

# False Perception

By

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## CHAPTER 1

Geoffrey reached over and took his wife's hand. She raised her eyebrow at him but said nothing. He lifted her hand to his lips and gently kissed the back of it, smiling at the slight giggle she tried to hide.

"You guys are so gross."

"One day you will have a husband, and he will hold your hand too," said Geoffrey MacNally to his thirteen-year-old daughter Janie.

"I don't think so. Boys are gross," she huffed as she glared at her older brother.

Jarod stuck his tongue out at her. "Little sisters are annoying."

She snarled at him. "Are you talking to your girlfriend? If she is even real. I bet you made her up to convince your friends you're human. Not the alien you really are."

"You're the alien."

"Alright, you two," Sandie MacNally said. "We are almost there."

"Great. A week away from my friends. Just how I wanted to spend fall break." Jarod rolled his eyes, at his sister. Who giggled at the face he made.

"Dad, why did we have to come here? We aren't campers," Janie asked. "Why couldn't we just go to Great America?"

"We aren't camping. Wait till you see this place. The main lodge is over a hundred years old. It's nestled along the Brule River where we will canoe and go rafting, as well as horseback riding, and all kinds of other cool stuff we don't get to do living in Madison."

"I like the city," Jarod said.

"You like Heather," Janie snickered.

"You guys will love it. We are staying at one of the newly remodeled cabins just down from the main lodge. Two bedrooms with a luxury bathroom and a porch that overlooks the river. And..."

"Wow, a porch. Fancy," Jarod said, not looking up from his phone.

Geoffrey didn't care what his teens thought. He wasn't about to spend another vacation at a beach resort or amusement park. He wiggled his eyebrows at Sandie. "You know, they have a murder night. We get to solve the murder of one of the guests. Like a mystery weekend."

"Oh, that sounds fun." Sandie tried to keep her voice upbeat. Solving mysteries was her husband's gig. She was looking forward to hours at the spa. If that meant spending one night solving a make-believe crime, it was worth the price.

"You know you hate those things, Mom. Quit acting like you're all excited."

"Janie, watch your tone," she said.

"Mom, you know it's true." Janie looked down her nose at her mother, but quickly straightened up when her mother squinted at her. "What is there for us to—wow!"

Jarod and his mother followed Janie's stare out the side window.

"I told you this place was fantastic. Look at that driveway. Holy cow!"

As Geoffrey pulled the family SUV in front of the lodge entrance, no one spoke. On one side of the covered entrance stood four enormous cedar pillars that supported the roof. Beautiful white lights spiraled up each post. When the strands reached the top, each strand then stretched across the roof, connecting to a chandelier in the center. The lights then continued towards the other side of the roof, connecting to four more massive pillars, and spiraling down to the cobblestone drive.

Everyone gathered their belongings and exited the vehicle. Five hours in the car and everyone stretched and moaned at the relief standing brought. A young man dressed in black slacks and a white shirt stood at the rear of the vehicle.

"Oh, I didn't see you there," Geoffrey said as he walked towards the back of the car.

“Hello. Welcome to the Sugar Maple Lodge. Where are you guys from?” he asked as he reached for the trunk latch.

“Madison.” Geoffrey smiled at a man and his wife, and what looked like an older son, as they entered the lodge. He followed them with his stare. Just in the entryway, they had stopped. The woman had her arms crossed, and she was shaking her head.

“Geoffrey?”

“Huh? What?” he asked as he turned towards his wife. She motioned for him to turn around. He glanced at the young man, who pulled out a suitcase. “Oh no, we’re staying in a cabin. Don’t we have to drive there?”

The young man replaced the bag. “Yes, you will. Just go inside, and the front desk will direct you. Once you unload at the cabin, you’ll bring your vehicle back here. Then you’ll be assigned two golf carts for your cabin. That’s what you’ll drive around while on the property.”

Jarod’s ears perked up. “We get to drive golf carts?”

The young man smiled. “As long as you are fifteen, you get to drive.”

Jarod shimmied as he spun around. “Yes.” He turned towards his sister. “You don’t get to drive.”

Sandie smiled at her son. “You get to drive her around.”

“Seriously?” he threw his backpack into the backseat.

“Yes. Seriously,” Geoffrey said as he led his family through the giant sliding glass doors. As they entered, he saw the man and his wife off to the right.

“We can’t do that, and you know it,” the woman said.

“Yes, we can. We can make it work,” the man responded.

“Jimmy, I don’t think we can make this work. I told you that.”

“I think we can. Why are you so quick to give up? C’mon. At least give it some thought. I do all your shit all the time, Cyn.”

“Like hell you do. I have to beg for everything.”

Geoffrey stood to the side, eavesdropping on the couple's conversation. He watched as the woman moved to the side and to leave, when the man she called Jimmy reached for her arm.

"I'm telling you. If you don't work with me on this, I'm going to have to teach you a lesson."

Her eyebrows lifted as she turned to leave. "What are you going to do? You need to quit threatening me."

He smirked as he followed her. "Well, you are worth more to me dead than alive."

Geoffrey stared at the pair as they rounded the corner and vanished through a closed doorway.

"I can't believe this lobby." Sandie ogled the giant fireplace directly across from the entrance. The large hearthstone almost filled half of a long wall. Logs burned behind a large black grate. The other half was all glass. She inhaled through her nose. "Oh my gosh, it smells like cookies."

"I want some cookies," Janie said, standing next to her mom. She glanced around the room. Scanning the area like a hound dog. "There." She pointed. Along the length of the front desk sat five large platters filled with various kinds of cookies.

"We're headed that way." Sandie scanned the lobby. Even though it was a grand room with no less than three huge chandeliers hanging from three different wood beams, which spanned the entire length of the ceiling, the room had a homey and inviting feel.

