

Chapter One

“Suicide!”

Casey Alexander stared across the coffee stained desk at the detective peering down his nose at her. “You don’t understand. Aunt Liddy would never take her own life. You’ve made a mistake.”

The minute she spoke the words, she realized her blunder. The detective’s gaze hardened, and the knuckles of his interlocked fingers whitened.

“Look, Detective. . .” she glanced at the name etched in the bronze plate, “Rafferty. Aunt Liddy is many things—zany, eccentric, you name it. But she’s not unstable, nor is she suicidal.”

“Was. She *was* suicidal.” Detective Rafferty shoved a crumpled scrap of paper sealed inside a plastic bag across the desk. “It’s all in the note.”

“I’ve read the note. You gave me a copy, remember?” Casey began again when his lips thinned into a frown. “You have to at least consider the possibility that Aunt Liddy was murdered.”

He lifted the note and held the side with the signature toward her. “Is this your aunt’s handwriting?”

Aunt Liddy’s script-like scrawl flowed across the page. She swallowed past the burning lump in her throat and nodded.

“Our handwriting analyst came to the same conclusion.” He lowered the paper. “And we found her boat floating free of its anchor in Quincy Bay. And we located a piece of her clothing that looks like an animal, possibly a shark, ripped to shreds.”

Detective Rafferty shoved the note into a manila envelope marked ‘evidence,’ yanked open the drawer to his left, and dropped the missive inside.

“I wish I could help you, Miss Alexander. I really do. Unfortunately, there are too many real criminals on the prowl for me to waste time and manpower on a clear-cut case. Your aunt is gone, dead by her own hand. How or why is something we may never know.” His gravel-laced voice softened. “Go home. See to your aunt’s things. Make whatever arrangements you need to bring closure, and then move on.”

“What about this?” She snatched her purse off the floor and pulled out a small, cardboard box. “Aunt Liddy sent it to me a week before she died.”

She peeled back several layers of tissue paper to reveal the mottled silver key nestled inside.

Detective Rafferty lifted the key, balancing it between his thumb and index fingers.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know. Aunt Liddy’s letter just said to find the lock it fits into.”

“That’s a little vague, don’t you think?”

Casey dug her nails into her palms. She knew he’d say that. “Maybe, but I still think it’s important.”

Detective Rafferty pushed back from the desk. His swivel chair creaked like a rickety porch swing on a windy day. With his hands folded across his ample belly, his rumpled gray suit, and striped tie complete with jelly stains, he looked like every police lieutenant on every cop

show Casey had ever seen.

“Have you been to the post office or the bank? Maybe it fits a lock box.”

“Not yet, but I intend to do that as soon as I leave here.”

After a long moment of silence, Detective Rafferty leaned forward, slid the key toward her, and rested his arms on the desk. “Can I give you some advice?”

Casey clamped her lips shut in a mutinous line. Did he really expect her to answer that?

“Let this go,” he continued without waiting for her response. “Your aunt was a nice lady. I liked her. She deserves to rest in peace.”

Casey reached for the key and dropped it back into its box. Her hands shook with anger and tears clouded her eyes. She loved Aunt Liddy, and she would not let this farce of an investigation tarnish her reputation. “I agree, Detective, and I’m going to do everything in my power to see she does just that.”

She rose. Detective Rafferty beckoned to a tall, brown haired officer hovering outside the door. “Brockman, would kindly see Miss Alexander to her car?”

With a stiff nod to Detective Rafferty, Casey headed for the exit. Not waiting for his junior sidekick, she strode out of the station, down the stairs, to the sidewalk.

“Hey, wait up! Miss Alexander, please. Wait.”

She spun on her heel, fuming. “Look, Officer Brockman, if you think I’m going to listen to one more bad word about Aunt Liddy—”

He hurried forward, hand outstretched. Between his fingers he clenched a small white business card.

“I just wanted to say that I knew Lydia. Liked her a lot. In fact, she used to cut my hair.” He glanced over his shoulder toward the station. “I don’t know what happened to your aunt.

