years ago, I was cleaning out a few boxes. Bubba had terrorized me over the years, until I finally convinced him I didn’t know about the money, which I didn’t. Then I found a letter to me from Mr. Gates. He’d left it in a box of papers that I’d always just shoved into the closet. It gave directions to where he’d buried the money. He told me to have it dug up and to leave, to run from Bubba.”

She took another drink from her glass. “But I didn’t want to run. I liked my life here, and I’d convinced Bubba I didn’t know where the money was, so he wasn’t bothering me. And I didn’t need the money.”

Marion shook her head in disbelief. “So you’d planned on leaving it out there for eternity?”

“Oh no, I left Mr. Gates’ letter with my will. When I died, I knew it would be found, and it would be given back to the proper authorities. I kept expecting Bubba to die, but he’s held on all these years.”

“Now he’s angry because he’s lost his money,” Marion said. “That was him this afternoon, right?”

“Yes.”

“What about Shane?” Marion hated the thought of Shane being involved in bank robberies.

“Shane had no idea of what happened,” Mrs. Gates replied. “I told him about everything after the car was dug up, and he was shocked. He’d known Mr. Gates for years. No one would have suspected him of robbing banks. He was a good man.”

Marion clamped her lips shut, then decided not to. “Bank robberies are dangerous. There’s always the chance of someone being shot and killed.”

Mrs. Gates stood and picked up her plate. “I’m tired now, and I’d like you to leave. I’ll pack up the food.”

Dallas and Marion exchanged glances, and Marion wanted to scream because she’d pushed too hard. If she’d played it straight she could have gotten more information from their hostess, like how many banks had been robbed, how much money had been taken exactly, if there had been anyone else involved.

“Mrs. Gates.” Dallas had stood up and picked up their plates. “You need to talk to the authorities, give them all the information you have.”

She didn’t answer, which was better than her telling them to bite the big one. When she was done packing up the food, she handed it to Dallas. “You may go now.”

Her attitude was back to what Marion had always seen from her: where she thought she was better than everyone else and that they should bow down to her and do exactly what she wanted and what she said.

Dallas took the food and Mrs. Gates pushed past them. “Show yourselves out. Please make sure the door is locked when you leave.”

Once they were outside, after Dallas had double-checked the door, they headed toward their cars.

“We’ll eat when we get home,” Dallas said, and Marion could tell he was unhappy with her.

“I say we forget the food and go to a restaurant,” she said. Better to stay in public with him when he was unhappy. He’d spanked her once or twice for “being bad,” and she was afraid that, if she wasn’t careful, tonight would be another of those nights.

“Nope,” Dallas said. “And, if you go somewhere else besides the house, I’ll spank you in the parking lot. I’ll just pull up beside you, take you from the car and bend you over the hood. It will shock everyone who comes by, but it will hopefully, teach you to follow the rules. Remember what Duncan said about making accusations without evidence.”

She threw up her hands in disgust. “May I remind you that I was right?”

“That doesn’t matter,” Dallas said. “She could still come back on us. She could say she never admitted to anything. She could accuse us of making stuff up. We need evidence, remember? Plus, this is not our case. Now, let’s go home.”

“Fine.” She pushed past him to her car, anger seeping into him. She knew Mrs. Gates could come back on them if they said anything to someone without evidence, but she didn’t really care. Her husband had been a bank robber. He’d left a ton of money buried in the dirt, and there was no telling how many banks they’d obviously done.

What they needed was some way to charge Bubba, but since she didn’t even know his last name, there was little chance of that happening. She supposed what she really needed to do was come up with evidence of some sort, but that wasn’t going to be easy.

She followed Dallas to the house, parking next to him in the garage. As she got out of the car, her mind was more on what she could do to link Bubba to the bank robberies. But she didn’t even know anything about him. He didn’t live here, and when she’d seen him earlier she hadn’t even written down his license plate. If she’d been smart enough to do that she could run the plate and get his name, and

address. That meant she needed to do just that. She would watch Mrs. Gates' house in the next few days and see if he came back. The possibility of it was pretty good, since he was upset about his money being found.