Four oversized leather sofas were placed in pairs, facing each other in the middle of the room. Filling the space in front of the fireplace. Catty-cornered at the edge of the hearth, sat four large winged backed reading chairs, again in pairs, with a small table between each set. One wall was covered with books from floor to ceiling. Several more chairs were placed in front of the books. At the far end of the room, a doorway led to the spa. Marked by a sign supported by two large white pine pillars. Sandie made a mental note to ask the front desk about making a spa appointment.

"Dad, are you coming or what?" Janie asked.

"Huh? Yeah."

"What is going on with you, honey?" Sandie asked as she grabbed his hand and led him to the front desk.

“Did you hear that guy? He said his wife was worth more dead than alive.” Geoffrey kept glancing towards the doorway the couple had entered.

“Geoff, people say stuff like that all the time.”

“Yeah, Dad. You work for a bank, not the popo. Quit trying to be like that old time English dude,” said Jarod.

“What are you talking about?” Janie asked her brother. “You know, that English detective dude with the sidekick?”

“You mean Sherlock Holmes?” she asked.

“Yeah, that guy. Dad thinks he’s a detective,” Jarod said as he followed his mom and dad through the lobby.

“You’re such a dork,” Janie said.

“You’re the dorkworm.”

“What the heck is a dorkworm?” she asked as they stepped in line, waiting to check in.

“It’s a dork, with her nose always in a book,” he said, sticking his tongue out at her.

“At least I knew who Sherlock Holmes was,” Janie said.

“Guys. Stop. We just got here. Can’t you go ten minutes without arguing?” Mom asked.

“Sorry mom,” they both said.

Geoffrey glanced around the lobby just before he was called to the desk. “Well, I think something fishy is going on with that couple. I’m going to keep my eye out.”

Both kids rolled their eyes.

Sandie MacNally stepped up to the desk with her husband. “You do that.”

## CHAPTER 2

“Good afternoon. Welcome to the Sugar Maple Lodge.”

“Hi. I’m Geoffrey MacNally. We have a reservation for the week.”

“Yes, Mr. MacNally,” the young lady said as she typed on a keyboard. “I see you have reserved one of our newly remodeled cabins.”

“That’s correct.” He glanced around, trying to find that couple. When he turned back to the reception desk, the young lady was staring at him. “I’m sorry. I missed what you said.”

She smiled. “I explained your cabin is ready for check-in. There is family style eating for all meals in the dining area just off the far end of the lobby.” She pointed over his shoulder. “If you miss one of the regularly scheduled meals, there is always a sandwich station and snack bar set up. If you want something that isn’t there, just ask any of us, and we will make sure you get what you want.”

Jarod stepped up to the desk. “Sandwiches all day?”

She nodded at him. “All day.”

“Oh man, I’m starving.”

“You’re always starving.” Janie squinted at her brother.

The young woman glanced at her watch. “The dinner service starts in ninety minutes. It goes from six to nine.” She handed him four cabin keys. “If you unload your suitcases, Martin can pull your car around and park it. The golf carts are big enough to carry you and your luggage. It will save you a trip back.”

Geoffrey signed the receipt and slid it across the counter. “How many people are here this week?”

“Oh, we are roughly at seventy-five percent capacity. The lodge has fifty rooms. And then there are ten cabins. Each cabin can hold six comfortably. However, four are being remodeled. If you are looking for the number of people, I’d guess—150 will be on the property this week.” She leaned over the counter. “We are just starting Wild Turkey season, but next week marks the beginning of most other hunting seasons here. It will really get going next week. You picked a great time to come.”

“Well, thank you.” Geoffrey stuck the keys in his pocket.

“You’re very welcome. Let Martin,” she pointed out the main doors, “know you are taking your luggage via the carts and he will get you set up. If you follow the road leading north out of the drive, you will see the first set of cabins on your left. That is where yours is located. You are in the Bear Clan cabin. Enjoy your stay with us.”

### CHAPTER 3

The golf carts, one driven by Geoffrey and one by Jarod, pulled into the cabin's drive. The kids jumped out and started towards the door. "You'll need a key," Geoffrey said as he held one up.

Janie grabbed it before her brother.

They started for the door.

"Take a bag. You can still help unload," Geoffrey said.

They each grabbed what seemed like the smallest pieces of luggage and bounded up the cabin steps.

"Well, so much for helping." Geoffrey grabbed the two larger bags and lugged them up the stairs.

"I can't wait to change," Sandie said as she carried two smaller items to the master bedroom. "This is nice." She walked to the fireplace across from the bed. She turned around and winked at her husband. "I think we can put this to good use."

"Ooh, hubba hubba," he said, moving towards her, taking her in his arms and kissing her neck.

"Oh, man, my eyes. Stop, please stop."

Both turned to see their son standing with his hands over his eyes. Sandie kissed her husband and turned towards the suitcase on the floor. "Stop it." She giggled and winked at her son. "I saw you kissing Heather the other day."

"Yeah, but we are young, and you guys are like super old. That's way gross." He smiled at his dad's expression. "Hey, can me and Janie drive around for a while, before dinner? We want to check out the grounds." He held up a map. "This says there is a covered pool. We want to find it and check it out."

Geoffrey glanced at his watch. "Meet us at the lodge at six."

"Cool. Thanks, Dad," he yelled as they ran out the front door.

"This may be the only time they get along." Geoffrey smiled at his wife. "We have just over an hour. How about we try out the bed?"



She snickered at him. "You'll have to cool your jets, big boy. I'm getting changed and freshened up for dinner."

"Fine. Make me suffer." He emptied the suitcases, setting the kids' clothes to the side as he put theirs in the dresser next to the window. He heard a car drive up and looked up to see a truck pull up in the drive. From his vantage point, he could only see the tail end of the truck.

"Why are they driving a truck?" He cracked the window and craned his neck to see if he could see or hear the visitors. His eyes widened the minute he recognized the voice. He quickly opened the window a little more.