Wish I did. I can understand your wanting the details. If you find anything. . .if I can help in any way, give me a call.” He tipped his head toward the card now clutched in her hand. “Okay?”

He gave a half-smile, then turned and went back inside.

Casey sighed. The brick façade of the Pine Mills police department sneered down at her, its many windows grinning like some giant, toothy jack-o-lantern.

Go home? Get closure? Were they kidding?

The strap of her leather handbag dug into her arm. She jerked it over her shoulder. She’d just learned that Aunt Liddy was gone, missing, and presumed dead. The last thing she intended was to leave this backwater hole-in-the-wall until she found out exactly what she wanted to know—Why.

She rubbed at the tears pooling in her eyes and followed the peony-lined sidewalk toward the silver BMW parked next to the station. Detective Rafferty might not like it, but she would open her own investigation with help from the police or no. She hadn’t spent countless hours reading the True Life Detective series for nothing.

“Casey? Casey Alexander?”

She paused with her fingers curled around the door handle. A tall, barrel-chested man, cheeks reddened and hair swaying in the crisp spring breeze, hurried toward her. On his head, he sported a brown leather cap, and reflective sunglasses hid his eyes. She fumbled with her keys, instinctively searching for the biggest, thickest one she could find. She’d read once that it was possible to thwart an attacker using them.

“Yes?”

The man drew to a halt a few feet shy of her passenger door. “I’m Jack Kerrigan. Remember me? I was a friend of Lydia’s.”

She squinted for a closer look. “Jack? Jack!” She dropped the keys back into her bag and hurried around the car for a hug.

Jack Kerrigan looked like he belonged on the cover of a Wheaties box. Casey remembered him working out, jogging regularly. Even at fifty something, he had a body college grads would envy. She drew back, surprised by the tension she felt in him.

Though it had been several years since she last saw him, the change in Jack’s appearance was remarkable. Gray streaked the raven hair, and lines crisscrossed his weathered face. He looked pale, drawn. . .tired.

She swallowed. “How—how are you?”

Jack’s grin offered a hint of apology. “Oh, I’ve been better.” He glanced at the police station. “Did Detective Rafferty answer all your questions?”

Her sunglasses poked from the top of her purse. She pulled them out, shined the lens on her pant leg, and slid them on. Her composure once more intact, she shrugged and turned her back on the building. “Not so much, but no matter. I’ll find what I need without them.”

“Liddy was a dear friend, Casey. I’d like to help, if I can.” He followed her around to the driver’s side. Their hands touched as he reached for the handle the same moment as she.

Casey stepped back and allowed him to open the door. “Okay. I’ll give you a call—”

He cut short her words with a wave. “Why don’t I stop by late this afternoon? You’ll be staying at your aunt’s place I assume?”

“I’m headed there eventually. I’ve got some stops to make first.”

For all his haste, Jack’s interest dissipated faster than a light fog on a warm day. He glanced over his shoulder while he waited for her to climb into the car. Once she sat inside, he closed the door and patted the roof.

“See you later.” He whirled and headed across the street the way he’d come.

Casey hit the power button on her window. “Sure, Jack. It was nice to see you again. Can’t wait to catch up.” Her words poured out faster, louder, as he walked away.

She blew out a deep breath, started the engine, and drove the four blocks to the Pine Mills Savings Bank. Along the way, she passed The Ice Creamery. Casey gulped back a sob. Aunt Liddy took her there for every birthday, holiday, and anniversary. Sometimes, they made up reasons to go. She could still taste the chocolate melting on her tongue.

Like the rest of the town, the bank wore its age proudly. Red, white, and blue bunting fluttered from the windows. Pathways decorated with flowers wound around the front and stopped at the steps, which were flanked on both sides by tall white columns. Casey parked, lifted the key from its box, and went inside.