There has to be more of it out there, she said. There just has to be, or maybe he thinks there is. If I could just--

"Oh!" She cried out in surprise as Dallas grabbed her. He pushed her so that she was against the car, and then put his hand on her back, bending her over. He slapped her ass and she cried out.

"What the hell?"

"You made me a promise!" He slapped her ass again, and again.

"I made no promise. I never did."

"You said you were coming here. I knew you wouldn't, though. You're too obsessed with this."

He continued to spank her, the swats not really stinging since he was spanking her over her pants. It was more the humiliation that he was treating her like she was errant child.

"You can't punish me for doing my job!" She knew better than to fight him when he was spanking her. But she could certainly scream at him, let him know she didn't appreciate it.

"I told you, this is for breaking your promise to me." The swats were hard, and she closed her eyes and stayed quiet when she wanted to do nothing more than screech at him that he was an ass, that he was just pissed because--

She laughed out loud. "You're mad because I won the bet!" she pushed away from the car and glared at him.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me, we made a bet about Mrs. Gates being involved in the money, and I was right. That's why you're spanking me, because you're mad that I was right."

"Oh for the love of Pete," he said, shaking his head. "You don't get it, do you?"

"Don't deny it," she said, laughing. "You think I'll forget about the bet, don't you. You're not going to get your little French maid thing, and I'm going to get my way."

He shook his head slowly, and Marion felt some of her thunder leave. "This is about you doing what both Duncan and I warned you about. You're a good cop, Marion, so I don't understand why you would do this."

"Because I..." she sighed heavily. "Because I wanted to be the first. It was ego. I...crap, I flew

off the handle and I could have landed us in hot water. We could still be there if she gets pissed. You're right about that."

What had she been thinking? She could blame it on them, since they were the ones who treated her like she was a child, who told her what she couldn't do. But in truth it was all her. Sure they'd talked down to her, but she should have risen above it, should have done things the right way.

She started to undo her pants. She'd taken off her utility belt before she'd gotten out of the car. Dallas watched her as she undid them, and she knew he was wondering exactly what she was up to.

When they were loose she lowered them to her knees and turned toward the car, bending over. "Spank me," she said. For a minute she thought he would say no. But then he went to the wall and took down a ping-pong paddle they kept here for just this purpose.

He put his hand on the small of her back and slapped the wood against her bottom. Marion closed her eyes and tried to center on the spanking, but her mind kept wandering back to the robberies, and how she could prove, after all these years, that this Bubba person was involved.

Right now, though, she just needed to let her husband spank her. After all, it always helped her to find her center.

Chapter Five

Man, did her bottom hurt. It had been two days since the spanking in the garage, but if she sat down just right she could still feel it. Dallas had said he was trying to get his point across, and he'd certainly done that. She hadn't gone back to Mrs. Gates's house, and the woman had not contacted her.

Duncan had said the authorities had asked him questions about possible suspects in the robberies, but he hadn't mentioned her. "No evidence," he'd said when she'd expressed her disappointment in his decision.

"She didn't rob the banks, after all, and the only way you know the other guy is by a nickname. If she hasn't turned him in for the last fifty years, she's not going to do it now."

Marion had agreed with him, but she was afraid if he said the word evidence one more time she would scream bloody murder. How did you find evidence fifty years later? She supposed it was a losing cause. The money was returned, and nobody had lost a life.

Except for Mr. Gates. Marion didn't even know his first name. She didn't know Mrs. Gates's first name, either. She'd always been Mrs. Gates, the woman who donated a great deal of money to causes around town, the woman who demanded, and received, respect from everyone.

What good would it do to sully her name at the end of her life? Sure her husband had been a bank robber, but Mrs. Gates and her family had money to begin with, didn't they? And she'd used the money for her charities, had she?

Marion shook her head and glanced out the car window. She was supposed to be writing speeding tickets, and all she'd done was give out three verbal warnings. Duncan would give her a verbal warning when he heard about that. He always told her she was too soft on speeders.