"Jimmy, I'm tired of you making me out to be the bad guy. Why do I have to call and tell them? Why don't you ever do it?"

"We agreed on that."

"Well, I want to change the agreement. I deserve a better piece of the pie."

"Well, maybe I want the whole pie. Maybe I'm tired of sharing. You ever...."

"No, no...seriously?" Geoffrey craned his neck and opened the window as far as he could. But the conversation had faded away.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Geoffrey almost fell out the window at the sound of his wife. "Huh?"

"Geoffrey, who are you spying on?"

"I'm not spying."

"Really? You are far enough out the window. You might as well just go over and introduce yourself." Sandie grabbed a clean blouse from the pile of shirts on the bed. She stepped over to the side out of view of the open window and changed.

"It's the couple from the lodge. I'm telling you, something is off with them. They're always fighting. How can you fight that much with someone you love? And why are they driving a truck? I thought you had to drive golf carts around?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "Not all conversations are arguments. What you hear is not always the whole story. Quit jumping to conclusions. And maybe they are driving a truck for another reason. I'm sure you can drive a vehicle around. They just might want to limit the damage done to the environment. Have you ever thought of that?" she huffed at him. "You always do this."

Geoffrey continued to stare out the window. "Do what?"

"Make a mystery out of nothing. It's like you are trying to create a mystery, just so you can solve it. I blame your grandmother."

He frowned at her. "What did she do?" he asked, laughing.

"She read you all those damn Agatha Christie books. I think you always secretly wanted to be a detective."

"Well, she made all the moving around bearable as a kid." He paused. "I don't know. I think something is going on with these two."

Sandie put on her white tennis shoes, giving up trying to reason with him. "I want to drive around before we eat. Hurry and get ready."

He closed the window. "I'm ready. Let me go to the bathroom, and we can leave." He glanced out at the cabin one last time before turning away.

## CHAPTER 4

After dinner, everyone seemed to congregate in the main lobby. Several people sat on chairs reading books from the massive library wall. Fred Wittenhouse, the owner, sat on the hearth reading a book to a group of young kids.

Geoffrey smiled at the scene.

Each kid sat with wide eyes as Mr. Wittenhouse animated every word, luring the children more in-depth into the story. Just when it was getting spooky, he closed the book.

“Okay, I think it's getting too scary.”

“No. No,” they yelled in unison. “Keep reading.”

Several parents laughed as they looked on.

Geoffrey glanced around, looking for his family. Through the giant glass wall that filled the back side of the lodge, he could see the fire pit had been lit and staff from the kitchen setting out the ingredients for smores. He looked at his watch. According to the schedule, the evening festivities were to begin at nine p.m.

Stepping out onto the back porch, Geoffrey saw his wife sitting on a lounge talking to another lady. He walked over and sat on the end of the chair. “Hey, honey, where are the kids?”

Sandie pointed to the other side of the fire pit. “They’re over there with some other kids. No doubt plotting a takeover.”

The other lady laughed. “My kids saw that smores were going to be made tonight, and that’s all they talked about all day.” She glanced over her shoulder and waved to two kids. “I have a ten-year-old and a twelve-year-old. How old are yours?”

Sandie sipped on her glass of wine. “We have a thirteen-year-old girl and a fifteen-year-old boy.” She nodded at the crowd of kids. “They seem to get along well at the moment.” She looked at Geoffrey. “Who knows how long that will last.”

He smiled as he sipped on the beer he had taken from one of the roving wait staff. "Hopefully until the end of this trip." Geoffrey listened to his wife's conversation as he peered around the patio. He heard laughter coming from behind. He turned and saw a group of people and the couple.

Geoffrey's heart raced. The hand that held the beer trembled. He patted his wife's leg. "I'm going to walk around. I'll be right back."

She winked at him as he left.

Heading towards the large group of people that surrounded the couple, he strolled up and listened to a story being told by one man.

"I couldn't believe the size of the bear. My friend froze. I told him not to move as I slowly reached and grabbed my bear spray. I said, 'Danny, the minute I spray this, run like a bat out of hell to the truck.' I pulled the can off my belt, lifted it, and sprayed. I think before the stream left the can Danny's ass was running."

The crowd laughed.

Geoffrey smiled, all the while watching the interaction of the couple. He didn't see their kid anywhere but assumed he must be off with the others. Geoffrey studied each of their movements. The wife stood close to a younger man. She seemed to be involved in an intimate conversation with him. He had his arm around her waist.

The woman's husband stood next to her. Geoffrey watched as the man repeatedly reached out for his wife's hand. To Geoffrey, it looked like she pulled away.

The husband leaned over and whispered in her ear. She rolled her eyes at him, turning back to the young man. She whispered in his ear. The younger man looked at her husband, and they both laughed.

"If my wife did that I would be pissed," Geoffrey thought to himself. He studied the husband's every move as he pulled out his phone and looked at the screen.

"I need to go take care of this," the man said to his wife. He leaned in and kissed her cheek.

"Are you going to come back?" she asked.

"I was planning on it. Unless you want to meet me at our spot?" He wiggled his eyebrows at her.

Geoffrey peeked around to see if anyone else was paying attention to the pair. Satisfied no one noticed his eavesdropping, he turned back to the couple.

“Oh, just come back here. We can always go there later.”

The husband pressed his lips together. “Sure. I’ll be back.”

Geoffrey noticed when he left, both the younger man and the wife watched him walk away. They leaned into each other. She whispered something in his ear and then laughed at whatever he whispered back. The younger man kissed her temple. He watched the pair, wondering how they could act like that in front of everyone.

Mrs. Wittenhouse, the owner, came out with a tray, followed by several other staff members carrying more trays. “Okay, everyone. It is just about time to make some smores,” Edna Wittenhouse said.

“Yeah!” yelled out most of the children.

