

Prologue

“Please state your name for the record.”

Simone stared at the detective sitting across the table with suspicious blue eyes. “You know who I am.”

Detective Claire Barnes fiddled with the digital recorder on the table between them. “I’m reinstating the formalities. Please state your name.”

“Simone Dawkins,” she said, pushing a strand of dark brown hair behind her ear.

“Simone, I’m going to cut to the chase. Is there anybody with your company that had a grudge against you?”

Simone’s raised her eyebrows. “Me?”

“Yes. You or any of the employees at Goodard Graphics.”

Simone stared at Detective Barnes defiantly, pulling her tall, thin body straight in the chair. “I think you know the answer to that question after all that’s happened. I don’t understand why you’re being this way.”

Detective Barnes creased her brow, confused. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about, so let’s get back to why you’re here. Now tell me, have you terminated anybody? Was anybody disgruntled? Were there office politics that might have pushed somebody over the edge?”

Simone set her jaw. “Somebody just tried to kill me and it’s obviously tied to the other crimes in Tanger Falls. Now please, I need your help.” She reached for the coffee cup in front of her but accidentally crushed it, spewing brown liquid over the steel table. “Do you have any napkins around here?”

“Forget the coffee; just answer the question.”

“No, this is a mess. We need to clean it up.”

“I don’t care about the coffee,” Detective Barnes said sternly. “This is the third crime on my case load in as many weeks. Now you’re saying somebody was trying to kill you. I think asking if anybody has a grudge against you is perfectly reasonable. So tell me, Simone Dawkins, who was pissed off enough to cause all of this chaos?”

Simone leaned back in her chair. “I can’t believe this. You keep going on as if you don’t know what’s happening.”

Detective Barnes glared at her. “I don’t know what’s happening, so please enlighten me.” She leaned forward. “This had to start somewhere. Where did it start, Simone? What set off this domino effect of madness?”

“I don’t know! Things were fine! Everything was fine until,” Simone broke off and her eyes widened in shock. “Oh God,” she moaned, tears welling in her eyes.

“What?” Detective Barnes said. “Please, anything helps.”

Tears rolled down Simone’s pale cheeks. “Three months ago.”

Detective Barnes stared at Simone waiting for more, but Simone sat silently, tears running down her cheeks. “Okay, this started three months ago? What happened?”

“I lied.”

“Just one time, or was it several times over the past three months?”

A sob wracked Simone’s body. “It kept going on and on and more people got involved. Before I knew it, everybody was tangled up in it.” She sniffed. “I didn’t mean for it to end this way.”

Detective Barnes pulled a wadded tissue from her pocket and handed it to Simone. “Who did you lie to?”

Simone looked toward the ceiling, the tears in her eyes glinting in the harsh light of the lamp hanging over the table. “Everybody. But I thought didn’t matter and I was wrong. I underestimated her. She does matter, and now she’s going to make me pay.”

“Who?”

Simone stared at Detective Barnes, a cold look in her eye. “Ruby Josen.”

Detective Barnes flipped through her notes. “I don’t understand. How?”

Simone shook her head. “I don’t know, but she’s the only one left. It has to be her. I just don’t understand how she did it. I don’t understand how she knew.”

“Knew what?”

“Everything.”

Detective Barnes flipped to a fresh page in her notepad. “Let’s take this from the beginning. Tell me what happened.”

Chapter 1

Ruby Josen wound around the people crowded at the end of the buffet table, trying to find a seat at one of the picnic tables while balancing a plate of barbeque, baked beans, green beans, and macaroni and cheese in one hand and a large cup of sweet tea in the other. It was a bright, clear day and Mr. Goodard, the CEO of Goodard Graphics, reserved the best picnic area next to the Smoky Mountain National Forest for the annual company picnic. Then again, beating out competition for the space wasn't hard. Goodard Graphics did all the graphic design and advertisements for every business in the area, so everybody was willing to give up the prime space once a year to give the employees a chance to socialize and strategize for the remainder of the year. The main office was located in Knoxville, but the branch office in Tanger Falls, Tennessee, located just outside of Gatlinburg, brought in almost fifty percent of the company's revenue. It made sense, considering tourism in the area around the National Forest. Their workload was consistently high.

"Hi neighbor, what's up?" Denise Rockwell said, dropping in the seat next to Ruby. Denise was a graphic artist and looked every bit the part with her long brown hair, dark brown eyes, and bright clothes. Today she was wearing a bright yellow shirt and jeans held up by a white belt with so many metal loops that she would never make it through an airport metal detector. She was short and curvy, but she made up for what she lacked in size with an explosive personality and brilliant creativity in her design work. It's why she was the most popular graphic artist in their office, and perhaps in all of east Tennessee. Denise was Ruby's best friend and neighbor in the one and only apartment complex in Tanger Falls.

"Hi Denise," Ruby said, brushing her long, blonde hair behind her ear. She peered at Denise with sky blue eyes over the rim of her sunglasses. "I see you're trying to outshine the sun in your outfit today."

Denise laughed as she sat. "And I see you're trying to blend in," she said, pointing at the long, brown dress hanging off Ruby's tall, slim frame with her fork. "Why do you buy your clothes two sizes too big? Or here's a better question: why are you sitting out here by yourself?" Denise asked. She motioned to the head table with a plastic fork. "Why aren't you up there with the senior staff? You should be hobnobbing with the folks from Knoxville. We only see them once a year."

Ruby laughed. "You aren't up there hobnobbing with anybody. You're back here, the same as me. Besides, I'm not comfortable with that crowd."