Was she being too soft on Mrs. Gates? Was she justifying her keeping her husband's secret all these years? What would have happened if, when she found the letter, she would have turned it over to the police and they would have discovered the money then? It would be easier to forgive her if she hadn't let the money stay hidden.

"Stop obsessing on it," she said to herself as she flipped her lights on as one of the local teen-agers came flying down the street. She pulled out after him and he pulled over. She'd just finished writing him a warning when a car she recognized drove by.

Bubba's car. What the hell was he doing here again? What did he expect to find? There was no way he was getting the money back from the government. Was he going to try and blackmail money out of Marion? But blackmail her with what? If he had something on her, he would have used it years ago. Wouldn't he?

Something else had to be going on, but what? She would try to figure that out later. Right now, though, she would follow the car and take down the plate. Then she could run it and find out who Bubba really was.

She told the teen to slow down, then hurried to her car. She came up behind Bubba at the stop sign not far from where she'd seen him. He was sitting there, talking on the phone. She scribbled down his license plate, then turned left when he turned right. She didn't want him to think she was following him. It might keep him from doing whatever it was he was doing.

She went back to the station and gave the plate to the dispatcher, then waited impatiently while she put the information into the computer. Seconds later it spit out the information.

Bubba was better known as Frank Smith. Marion wrote the information down, then went to the computer in the officer's room and put the name into the criminal database. It came back with quite a few hits, of course, since it was so common a name. But when she put in his particulars, like address, weight and height, it came back with nothing.

"So he's kept his nose clean since robbing the banks," she said to herself. She glanced at the clock. She had another hour left on her schedule. She should be out working. Instead, all she wanted was to find out who Frank Smith really was. There were several databases she could check into, and that's exactly what she would do. Tonight.

She put the information she'd gathered so far into her notebook and put it into her locker. Then she went back out to patrol the streets. The rest of the afternoon was boring, with everyone obeying the traffic laws and nothing was happening otherwise. When it was over she grabbed her things and went home. She took a shower and sat down at the computer and started to search.

When she'd gone through the databases she came up with the information she wanted. Frank Smith, the one she was searching for, hadn't existed before 1955, and the man she'd seen was much older than that.

A thought occurred to her, and she put in more information, starting to dig. She was still sitting at the computer when Dallas came home.

"This is a shock," he said. "Not that I'm complaining, but you've never not been cooking when I get home. Something's up. Tell me what."

She clicked on the keys. "I found what we were missing. I think Bubba, whose real name is 'Frank Smith' or that's the one on his driver's license, is really Mrs. Gates's husband. I think the two of them robbed the banks together. I think she left him holding the bag, so to speak. I think she was a little rich girl out for a joy ride, and she took the money and buried it in the field to keep it from her 'husband,' whom nobody really remembers meeting. I think she'd had her fun and was ready for it to end."

“That is a big accusation,” Dallas said. “The woman is a pillar in the community. She’s lived here all her life.”

“And, according to country records she’s never been married, and there was never a death recorded in the 1950s of someone named Gates. She’s lied to us.”

He stared at the screen, then glanced at her. “This is the evidence you needed. Have you said anything to Duncan?”

“No.” She tapped a few keys. “Bubba drove through town today, and I ran his plates. His background information showed he wasn’t around before 1955. I guess when they’d finished their crime streak and she left with the money, he just started a new life. It’s so unbelievable.”

“Not really,” Dallas said. “People do things like this all the time, and back in the 1950s when there were no computers it would be easy to start off as a new person.”

“We need to go talk to her.” She didn’t get up from her seat, though. “Or I guess I should talk to Duncan first. He’s the one who should decide where to go from here.”

“You’re right, of course, but I know you want to go by and confront her with the information.”

She laughed softly. “Oh yes, I do, but I think if I did it would be a mistake. I really do need to talk to Duncan. Should we do it now, or should we wait and do it tomorrow?”

Marion thought about Bubba, who’d driven through town several hours ago. Was he a threat to Mrs. Gates? Somehow she doubted it, but there was the always the possibility. It would be best, she supposed, to call Duncan so he could do a welfare check on her.