“Cynthia, darling, would you help me?” Edna asked as she walked past the group.

Geoffrey’s head spun, trying to see who she was talking to.

“Of, course,” Cynthia responded.

Geoffrey stared at the woman who he had been watching, hug the man, who was not her husband, kiss him on the cheek, and then followed Edna towards the outdoor barbeque area. He shook his head. “I can’t believe she did that in front of all these people,” Geoffrey muttered. At least now he knew their names. Jimmy and Cynthia. Maybe he could do some snooping and find out what their story was.

## CHAPTER 5

Monday morning after breakfast, Geoffrey and the kids entered the archery tournament while Sandie spent her first day at the spa.

“Hey, Dad?” Jarod asked, as they helped put the targets away.

“Yes, Jarod?”

“Can Janie and I just grab a sandwich and go exploring? A few of the other kids from last night were going to get together and take some food and go around the property.”

“Yeah, Dad. Can we? We can be back by six for dinner.” Janie bounced on her heels, waiting for her dad’s response.

“Sure. Did you put the bug spray in the golf cart?”

“Yeah. We have it with us. We will spray before we go exploring.”

“Okay. Six p.m. at the lodge.”

“Thanks, Dad.” They both yelled as they ran off with a few other kids.

Geoffrey found himself with nothing much to do. He didn’t feel like canoeing or river rafting. Plus, they were scheduled to do that on Wednesday. He looked around the back patio. A few were lounging in the sun. The breeze was cool and most sat in long sleeves and long pants.

He stepped into the lodge. The lunch meal had just been set up, and Geoffrey decided he had nothing better to do. “Might as well eat,” he thought. He sat down at one of the large tables. There were bowls filled with chicken and rice, salad, rolls, and corn on the cob.

He chose a table that had four other people at it. “Hi, mind if I join you all?”

“Not at all,” said one older man. “I’m Nathan. This is my wife, Rose.”

“Nice to meet you both.” He smiled at the two others. “I’m Geoffrey.” He filled his plate and settled in for lunch. Looking around the room, he saw Edna Wittenhouse overseeing everything. He noticed the young man that Cynthia had been hugging last night was helping Edna. She patted his cheek, and he hugged her. Then he left. Geoffrey listened to the two couples at the table talk about their

morning events. He scanned the area and hid his excitement when Cynthia walked into the room. She was by herself.

He studied her every movement. She walked over to Edna and kissed her on the cheek. Making him wonder if she and her husband were regulars. Edna walked around to each of the tables. The owner made sure everyone enjoyed their food. Engaging in light conversation with each.

Geoffrey's foot twitched as the pair got closer to his table. "Well, good afternoon, everyone. How are you all doing?"

Several people answered.

Geoffrey turned to Cynthia. "I think I have seen you in the cabin next to mine."

Cynthia cocked her head to the side. "I wouldn't doubt it. We are overseeing the remodels in some cabins. I have been at several these last few weeks."

"Oh, that explains the truck. I wondered why someone was driving a vehicle." Geoffrey smiled at her.

"Oh, yeah. The golf cart would not be convenient to use. Especially carting all that construction stuff around." She noticed Edna turn to leave. "It was nice speaking with all of you," Cynthia said as she followed Edna and left the table.

Geoffrey sat for a few more minutes and decided he wasn't hungry after all. He cleared his table area and walked out into the lobby. The afternoon activities were going to be starting soon and the earlier crowd in the lobby was now gone. He thought this would be the perfect time to see if he could find anything out about his mystery couple.

He walked up to the front desk. It seemed to be manned by a very young girl. "Hi," Geoffrey said as he leaned across the counter. "I was hoping you could help me with something."

"Sure. What can I do for you?" she asked.

"The couple that is heading the remodeling of the cabins. Can you tell me anything about them?"

"The Candorellis? All I know is they are not only doing that, but they are doing all the remodeling on the grounds. They have their own construction company."

“Have they been married a long time?” Geoffrey smiled as he nibbled on one cookie he took from the platter.

“I don’t really know. I haven’t been working here very long. I’m still getting to know everyone. Why do you ask?”

“They look familiar. I was hoping I could place them.” He leaned closer. “I’m too embarrassed to ask them where I might have met them before.”

She smiled at him. “Oh, that happens to me all the time.” She glanced around, then leaned into him. “They always fight. I think it's about the business. I know Fred and Edna have told them to not do it in public. It has gotten that bad.” She glanced around again. “I have heard the husband say he could kill her.”

Another couple came up to the counter. “Thanks for the information,” Geoffrey said as he grabbed another cookie and left.



## CHAPTER 6

Geoffrey stood in front of the fireplace, contemplating what to do next, when he got a text from his wife.

*Hey, babe. I'm going to miss lunch. I'll meet you all at dinner. I got in the mud bath and I scheduled a message. See you later, love you bunches.*

Geoffrey frowned at his phone. "I guess I'm on my own." He glanced around, not sure where to go next. Picking up a map on one of the end tables, he scanned it. He finally decided on a walk around the grounds that would take him by the horses, canoes, and kayaks. Standing and stretching, he grabbed a few cookies off a platter that had been set on one of the main coffee tables and headed towards the back patio.

Thirty minutes later, Geoffrey found himself in the stables. Several horses were in their stalls while a few were wondering the pasture. He found the main entrance to the office and entered to a room full of people laughing. They all turned towards the chime. "Hi, I was going to sign my family up for a trail ride," Geoffrey said.

"Well, you are in the right place. How many you got that want to ride?" An older man spoke up.

Geoffrey watched the old man come towards him. His skin was tanned and leathery from years in the sun. He wore the standard ranch wear. Jeans, long sleeve shirt, and boots. But it was his belt buckle Geoffrey couldn't quit staring at. A huge silver buckle inlaid with what he thought was a copper bucking horse with a cowboy in the center. "Um, four. There are four of us."