"Not comfortable with them? You work with Simone and Millie every day." Denise stared at Ruby. "Wait a minute. Are you still miffed about being passed over for the executive secretary position a couple of months ago?"

Ruby slumped in her chair. "No, that's the past and there's no use dwelling on it," she poked at her baked beans, "Millie isn't nice to me. She's a bully, and Simone doesn't stand up for me. Ever since Mr. Goodard hired Millie as the executive secretary, it feels like they're ganging up on me."

"Are they still giving you problems?" Denise glared at Millie Banks, who was chuckling at the head table beside Mr. Goodard. A strand of red hair fell from her loose bun, dangling next to her porcelain skin. "I could snap Millie in half. She's a stick." Denise chuckled. "Five minutes in the sun will probably give her skin cancer. Those redheads burn easy."

"That's not nice," Ruby mumbled.

"Sorry," Denise said. "What's the problem? Is she still claiming you're rude to customers and messing up work? Because that's crap. All the customers I work with say you're a ray of

sunshine.” She took a gulp of her tea. “And why isn’t Simone sticking up for you? I mean, you two got along great until Millie was hired. Did she flip on you or what?”

“I don’t know about Simone. As for Millie, you know we didn’t get off to a good start,” Ruby said. “She’s still mad about me about messing up the paperwork for one of the clients when she first started. She reminds me of that every chance she gets.”

“Ruby, everybody makes mistakes. That could have happened to anybody. And it was what, once in how many years?”

“Eleven years,” Ruby said.

“Heck, that’s the best track record I’ve heard of.” Denise paused to stare at Millie. “You know, I’ve heard a few of the graphic artists say she’s trying to change everything. A client called me last week and said they got their pre-production package digitally, and it nearly crashed their server because the attachments she sent were too big. I had to come to the office, print it out, and hand deliver it to the client at their office in Gatlinburg. Is Millie doing that a lot?”

Ruby nodded. “All the time. I tell her that she needs to talk to Mr. Goodard about these changes, or at least with the clients, but she does what she wants. She’s always telling me I need to be more innovative and fully embrace technology.” She snorted. “She talks to me like I don’t know what I’m doing, but I know more than she does. Heck, I’ve been grinding away as their receptionist since this office opened. I was more than qualified for that job, but they brought her in from out of nowhere.” Ruby sipped her tea. “I don’t get it. Simone said she’d give me a reference. I thought the business manager’s word would have weight.”

“Did you ask Simone about it?”

“No, I can’t do that. That stuff’s confidential. She can’t talk about the hiring process. Besides, she’s so distant these days between her divorce and training Millie that we don’t talk much. When we do, it seems like she’s siding against me. I don’t understand it.”

“Ruby, quit being a doormat. She promised you a reference. I think it’s perfectly appropriate to ask if she gave it.”

“I don’t know.”

“Just ask her. I’m sure there’s something she can tell you without violating any sacred policies. Maybe it will explain why she’s been so distant lately too.” Denise looked around and spotted Simone getting a tea refill. “Come on; let’s ask her now. The sooner you get answers, the sooner you can move on.”

“Denise, no!” Ruby said, but before she knew it Denise jumped from her seat and was chatting with Simone. She saw Simone pull herself up straight and look down at Denise. Ruby thought it was silly that Simone wore high heels. She was five foot ten and towered over most of the women in town, so it’s not like she needed extra height. Denise touched Simone’s arm as she leaned in to say something else. Simone shrugged and walked over to the table.

“I need to get back,” Simone grumbled. “I told Millie--“

“Have a seat,” Denise said sternly.

Simone stared at Denise for a moment, and then sat across from Ruby. “What’s on your mind?”

Denise poked Ruby in the arm. “Go ahead, ask her.”

Ruby sighed. “I was wondering. I mean, I know Mr. Goodard hired Millie for the executive secretary position a couple of months ago.”

Simone furrowed her brows. “This isn’t about you two fighting all the time, is it? Because I told you, it’s time to overcome your differences and establish a professional relationship.”

“No, it’s not about that,” Ruby said. “I was just wondering.” She trailed off and looked around.

“What?” Simone asked, irritated.

“A while back when you were taking applications for the executive secretary position, you said I’d be an excellent candidate for the job. You said you’d give me a reference for it, too. I was just wondering; did you give Mr. Goodard that reference?”

Simone set her jaw and glared at Ruby. “I don’t recall saying any such thing.”

Ruby’s jaw dropped. “But you did! It was right after Valentine’s Day. You said Mr. Goodard wanted somebody experienced in that position and my long history with the company would make me the perfect candidate. And you did tell me to put your name down as a reference.”

“Oh that,” Simone looked around. “You misunderstood me. What I said was that I’d understand if you applied for the job and wished you luck. I never said you were guaranteed the position.”

“That’s not what I said.”

“And furthermore,” Simone said, cutting Ruby off, “I couldn’t be a reference because I’m your direct supervisor. That would be a conflict of interest.”

“No it wouldn’t,” Denise said. “It makes perfect sense. Besides, don’t people usually call the current supervisor when they’re interested in hiring someone?”

Simone continued to look away. “Perhaps.”

“Well, did Mr. Goodard call you after Ruby interviewed with him?”

Simone started to stand, but Denise reached across the table and grabbed her arm. “I asked you a question.”

Simone glared at Denise. “I wasn’t aware that graphic artists were familiar with office policies.”