She picked up the phone and dialed Duncan’s number. When he came on she started the conversation by saying she knew she was probably breaking the rules, but she’d done a little sleuthing this afternoon. She gave him the information she’d come across, and then listened to the silence.

“I’ll be damned,” he said. “Something tells me you might be right. You should have told me about the conversation you had with her about the bank robberies earlier.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I was worried about protecting her husband’s reputation, even if I never knew him.”

“Water under the bridge,” he said. “I’ll go out and talk to her now, and I’ll call you back.”

“Thanks.” She didn’t want to sit here, waiting to see how things would turn out. She wanted to go into town, talk to Mrs. Gates, see the expression on her face when Duncan gave her

the information Marion had come up with. Would she admit to the facts, or would she deny them? And was there any way for them to prove them? No, there was no way.

“She’s going to get away with it, both of them will.”

“Yup.” Dallas took her hand and stroked it gently. “But at least the money has been found. It’s been put back into the system as recovered funds. They’ll never face jail time, but sometimes things like that happen.”

“It sucks that I believed her.”

“We both did.” He stood. “Truthfully, what would we have done? She sounded so convincing, and neither of us bothered to check things out. Sucks, when you think about it. Of course I blame myself for it more than you. You wanted to check into things and I stopped you. Well, Duncan did, too.”

“Yeah, you’re right about that.” She glared at him. “I was ready to do my job, and you guys kept me from it.”

She stood up and sat down on his lap. “Of course there is always the consolation that I won the bet, the one between the two of us. I was right when I said she had something to do with the money, which means I get...”

“Yes, what do you get?” He tickled her side and she laughed, wiggling in his lap. “You never did say what you wanted as a prize.”

“I’ll think about it and I’ll get back to you.” She leaned down and kissed him. “At least I know the French maid’s uniform is out.”

“Unfortunately,” he replied. “One of these days, though, I’m going to win a bet, and you know what’s going to happen.”

“To quote a word you just used, unfortunately, yes I do.”

He grabbed her head and kissed her deeply. They’d just settled into a great necking session when her phone rang

“Ignore it,” he said as he nibbled on her lower lip.

“What if it’s Duncan?”

“He can leave a message.” The phone stopped and they started kissing again, and then it rang again.

“Something tells me he’s not going to quit calling until we answer,” Marion said. She reached for the phone and put it on speaker. “Duncan?”

“Yup.” He didn’t sound happy and Marion glanced at Duncan.

“Please don’t tell me she’s dead.”

“No, we didn’t find a body,” he said. “We found a house full of furniture and a note for you. It’s sealed. You want me to read it?”

“Yes.”

The rustling of paper came over the phone line. Duncan cleared his throat, and then said, “Well, hell.”

“What does it say?” she asked.

“It says, ‘Never trust a bank, because they can be robbed.’ Sage advice is you ask me.” He chuckled. “Then it says, ‘You should have arrested me when you had the chance.’”

“What else does it say?” Marion asked.

“Nothing,” Duncan said. “That’s the entire letter.”

Marion started to laugh. “She knew I was on to her, but I gave her just enough time to get away.”

“We did,” Duncan said. “Well, at least we have the money. What kind of person robs a bank and then buries the spoils from it for more than fifty years?”

“Someone who did it for the fun,” Marion replied. “Her family was already rich. I would love to corner her, ask her questions. But you could never know if she was telling you the truth, or if she was lying. She was a skilled liar.”

“Very,” Duncan said. “Y’all take care and have a good night. See you tomorrow.”

She ended the call and sat the phone down. “She ran. I guess Bubba was back in town to pick her up. I’m disappointed that she didn’t give us more answers than what she did.”

“Very disappointed,” he agreed. “But, it’s over now. Tom will be thrilled that he’s got a scandal on his hands. It will sell a bunch of newspapers.”

He stroked her thigh. “Now, let’s talk about what’s for dinner? Or should we skip it and go directly to dessert?”

“You know how I love sweets,” she said. “I’m thinking dessert is a good idea. And before you think you’re going to get away with losing the bet, I’m going to come up with something really good, and you’re going to pay...big time.”