"Have you ever ridden before?" the man asked as he grabbed a book from behind the chest-high counter.

"No. Is that still okay to ride?"

"Oh, heck yeah. We have all levels of riders that come through here. We have horses specific for beginners." The man scribbled on a scrap of paper, then filled out a form in the book. "I'm going to have

you fill this out and we'll get you on the schedule." The man spun the book around and handed the pen to Geoffrey.

He glanced at the paper and quickly filled out the needed information. When he was done, he handed everything back to the old guy with the belt buckle. "Here you go."

"What day are you wanting?" he asked.

"Do you have any openings for Tuesday, tomorrow?" Geoffrey asked.

The man scanned the book. "Hey Josh, you still got the Edwards group? I thought they canceled?"

"They did, Herman. That spot is open."

Herman looked at Geoffrey. "How about two p.m.? Will that work for you?"

Geoffrey nodded. "That would be perfect."

"Just be here by one thirty. We'll get you guys saddled up and on the trail by two."

"Thank you," Geoffrey said as he walked out. He heard the laughter resume as the door swung shut. The sun warmed his face as he headed towards the dock area. Just before leaving, he saw another ranch hand talking to what looked like a cop or sheriff. Geoffrey wondered why there would be a sheriff on the premises.

As he neared the pair, the sheriff turned to leave. Geoffrey caught up to him just as he was about to head down the trail back to the lodge. "Excuse me?"

The large man turned around. "What can I do for you?"

"Oh, I saw you talking to the guy from the ranch and I was surprised a sheriff was out here. Is there anything wrong?"

Gene Buford stared at the little man before him. Didn't look like much of a hunter. "Why would there be anything wrong?" he asked as he headed up the trail.

"I was surprised to see law enforcement out here, that's all." Geoffrey stared at the man. He must have been six foot seven and about forty pounds overweight. He wore what could only be described as a 70s porn star mustache and dark aviator sunglasses.

“Well, I’m a retired sheriff. Been working for the Wittenhouses for about three years now.”

“Oh.” Geoffrey paused. “Do you have a lot of problems here? I can’t imagine things getting out of control at this place.”

“You would be surprised at some of the stuff that happens around here.”

“I never thought about this until now, but if we had an emergency, what would we do? I know up at our cabin we don’t have decent cell service. How would we even contact you?”

Gene Buford shook his head. “We implemented this new system about six months ago. It seems I’m going to have to give another training on it.” He walked along the path in silence for a few minutes. “Did they give you any numbers to call or tell you about the phone in your cabin?”

Geoffrey tilted his head to the side. He raised an eyebrow at the sheriff. “There is a phone in our cabin?”

Gene sighed. “Yes. In your cabin is a phone. It directly dials the front desk the minute you pick it up. They will then contact me or one of my men. I have another retired cop and a paramedic that works for me.”

“Okay, what do we do if we aren’t in the cabin?”

“On the back of your key card, there is a number. If you call that, it will ring in my office. If no one is in there. It will automatically ring the front desk.”

Geoffrey nodded. “That’s good to know. I definitely think they should tell you that at the time of check-in.”

“Like I said, I’m going to have to have another training session.” They came to a fork in the path. “I’m heading to the lodge. You going that way?”

“No. I’m going down to the river docks. See what that area looks like. Thanks for your time sheriff.”

“You’re welcome. Enjoy your stay here. I hope you never have to use the emergency number.”

“You and me both, sheriff. You and me both.”

## CHAPTER 7

9:30 Wednesday morning

“Oh my gosh,” Janie said as she exited the golf cart.

“Dad, why did we go on that long horseback ride yesterday? I don’t think football practice is this bad. I hurt in places I didn’t even know I had muscles,” Jarod moaned.

Sandie tried not to laugh, but the sight of them hobbling was too much. All of them were hunched over and with each step, it looked like they were walking on glass. “We must look ridiculous.” She giggled. Then broke out into laughter.

Each of them glanced at one another and the laughter overtook them. Walking into the lodge, several guests turned to see what was happening. The kids were doubled over, and tears ran down Sandie’s face. Geoffrey stood, waving his hand around, trying to catch his breath.

“I think today should be a do-nothing day,” Geoffrey said once he regained his composure and led the way to a table in the dining room. As quickly as they sat down, bowls of food showed up.

“If you guys want something like an omelet, or over easy eggs,” the waitress pointed to the front of the room. “There is a station over there where they will make it fresh to order.” She smiled as she set the last of the bowls on the table.

He stared at the all the food and wondered how much actually goes to waste. There was a bowl of scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, a platter of pancakes and waffles, and a bowl of hash browns. “Wow. This is a lot of food.”

“I’m starving too,” Jarod said as he reached for the bowl of bacon.

“Me too,” Janie said as she took two pieces of bacon out of the bowl before her brother had a chance to eat it all.

“I think we should spend the day at the pool.” Jarod gulped down his orange juice. “I noticed they have a jacuzzi and a sauna.”

“Yeah, and today there are all kinds of cool events going on. Lots of games and races. I think that would be fun.” Janie reached for a pancake off the platter in front of her.

“I could go for a day in the jacuzzi,” said Sandie.

“Then, after breakfast, we will head to the cabin and load everything up.” Geoffrey sat back and watched as his family continued to chat and eat. He thought to himself, they needed to spend more time around the dining room table. With practices and clubs, sometimes they rarely spent an hour together as a family.

He smiled at his wife. “I think we need to make time for regular family meals. Where we all sit down for a meal and conversation. With no phones or video games.”

Janie and Jarod shrugged.

“I think dinners would be great,” Janie said.

“Me, too.” Jarod smiled at his dad. “I kind of like this. Finding out how our days went. This is cool.”

Geoffrey raised his eyebrows at his wife. “Who are these kids? What happened to ours?”