“I’m familiar with more than you know. Come on, Simone. It’s a simple question. Answer it and you can go.” She let go of Simone’s arm and nodded toward the head table. “I don’t think the ‘in crowd’ has missed you yet. Answer the question, and we might let you get away before they see you consorting with the lowly staff members in the branch office.”

“Fine,” Simone said, glaring at Ruby. “The truth is that I’m not at liberty to say whether Mr. Goodard called me or what I said if he did. That’s confidential information and I’d be violating the law I answered it. I’m completely within my rights to say it’s none of your business.” She stood. “I’m sorry you’re upset about getting passed over for the job. You were a good candidate, but Millie was a better candidate. Reality isn’t always nice and life isn’t fair. I understand if you if you decide to move someplace you feel is more appropriate for your skills. In fact, I wish you luck.” She glanced at her watch. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have some people to speak to before I pick up my son.” Simone snapped.

“I thought Daniel rode the bus,” Ruby said. “Why do you need to pick him up?”

Simone glared at Ruby. “He had something after school today, okay?” She put her hands on her hips. “Is that all ladies?”

“Go on,” Denise said, waving her off. Simone stormed away from the table. “I hope she gets TMJ from clenching her jaw like that,” Denise grumbled.

“That’s not nice,” Ruby mumbled. She glared at Simone, who managed to recover from their conversation and put on a bright smile for Mr. Goodard in the thirty seconds it took her to reach the head table. “Thanks.”

“For what?” Denise asked. “That did no good. All we discovered is that Simone’s a liar.”

“So you believe what I said about her promising me a reference?”

“You’re one of the most honest people I’ve ever known. Now her,” Denise snorted. “I think all she just did was lie. She wouldn’t know the truth if it kicked her in the rear.”

Ruby snickered. “It’s good to know I’m not the only one who thinks that.”

“Oh, I think she’s an equal opportunity liar. That’s probably why her husband walked out on her. Did you hear about that? I heard he left her a note on New Year’s Day saying he resolved to correct the mistake of marrying her and start a new life. Things are never that abrupt unless something nasty happened.”

“Maybe,” Ruby mumbled. “Oh Denise, what am I going to do?”

“I don’t know, but maybe she gave us a clue.” Denise said. “You’ve been here a long time. Maybe it’s time to get out of this rut.”

Ruby threw her fork on her plate. “The opportunities to do that are limited in a small town like this one.”

“You never know what tomorrow might bring. It could be a miracle.”

Ruby snorted. “Or a disaster, like the past five years.”

Denise patted Ruby’s hand. “Nothing lasts forever. Just wait and see. I feel things will change for you very soon.” She smiled. “And that could be good for all of us.”

Chapter 2

“These meeting packets are a disaster!” Millie shouted, tossing the notebooks across the mahogany table in the conference room. “Ruby, what did you do?”

“I did them the way Mr. Goodard always asked me to do them,” Ruby said, gathering up the three ring binders. “What’s wrong with them?”

“Tabbed notebooks? Are you serious?” Millie said, her green eyes blazing. “That’s so middle school. Why aren’t they bound? That would be easier.” She plucked a binder from Ruby’s hand and flipped through it. “Or better yet, why aren’t these files digitized? The final product will have to be. Why are we messing with all of this paper? It’s a waste of time and resources.” She waved her hand at the ceiling. “We have a projector. It would be more effective for me to make the presentation on the big screen.”

“Many of our clients do their proposal packets digitally, but it takes time to get people to fully convert,” Ruby said. “We’re trying to be patient and let them upgrade on their own. Clients stay with people they feel comfortable with, and we want to help them make the transition at their own pace.”

“They’re hiring us. We should be setting the pace,” Millie huffed, handing the binder back to Ruby. “And this particular client is the city. They should be ahead of the curve! Why are we allowing them to drag along in the twentieth century like this?”

“We’ve been trying to get them to go digital for years but they won’t do it. I think it’s because the mayor is computer illiterate. She isn’t running for re-election because she wants to retire next year. We hope we can get whoever replaces her to upgrade to digital presentations.” Ruby shrugged. “And besides, Mr. Goodard thought it would be more practical to provide the laptops to the graphic artists. The projector and screen is for their portion of the client consultations; not ours.”

“I didn’t ask for your opinion,” Millie snapped.

“I’m sorry. The city brings in our biggest campaigns. I’ve known this group for a long time. I thought you might want to know.”

“I’ll know plenty directly from them soon enough,” Millie snapped. “I can’t believe Mr. Goodard has been able to work with them in such an archaic manner for so many years.” She snorted. “Well, he put me in charge so things are going to change. I’m going to tell the mayor she can go digital or go home.”

“I don’t think Mr. Goodard will like that. He has a good relationship with the mayor and the city council members. That might have consequences he won’t be happy with.”

“Like making us and the city more efficient? What’s wrong with that?” Millie asked.

“We’ve found that you have to handle politicians more delicately than commercial clients. The egos at work – it’s hard to explain. If Mr. Goodard says to do it their way, then he’s obviously established a good working relationship with them and we should cooperate.”

“I care about working efficiently, not politics. Mr. Goodard might, but he’s dealing with his sick mother and he isn’t here to massage their egos. That’s not our job anyway. We’re here to consult with them on the fall tourism campaign. They need us more than we need them, and they need to respect us by helping us work more efficiently. If the mayor can’t deal with digital files, then it is time for her to be on her way.”

“It’s just until the start of the new year. I don’t understand why it’s such a big deal to push this now.”

