

Chapter One

He was early, as usual. But the crowd was thick and bothersome nonetheless. Summer season had kicked off in Puma Springs. The high mountain air, the clear skies, the afternoon thunderstorms and the cooler temperatures they brought with them drew the city-dwellers up into the mountains for their vacation getaways. As surely as the world spun on its axis, the flatlanders would make their way to the Springs to cavort, hoot, prance about in ridiculous “mountain fashion” outfits and, most importantly, fill the coffers of the small town with money spent on dining, lodging and the various (and somewhat silly) activities available in and around the town. Zip line over a gorge? Check. Mountainside slide? Check. Artificial wave pool installed at the base of the Puma Mountain? Check.

The town of Puma Springs took its name from the many and varied hot springs that speckled the small valley. Most of them contained sulfur and, thus, emanated a particularly noxious odor. Thankfully, the breezes that flowed through the valley on a regular basis dispersed the steam clouds and the accompanying smell quickly. One had to be within fifty feet of a spring before the odor filled the nostrils. The most notable of the local springs was called “The Devil’s Pot.” It was only about five feet across but had a particularly strong odor and had the hottest water of all the springs. It regularly measured at 112 degrees or higher. Thus, there was safety fencing and warning signs around it to keep people from burning themselves or worse. Some said that the Devil’s Pot had been originally named “Yellow Poison” by the Native Americans back in the day and was the reason the tribes had never settled this particular valley.

Lewis did his best to keep a smile on his face as he worked his way through the crowd to their usual table near the back, away from the speaker (but not too far away) and within earshot of the quiz master. He blended into the crowd with his wicking pullover and casual yet somewhat nice jeans. The pullover covered his comic book t-shirt. He preferred to keep his superhero fandom to himself. It was Trivia Night at Bigfoot Bar and Grill. This was Lewis’ favorite night of the week. Trivia night was when he let loose - a little. Lewis was not known for letting loose. He was known for staying buttoned up. He kept to himself. He lived alone. He worked at the local library. In fact, those who knew him knew him from the library. He’d been a mainstay at the Main Desk for over a decade now. He’d moved to Puma Springs because that’s where his college friends Mikayla and Carl lived. They’d moved there right after college to work at the local resort, Puma Springs Spa and Conference Center (PSSCC). They liked the town so much, they decided to settle there.

Back when he was living in the big city working for a data analysis company and wooing Erica, the woman who would eventually become his wife and then, inevitably, his ex-wife, he thought Em (that’s what he’d called Mikayla ever since they’d first met during Orientation Week) and Carl were crazy to live in such a small, isolated

community. He ended more than one phone conversation with them gleefully singing the dueling banjos melody. But now that he'd lived in Puma Springs for several years, he looked back on his younger self and laughed. *I was blinded by love and money back then. And more than my fair share of pot, if I'm being honest. I'm glad those days are behind me.*

He squeezed by a waitress bearing a large tray of beers and a couple of pizzas and sat down at the end of the long wooden table around which the rest of the trivia team members would gather over the course of the next half hour. He checked to see if the staff had put up the large umbrellas outside. They had. Good. That would keep the rays of the sun off their table. When the umbrellas weren't up, it became very hot very quickly in this corner of the restaurant during this time of year. He asked for his usual order - large pepperoni pizza and an Arnold Palmer - when the waitress came back by. She smiled and said, "I already put it through, Lew." He smiled and said thanks. Yes, he was a regular. He came here every trivia night.

He pulled out his phone and meandered around his usual sites as he waited for his food and the others to show up. A murmur ran through the crowd, some of them exiting after very late lunches, some of them entering for early dinners, as a gaggle of festively dressed rollerbladers swooped by on the road just outside the large restaurant windows. Superheroes and princesses of all sorts (space and/or Disney) passed by the window. Lew spotted Em in her usual Yuki Mori yellow jumpsuit. He waved at her. She waved back. Lew smiled and thought, *Silly woman. Good for her.*

He'd always admired Em's ability to not give a fuck about what other people thought. It was her superpower. That made even more sense when she hooked up with Carl at the beginning of their sophomore year. Carl was a double nerd. A Classics major who loved comic books. She fell for him instantly. It took him a couple of months and a "dude if you fuck this up I will kill you" speech from Lewis before Carl realized what he was getting into with Em. To his credit, when he did clue in, he committed to Em and she to him and the rest, as they say, is history.

The cosplay rollerblade group was a thing Em started on a lark by herself one summer evening about three years ago. She took her Halloween outfit from the year before, shrugged it on, put on her rollerblades and headed out. Puma Springs is the type of town - small, quiet, not much happening - in which the site of a young woman dressed in a Japanese anime costume will make the front page of the local paper. And it did. Along with the picture was a short article about Em and Carl and their coffee shop/comic book store. They'd had the store for a little under a year by then. But when the article hit the paper, more locals started showing up. When the picture went up on the town's website, more tourists showed up. They all wanted coffee and a picture with the cosplay rollerblade girl. Soon that popularity transformed into the weekly cosplay rollerblading group, weather permitting. It just so happened to be on the same night as trivia - thank god. Lewis had a built in excuse not to join the group. If it weren't for the

scheduling conflict, Em would have had him out stumbling along in some ridiculous get up by now. Carl whispered to him one night, “I scheduled my evening class for that day of the week on purpose.” They’d look at each other, fist bumped and laughed. They both loved Em, but they didn’t always want to do the things that she wanted them to do.

Lew focused back on his phone as the rollerbladers skated around the corner and out of sight. The waitress put his pizza down and he pushed his phone to the side and he peeled off a piece and slapped it down on a smaller plate. It was fresh out of the oven. It needed a minute to cool. His phone screeched with one of those emergency alarms. So, too, did half the phones in the restaurant. The tourists looked around in confusion as the locals silenced their phones and read through the very important message that had been sent out by the very important government agency. *What is it this time?* wondered Lew. *Lost cat? Weather warning? Or is it just a test of the system? Honestly, how many times does the system need to be...*

His train of thought stopped cold as he read through the text on screen, “Senior Alert: If anyone has seen a green, classic, Ford pickup truck with the logo for Evenston Ranch on the side, please contact Puma Springs Sheriff’s Department immediately.” That was it. But that was enough. Evenston Ranch. Wellmer Evenston and his prized Ford pickup truck. One of those classic, flare-sided pickup trucks that the Joads from Grapes of Wrath could have driven. Senior Alert. Wellmer Evenston was the geriatric sole survivor of the long-time local Evenston family. Some liked to quip that Wellmer was older than the town itself. The town was one hundred and two years old. Wellmer looked about the same age. But he insisted on driving into town from the family ranch every single day, weather permitting and, sometimes, weather be damned.

Over the past few years, Wellmer and his green truck had been found parked awkwardly on the side of the road more than once. Usually, Wellmer was just sleeping. Sometimes he was taking a moment to listen to his favorite song on the oldies station. One time, it was rumored, Wellmer and his truck had been found parked right on the railroad tracks in the middle of the night. The police had to call one of the ranch workers to come drive Wellmer back home. Wellmer wasn’t seen around town for a couple of weeks after that happened. People started whispering that maybe he’d passed on and the ranch hands were keeping it quiet. But then, one day, Wellmer and his green truck drove right through town. Wellmer smiled and waved and honked his horn when others honked at him. Things went back to normal. Although some said that from that point on Wellmer always looked like he knew something no one else knew.