Huge. Cavernous. Even if she tried for days, she’d never come up with a word that did the place justice. She could put on lipstick by her reflection on the gleaming marble floors. She adjusted her blazer and scarf, smoothed the wrinkles from her silk blouse, and walked through the red velvet rope line to the teller windows.

“Okay, thanks, Jeff,” said the young brunette standing in line in front of her.

“No problem, Monah. Let me know if that key gives you any trouble.”

Key?

She strained to see. Sure enough, “Monah” picked a silver key similar to the one clenched in Casey’s hand off the granite counter.

“Excuse me,” Casey said, dropping out of line to follow Monah to the service desk.

Monah tucked a white bank envelope into the tiny macramé purse bouncing on her hip.

“Yes?”

“I know this will sound strange,” Casey opened her hand to reveal the key lying flat on her palm, “but does the key they just gave you look anything like this one?”

The young woman looked taken aback. She glanced first over one shoulder, then the other. “Um. . .I don’t think I caught your name.”

No wonder she looks like a doe in headlights, Casey thought. She might as well have bowled her over and ripped the key from her purse.

“I’m sorry.” She pulled back her hand with a sheepish grin. “I’m a little overzealous at the moment. My name is Casey Alexander. I’m Lydia Alexander’s niece.”

“Lydia’s niece!” Monah’s eyes widened behind her preppy black spectacles. “I hoped I’d get to meet you. She’s told me so much about you.”

A twinge of sadness nudged Casey’s stomach. “Thanks. I loved her, too, which is why I’m here. Listen, I was wondering—”

To her surprise, Monah took her arm and led her to a quiet corner of the bank. Potted palms hid them from prying eyes. Nestled amongst them were two brocade-covered chairs. Monah sat on one, Casey the other, close by.

Monah put her hand to her chest. “My name is Monah Trenary. Did Lydia ever mention me?”

Casey shook her head. “I don’t think so. Should she?”

The hopeful light in Monah’s eyes faded. Surprised by her fervor, Casey unclasped her hands and touched Monah’s elbow. “Maybe she did and I forgot.”

Monah twisted a strand of her long brown hair between her fingers. “Well, it’s just that Lydia and I got to be friends after she started coming to the library. We talked a lot, about God and stuff. Matter of fact, she accepted Christ not more than three months ago. That’s why I find

it so hard to believe—”

She broke off and clasped one of Casey’s hands. “You don’t believe she committed suicide do you? Not Lydia.”

“Aunt Liddy. . .Aunt Liddy talked to you about God?” Casey blinked, trying to process all Monah said in one simple sentence.

“Yeah, and she was more full of spunk than ever. Do *you* think she was ready to end her life?”

Finally, someone who thinks like me.

Casey shook her head so hard both hoop earrings bumped against her cheeks. “No, I don’t believe Aunt Liddy would do such a thing. The woman I know would never have acted so selfishly. But I can’t for the life of me think of why anyone would want to do her harm.”

“Maybe that’s where I can help, if you’ll let me. Not that I think Lydia had enemies, mind you, but I’ve lived here all my life, and I know just about everyone. Maybe I can answer your questions.”

Optimism mixed with caution over her new ally swirled in Casey’s stomach. She bit one corner of her lip and nodded. “Okay, then maybe you can tell me about this.”

She retrieved Lydia’s key. This time, Monah didn’t shy away, but pulled out her own key and held the two side by side. It was obvious they didn’t match. Casey stifled a stab of disappointment.

“Sorry,” Monah said. “She didn’t tell you what it’s for?”

“No, but I’m just getting started. I’m headed to the post office next, and then Aunt Liddy’s house. Something will turn up.”

Monah glanced at her watch. “Wish I could go with you, but I’m due at the library in less

than an hour.” She tore a piece off the bank envelope, scribbled her number across it, and handed it to Casey. “Call me if you need anything. I wrote the library’s phone number on there, too, just in case.” She rose, her long hair swaying. “I’m glad you’re here, Casey. Maybe now the police will have to listen. They wouldn’t hear me.”