“You don’t need to understand, Ruby. You’re just the assistant. You handle the information and communication; that’s it. It’s my job to understand. My job and Denise’s job as the graphic

artist.” Millie looked at her watch. “By the way, where is Denise? Isn’t she supposed to be here for the meeting? She’s the designer they requested.”

“The meeting isn’t for another fifty minutes. She’ll be here.”

Millie blew out a sharp breath. “I don’t know why we let the graphic artists work from home. That’s ridiculous. I think they need to be in the office with us. How do we know they’re putting in all of their hours?”

“They can’t work on a standard forty-hour week and meet their deadlines,” Ruby said. “I live next door to Denise. Sometimes she works on projects for sixty hours over a week. Then the next week it might be half days with three client meetings. It depends on the project and the deadlines. They don’t have steady hours. Besides, we don’t have enough office space for them to work here. Mr. Goodard thought it would make better financial sense to have a smaller office and allow the artists to work from home and come in as needed. It saves us a lot of money in rent.”

“Well, I think they should be required to check in regularly during normal business hours. I’m going to talk to Mr. Goodard about that.”

“Good luck,” Ruby mumbled.

“What did you say?”

Ruby looked down. “Nothing. I’m sorry.” She sighed. “What do you want me to do with the meeting packets?”

“Take them out of those three ring notebooks and bind them. I think the plastic spirals would look more professional and reflect our quality of work. This is an advertising firm, not a middle school.”

“The intern is out this morning. I don’t know if I can get that done by myself in the next fifty minutes.”

“I’ll send Simone to help you. If they aren’t done when the meeting starts, I’ll stall them. Bring them to me when you’re done.”

“Will do,” Ruby said, turning to leave the room. She nearly walked into Simone.

“Watch it!” Simone snapped.

“Simone, I need your help,” Millie said. “Ruby screwed up the meeting packets. Will you help her get them right before the mayor and city council members get here?”

“I’m not surprised,” Simone said, grabbing the binders from Ruby. “Come on; let’s fix this mess before the politicians get here.”

Chapter 3

“I had to listen to Simone lecture me on adjusting to a new way of doing things for the next forty-five minutes while we hustled to bind those packets,” Ruby said, taking a bite out of her ham sub. “I can’t believe it. They’re turning everything upside down. I’m surprised the vendors aren’t complaining!”

“She and Millie weren’t so bold in the consult meeting,” Denise said, poking at her salad. “It was all yes ma’am, yes sir, and yes mayor, whatever you want. Then after the meeting, Millie told me that she expected me to dress more professionally in the future.” Denise motioned to her pink button-down shirt and tan pants. “I mean, what’s wrong with this? I’ve worn this same outfit to meetings during the spring and summer for years. Simone and Mr. Goodard had no problem with it.”

“I’ve noticed that Millie doesn’t like bright colors,” Ruby said. “I don’t know if you ever saw the red sweater that Simone wore in the winter, but Millie said something about it giving her a headache shortly after she started in March. I noticed that Simone never wore it again and that surprised me because she loved that sweater. She must have worn it once a week during the fall and winter over the past two years.”

“I’ve noticed that most of the office staff dresses like they’re at a funeral,” Denise said. “I mean, no offence. I know you aren’t fond of bright colors, but it seems everybody around the office has toned it down.” She chuckled. “I guess she sees that neon red hair in the mirror and she can’t take any more.”

“I don’t know. She’s certainly remaking that office in the image she wants. I’m surprised at Mr. Goodard for hiring her. Leena would have never acted like Millie did over that meeting this morning.” Leena was the executive secretary that retired at the end of January. “She was flexible and though it was great for people to express their individuality because it showed clients we can work together to adapt to their needs. Remember the painting that was in the lobby of the fall sunset over Gatlinburg?”

“That’s a beautiful painting!” Denise said.

“Daniel Powell did it for a charity auction and Mr. Goodard bought it for the lobby.” Daniel was one of the graphic artists in their office. Many of them had side jobs to help pay bills and to build up a portfolio in hopes of eventually becoming full time freelance artists. Denise did book covers for several e-publishers, and she occasionally took on various other short term art projects and freelance assignments to supplement her income. “Did you notice that it’s gone?”

Denise stared into space for a moment. “It was gone. What happened to it?”

“Millie took it down. She thought it was unprofessional.”

“To decorate with artwork by our own designer? Why?”

“She said our purpose is to serve advertising needs and it’s a conflict of interest to display freelance work because that’s not what we do. She took down everything you guys contributed to Leena to display around the office.”

Denise’s jaw dropped. “Even the framed print of my book cover that won the cover of the year for independent artists last year?”

Ruby nodded. “Even that one. I managed to get it. I’m planning to put it up in my apartment, unless you want it back.”

“No, you can keep it. I already have a print and I’d be honored for you to have it.” Denise sipped her drink. “When did this happen?”

“She’s been complaining about it since she started here, but she took them down day before yesterday.”

“I wonder what set her off on that one.”

“Who knows?” Ruby mumbled, wiping her mouth and dropping the crumpled napkin on her empty plate. “Who cares? All I know is she’s driving me crazy and the thought of going back for the afternoon makes me sick. You’re lucky you can go home. At least you have some relief. I have to put up with her and Simone fussing at me until six o’clock. I might lose my sanity.”

“At least it’s Friday, right?”

“Yea, right. Not like weekends mean much to me.”

“No big plans, eh?”