That had been just about this time last year. Now here was this senior alert and the police asking for information on a truck that could be only Wellmer’s truck. Lew chewed on his first bite of pizza and pondered what it meant. He didn’t ponder for long, though as Marcus sat down at the corner of the table. Lewis and Marcus shook hands in greeting. Marcus said, “How were the paper mines today?”

Lewis Hurdy and a Little Bit of Murder: Substack Sample

Marcus Shellhorn looked like a displaced college professor. He never wore jeans. He almost always wore a collared shirt and most of the time a sports jacket. He was the archivist for the local museum. Marcus corrected anybody who called it the “local museum” by informing them that it was, technically, “a regional museum.” When Marcus said this to Lewis upon the occasion of their first meeting, Lewis thought Marcus was an asshole. But, he realized over the course of the next few minutes of their conversation, Marcus was simply a big fan of accuracy. He wasn’t a stickler for facts. Sticklers are assholes who like to show people up by being know-it-alls. Marcus was not a know-it-all. He’d be the first to tell you that. But he wanted to know everything. He consumed information. Marcus was a true fan of facts. He adored information. The more obscure, the better. He loved accuracy. And, to be clear, the Evenston Western History Museum and Archive was a regional museum. Its purview was to collect and curate original source materials related to the Upper Rocky Mountains Pioneer Era. The museum had been founded decades ago, upon the town of Puma Springs’ Fifty Year Jubilee, by Wellmer Evenston’s father, Cassius. As a regional museum, it had to spend its resources carefully. Its staff was small and Marcus was its only degreed museum worker. As such, he took great pride in his work and oversaw most if not all of the preservation work.

Marcus and Lewis had met three years before right here at the Bigfoot Bar and Grill. Lewis was sitting at the bar. He was supposed to be on a blind date set-up for him by, of course, Em. But the blind date had not lasted that long. It had not lasted that long because Lewis had, once again, screwed things up. He’d showed up half an hour late and then proceeded to insult the woman, one Sheila Claremont, within the first few minutes of the getting to know each other small talk. Lewis didn’t mean to insult her. It just came out that way. He doesn’t even remember what, exactly, he said to her. But he does remember the sting of Sheila’s surprisingly quick slap to his face.

The date had been in October, a non-touristy time of year in Puma Springs. The BFBG had less than two dozen people in it on that mid-week night. All of those less than two dozen people heard the smack of Sheila’s palm on Lewis’s cheek. They turned and stared in silence as Sheila stormed out of the BFBG and out of Lewis’ life where she had spent a very short amount of time but had made a very distinct, hand-shaped, impression.

Lewis worked his jaw to relieve the pain of the slap and made sure to stare very intently down into his beer glass. He couldn’t bear to look up and see the prying and judging stares of the other restaurant goers. He was bound to know some of them by face if not by name. That’s the curse of working the front desk of the local library. Everybody comes by the library eventually. Everybody stops by the front desk. Lewis’ unofficial town moniker was “library guy.” Most of the time he warmed to that small town element of his job. It was gratifying to be recognized in the grocery store or walking down Main Street. For the first time in his life Lewis felt like he belonged. But in that

moment, with his face still stinging and, he assumed, glowing bright red, all he wanted to do was dive into his beer glass and never be seen in public again.

That's when a slightly drunk Marcus sat down next to him and put an arm around his shoulders. Lewis was startled but did not push Marcus away. Any distraction was welcome at that point. Marcus smiled at him and said, "Let me tell you about the time a date threw a drink in my face." That is precisely what he did and the story made Lewis laugh his ass off. The two had been friends ever since. It was when they decided to move from the bar to a table that Lewis asked what Marcus did for a job. That's when Marcus first corrected Lewis by saying, "No, it's a regional museum." If Marcus had not been so kind moments before, Lewis might have headed back home right then and called it a night. But, thankfully, Lewis pushed through his annoyance at being corrected and asked, "Ummmm, what's the difference?"

A few beers, a shared pizza and a more interesting than it had any right to be conversation about the history of museums and their civic good later, Lewis and Marcus were fast friends. At one point, Marcus noted the flier tacked to the wall by the main door and said, "You ever do the trivia here? They started it a couple of months ago."

Lewis shrugged and said, "I did once but..." He shrugged his shoulders again.

Marcus's eyes went wide as he said, "Great! You can join our team. We're just starting one up. There's me, Kendra and Hank. Kendra's from the bookstore. She knows all the literature stuff. Though, I suppose you do, too, mister library. That's good though. Overlap is good. Hank's got sports covered. I'm good with science and history. And you..." Marcus leaned back and looked playfully askance at Lewis as he asked, "What would you say your trivia strengths are?"

Lewis put on a smug air as he said, "I'm great with any and all details about that golden age of culture referred to often as 'the 80s.'" In addition to that niche specialty I'm well versed in movies, TV shows, books, comic books, some politics, some world history, some..." He waggled his hand back and forth in mid air, "Some of this, some of that. I prefer to think of myself as a generalist. I like to know a little bit about most things while pretending I know a lot about everything."

Marcus raised his glass. Lewis did likewise. They clinked them together and made a toast, "To trivia!" Lewis joined the newly-formed team the following week and had been part of it ever since.

In response to Marcus' present day question, Lewis said, "The paper mines were relatively calm today. The thunderstorm in the afternoon kept people away so things were quiet from one til I left."

Marcus waved at the waitress who waved back at him. She'd put through his usual order. Marcus turned back to Lewis, "I wish you'd get that place to stay open later."

This was a well-trod topic of conversation between Marcus and Lewis. If Marcus were in charge of the world, every library and museum would be open twenty-four

seven. Lewis said, “There aren’t enough talented and knowledgeable people to work the desk for those night time shifts. They tried a few years ago. Remember Lara with the pink hair? Or Elroy?”

“Which one was Elroy?” Marcus asked.

“The former lawyer who barely spoke,” Lewis said. “He wouldn’t look people in the eye when they came to the desk. Then, of course, there was the infamous Beers and Books incident which put an end to all talk of night time library hours for the foreseeable future.”

“Ahh, yes. Beers and Books. Sounds like such a great idea but...” Marcus started.

Lewis finished, “...having free range drunks spilling Pale Ale all over the paleontology collection just doesn’t work.”

“Pale Ale. Paleontology. I see what you did there. And I like it,” said Marcus.

The waitress deposited Marcus’ usual Amber Grouse pilsner and said, “The pizza will be up in a couple.” She darted off towards the main door to seat a new party.

Marcus looked after her and said out of the side of his mouth, “Penny’s great. Really great.”

“She’s also really married so put an end to those leering thoughts right now,” added Lewis. “I don’t want you fucking up our trivia night. The BFBG is the best place for a burger and pizza in town. For a non-culinary skilled bachelor such as myself, I cannot have you risking this restaurant.”

Marcus waved him off, “I’m not going to do anything. But even if I did, I’d get kicked out. Not you.”

Lewis said, “Nope. You and I and Hank and Kendra are linked. They think of us as one unit here because of our regular attendance...”

“...and dominance...”

“...and, yes, dominance of the trivia night. So, don’t fuck it up. Whatever happened with Rozlyn, with a Z, down in Denver?”

“Rozlyn with a Z down in Denver is spending a year in D.C. for a special training. Archivist training. You wouldn’t understand. Far too complicated for you, mister librarian,” said Marcus.

“Hey! I work at a library. I’m NOT a librarian. Please. I don’t know how many times I have to tell you that,” said Lewis.