Sandie laughed. “I like these kids just a little better. I say we keep them.”

The pool festivities were set to start at eleven and no one seemed in a rush. Back in the cabin, Jarod flopped down on the sofa and Janie took up residence in the leather recliner. Both had their eyes closed, and neither looked like they had a care in the world.

“When you guys get your stuff ready, we can just go to the pool. I suggest we bring our swimsuits and towels. That way we can change for a late lunch without having to come back here,” Geoffrey said.

Sandie nodded as she walked into their bedroom. “That sounds like a plan.”

Geoffrey moved to the front porch to sit and relax. The morning sun had warmed the rocking chairs, and with no breeze, it was a warm fall morning. He sat back with his eyes closed when he heard the rumblings of a truck. Glancing up, he saw Jimmy and Cynthia exit the vehicle. Both went to the back

of the truck and grabbed some construction supplies. Geoffrey watched as Jimmy grabbed a large roll of blue plastic tarp and a couple of cans of paint. He waved as they glanced in his direction.

Geoffrey cocked his head to the side and listened to see if he heard them arguing. This time, all he heard was music. Glancing at his watch, he realized the activities at the pool were going to start in the next fifteen minutes. He stood and stretched, meandering into the cabin. "Hey, you guys ready to go?"

The kids came out from their room, dressed in their swimsuits.

"Yeah, Dad. We're ready to go." Jarod put on his t-shirt and slipped on his flip-flops.

Sandy came out from the master bedroom. "I have a bag packed with their change of clothes."

"Do you have my swimsuit in there?" Geoffrey pointed to the bag.

"Yes. I don't know if I will get in the pool or not, but I brought yours and mine, just in case." She glanced around. "Are we ready to go?"

"Yeah, let's hit the road." Geoffrey locked the cabin door behind them as they headed to their carts.

Jarod pulled out first and started towards the pool. As Geoffrey was backing up, he heard the couple fighting as they left the cabin.

"You always do this." Cynthia yanked on the truck door.

"You were supposed to grab the bucket with the paint supplies. Why does it always land on my shoulders?"

Once the couple was in the truck, Geoffrey couldn't hear them anymore. He felt his wife's stare, and he contemplated whether to look in her direction. He glanced over at her. "What's that look for?"

"You need to leave that couple alone and quit going out of your way to find out about them and spy on them. You need to stop."

"I'm not spying on them. They have their arguments in front of everyone. That's not spying."

"Geoffrey, there is nothing going on with this couple. They are a married couple who work together and probably want to kill each other." She smirked at him. "Trust me, I understand the feeling."

He shook his head. "We never argue like that. We have our disagreements, but nothing like what they do." He pulled into the parking area of the indoor pool. "I'm telling you, there is something wrong. The husband is going to snap one day. Then you will see how right I was."

"Right about what exactly?" asked Sandie.

"The husband wants to kill his wife. When he snaps and does it, maybe then you will trust my intuition."

## CHAPTER 8

Thursday Evening at 5 p.m.

Geoffrey had a hard time containing his excitement. The murder mystery night was going to begin at seven p.m. Drinks were going to be served at six thirty. He smiled at his wife. "Are you excited about tonight?"

She glanced, nodding. "I am actually. I thought I would want to talk you out of it, but I'm looking forward to it."

He took a sip of his wine. Then ogled his son. "What are your plans for the evening?"

Jarod swallowed a gulp of soda. "The lodge has a bunch of events planned. We're having a bonfire at the river. Then we're going up the ridge to use a telescope. One of the guys has a one." He munched on a few fries.

"Then they have a swim party planned at the pool. With pretty lights and snacks," Janie said, bouncing up and down in her seat.

"What time is everything supposed to be over?"

"The flyer said at midnight. I think it's the same time your event is over." Janie took a big bite of her hamburger.

"As long as you guys go right to the cabin, you can stay out until it is over. Understood?" Geoffrey asked.

"Yes, we will go right to the cabin," Jarod said as he finished the last of his fries.

They both jumped up from the table.

"Can we go now?" Janie asked as she bent down and grabbed their bag with their swimsuits and towels.

"Yes, remember to be at the cabin by twelve thirty." Geoffrey kissed each child on the cheek.



They both hugged their mother and off they went.

Sandie turned to her husband. "They really are enjoying this week."

"I know. I can't believe it." He leaned into Sandie. "Let's make a bet. How long before they fight when we leave here?"

Sandie laughed. "I say within the hour."

They both finished their wine and left the dining room. The lobby was bustling with people dressed in costumes. Sandie grabbed Geoffrey's arm. "Oh my gosh, were we supposed to dress up?"

He shook his head. "No. Only certain characters were to dress up. That's how you know who to talk to." He patted down his jacket. "Oh, crap."

"What? What is wrong?"

"I left the envelope with our instructions for the night back at the cabin." He kissed her cheek and glanced at his watch. "I'll go and get it. I'll be back before the cocktail hour even starts."

"Okay. Hurry." She watched him leave and decided an extra glass of wine could help the night along.

## CHAPTER 9

Geoffrey pulled the golf cart into the small drive of their cabin. He noticed Jimmy's truck in the adjacent driveway. He could hear music playing from inside and snippets of a conversation. But the music drowned out the words.

He entered the cabin and headed straight for their bedroom. The envelope was on the little dresser by the window. Before he left, he peeked from behind the curtain at the cabin next door. Their bedroom window looked directly into the other cabin's main living room. The blinds had been drawn, but they were sheer, allowing Geoffrey a partial shadowy view into the cabin.

His heart raced as he watched what looked like a larger silhouette grab and hit another figure. Geoffrey couldn't believe it. He continued watching, his mind unable to grasp what he was seeing. It looked like the larger figure grabbed a large object and swung. The smaller silhouette fell to the floor and Geoffrey heard a loud crash at the same time liquid splattered the curtains and window area.