Ruby shook her head. “I thought about going to see that big action movie opening this weekend, but I don’t know if I feel like going to the trouble. It’s ironic. We have entertainment and shopping in Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge, but there’s not a single decent movie theater nearby. I’d like to splurge and see it in 3D, but that means I have to go into Knoxville to see it. That’s nearly an hour’s drive through mountains one way and being stuck in a movie theater full of people for two and a half hours. Plus, they’re calling for a chance of storms tomorrow which would make the drive more challenging. I don’t know if I’m up to that.”

“I hear you.” Denise thought. “The spring festival is this weekend. It’s in town and it’s free. All you have to pay for is food, and we can get home quick if the weather turns bad. Do you want to go to that?”

“I don’t know; I don’t feel like getting in crowds. The whole town will be there.”

Denise rolled her eyes. “That’s what, 150 people? It will do you good to get out. What else are you going to do? Sit in your apartment and stew over how much you hate your job all weekend? Come on, we just got paid. Take a break. Get out some. Spoil yourself a little. You might even have fun.”

“Okay, I’ll go,” Ruby mumbled. “But I’m not getting up at the crack of dawn to be there. Not before midmorning. I want to sleep in.”

“Me too,” Denise said. She looked at her cell phone. “I hate to shoo you away, but your lunch hour ends in ten minutes. You better get back to the office, and I better head home and get started on this city project. They want the entire world on a silver platter, and they want it yesterday. I have to get started if I want to meet the deadline.”

“Thanks for having lunch with me,” Ruby said, standing and picking up her purse. “It was good to get out, and you’re right. Maybe getting out tomorrow will do me some good. I need to do something different.”

Denise smiled and patted Ruby on the arm. “I couldn’t agree more.”

Chapter 4

Ruby sat at a picnic table at the park Saturday afternoon, enjoying the breeze blowing through the trees. It was more crowded than it had been for the company picnic but then again, this event included the entire town. Tanger Falls hosted a spring festival every year during the first weekend in May. The event was open to the public, but it was held as more of a local celebration for the permanent residents to usher in the slower summer season. Tanger Falls, like many mountain towns, got the majority of their tourism during the fall and winter, when the area peaked with changing leaves, holiday celebrations, and the winter ski season. The spring festival was a way to celebrate getting their town back to themselves for a while.

“It’s so nice out today!” Denise said, sipping a milk shake. “The weather is perfect!”

Ruby nodded. “I’m glad the rain held off. I was afraid we’d be stuck inside.” The forecast had been calling for a chance of storms that day but so far, it was sunny and clear. “Do you want to hike one of the trails up the hill? I can find an easy one if you want.” Ruby loved to hike. In fact, it wasn’t uncommon for her to hike the trails in the National Forest after work and on weekends during the long spring and summer days. She knew every trail on their side of the forest and many in the Gatlinburg area.

Denise shook her head. “I went jogging every day this week and frankly, I’d like a day off from strenuous activity.” She looked at the people milling about. “I’d like to see some of the art exhibits at the convention center.”

“Now Denise, you told me I need to get out and you want to be cooped up in the convention center? I thought we were supposed to forget about work over the weekend. Looking at that stuff will remind me of all the meetings and deadlines we have next week.”

“I know, but I love it.”

Ruby peered at Denise. “Do you love it, or are you keeping an eye on the local competition?”

Denise rolled her eyes. “Um, okay, maybe both.” She sighed. “I tell you what. Why don’t we part ways for an hour? You can hike one of the trails, I can scope out what the local artists are up to, and we can meet back here and decide what to do next.”

“I guess that’d be alright. I didn’t dress for a strenuous hike today so maybe I can hike one of the lower trails. It’s been a while since I did the foothills trail back there,” Ruby said, pointing toward the entryway to the forest.

Denise smiled and stood. “Thanks! I’ll meet you back here in an hour. I promise we’ll do whatever you want for the rest of the day.”

“Alright,” Ruby said, standing and stretching. She really wanted to hike one of the longer trails, but could see that Denise wasn’t interested. Oh well, Denise was compromising by cutting her artistic musings to only an hour, and a shorter trail would work out fine. Ruby knew she could hike the foothills trail at the entryway of the forest in about forty minutes and be back well in time to meet Denise. She wound through the crowd toward the forest entryway. As she got near the trail entrance she bumped into Simone. Simone’s twelve-year-old son, Daniel, was behind her and smiled as he spotted Ruby.

“Hi Miss Ruby!” Daniel said, his blue eyes brightening as the wind blew light brown hair out of his eyes.

“Hi Daniel. Hi Simone. Are you enjoying the festival?”

Simone grumbled something indiscernible, grabbed Daniel’s arm, and pushed past Ruby. Daniel looked back and shrugged. Ruby shrugged back and turned away. “Geeze, I hope she didn’t sprain anything trying to run away from me,” Ruby mumbled.

“I hope she didn’t either,” a voice said behind her. She turned to see a young man with curly black hair touching his shoulders and piercing blue eyes.

Ruby blushed. “I’m sorry; I must sound crazy mumbling to myself. I forgot; my friend isn’t with me.”

He smiled. “No worries. I think everybody talks to themselves from time to time.” He extended his hand. “My name is Bryce.”

Ruby shook his hand. “I’m Ruby. Pleased to meet you.”

“Actually, I should apologize. That was bold of me to butt into your musings,” Bryce said. “I saw that interaction and it seemed curious to me. You obviously know each other and the boy greeted you warmly, but the woman went to great pains to escape your presence. Do you have a bad relationship with her?”

“I wouldn’t say a bad relationship. I mean, she’s my boss. As for Daniel, I’ve known him since he was a year old. I’ve watched him grow up.”