Casey offered a wry smile. The police hadn’t listened to her, either, but it was a comfort to know someone else tried. “Thanks, Monah. I’ll call you.”

Monah left, taking her green tea scent with her. Casey folded the paper and slid it into the pocket of her billfold. She decided to check her voicemail before heading to the post office, and was glad she did when a message from her secretary told her one of her clients accepted the web design she proposed before leaving Virginia Beach for Massachusetts. At least something was going right.

She remembered the location of the post office without much trouble. She’d accompanied her aunt on more than one occasion to buy stamps. Outside, a line wound through the double glass doors, down the sidewalk, to the street.

What in the world?

Purse in hand, she exited the car and went to take her place in line.

“Hello there.”

Casey turned to look at the kind face that accompanied the friendly voice. “Hello.”

“Gotta love tax time.” The woman, easily in her late fifties or early sixties held up a long white envelope. “Are you mailing your return?”

Tax time. No wonder. Casey grimaced. “No, ma’am.” She peered around the line of last minute filers at the doors. From here, the sunlight bouncing off the glassed entrance winked like a lighthouse.

“Did your filing early, huh? I always tell Delbert we wait too long. I wish he’d listen to me and get this silly thing taken care of in January.” She waved at the people standing in front of her. “Seems like the line gets longer every year.”

“No kidding.” The words sounded harsher than she intended. She took off her glasses and poked out her hand. “I’m Casey Alexander.”

The woman smiled, revealing two rows of perfect dentures. The flowered scarf wrapped around her pink foam rollers snapped and fluttered. She put up her hand to stop it from flying off.

“I’m Ethel Dunn. You say your name’s Alexander? I don’t suppose you’re Lydia’s niece?”

Several heads turned to stare, and no wonder. The woman practically shouted to be heard above the wind and voices.

“Yes, that’s right,” Casey said.

The old lady nodded, her head bobbing like a yo-yo on a short string. “I thought so. You sure have grown up. Why, I remember the first time you ever came to Pine Mills. Your aunt was so proud of you. She talked on and on about how much you and she looked alike. If ever there was a person who loved their niece, it was Lydia. Listen, I was sorry to hear—”

Casey glanced about at the growing number of interested onlookers. “Thank you,” she said, cutting her off before the speech got longer. “Maybe we can catch up another time?”

She slipped out of line, ignoring the irritated glances tossed her way, and wound toward the front where a female postal worker stood directing people toward available windows.

“Sorry, Miss. I’m afraid you’ll have to wait your turn.”

Casey tugged the key out of her purse. “Yes, ma’am. I’ve just one quick question. This

doesn't happen to look familiar does it? Maybe a post office box?"

The postal worker barely glanced at it. "Nope. Ours are bigger and have fatter heads. Plus, there's an ID number on them for when we have to reorder." She reached around her and waved to the next person in line.

Panic gripped Casey's insides. "I'm really sorry." She dipped back into the woman's line of sight. "I know you're busy. But could you look again just to be sure? It's very important."

The lady took the key in one hand, and gestured people forward with the other. "See right here?" She pointed with a chubby, brightly painted finger. "It should say United States Postal Service or USPS. It's not ours."

"Oh."

Disheartened by the quick rejections to her first attempt at tracking down a clue, Casey shoved the key back into her purse and walked, head lowered, to her car.

"Okay," Casey sighed, sliding into the BMW's heated leather seats, "what would Brandy do?"

Star of the True Life Detective series, Brandy Purcell was Casey's favorite character. She flicked her long blonde hair over her shoulder and tapped her temple the way Brandy always did whenever a case had her stumped.

"Think. Think. Think." She snapped her fingers. The house. The key was an important clue, no doubt, but surely there would be others. She started the engine and pointed her car toward the highway.

Aunt Liddy lived in an old Victorian two-story a few miles outside of town. Along the way, high stone walls carved from the belly of the Appalachians rose on either side. Wildflowers dotted the valleys, and with her window cracked to catch the crisp spring breeze, she could just

smell a hint of pine.