Marcus screwed up his face and asked, “Why is that again?”

“Because I don’t want to get yet another master’s degree. I did that once, right out of college, right into grad. school. Internship for a big company, specialized degree. Work in the day, school at night and Erica somewhere in between those two. I...I just don’t want to do that again. That’s not why I live here in Puma Springs. If I wanted that type of life, I would go back to Denver. Or Salt Lake. Or Boise. Or...”

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“Okay, okay. I get it. I get it. But I think you’re missing out. I think you’d be the best damn librarian ever,” said Marcus.

Lewis picked up the last piece of his pizza and said, “Maybe in another life. Not this one.”

When Marcus’ pizza arrived, a classic margherita, he asked Lewis, “What do you think about that alert?”

Lewis drained the last of his Arnold Palmer and said, “Wellmer, Wellmer, Wellmer, what have you done now?” Then in a more serious tone added, “I hope he’s alright. Was he at the last board of directors meeting?”

Marcus swallowed a bit of his pizza and said, “He was not. That’s precisely where my mind went when I saw that alert.”

“Any explanation why? Did Lynn say anything?” asked Lewis.

Lynn Colterhuat, Museum Director. Marcus’ boss. Marcus shook his head, “No, she didn’t. She was just as surprised as the rest of us. The June meeting is usually when Wellmer makes a big speech. Town vitality. Living history. The importance of civic duty. It’s great stuff. But...he wasn’t there this year.”

“That was - what? - two weeks ago?” Lewis asked.

“Mmmm, ten days. The meeting was the twentieth, no, the twenty-first this year,” said Marcus as he picked up his next slice.

“And here we are, staring July the Fourth in the face and Wellmer is, apparently, missing. Along with his truck,” said Lewis.

Before Marcus could respond, a voice called out from the front door, “Hey, smart guy. Save me a piece of pizza.” Marcus and Lewis turned and waved at Kendra. This was Kendra’s usual greeting when she arrived for Trivia Night. A couple of years back, on the first anniversary of the trivia night being held at BFBG, the quiz masters (there were four who rotated, a different one every week of the month) held a special trivia contest. It was a three-night event starting on a Thursday. It was for individuals, not teams. They called it The Small Town Smartie Pants Contest. Yes, Lewis, much to Marcus’ disappointment, had won. Lewis was crowned with an official tinfoil crown in a very sloppy and loud ceremony as official “Smart Guy of the Year.” For various reasons that the quiz masters had yet to fully reveal, the contest had never been held again. This irked Marcus as he was sure he would win the next time. On the other hand, Kendra loved it because she would continue to call Lewis “Smart Guy” until he lost his (tinfoil) crown, which may never happen as the quiz masters suffer from such a high degree of professional jealousy amongst themselves that they will most likely never spend the time together to organize another Small Town Smartie Pants event again.

Kendra parted the crowd with her determined stride and sat down opposite Marcus. Kendra was a cross between a business woman and an athlete. She was the literal face of the Puma Springs Chamber of Commerce website. In the past few years, Puma Springs had done its best to attract small business owners with a combination of

start-up costs set asides and tax incentives. Kendra had moved here from the east coast so she could 1) train at altitude and 2) run her own business. Puma Springs had a subculture of aggressive athleticism. Lewis and Marcus were remarkably not athletic. Kendra was. She stole a slice of pizza from Marcus' platter as she looked at Lewis and said, "I said to save me a slice."

Lewis grinned and said, "That's not my pizza."

Marcus huffed in pretend indignation. Kendra said, "Then save me a slice of his pizza."

Lewis quipped, "That's not my dog."

Kendra and Marcus looked at him for a moment then Marcus slapped the table top, "Pink Panther. Right. Does your dog bite? No. That's not my dog. Right. I got it."

Kendra shook her head and said, "I don't want dog. I want pizza." She all but inhaled the slice she took from Marcus.

Lewis said, "So, just how much are you working out these days? What insane phase of training are you in exactly?"

Kendra mumbled around the slice, "I've decided to cut back."

"Ahhh," said Lewis as both he and Marcus rolled their eyes bigly. "The semi-annual delusional phase of training." He raised three of his fingers one-by-one while he looked up into the air. "It's come a little earlier than usual. Does that mean it will end earlier, too?"

Kendra frowned and waved at Penny. Penny came over and the two hugged and chatted for a moment. When Penny left, taking Lewis' empty pizza platter, Kendra turned back to her fellow team members and said, "Nooooo. I'm serious this time. The way business is picking up, I simply don't have time for all the training I'd need to stay in competitive condition."

"Ohhh," said Marcus mockingly as he splayed a hand on his chest. "Then I feel sorry for the Main Street community?"

Kendra, sensing the barb, furrowed her brow and asked, "Why's that?"

"Because you are about to get up in everybody's business. The energy and focus you put into training has to go somewhere. My guess is you'll become the Main Street busybody, the Main Street, ohhhh, what's that word, that German word? It describes it perfectly."

"The Main Street shut your face before I shut it for you?" glared Kendra as she took her beer from a passing Penny.

"Yes, that's it! That's exactly it!" said Marcus.

"But you have to say it with a thick German accent. Like shutta yo face or ahh shutta it for you," attempted Lewis.

Kendra and Marcus stared at him. Kendra said, "That's not German. That's Italian."

“Really bad Italian. You should never speak with an accent again, ever. Remember last Halloween...” Marcus turned gleefully to Kendra

Kendra picked up the story, “...when he dressed up as Dr. Freud and pretended to diagnose all our psychological foibles. His accent was so bad. And his insights - and I use that term loosely - were so wrong. Not even funny.”

“No,” protested Lewis weakly. He knew where this story was going. “We were making fun of Kendra’s workout stuff. Not me. Not...”

Marcus spoke over him, “Not even close to being funny. Because they were clearly projection on his part.”

Kendra nodded aggressively then took a sip of her beer then nodded more aggressively, “Clearly! Hardcore projection. I still think it was the costume. The haunted costume. The ghost of Dr. Freud lives inside it and it possessed him for the evening. I hear he doesn’t even remember what he did that evening. He must have been really drunk.”

“But,” Marcus snapped his finger, “he doesn’t drink. Strangest thing. He must have been drunk on idiocy. Only explanation for how he behaved that night, Only explanation.”

At this point, Kendra and Marcus turned to pass silent judgment on Lewis. Lewis cleared his throat and said with only slight contrition in his voice, “It was, as I’ve told you many times now, a Halloween curse. That’s the only reasonable explanation. That suit - you’re right. It’s cursed. So, I absolve myself of any responsibility for what I may have said...”

“May have said???” Kendra arched an eyebrow as she raised her voice.

Lewis raised his hands in surrender, “I apologize for what I did say.” Kendra relaxed and smiled - a little. Lewis added, “But in the immortal words of Shaggy - it wasn’t me.”

Marcus was about to make another point about Lewis’ infamous Halloween behavior when Hank (full name Henry Alcott Wadsworth) sat down next to Kendra and gave her a side hug as he said, “How’s my favorite triathlete?”

Hank was the backcountry adventurer of their small crew. He lived for going into the mountains and getting away from it all. He had been this way ever since his extended family took a rafting trip down the Green River when he was only five years old. He and his cousins, his aunts and his uncles, his second cousins and a few non-blood related, long-term family friends had the time of Henry’s young life during that week on the river. That’s when Henry declared his name to be Hank and Hank it had been ever since.