“Ah, I see.”

“He’s always been nice to me. Now Simone,” Ruby stammered, “we haven’t been getting along lately. We used to be friends but some things have happened at work,” she blushed. “I really shouldn’t burden a stranger with this.”

Bryce motioned to a ‘Psychic Readings’ booth next to the forest entrance. “Actually, it’s my job to help people with their problems. I’d be glad to help. Why don’t you come in?”

Ruby glanced at the booth. “No offence, but I don’t believe in that stuff.”

“None taken. Come on, have a seat. Tell me about one thing troubling you and I’ll see if I can help make it better. No charge.”

Ruby raised an eyebrow. “No charge?”

Bryce smiled. “A free demonstration. Come on, you can take it or leave it. No charge, no obligation. Just one reading. Give me a try.”

She sat in one of the two plastic chairs in the booth. “How does this work? Do you look in a crystal ball or draw tarot cards or read a star chart to get my fortune?”

He laughed and pulled his plastic chair so he was facing Ruby. “No, I don’t work like that. I do psychic readings. All I need is to hold something that you wear a lot to focus on your energy. I’ll share what I sense. If you still want my help, all you have to do is ask.”

“Okay, what do you want to hold?” Ruby asked.

“Something with metal works best. Metal holds energy better.”

“What does energy have to do with it?”

“Everything that happens, every experience that we have, is energy. Energy is never lost. It’s just redistributed. Every experience you have becomes part of your energy. Objects that you carry or wear frequently hold the memory of your experiences better because they’re with you more often.” He motioned to her right hand. “What about that ring? Do you wear it every day?”

Ruby looked at the heart shaped ruby wrapped in a white gold band on her right ring finger and slid it off. “Yes. This is the ring my parents gave me when I got my associate’s degree.”

“How long ago did you graduate from school?”

“Ten years ago.”

“Do you wear it regularly?”

“Yes,” Ruby said. “I wear it every day.”

“That should do. Let me hold it for a moment.”

Ruby pulled off the ring and handed it to Bryce. He put the ring in the palm of his right hand, covered it with his left hand, and closed his eyes. He sat still for several moments; long enough

that Ruby wondered if he fell asleep. She was fixing to poke him when his blue eyes sprang open and he handed her the ring. The ring was ice-cold and Ruby shuddered as she took it from his hand. She glanced at it a moment, but didn't see anything wrong with it. She slid the ring back on her finger and it warmed quickly.

"So?" Ruby asked.

Bryce stared at Ruby. "I'm sorry, it was overwhelming. You've been through a lot. I see that the past few years haven't been easy for you. You've experienced a lot of loss."

Ruby looked around. "No more than most people, I suppose."

"Actually, you have lost a lot for your relatively young age. I see your mother passed away in a lot of pain a few years ago, and your father is no longer a part of your life. You have no family close to you."

Ruby looked down. "Mom died of pancreatic cancer five years ago." She sniffed. "It was awful. She was my best friend. Sometimes I still can't believe she's gone." Ruby wiped the tears forming in her eyes and looked up, composing herself quickly. "But she's in a better place, you know. I miss her, but I'm glad she isn't sick or hurting anymore."

"What about your father? Who's this woman he's with now?"

Ruby grunted. "Dad married Katrina nine months after Mom died. She was a medical assistant with the Mom's doctor. This woman ..."

"Your stepmother."

"She's earned no title in my life."

Bryce leaned back and spread his hands innocently. "My apologies."

Ruby stared at Bryce a moment. "I believe she had her sights set on him the day Mom was diagnosed. I don't know if anything was going on between them while Mom was sick. I suspect it could have been. Anyway, she convinced him that he needed to leave Tanger Falls and get away from this place to start over. They moved to Atlanta right after they got married. He never comes back."

"Have you gone to see him?"

"I go down there every year for Christmas. I usually stay a couple of days and come home. We talk every couple of months or so. I don't like being down there. It's obvious that woman hates me and he won't stand up to her." Ruby sighed. "Katrina changed him. I don't know him anymore. He used to be kind and down to earth, but now all he cares about are money, material possessions and social connections. It's all about keeping up with society and making a good show to the neighbors. He's shallow and superficial; just like her."

Bryce leaned forward. "Perhaps the pain of losing your mother was so great that he developed this new life to protect himself from grief."

"Or perhaps he's selfish jackass," Ruby hissed. She twisted the ring on her finger. "It doesn't matter. For all intents and purposes, you're right. I'm an orphan. My mother died and the father that raised me died with her. I have no siblings and my cousins live all over the southeast. I'm not close to them anyway because most of them are a lot older than I am. So I have no family. All I have is work and my friend, Denise."

"What about a boyfriend? I didn't see any men in your life. I mean, other than your father and people you work with."

"Tanger Falls isn't a social hotbed."

"When's the last time you went on a date?" Bryce asked.

Ruby laughed. “A real date? It’s been so long that I can’t remember.” She looked down and twisted the ring again. “I had a boyfriend in college. We dated for a year. He wanted to get married.”

“What happened?”

Ruby looked at her feet. “He decided to join the military and I didn’t want to be a military wife. All that moving around – there’s no stability in that kind of life and that’s not for me. My place is here. My roots are here. He wasn’t willing to settle here and I wasn’t willing to leave, so that was it. We broke up. I’ve dated a few people since then but nothing’s worked out. I guess I’ve given up.”

“That’s too bad,” Bryce said, “you’re a beautiful woman.”

Ruby blushed and brushed the hair out of her face. “Thanks, for all the good it does. I’m still alone.”