A week later, Marion had decided on her winnings. She was set to tell Dallas that night, and she knew he was going to be surprised, and that he was going to love it. She'd just finished her shift for the day and had already changed into her street clothes. She was going by the grocery store to pick up some wine, something to celebrate the beginning of her four days off.

It was definitely time for a break. She got in her car and put the key in the ignition. The phone rang before she could start the car though. She checked the ID. It wasn't a number she recognized, but she answered anyway.

"Is it warm there?" She recognized the voice immediately.

"Mrs. Gates."

"It's warm here, that's for sure. Living in the tropics is going to be fun."

"You're a bank robber." Marion relaxed against the seat. "You lied to me. Everything you told me was a lie."

"Not all of it," she said. "My name really is Gates."

Marion laughed. "Did you use any of the money y'all took?"

"None of it. Well, I didn't. Bubba used his share. And when I left him and took what was left, he was very angry. But he's happy now that we've got money, legal money that we're living on. I'd forgotten how much I'd enjoyed being with him."

"Why did you do it?"

"For the thrill of it," she said, confirming what Marion had guessed. "But after a while it got to be too much. There was one time when it seemed as if Bubba would actually shoot someone. That's why I left, because I was afraid that he would do it sometime. I left him some money, a goodly portion of it. And I'd never told him my real name or where I was from. He didn't think about it again until he saw the story on the news about the car. Then he knew it was me."

"And Shane Boyd?"

"Innocent as a baby," she said. "He thought he was defending me against Bubba that day you came up."

"And the story about your husband, the one who never existed?"

"Sweetheart, after fifty years, there was nobody there to contradict me. Shane had been around, but he never let on that I had never been married."

“You should have stayed, faced the music for what you’d done,” Marion said.

“And spend the rest of my life in jail? I don’t think so. I’ll have to face my maker when I die. I’ll be punished then, I’m sure. Until then I’ll enjoy the sunshine and warm water. You take care.”

The phone went dead and Marion smiled, “You too, Mrs. Gates.”

She sat there for a few minutes, pondering what the woman had said. And then she started the car and went to the store. She bought some steaks and potatoes and some fresh corn on the cob, making sure she picked up a good bottle of wine to go with it. Then she went home and started up the grill.

When Dallas came home she had already put the steaks on. “I love the beginning of your four days off,” he said as he opened the bottle of wine. He’d greeted her with a big kiss, and after he’d poured her a glass of wine he gave her another.

She savored the kiss, then gave him a big smile. “Guess who called me today.”

“Who?”

She told him about Mrs. Gates’s call, and he started to laugh when she was done. “Well, she’s living a good life, but she’s probably right about meeting her maker. At least she knows that and she’s ready for it.”

They ate dinner, and when they were done she settled into his arms for a night of television. Before it started, though, she turned her gaze toward him. “I’ve figured out my prize. Be ready for it on Saturday night.”

“What should I be ready for?”

“For whatever pops up,” she replied. “I’m not going to tell you what I want, because it would spoil it. You just have to know that it’s something for both of us to enjoy. Be prepared.”

“Can I have a hint?”

“Nope.” She gave him a big smile. “But I will say you’re going to have to go out for a while on Saturday so I can set the scene properly. Be gone from three to five. That’s all I’m going to say.”

“I can spank it out of you.”

She laughed. “Doubtful, but you could try. Later. Right now I want to watch some TV, so leave me alone.”

She settled in his arms again, and she knew, even though she wasn’t looking at him, that

he was smiling.

She used the dining room table as the centerpiece. It had taken her a little bit to get it moved into the den, but that would be the best place for this little play to take place. She had everything set up, the table, the leather chair behind it, the gavel on top of it.

Dallas's real fantasy was for this to take place in his actual courtroom, but she didn't want to take that chance. There were too many people with cameras nowadays; too many chances of someone seeing and it getting out to the public.

It wouldn't be good for either of their jobs if that happened. So he was just going to have to settle for it happening in their home. She'd resisted this fantasy for the longest time, but had finally decided on it as her winnings for the bet since she could control the setting.