His backcountry excursions required him to be in decent physical shape. He saw this as a mutual connection between him and Kendra. Kendra did not. To her athletic training was a science and a pursuit. A scientific pursuit if you will. It was the honing of one’s body and mind in order to attain a specific goal - triathlon dominance. She saw

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Hank's higgledy-piggledy, woodsy feats of strength - hoisting canoes above his head with one hand, felling dead trees with one shove, etc. - as throwbacks to the early days of circus strongman. Hank knew this and reveled in it. Kendra knew Hank knew this and tolerated his boyish behavior - for the good of the team.

Before Kendra responded to his greeting, Hank asked them all, "What do you think's going on with Wellmer? Seen any old, green, Ford trucks lately?"

All three of them shook their heads and fell silent for a moment. None of them said it but they all thought it - Wellmer was most likely dead. Missing truck. Police alert. Not at the board of directors meeting. Hadn't been seen driving through town in a week, maybe two. Marcus broke the silence with a weak suggestion, "Maybe he's finally gone to see his estranged sister." The town legend of Wellmer's long absent sister, Belinda, who lived in Flagstaff, was as long-lived as it was devoid of details. No one knew why Belinda and Wellmer were estranged. No one alive and in town, excepting Wellmer himself, had ever seen Belinda. All that was known was that Wellmer would never talk about his sister. The only record of Belinda actually being a living person was a picture of the two - Belinda and Wellmer - when they were six and five respectively. This picture was part of the room in the regional museum dedicated to the founding and early days of the town of Puma Springs.

Marcus' comment was followed by another moment of silence. Finally, as the crowd settled at their tables and the quiz master for the week, Herman Livingstone, walked up to the slightly raised table in the corner of the restaurant, Kendra lifted her beer and said, "To Belinda and Wellmer, wherever they may be." Lewis clinked his empty Arnold Palmer glass with Kendra's and Marcus half-empty beers while Hank pantomimed holding a glass and joined the toast.

Chapter Two

It was the half-time break in the trivia game when the quiz master took fifteen minutes to go to the bathroom and snarf down some food. The team (their name this week was “Sticky Filters”) was in a close third place, behind the second place team, a bunch of loud Denverites, by two points and only five points out of first place. Hank looked at their score on the answer sheet which Marcus with his erudite cursive kept and said, “Five behind. Not a problem.” He sliced his hand through the air sideways as if he were chopping down a tree.

Lewis said, “Sorry about missing the Remington Steele question. Stephanie Zimbalist. Not Stephanie Powers. She was on Hart to Hart. Zimbalist. Of course, how could I have mixed those two up?”

“Well, both shows were cheesy, 80s mysteries. Pretty much the same so it makes...” started Kendra.

“Pretty much the same?” exclaimed Lewis in mock affrontedness. “Remington Steel and Hart to Hart pretty much the same??? Puhleeze! That’s like saying Lord of the Rings and A Song of Ice and Fire are pretty much the same.”

Hank shrugged, “They both have dragons and lots of swords and kings and elves and...”

“There are no elves in Song of Ice and Fire,” snipped Kendra.

Hank bobbed his head back and forth, “Okay, but some of those creatures are elf adjacent. Like immediately adjacent. Like right next door. I mean, they’re pretty much elves.”

“When are people going to realize that Lord of the Rings is not about the elves or the dwarves or Gandalf and his kick-ass horse. It’s about the Hobbits. The Hobbits were Tolkien’s genius. They’re what makes the whole thing work. Without the hobbits, the Lord of the Rings would suck. No amount of froopy elves or wizards with long beards could make it work.”

Hank grimaced for a moment then said, “Sure, but...Liv Tyler. Back in the day.”

“And prime Viggo,” added Kendra as those two clinked glasses.

“Philistines,” added Marcus. “We’re talking about the books, not the movies.”

“I’m going to say it,” warned Hank as he tilted his beer glass at Marcus.

“Don’t. Not tonight. I simply can’t bear having to humiliate you yet again when you make such idiotic statements,” said Marcus.

Hank, undeterred, rattled off, “The Lord of the Rings movies are better than the books. Next Generation is better than The Original Series. Jaws 2 is better than Jaws the first. The Star Wars sequels starring Daisy Ridley et al are better than the originals. And, lastly, the hill that I will die on, Chinatown is better than Godfather.”

Kendra and Lewis through pieces of flatbread at Hank. Marcus tsk, tsked him vehemently. Lewis, now dipping another piece of flatbread into the communal hummus,

said, “Sometimes I forget just how wonderfully arrogant and stupid you are. Such a combination. It’s amazing, really.”

Kendra added out of the side of her mouth, “He’s not wrong about Next Generation, though.”

Hank turned to her sharply and said, ‘Yes, feel the power. Now...say it. The sequels are better than the original Star Wars. After me. The sequels are better than...’

Kendra threw another piece of flatbread at him. It bounced off his nose and fell to the floor at Penny’s feet. Penny, having come over to deliver the group’s standard second half mix of appetizers, pointed her finger at Hank, “Don’t make me pick that up now!” Hank bent down, picked up the piece of flatbread and defiantly popped it into his mouth. A chorus of “Ewwwww!!!!” came from his compatriots. Penny couldn’t help but laugh.

Lewis said, “Honestly, Hank. Save that behavior for the backcountry. We’re busy being civilized here.”

“Civilization is overrated,” said Hank as he chewed dramatically on the bread for a moment then coughed a couple of times before swallowing. “A little dirt will do you good. Builds up the immune system.”

“Your immune system better be strong because your brain system clearly isn’t,” said Marcus, very proud of himself.

All of them, including Penny, looked at Marcus and said in unison, “Brain system???”

Marcus opened his mouth to retort but couldn’t think of anything to say so he simply drank his beer and pretended to ignore the others. Hank jumped him, “You’ll have to excuse him. His brain system’s on the fritz. Ha. Brain system. Nope, that’s never going away.”

There was a crackle of static as Herman the quiz master stood up next to his table and spoke into the microphone, “I have some bad news. I just had it confirmed by a friend who works down at City Hall. The police found Wellmer Evenston’s body earlier tonight. He was in his truck at the overlook for Misty Falls. They found him slumped behind the wheel. There is no cause of death as of yet but...but...” Herman lowered the microphone away from his face for a moment. He raised it a few seconds later, “I’m sorry. I can’t finish the game tonight. Wellmer...he was such a part of this town, such an important part. I need to go home. Excuse me.”

Herman put down the microphone, picked up his shoulder bag and headed straight for the door. Hank shot a questioning look at his team members. Marcus whispered, “Herman is married to a cousin of the Evenston family.” They all nodded in mute understanding. The manager of the restaurant, Aaron Dundle, made his way to the microphone and, after clearing his throat, said to the crowd, “Truly sad news. I’ve just heard the same from a friend. In light of this, we’re going to close the restaurant in half an hour. Please finish up your meals, pay your tabs and remember to tip your

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servers. Let's all go home and hug our loved ones." There was a smattering of sad applause as Aaron put down the microphone.

What no one had said at his point was that a dead body found alone in a motor vehicle usually meant that person had committed suicide. No one mentioned this point as the crowd paid and exited over the course of the next few minutes. It wasn't until the four of them were outside on the sidewalk out of earshot of anybody else that Kendra looked them each in the face and said, "You don't really think he..."