“What about your co-workers? Any prospects there?”

Ruby shook her head. “All married.”

“How about online dating?”

Ruby snorted. “Please.”

“Okay,” Bryce said. “I saw this friend you’ve mentioned. There is someone in your life that you have a positive connection with?”

Ruby nodded. “Yes, Denise. She moved in the apartment next door just after Mom died. She’s a graphic designer at the firm where I work. We’re best friends.”

“Then you’re not completely alone. That’s good. Perhaps you’re good for each other. You can inspire and encourage one another in creating a better life.”

“I’m not doing well in that area, as you probably saw.”

Bryce nodded. “I saw a recent disappointment. It was something at work. Were you passed over for a promotion?”

“I was.” Ruby said. “I don’t know what happened. I thought I’d get it. I’ve been working there for eleven years, since they opened. I know the place and the clients better than anybody else. My boss even offered to give me a reference, but when it came time to hire for the position, they decided to hire somebody from out of town, and she’s been awful. She’s changing everything and she’s mean to me.”

“I’m sorry to hear this,” Bryce said. He stared off for a moment. “You said that woman that passed by you a moment ago was your boss?”

“Yes, Simone.”

“And she promised to give you a reference for the job?”

“Yes.”

Bryce stared at Ruby. “I hate to tell you this, but she lied to you. Not only did she not give you the reference, but she helped this other woman get the job.”

Ruby gasped. “How do you know? I mean, how were you able to see that by holding my ring?”

“I can see people that are connected to you in a limited way. But I didn’t see this by holding your ring. That woman, Simone, she bumped against me in the crowd back there too. I sensed deception from her. Holding your ring helped me pull the pieces together and see more clearly.” He closed his eyes. “This other woman that got the job. What’s her name?”

“Millie.”

“Yes, I see. Millie is a friend of Simone’s.” He furrowed his brows as if concentrating. “Actually, I sensed there was something else connecting them but it’s hazy; or hidden. I do know

they're going through similar trials and Simone wanted to help her friend. Are they both single parents?"

"Simone's getting a divorce. I don't know about Millie."

"She has children but never married the father. Something happened. It's that haziness again. He left her but I can't see why. I do sense deception." He sighed. "You're surrounded by liars."

Ruby slumped in her chair. "See, this is what I mean. Everybody has an excuse for why they're doing what they're doing and keeping me stuck in place. They're single moms and I'm supposed to roll over and play dead so they can get ahead?"

"Ruby," Bryce said sternly, "I'm not telling you how to perceive this information. I'm sharing what I see. Remember, I asked you here so I could help you." He sat up straighter. "In any case, there's no excuse for being a liar. That makes things worse and hurts people that don't deserve to suffer for your mistakes."

"Okay, you said you could help. What should I do? What help do you have to offer?"

Bryce leaned back. "I understand your frustration. You've seen a lot of grief and loss in your life, and you deserve better. And you're right. Their misfortunes are no excuse to mistreat you or anybody else." He closed his eyes again. "I believe that Simone fully intended and expected for you to get that job, but Millie was desperate. For some reason, Simone felt it was her responsibility to help Millie. That wasn't right. There were plenty of other places where Millie could have found help. She took the easy way out by running from her problems instead of working them out, and now you're paying for her mistake. That's not right and Simone knows it, but she so strongly believes in her reasons that she's pushing you away to assuage her own guilt." Bryce opened his eyes, and they flared with anger. "But making others pay for your mistakes is the greatest injustice in life. Millie will pay for this one. I say be patient. By this time tomorrow it will be set right."

Ruby stared at Bryce. "How?"

"What do you mean, how?"

"You said you'd help me. How is this going to happen? What am I going to do?"

"You aren't going to do anything. You're going to go about your life and leave this to fate."

"Okay, how's fate going to work this out by this time tomorrow?"

Bryce smiled, but something about the smile was frightening. "There are many possibilities and any of them could come to pass. I'm not sure which one will, but I can tell you this. Millie is being mean for the sake of being mean. She feels like the world is mistreating her and she has a right to mistreat it back. But she's wrong." Bryce reached for Ruby's hand again and held it.

"Don't worry about it, Ruby. Fate is a funny thing but it always acts appropriately. I can see that a change is coming very soon. She won't be troubling you anymore."

Ruby shuddered and pulled her hand away from Bryce's cold grasp. "I promised to meet my friend back at the festival. I'd better go before she comes looking for me. What do I owe you?"

Bryce shook his head. "I said it was free. You honored your part of the bargain by accepting my offer. I'll honor my part. But please, don't worry. Things will move in a better direction for you soon."

Ruby smiled stiffly and stood. "Thanks for your time. It was a pleasure to meet you."

"The pleasure was mine," Bryce said, standing and fading into the crowd.

Ruby rushed past people milling around near the trail entrance. She was pushing through the crowd so fast that she almost passed Denise waiting at the table. Denise stood as she saw Ruby approach and reached out, grabbing her arm and snapping Ruby out of her fugue. "Hey girl, how

was the hike?" She pulled back her hand and stared at Ruby. "What's wrong? You're pale. You look like you've seen a ghost."

Ruby thought about telling Denise about Bryce, but changed her mind as she saw her friend's bright face. Warmth penetrated her and drove out the chill from her encounter with the mysterious man. "It's nothing. It was chilly in the woods with that breeze blowing, and then there was that crowd to get through. I feel better out here in the sun." She laughed nervously. "I lost track of time, too. I'm sorry about that."