When five o'clock rolled around, she heard him pull up next to the house. She had no doubt in her mind that he'd been waiting for five on the dot. She hadn't changed into her outfit yet, because it would give it away. Of course she was sure he would figure it out once he came inside and she handed him one of his judge's robes.

He came in the back door and she thrust it at him. He took it and frowned. "Into the den with you," she said. "I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Okay." He narrowed his eyes. "Do I get more of a hint?"

"No." She pointed to the den. "Go."

Changing took her a few minutes. The outfit was low cut on top and high cut on the bottom. She'd selected the one that was all black except for the white apron and the white lace around the skirt and the off-the-shoulder blouse.

She picked up the feather duster and took a deep breath. She'd never worn anything like this before, but she knew how much Dallas wanted it. One more deep breath and she headed for the den.

When she got there she peeked around the corner. Dallas was in his robe, sitting behind the desk. He knew what was going on, now, and she could tell from the look on his face that he was excited.

She stepped into the room and cleared her throat. "My boss, he sent me here." She had no luck with doing accents, so she used her regular voice.

"For what purpose did he send you?" Dallas picked up the gavel and lightly tapped it on the table.

“He said I was a bad maid and I had to go and see the judge. He said only the judge could straighten me out.”

“Come closer.” He leaned forward. “I want to get a better look at you.”

She tiptoed into the room, waving her feather duster around. “I did nothing wrong, I swear.”

“I said step closer.” She went to the table and stopped.

He glanced at her, and then he stood. He made an impressive figure in his robes and for a minute she thought about saying, “Okay, role playing off. Just spank me and take me.” But she knew that wasn’t what he wanted so she stood still and bit her lower lip as if she were nervous while he examined her.

“Tell me exactly what your boss said.”

“He said that only a spanking from the big, strong Judge McCormick would teach me how to do my job properly.”

“So be it then.” He pointed to the desk. “You will bend over it.” She did as he said, and then he went to his chair and sat down. She knew he was getting an eyeful with her in her current position, and the way his gaze locked on her breasts, she could tell he was fighting to keep control.

He waited a minute, then another, the time dragging on as he stared at her. Then he picked up his gavel and banged it down on the table. “Ms. Maid, you are hereby sentenced to a harsh spanking. Do you have anything to say before I carry out the sentence?”

“I ask for leniency, Your Honor. I promise I was being good. I promise.”

“Sorry, but I know your boss. He wouldn’t send you unless you needed this.” He stood and picked up the paddle she’d left by his chair. “It’s time for your spanking.”

He came around the table slowly. Marion’s excitement kicked into high gear when he placed the paddle next to her, then put his fingers in the elastic of her panties and worked them over her hips and down to her ankles.

“Legs spread,” he said as he picked up the paddle. When she was in position he rubbed the paddle against her bottom. “According to the sentence, this will be a spanking without limit. You will be swatted until I think you’ve learned your lesson.”

“Yes, Your Honor.” She braced herself for the first swat, knowing that if she tensed up too much it would start things off badly. She closed her eyes as he rubbed the wood against her bare flesh. He gave her one, two, three small swats, and then he pulled back and smacked her

ass, hard.

The spanking grew harder with each swat, the wood coming down and down and down. Marion wiggled her bottom and protested, hoping she was saying the right things to meet Dallas's wishes.

"Judge, Judge, you must stop!"

More swats came down.

"And why should I do that?"

"Because my bottom is tender. It needs not to be abused in this way."

Even more swats landed.

"You don't determine when the spanking is over, I do." Marion tried to keep from crying out as he increased the intensity of the swats. She liked a good spanking, but his one was tougher than most. She moaned softly, and he rubbed the wood against her bottom.

"Thank you, Marion, for using my fantasy to fuel your prize for the winning." He helped her to stand and then he kissed her gently. "I love you."

"I love you too, darling." She kissed him back. "Is my spanking done?"

"Not by a long shot, darling." He wiggled the paddle and she glanced at it, and then back to him. "Now, assume the position, and then I'll have you assume another position that will thrill us both even more than the first one will."

The End

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