Marcus said quickly, "Too soon to tell. We don't have the facts."

Lewis said, "Sure, of course. But..."

Hank added, "Yeah. But."

Kendra held her arms out wide and said softly, "Come on. Group hug. Group hug." They stepped in and hugged each other in a big, stumbling mass for several seconds. When they broke apart, they promised to check in with each other the next day via the trivia team group text. Kendra emphasized, "If one of you doesn't respond - Hank! - I'm going to track you down and beat you with your own paddle."

Hank raised his hands in surrender, "Okay, okay. I'll go home and plug my phone in right away. Promise."

And with that they went their separate ways home.

Chapter Three

At work the next day the mood was somber. Only the toddlers brought in by their mothers for storytime were smiling and happy. Brett, his frequent partner for Main Desk shifts, said to her as they watched a three year old spin in circles for the pure joy of spinning in circles, “Ahh, to be so young and unconcerned.” She looked over at him. Brett was going to grad. school (mostly online, with a couple of weekend “colloquiums” per year) to become a librarian. She looked the part with her square frame glasses and short, practical haircut. Brett had moved to town and started working at the library almost two years ago. She’d been paired with Lewis at the front desk so he, as senior Main Desk Guy, could help train her. Brett was forever grateful to Lewis for the way he stood up to an asshole (drunk) visiting lawyer who’d screamed at her about a room reservation. After Lewis’ dressing down the lawyer stormed out mumbling about lawsuits and implied liability.

The Simon Wendicott Memorial Library was a haven for locals and tourists alike during the heat of the summer days in the high valley. July was the hottest month in Puma Springs and, while considerably cooler than the lower altitude urban areas, the temperature was famous for creeping up into the low 90s during the Fourth of July celebrations held at various points around town in the days running up to the Big Bang Fireworks and BBQ. The wide sweeping curves of the main lobby, its pale green marble floor and its high ceiling inspired everyone to relax and take a deep breath as soon as they stepped through the main doors with their large brass handles. The marble for the floor (and the main desk and the desk in the Reference Department on the second floor) had been a bone of contention and the source of a dozen stories in the local paper, The Mountain Guardian, when the library was refurbished and expanded in the early 2000s. The director of the library at the time insisted on having the marble. The town council insisted on being more cost conscious. A back and forth exchange of points of view (and carefully worded invectives) occurred in the pages of the Guardian over the course of a year. The director wouldn’t budge. The town council wouldn’t budge. At last, an anonymous donation for the “perpetual care and upkeep” of the library solved the problem but created a mystery. The donor wanted to remain anonymous. Moreover, the donor insisted that only the library director be allowed to allocate the money from the donation and the director was not allowed to say how much money had been donated.

These strange conditions led to a flurry of legal opinions and the library was on the verge of losing the donation because of the council’s insistence on transparency which was transparently due to their ire at having been outfoxed by the anonymous donor. A town meeting in which not so carefully worded invectives were directed at the council members by sundry members of the public decided the matter at last. An independent accountant would be allowed to oversee the use of the monies of the donation along with the director. This slight acquiescence to the demands of the council allowed the members to save face while at the same time assuring the director’s vision

for the refurbishing and expansion was carried out without any financial burden placed on the town budget.

When the building was fully renovated and opened to the public the comments about its “modern update on classic style” filled the letters to the editor in the Guardian for weeks. The marble floors, desk and accents were commented on endlessly. One of the town council members, a retired physician named Carl Mellis, wrote one such letter himself, accompanied by a photo of him standing in the lobby holding a sign saying “I was wrong.” During the subsequent round of local elections, Carl was the only council member to retain his seat. The director in charge of the renovation retired a decade later. The “secret endowment” as the donation had come to be called passed into the hands of the current library director Samantha Mellmorth. More on her later.

A young, fit, spandex-clad mother (possible triathlete) walked out of the children’s section calling her son’s name. She smiled and apologized when she saw him spinning and spinning and getting in the way of the people walking through the main doors. Brett said, “No worries. He’s been a little bright spot for us these past couple of minutes.” The mother’s face collapsed in a frown for a moment as she picked up little Gunner. She cocked her hip to the side and rested Gunner there as she stood by Brett’s end of the main desk and said, “Ohhh, I know. Poor Wellmer. Poor family. There’s no one left at their ranch. I think. No direct family. There was that creepy cousin who moved out there a couple of years ago but I think he left last fall. Or was it the previous fall?”

“Right, what was his name? I think he left right when I moved to town.” said Brett as she let Gunner wrap his tiny fingers around her pinkie.

“Ummm, I think it was...it was...” the mother closed one eye as she scanned her memory.

Lewis spoke up, “Caden. His name was Caden. But I forget his last name. It wasn’t Evenston, though.”

The mom pointed a finger at Lewis, “That’s right! Creepy Caden. That’s what Anna, my nurse friend, called him. She worked out there for a bit when Wellmer was having a bad time with his asthma. Caden. Caden something something. Anna was convinced he was up to no good out there. Shortly after he left Wellmer’s asthma cleared right up. So...there you go.” The mom bounced Gunner on her hip for a moment then turned back to Brett and Lewis as she said, “I’m Lori Michelson. Nice to meet you.”

Brett said, “I’m Brett Charles and down there is official Smart Guy Lewis Hurdy.”

Lewis clenched his jaw at this introduction but waved and said, “Nice to meet you. Brett, in case you couldn’t tell, loves to tease me. It would be improper of me to mention her nickname so...I won’t.”

Lori laughed and said, “You two. Funny librarians. Who knew? That’s what I love about this town. You think you know people, you think you’ve got them pegged but then they go and do something surprising. It keeps me on my toes. I love it here. So much better than the city. Such a better place to raise this one.”

“So, you’re new to town?” asked Brett.

“Guy, my husband, and I have spent a few summers up here. I do my best to pry him away from work. He’s a bit obsessive that way. I made him promise to take summers off a few years back. I’d been up here with my family when I was a kid a few times so we decided to check it out. Did that. Loved it. Once we started looking for daycares and schools and all that stuff for Gunner it got us thinking. Why not move to Puma Springs? We debated it for a few months then his job started offering full-time remote work and we jumped on it. I sold my studio - pilates - to a friend and we put our house on the market while looking for a place up here. My grandparents’ cabin is the one with the old red barn just outside of town. That’s why my family came up here when I was young. My dad and his siblings have been arguing over who gets it and should they sell it and all that for about a decade now. Finally, I told them, told dad to tell my uncles and aunts that Gunner, Carl and I are going to live there until we find our own place and you know what? That shut them all up. No one wants to sell the place now. In fact, my Uncle Mike and Aunt Debbie are coming for the Fourth. I haven’t seen them since I was a kid and they visited us when we were up here for a couple of weeks one summer. I swear this valley is magical that way. It brings people together. I’m so happy to be living here full-time now.”

Lewis waited until Lori was finished before asking, “The piece of property with the red barn? Isn’t that the Morley parcel? One of the first pioneer families in this town? The Morleys from, ahhhh, Baltimore? Do I have that right?”

Lori screwed her face up comically for a moment, “That’s right. Lori Morley. That was my name growing up. Now I’m Lori Michelson. Good for you. How did you know that?”

Brett couldn’t resist, “Remember,” she poked her thumb in Lewis’ direction, “official Small Town Smart Guy.” Lewis rolled his eyes - hard.