Denise studied Ruby for a moment, and then nodded. "I'm glad you're better. How was your hike?"

"My hike? It was fine. You know how time alone is. You get some clarity and perspective on life."

"I'm glad to hear it. So, what's next?"

Ruby looked at the people milling about. "I think I've been outside enough for one day. Why don't we go see that movie in Knoxville?"

Denise raised an eyebrow. "I thought you wanted to stay out of crowds?"

Ruby shrugged. "We've been in one here. The only difference is that we'd be in a climate-controlled theater there. I do want to see the movie eventually so why wait? You did say that we just got paid and should spoil ourselves. I'd kind of like to get out of town for a few hours and do that."

Denise nodded. "I'll split the cost of gas with you if you'll drive."

Ruby smiled. "Let's go."

~*~

"It's set," Bryce said, bowing to the elder sitting on a felled tree in the National Forest. Midnight stars twinkled over the town of Tanger Falls in the valley below them. "Things are back in motion."

"Are you sure about this?" the elder asked, staring at the dark town below them.

"Absolutely. It will work."

The elder sighed. "I wonder if it's wise for you to be dealing with so many people in this situation. It's safer to deal with the humans one at a time."

"That's too slow. They interact with one another. You have to work with all the players if you want the pieces to move in the right direction."

"I don't know. It seems dangerous."

"It'll work. Don't worry."

The elder shivered as leaves danced in the breeze. "We'll soon find out."

Chapter 5

The telephone woke Ruby on Sunday morning. She rubbed her eyes and looked at her alarm clock, which glowed seven o'clock in soft green numbers. "You've got to be kidding," she mumbled, turning over and pulling the pillow over her head. It was too early for this crap. It could wait a couple of hours on her voicemail. It was probably a wrong number anyway.

Five minutes later, the phone rang again. Ruby sighed and turned on her back. Whoever it was obviously wouldn't give up until they talked to somebody. She jerked the phone off her bedside table and hit the answer button. "Hello?"

"Ruby, it's Denise. Have you seen the morning news?"

"No, I'm sleeping. It's seven in the morning."

"I'm sorry, I thought you'd be up," Denise said. "Don't you go to church on Sunday mornings?"

"No, not these days." Denise sniffed. "What's up?"

"Millie was murdered last night."

"What?" Denise shouted, bolting up in bed. "What do you mean murdered?"

"I mean somebody killed her."

"Well duh. What happened? Who was it? How did you find out?"

"Whoa, one question at a time," Denise said. "I got back from my morning jog and saw Mr. Phiser reading the newspaper on his balcony. You know him. He's the elderly man in the building next to the entrance that sits on the balcony and watches people every day?"

"I know him."

"I noticed Millie's picture on the paper and he let me read the article. The neighbor in the apartment next to Millie heard screaming and banging around like there was a struggle and called the police. When they got there, Millie was lying on the floor in the den. It looked like she had been hit several times with a blunt object, but the police didn't find anything to indicate who did it. No weapon, no sign of forced entry. She was in her nightgown and no lights were on. They think whoever did it knocked on the door and she let them in."

"She lived alone? I thought she had kids?"

"Two kids but not married. She had them with her boyfriend. I guess they broke up, I don't know. The paper didn't say. It said that the children were with their father in South Carolina."

"Well, that's good because they're safe. It also means the boyfriend didn't do it."

"Obviously not, if he was with the children out of state when it happened."

"South Carolina? No, that's what, three or four hours away?"

"Depending on what part of the state you're going to."

"I don't know anything about her," Ruby said. "I don't even know where she lives."

"The paper said she lived in Sevierville. I think I vaguely remember Simone saying something about Millie trying to find a place here in town since her boyfriend left. So they must have lived together and recently broke up. I guess they share custody of the children." Denise was quiet a moment. "I didn't really know her either. I wonder who does?"

"I think the better question is, who would do this to her? Obviously, she was a thorn to more people than just me."

"Ruby, she wasn't nice but I don't think she deserved to die."

Fate is a funny thing but it always acts appropriately.

Ruby paused to push the unbidden thought out of her head. "You're right. I don't know what I feel. I can't believe this happened."

"You're in shock," Denise said. "I am too. Everybody is, or will be when they find out."

There was a beep in the line. Ruby checked the incoming number. “Denise, I have to go. It looks like Simone is trying to call me.”

“Take the call. See if you can find out anything from her and call me back.”

Denise hit the button to switch lines. “Hi Simone.”

“Ruby, I’m sorry to call you early on a Sunday morning. I hope I didn’t catch you on the way to church.”

Ruby paused. Why did everybody think she was at church? “No, I’m at home. I just got off the phone with Denise. She told me about Millie.”

“I can’t believe this. I hate to ask, but can you come to the office? The police are here and they want access to our personnel files so they can interview people today.”

“Interview people? Why?”

“Millie was murdered. They have to interview everybody that knew her to narrow down the suspects.”

“Oh.”

Simone sighed. “I have the paper files and offered to copy them for the detective, but he wants a report run from our database system and I don’t know how to filter it to just get the information he wants. Can you come in for a few minutes and help me? You’ll get comp time for it.”

“I’ll be right there. Give me twenty minutes to get dressed.”

“Twenty minutes. Got it,” Simone said curtly and hung up.

Ruby sat for a moment, puzzled by the abrupt way Simone ended the call. She shook her head and hit the hang up button. Good grief, a colleague was dead and she still couldn’t be cordial. Ruby walked to her closet and pulled out a shirt and jeans to start what would be anything but an average week.