The mountains always fascinated Aunt Liddy, and Casey loved visiting them with her. Hard to imagine her gone.

She wiped her damp eyes, and then adjusted the mirror to check her mascara. No streaks. Good. She lifted her hand to push the mirror back and paused. Funny. She hadn't seen any other cars, but bearing down was a large, black pickup. She slowed and eased over to let the vehicle pass on the one stretch of straight road for two miles. No good. The driver refused to budge.

She clenched the steering wheel tighter. Behind her, the headlights in the rearview drew closer, like some ancient, angry gargoyle. She tore her gaze from the mirror and focused on the upcoming curve.

Relax your grip. Accelerate into the turn. Don't over steer.

Easy to say. The hundred foot drop looming to her right made it difficult. She held her breath as one of the front tires rumbled off the road, spewing dirt and gravel. With a smooth, controlled jerk, she pulled the car back, knuckles white, legs shaking.

The yellow-eyed, silver toothed beast inched closer. Casey no longer saw the yawning grill in her mirror. It was too close, and getting closer. The first thump nearly sent her skidding out of control. She quelled the urge to stomp on the brake, corrected the fishtail, pressed on the gas.

“God, help! Help me!”

No time to wonder who was trying to force her off the road or why. She shoved the thoughts aside and concentrated on her driving. Up ahead, a scenic turnout sloped up the mountain. If she could get that far before the truck hit her again. . .

She risked a peek. The large, black Chevy inched closer, its engine roaring as the driver

downshifted. She wouldn't have the luxury of slowing down to make the jump. It was all or nothing.

She dropped her right hand to the parking brake and timed the turn. The black truck hugged the center line, no doubt to try and force her off next time he hit. She waited, heart pounding, as the turnout rushed to meet her.

The Chevy crashed into her bumper. The back end swung, hard. The wheel jerked, and would have ripped from her hand if she hadn't been ready. With the added momentum, she almost missed the turnout. She gasped as the edge of the mountain swirled by outside the window.

Once she hit the turnoff, Casey wrenched up on the parking brake. The back tires squealed as the car swung round, spitting smoke and gravel. She grabbed the wheel, tried to steer with the spin, and nearly threw up when at last the car rocked to a stop.

Her hands shook so badly, she fumbled for several seconds with the door handle. At last, she kicked it wide and scrambled out of the car. She tripped, caught herself, scraping her palm in her haste to get as far away as possible.

She headed for the tree line. Branches ripped across her face as she threw herself into the woods and squatted behind a scrubby bush. Above the sound of her own ragged panting, she strained to hear if anyone followed. After several moments, her breathing slowed, and the early evening silence returned to its former stillness.

Whoever drove the truck must have sped away when she went off the road. They either thought they got me, or gave up, she thought, shuddering.

She left the safety of the trees and crept toward the car. The soft idle of the engine mingled with the ding, ding, ding, of the open door.

Thank God for those defensive driving classes she took last summer. She signed up after Brandy Purcell nearly got killed by an angry suspect in the latest book of the True Life Detective series, *Backward Glance*. Hands shaking, she reached inside the car and flipped off the key.

In the center console lay the Post-It notes and pencils she bought after reading book two, *Downward Spiral*. Brandy Purcell always had Post-It notes handy to jot down clues. Casey thought it a good idea.

She scribbled, late model Chevy, black, extended cab, on the yellow sticky note and pasted it to the window.

“Hey up there!”

Casey nearly jumped out of her skin. The voice rang off the rocky walls, echoing so she heard ‘hey up there’ over and over. She pulled her head out of the car. The afternoon sun shone in her eyes, blinding her, but when she squinted, she saw a man running toward her with a shovel clenched in both hands.

Her breath caught. A muscular male wielding a shovel could really do some damage, and she didn’t have Brandy’s martial arts skills to fall back on.