Lori laughed then looked at her wrist as a message buzzed on her watch, “Ooops, got to run. My girlpack is getting antsy. I told them I’d join them for a run. Got to take this one back so daddy can watch over him while I’m on the trail.” With a big wave and a bigger smile, Lori Morley Michelson headed out the main doors.

Lewis waited until the doors closed before saying to Brett, “Really? Twice? You use the smart guy thing twice?”

Brett cocked her head playfully to the side, “I’m in the lead now.” She pulled out a drawer and made a couple of tick marks on a piece of paper taped to the insides.

“The lead?” asked Lewis.

Brett closed the drawer and looked at him out of the side of her eye, “Can’t tell you. Sworn to secrecy.”

Lewis looked at her long and hard for several seconds then said one word, “Kendra.”

Brett's eyes went wide but she kept her composure as she said, "I can neither confirm nor deny any involvement by any bookstore owner/operator in any such..."

"What did she offer? Gift cards to her store? I bet it was gift cards to her store. Ohhh, Kendra. Kendra, Kendra, Kendra. You're playing with fire. Marcus was right. He was right."

Brett asked, "Marcus? Your trivia buddy? How was he right?"

Lewis was about to explain Marcus' comment re:Kendra becoming a busybody now that she wasn't training as much when the phone rang. The set-up of the main desk had a phone on either end where the two staff sat. It was Lewis's extension that rang. He picked it up, "Simon Wendicott Memorial Library, how may I help you?" Lewis nodded and nodded as he listened to the patron on the other end of the line. A moment later, he said, "That's a question the Reference Desk can help you with. I'll transfer you right now. Take care." He pushed the required buttons then hung up and looked over at Brett. "I love it when I can transfer them upstairs."

"We should just start transferring all the calls upstairs," joked Brett.

"Tempting, I admit, but you know Shelly would find a way to get back at us," said Lewis. Michelle Uller was the head of the Reference Department.

Brett asked, "Is it true she once filled Kayla's office with shaving cream balloons?"

Lewis tilted his head and pinched one eye closed as he said, "I think that's just a legend but the old guard here will never fully tell me."

"The old guard?" said Brett with a tone of disbelief in her voice. "You're the old guard."

Lewis shook his head, "No, no. If I'm anything I'm the middle guard. The old guard are the ones who were here long before me. Shelly, Kayla, Jon - he left right before you arrived. He's at the college now. You know the guy with..."

"...the very muttorny mutton chops? Yes, I know Jon," said Brett in such a way that Lewis made sure to not talk about Jon anymore.

"Those three and, who else?" Lewis went on. "Samantha, of course. And Mersey who works weekends in Kids. You've met Mersey, right?"

"Once, when I first started here. But my school schedule keeps me away on the weekends so I rarely see her. But, that's not the point. Yes, there are people who were here before you, Lewis. But you've been here for a while now. Over a decade, right?" Lewis nodded begrudgingly. "So, yeah, more than a decade makes you old guard." She rested a hand on her chest, "Which makes me new guard. Just to be clear."

"And what does all that unnecessary nameology do?" Lewis asked, slightly peeved. He didn't like thinking of himself as old guard or old anything.

"It..." Brett looked upwards for a minute, carefully choosing what to say next, "...gives me hope."

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Lewis was ready to be disgruntled with Brett but her answer wrong-footed him, "...hope...???"

"Yes. Hope. This is a good place this Simon Wendicott Memorial Library. And Puma Springs is a good town. It gives me hope to work at a good place in a good town. I moved up here from the city, just like you did. You're old guard now. That means one day I can be old guard. That's a good thing, Mr. Hurdy. That's a very good thing."

Brett had shared small parts of her family history over the course of the past couple of years. Those small parts were hard stories. Lewis listened to her when she was in the rare mood to talk about her past and made sure to never come off as dismissive when she did open up. What little she shared made Lewis thankful for his parents, may they rest in peace. They weren't perfect, by any means but they were a thousand times more caring than Brett's had ever been.

The main doors opened and a handful of patrons walked in. One of them stood to the side and retracted an umbrella. That's when Lewis noted through the large window which looked out over the south end of town just visible on the landing of the stairwell that it was starting to rain. Most storms came up from the south, channeled towards town by the high peaks on either side of the wide valley. He turned back to the main door. Brett had greeted the other patrons as they came in. Her end of the desk was closer to the main door. The woman with the umbrella was looking for a place to leave it as she walked into the lobby. Brett said, "We can keep that up here, if you'd like."

The woman, mid thirties, fit but not obsessively so, jeans, casual blouse with a sport jacket (sleeves rolled up to the middle of her forearms), approached the desk and said, "Oh, perfect. Thanks. I don't want to drip water on any of the books."

Brett took the umbrella from the woman and walked back around the corner where they stored such items for patrons. While Brett was momentarily absent, the woman looked over at Lewis who said, "Hello. Anything else we can help you with today?"

The woman stepped down to Lewis' end of the main desk and said, "Actually, there is. I'm looking for a good mystery. Do you have any recommendations?"

"Ohhh, you asked the right man. Lewis loves mysteries. He's just the smart guy you want to give you recommendations," said Brett as she came back to the desk.

The woman took a moment to look back and forth between Lewis and Brett then focused on Lewis as she said, "I sense something going on here but I'm not going to ask."

Lewis said decisively, "There is nothing going on here except my coworker trying to win a silly bet."

"Ahh," said the woman as she half-turned to the display of new fiction which was indicated by the sign with art deco-ish font that read "New Fiction." She eyed the closer end of the shelf as she asked Lewis, "Mr. Right Man would recommend...?"

Lewis interrupted, "Lewis. My name is Lewis Hurdy. Please ignore my coworker from here on out. She thinks she's clever and she's just not."

"Am so!" protested Brett with a smile on her face. "So darn clever."

The woman stifled a laugh as she pointed at the shelves, "Any good mysteries here?"

Lewis walked out from behind the L-shaped desk to stand a couple of feet to the side of the woman. He scanned the shelves making thinking noises as he did so. After a moment, he reached out to one of the thicker books on the shelf, "The latest Robert Galbraith. That's a great series. But you might prefer to start at the beginning. Rich characters in this. That is, not wealthy characters but very well-developed characters. Well, there are some wealthy characters but they aren't the main characters. The main character is missing a leg. Part of a leg. War injury. So, not wealthy. Though he does build up his business over the course of the series. He adds a permanent partner who, of course, becomes a love interest. It's a whole will-they, won't-they dynamic. But handled very well. Not cheesy. Not like, ohhhh, Moonlighting for example." Lewis turned to look directly at the woman. She looked up at him. She was only a couple of inches shorter. Her semi-blonde hair swept the tops of her shoulders. He added, "You know Moonlighting?"

This was one of Lewis' opening gambits with women. Due to its triathlete subculture, Puma Springs attracted a fair number of attractive and very fit young females. Too young for Lewis' taste. There had been too many encounters at parties and other social gatherings when he'd struck up a conversation with one and, only minutes later, he heard the Steely Dan song "Hey, Nineteen" playing in the back of his head. Lewis tried to push past this point but after a couple of very awkward dinners filled with "no, who's that?" type of questions, he gave up. He now had an array of questions he could easily slip into conversation, especially when he was at the library, that helped qualify potential romantic partners. This was one of them. The first qualifier - no ring - had already been checked.

"Moonlighting?" the woman said flatly. "Isn't that a beer brand?"