Geoffrey had to get a better view. He snuck out the door of the cabin and tiptoed down the small walkway between the two the buildings. When he came to the window, he peeked through the blinds and witnessed Jimmy frantically rolling up the blue tarp he had carried in earlier that week.

From his vantage point, Geoffrey could see a red like liquid dripping down the opposite wall of the cabin. He calmed his breathing and crept back up the pathway. Inside, Geoffrey used the phone to dial the front desk of the lodge.

"Sugar Maple Lodge."

"This is Geoffrey MacNally. I need you to get the security guy on the phone!" He panted.

"I'm sorry, Mr. MacNally. Did you say you have an emergency? I couldn't understand you. You're going to have to calm down and speak clearly."

Geoffrey halfway listened to the woman. He could see Jimmy carrying the tarp out to the truck. He watched as Jimmy ran back into the cabin and grabbed what looked like a bag or a purse. "Oh my gosh, he's getting away. He is going to get away with killing his wife."

"Mr. MacNally, who killed his wife?"

"I have to follow him. I can't let him get away." Geoffrey dropped the phone and ran to his cart. He knew he couldn't keep up with the truck, but he was sure he could stay close enough to at least see where Jimmy was taking the body.

The truck was pretty far ahead of Geoffrey's cart, but he could still see the dust trail as the truck sped ahead. He followed him for what seemed like several miles when the truck made a left-hand turn into a big warehouse parking lot. He pulled in behind the truck but kept his distance. Geoffrey watched as a large bay door opened and the truck entered.

Geoffrey pulled his golf cart over to the side of the building and hid it behind a large garbage bin. He crept around the front to the bay door. He saw Jimmy heave the tarp out of the truck and carry it to the far area of the warehouse.

Pulling his phone from his pocket, he pulled up the number he had just days earlier put into his contact list. The number for Gene Buford, retired sheriff. The phone rang and rang. Finally, a young man answered it.

"Yellow?"

"I need to speak to Sheriff Buford. Now!"

"Hang on. Gene? Come here. You got a call."

"Who the heck is it?"

"I don't know some guy yelling at me."

Gene stepped over to the phone in the little office just off the lobby. "Well hell. This is Gene."

"Sheriff Buford, this is Geoffrey MacNally. Come quick. I just witnessed Jimmy kill his wife."

"What the hell? Is this a joke?"

"No, sheriff, it isn't a joke. I was at my cabin." Geoffrey paused and peeked around the corner from his hiding spot. Jimmy had laid the tarp on the floor and disappeared into an area out of view from Geoffrey's vantage point.

"I watched him kill his wife and then wrap her in a tarp. Get here fast. He is getting ready to dispose of the body."

“What body? Who has been killed?” Gene Buford yelled into the phone.

By now, a small crowd of lodge guests had gathered around the sheriff.

Sandie MacNally saw the crowd and meandered towards it to see what had happened.

Geoffrey grabbed his hair and yanked on the ends. “Jimmy killed his wife. They were working in the cabin and I saw him hit her, and then I saw blood all over the cabin. Please, just hurry. I followed him to some big warehouse. It has three big bays and a lot of construction equipment. I think it is north of the pool. Please hurry.”

“Okay, Mr. MacNally. Don’t do anything. We will be there in just a few minutes.” Gene Buford hung up the phone.

“What the hell is going on, Gene?” David, the EMT for the property, said as he grabbed a go bag from a shelf behind the desk.

“A guy I met the other day, a Geoffrey MacNally, said he saw someone named Jimmy kill his wife.” Gene was about to continue when he heard a gasp behind him. He turned to see a young brunette. Her mouth was wide and her eyes bulged. “I’m guessing you know who this MacNally fellow is.”

“He’s my husband.” She hung her head. “He said that the maintenance man or some guy who does the remodeling here was going to kill his wife. I think he said his name was Jimmy.”

Gene looked at David. “Who the hell is Jimmy?”

David shrugged. “That’s James, the guy who does the remodeling. He’s married to Cynthia, but his name is James.”

“Yes,” Sandie said, nodding her head. “That’s the wife’s name.”

Gene scratched his head. “Cynthia is the Wittenhouses’ daughter. James loves that woman. He would never kill her.” He looked at the wife. “What makes him think that?” As he waited for her answer, he gathered his weapon and began walking to the lodge entrance. Several people had gathered and followed him and his men towards the driveway.

“He has been witnessing them argue all week. He has it in the head that Jimmy or James or

whatever his name is, was plotting to kill his wife.”

There was a small gasp as several heard that murderous declaration.

“Ride with me,” Gene said to Sandie. “I need to know about your husband.”

She nodded. As she followed him out the doors, she heard a familiar voice yelling mom. She turned to see her two kids running towards her.

“Mom, we were out on the patio. We heard someone was hurt. Mom, what’s going on?” Jarod asked as he held his sister's hand.

Sandie glanced at the sheriff. He sighed as her eyes pleaded with him. “Oh, for crying out loud. Come on. All of you, get in the car.”

## CHAPTER 10

Geoffrey hid behind a large plastic barrel. He watched as Jimmy grabbed what looked like a giant blowtorch. The man positioned the tarp near a large industrial style drain. Geoffrey knew he had only a few minutes before the sheriff and his men showed up. And although he didn't have any idea how long it would take for the evidence to be burned, that torch looked like within a few seconds it could disintegrate anything in its path of flames.

Geoffrey glanced around the immediate area. "There has to be something I can use as a weapon," he whispered to himself as he searched for something he could use. His eye landed on a piece of PVC pipe, roughly about four feet. He crawled over to it, keeping his head down. He grabbed the pipe and crawled back to his hiding spot. When the moment was right, he would step out and stop Jimmy from damaging any evidence.