Lewis was crestfallen. This woman didn't know Moonlighting. He turned back to the shelves to hide the look of disappointment on his face. He pulled out another mystery - Ann Cleeves' latest - to hand to the woman when she said, "But who doesn't love Cybil Shepherd? Moonlighting was prime Cybil."

Ann Cleeves was forgotten in his hands as he turned back to the woman, "The best kind of Cybil. Not the..."

"...multiple personality Cybil. Did you know that was apparently all fake?"

Lewis was stuck. He paused for a moment, silent, then said, "No, I didn't. I find that fascinating. If that's true. And, also, that's Sybil with an S. Cybil Shepherd is with a C." He swallowed hard and closed his eyes, "Sorry. Couldn't stop myself. Sometimes being a smart guy gets in my way."

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The woman put a hand on his forearm, “Don’t worry. I like a man who knows his names.” They looked each other in the eye and were in the midst of having a moment when Samantha exited the elevator. The library director rarely came down to the first floor. Her office was on the third floor along with the research archives. Samantha was constantly busy on the phone or taking meetings or going to meetings. It was a minor event when she showed herself on the first floor. Today she was dressed in a dark gray, wraparound dress with red highlights. A power dress he’d heard Brett call it one time. Her black hair was swept back from her forehead and sealed in place by a combination of hair gel and utter determination. She spotted Lewis the moment she stepped out of the elevator and with a brief but decisive, “Excuse me” to the woman, pulled him aside.

She looked him directly in the eyes and held his shoulders as she spoke, “I need you to work on a special project for me. Right now. It’s time sensitive.”

Lewis said, “Ahhhhoookay. Okay.” Over Samantha’s shoulder he saw Brett come out from behind the main desk and lead the woman he’d been talking to down to the other end of the New Fiction section. Good. He focused back on Samantha who was still staring directly into his eyes. He asked, “Is something wrong? What’s this project?”

Samantha pulled him by the elbow back into the elevator and pushed the button for the third floor. The elevator started up. Lewis’s knees buckled slightly under the pressure of the elevator and the instability of the moment. He’d never seen Samantha like this before. She was driven and focused. Yes. But she was also kind and generous. She said at least once a week how great the staff was and how lucky she was to have her dream job. That was normal Samantha. The Samantha standing next to him in the elevator was non-normal Samantha. X-factor Samantha. Weird Samantha. Samantha the unknown. And silent. As Lewis looked at her, she held up a single finger indicating he should remain silent. He did so. He did not like doing so. But he did so.

The elevator opened on the third floor and, as always, the slightly musty smell of old books and maps seeped into Lewis’ nostrils. This floor was full of shelves that were stacked high with primary source records from around the region. Marcus had on more than one occasion opined that those records should be stored in the museum, his museum. Lewis’ reply to that opinion was, “You’ll have to pry those records from my cold, dead hands.” The records, you see, came along with the secret endowment. The proper care and maintenance of the records was the ostensible reason that the anonymous donor had given so much money to the library. Not only could the records not be transferred to the museum, which, Lewis admitted, had a general claim to them, but they could not be taken out of the third floor. Such was the stipulation of the secret endowment. They were to be studied in situ only. There were no digital copies of them to be made. If a scholar, history buff or property claims researcher needed information contained in the records, he or she had to come to the Simon Wendicott Library, third floor archives to peruse them.

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But Lewis didn't have time to contemplate this situation or, even, to enjoy the aroma of history, as he called the smell of the records, because Samantha pulled him out of the elevator and around the corner past the water fountain and bottle filler and right into her office with the large windows that looked to the east over the south fork of Deer Creek. The solitary peak of Puma Mountain scratched at the sky ten miles in the distance. Samantha threw herself into her chair behind her desk and waved for Lewis to sit down as well. He did. She leaned forward with elbows on her desk and said with a tight face, "A few minutes ago Sheriff Potter called me." Her eyes went huge as she stared at Lewis. "You need to swear to me, and the Sheriff, that you tell no one what I am about to tell you."

"Swear?" asked Lewis, confused.

"Swear," said Samantha intensely. She caught herself and leaned back in her chair. She ran a hand over her hair as she stared up at the ceiling for a moment. She focused back on Lewis and said, "Look, I know this is strange. It has to do with Wellmer Evenston's...murder." Samantha took a moment to let that sink in for Lewis.

He said, "Murder? Like...murder murder?"

Samantha said, "Yes. Murder."

"Wellmer was murdered," Lewis said thinking out loud. "And Potter called you and you came downstairs to get me because...ohhh." He leaned forward in his chair now. "There's a link, a clue, a something that the Sheriff needs from the library. He called you because you both grew up in town and you got me because...why did you come get me?" Lewis leaned back in his chair, confused once again.

"Because you have no tie to the Evenston family. I do. Old history from growing up here in town. So does Potter. So do a lot of people, once you think about it. But you...don't. Somehow you've remained remarkably unconnected to the Evenston family during your decade here. It is a decade, isn't it?"

"A little over a decade," said Lewis. He chided himself mentally for being so particular. "Yes, a decade. Yes."

Samantha pushed onward, "Good. That's good. Here's what I need you to do. Bill," Bill Potter, hometown boy and long term sheriff. "...found a scrap of paper in Wellmer's pocket. That is, one of his deputies did. He called me and sent me a picture of it." Samantha opened a drawer and pulled out her smartphone. She tapped the screen a couple of times and was about to hand it to Lewis but stopped to say, "You have to swear to me that you won't tell anyone about this. Bill said if you'd prefer he'd come deputize you either today or tomorrow if that makes you more comfortable with this."

Lewis said, "Ahhhh, ummmm, not sure how to respond to that. Yes, yes, I will keep this secret. If the Sheriff thinks it's appropriate to deputize me then...okay. Sure. But I can keep a secret without that. I promise. Main desk honor." He held up three fingers of one hand. He didn't mean to make a joke in this situation. He wasn't trying to.

But as soon as he held up his hand, he regretted it. He pulled his hand back down and looked Samantha in the eye as he said, "You can trust me. I promise."

Assured by his last statement, Samantha handed him her phone. He looked at the image displayed and tilted it side to side. "May I?" he asked as he gestured to the screen with his fingers. She nodded. He expanded the image with his fingers and spent several moments staring at it then handed the phone back to Samantha as he said, "That looks like a torn corner of a page from one of the ledgers up here on the third floor. The image is a little fuzzy but I think it's page 47. Page 47 of one of the - how many is it again? - six hundred-ish books stored up here."

"Six hundred and fifty nine ledgers. Three hundred flat maps. Seven indices. That's the whole collection. And, yes, that's what I thought when I first saw the image, too. It's a torn corner from one of the ledgers. The grain of the paper looks very similar, if not an exact match. The color of the ink. The style of the numbering. They all match."

It was Lewis' turn to hold up a solitary finger. Samantha fell silent as he did so. He asked, "How did Sheriff Potter recognize that?" Lewis studied Samantha's face as he said, "No offense, but he's not the most bookish person. So..."

Samantha said, "When I took over as director, there was a small get together up here. Me, Bill, a couple of other local kids we grew up with. I held it up here. I showed them around the collection a bit. I was very proud. They were happy for me. It was a nice moment. Bill remembered the books I showed them when his deputy brought the items they collected from the crime scene." She winced when she said that phrase.

So, too, did Lewis.

Samantha pushed past the wince and said, "I'll need you to go through all the ledgers, check to see if, as we both suspect, that piece was torn out from one of them. You have the page number so...it won't be a blind search. It may take a number of hours but, at least, you know what you're looking for."