Gene Buford pulled his sedan up to the open bay door. As he rolled to a stop, several other vehicles pulled in behind him. Exiting the vehicle, he turned to the small, well-armed crowd. "I don't want you guys following me in." He pointed to David and Joe, the other retired sheriff. "You two follow me."

Sheriff Buford walked in through the open bay door. He had his weapon drawn but at his side. He could hear yelling as he made his way towards the back of the warehouse.

"Stop!" Geoffrey screamed. "Don't make me hit you with this." He held the PVC pipe in both hands, raised over his head.

Jimmy turned around and stepped back. "Who the hell are you?" He looked around, seeing if any other madmen were going to show up. "Why are you here?" He lifted the sprayer just in case he needed a weapon. Not much of one, but he knew the industrial strength sprayer would at least buy him some time to get to his truck.

"I know you killed your wife. I watched you do it." Geoffrey motioned towards the tarp. "I know you wrapped her up in that tarp. Now you're going to use that blow torch to burn up the evidence."

Jimmy shook his head. "I have no idea what you're talking about. There is nobody in that tarp."

"Don't deny it..." Geoffrey was cut off by a booming voice behind him. He turned to see the sheriff, along with a large crowd of people.

"You two," he motioned to the two men. "Lay down your weapons. And both of you get on your knees."

Geoffrey guffawed. "I'm not the bad guy, he is."

"The hell I am. This guy just showed up with a frigging pipe in his hand, telling me I killed Cynthia," Jimmy said, waving the sprayer in his direction.

"He did kill her. I saw the blood on the wall after he hit her with something." Geoffrey stood his ground.

"What blood? What are you talking about?"

Geoffrey's voice was high pitched. "I saw the walls splattered with blood."

Jimmy looked at the sheriff and then back at the crazy man before him. He shook his head in disbelief. Trying to think what he was referencing. His jaw opened and then his mouth crept up into a smile. He tried not to laugh, but the absurdity of the situation hit him. "Holy shit," with that, he broke out into laughter.

Geoffrey, along with the sheriff and everyone else, was motionless, stunned into a dead silence. "What the hell is so funny?" Geoffrey asked as he lowered his weapon just a little.

Jimmy was almost doubled over with laughter when his wife stepped out from behind the sheriff.

"Jimmy, what the hell is going on?" Cynthia moved towards her husband.

Geoffrey's shoulders sagged as he dropped his arms. Still in his hands, the pipe rested on the ground. "You're alive? But I saw him hit you. I saw the blood." Geoffrey's brow wrinkled. "You were flirting with that young man, and you two always fight."

"What young man?" Cynthia asked. "What are you talking about?"

“The other night. Around the fire pit.” Geoffrey glanced between Cynthia and her husband. “You kissed him on the cheek. And you two giggled at each other.”

Jimmy looked at his wife, then Geoffrey. “You mean her brother?” He broke out into another laughing fit.

This time, Cynthia joined him.

Jimmy got himself under control. “This is going to be the best story of the year. Of my life.”

“Do you mind letting us in on it?” Sheriff Buford said as holstered his weapon. He crossed his arms and waited for an explanation.

Sandie and the kids stepped towards Geoffrey. “Oh Geoffrey, what have you done?” Her face softened at the sight of Geoffrey’s glazed eyes and his wrinkled brow. “Honey?” she asked.

Jimmy straightened and exhaled a long breath. “I was up at the cabin we have been working on.” He nodded at his wife. “I laid out the tarp and had the paint tree standing in the corner. I had hooked a few cans of paint on the arms and I was raising it to the height I needed. I moved the ladder over and took one step towards it. I slipped on the tarp, knocked the tree over and paint went everywhere.”

He pointed to the tarp. “I wrapped up the cans of paint and I was trying to minimize the damage my clumsy butt caused.” He snickered and then broke out into laughter again. “The fact that you thought I had killed my wife because she was having an affair with her brother is priceless.”

A few of the others in the warehouse giggled at the absurd story. Within a few moments, the room filled with laughter.

Sandie and the kids came up next to Geoffrey. Sandie reached out for her husband's hand. “Are you okay, honey?”

“Yeah, Dad. Are you alright?” Janie asked, wrapping her arms around her dad's waist.

Jarod pressed his lips together to hide his smile. His dad looked up, and Jarod reached out for his shoulder. “It’s okay Dad. It was an honest mistake.”

Geoffrey nodded. His shoulders drooped and his face flushed.

Jimmy walked over to the man.



The crowd grew quiet. No one was sure what he would do to the man who just accused him of murdering his wife.

Jimmy stopped almost toe to toe with him. He looked Geoffrey up and down. His eyes narrowed in on him. Just when sheriff Buford made a move to separate the men, Jimmy grabbed the Geoffrey and hugged him. Patting him on the back with both hands, then grabbing his shoulders. "You were willing to risk your own life to make sure my supposedly murdered wife got justice. That's awesome. And not to mention you gave me the best story for my next poker night."

The crowd chuckled as they slowly left the warehouse. Leaving the MacNally's, James, Cynthia, and Gene Buford and his men.

Sheriff Buford looked at Geoffrey. "What made you think James here would kill his wife?"

Geoffrey shrugged. "Overactive imagination."

His wife smiled at the group. "He thinks a mystery lies in everything. Too many detective stories."

He grabbed his wife's hand. "I promise I won't ever jump to conclusions like that again." He kissed his wife's cheek. He looked at the Candorellis. "I am so sorry. I hope you can forgive me?"

James laughed. "No worries. This really is just about the most exciting thing to ever happen to me."

Geoffrey and his family were the last to walk out of the warehouse. They drove back to the lodge in silence. As they all entered the lobby, the kids turned towards their dad.

"Dad?" Jarod said.

"Yeah, son?"

"Do you think we can come back here for our next vacation?"

He looked at his wife and then the kids. "Seriously?"

Jarod and Janie nodded.

"This has been the best family vacation ever," they said.