Lewis puffed out his cheeks. Just the thought of pulling the oversized ledgers made his back flare in pain. Marcus would have chided him. The museum was home to a dozen ledgers and envious of the library's much larger collection. But Lewis was a walker, not a weightlifter and the ledger's were heavy. He was about to protest, albeit mildly, to Samantha when he saw the look of fear on her face. He'd never seen Samantha Mellmorth, Library Director and local girl done good, look anything close to as desperate and...haunted as she did in that moment.

But it was just a moment. As soon as she realized Lewis was looking at her, she recomposed herself, sat up straighter in her chair and said, "I'll need you to do this after hours. The sheriff doesn't want anyone to know Wellmer was murdered. Not yet. Not until after the Fourth of July weekend is over."

Lewis was about to launch into a more than mild protest of this point but he bit his tongue. After a moment of thinking through the situation, he found himself actually agreeing with this deception by delay. He was sure ever efficient Bill Potter would not let

any harm come to the good citizens of Puma Springs. He was, also, sure Potter wanted to protect the economic boost that the swell of tourism of the Fourth brought to town. Years ago when he lived in the big city, he would have scoffed at this idea and railed on about telling the public the truth. But having seen how much these holidays and the summer season in general brought in to Em and Carl's Comics and Coffee store, he was glad that the sheriff was being tight-lipped with the news. After all, it wasn't like there was a rogue shark swimming in the waters of Big Pine Lake.

A point popped into his head, "What about...Wellmer's funeral? Do we know if there's going to be a funeral and if so..."

Samantha jumped in, "Bill says the funeral will be sometime next week. That will allow Belinda to be here for it."

"Belinda Evenston? Ohhh," said Lewis. Then, "Right, of course. His sister."

Samantha picked up on Lewis' confusion, "I know. The mythical Belinda. I have to confess I'm curious what she'll look like."

"So, you've never seen here either? Not even growing up in town?" asked Lewis.

"No. The only person in town who's seen Belinda is Wellm...Oh, no. It's...no one now..." She shook her head, "It's funny how families work. You'd think whatever got between those two all those decades ago they would have found a way to get past it. But that hasn't happened. In fact, I think the opposite has happened. I think their relationship got worse and worse over the years."

"Why do you say that?" asked Lewis.

Samantha was about to launch into her theory but stopped herself and said, "No. it doesn't matter. Not my business. We need to focus on the task at hand. Rather, you need to focus on the task at hand. I'll need you to start tonight. I figure an hour after the library closes down will give you enough coverage. Everyone will be out of their offices by then and you can come back...ohhh," Samantha reached into her desk drawer. She pulled out a gray, plastic, electronic key fob. She handed it across to him as she said, "That's my backup fob. Use it when you come back tonight. That way when Lyle goes over the records at the end of the week, he'll think it was me coming back to do some work. That won't be unusual at all."

Lewis stood up and took the fob from Samantha. He remained standing up as he said, "Okay. I imagine this will take a couple of hours each over two nights. What, exactly, am I supposed to do when I discover the ledger with the torn piece?"

"Set it aside here in my office. The fob will let you in here, too. Send me a text and I'll let Bill know. He'll stop by the next morning for a visit. Since we've known each other forever that won't draw any attention. He'll take the ledger then. He'll make sure to bring some big shoulder bag or something so no one will see him leave with it."

Lewis said, "Uhhh, not to tell you how to do this but won't taking the ledger out of the library violate the agreement made when the secret endowment was donated?"

Samantha shot Lewis a sharp look, “A very good point, Mr. Hurdy. One that I’ve already thought of. Before I went downstairs to find you, I sent an email to the appropriate person to explain the situation. I imagine since this is a law enforcement issue that an exception will be made. If not...then Bill will have to have his techies come up here to do their testing.” Samantha stood up and gestured to the door, “It’s time for you to head back down. But since I was a bit dramatic in dragging you up here - I apologize for that - you’ll need a cover story to tell your fellow workers.” Samantha held up a single finger one more time then stepped to the side of her office with the large bookshelf. She bent down and withdrew a black, three-ring binder from a shelf full of black three-ring binders. As she handed it to Lewis, he saw the colorful paper with silly designs inserted on the front cover. He groaned. Samantha pressed the binder into his grasp and said, “Yes, once again you have been chosen as the Staff Party Planner. Take the sacred binder, get feedback from your fellow bookies and come up with something fun.”

The Staff Party. The dreaded Staff Party Planning Binder. This duty rotated amongst the longer tenured library staff. It had been three, maybe four years since Lewis had been in charge of it. Normally, he wouldn’t have to do it again for another couple of years but, he had to admit, this was a good cover story. The party was held at the end of summer, usually coinciding with Labor Day Weekend. That was the last big tourism weekend in Puma Springs until the Fall for Books Festival in the middle of October.

Samantha waved him out the door, “Ohhh, don’t be so melodramatic. I know it was your comic book woman friend who came up with the League of Extraordinary Authors theme the last time you were in charge. Just get her involved again and she’ll do it all for you.” She paused as she was closing the door behind him, “What’s her name again? I’m so bad with names.”

“Mikayla Landstrom. Carl’s her husband. You might know him from...” said Lewis.

“Carl Landstrom. He teaches up at the college. History, right?” asked Samantha.

“He’s an adjunct professor. Usually one class a semester. Usually history, yes, that’s him.”

Samantha said, “Right, right. Okay.” Her face turned serious as she said, “Thank you, Lewis. I know this is odd. Thank you for helping. I know Bill is grateful as well. You’re helping the town by doing this. Thank you again.”

Lewis nodded and mumbled something obligatory as Samantha shut the door to her office. Lewis headed into the elevator and pushed the button for the first floor. As the elevator descended, he made sure to slip the key fob into his pocket so Brett wouldn’t see it and, with another groan, opened up the Staff Party Planner binder. The binder was, he thought, its own mini-archive. Each year for twenty or so years, the key details (including pictures) of that year’s party were put into a special form (Samantha loved her special forms) and put in plastic sheet covers into the binder. This way

whoever was tasked with arranging the party for the current year could easily go back through previous parties (that's where the pictures came in really handy) for inspiration and, too, to not duplicate a party idea that had already been used. At least, not duplicate it too closely. Some similarity was allowed.

Lewis remembered being very confused the first year he lived in Puma Springs and worked at the library. When the annual event came up, he asked his then Main Desk coworker Chloe, "Why does the library have a party? I mean a party like that? That doesn't seem very library-ish to me."

Chloe, a self-described herb witch who'd grown up in a similar small, mountain town said, "Well, first, parties are fun. And, second, when you live in an isolated town like this you need to blow off some steam every now and then. You need to find ways to dress up and express yourself and let loose and do fancy, big city stuff. But not really big city stuff. But sort of big city stuff. You don't want to let yourself feel too...provincial when you live in a town like this. If you let that happen then over time the town turns sort of...well, cultish. Big parties with big themes are a way to make you think big, make you think beyond the town and its inhabitants and daily doings. Too much of the local library and the local museum and local history and local chamber of commerce makes Chloe a dull girl. That's why." She said the last couple of sentences with a sense of don't dare to doubt me, new guy. So, Lewis didn't doubt her and, after his third library party in three years, he finally understood what she meant. That year's theme was Great Future Gatsby. Everyone had to come dressed in a sci-fi version of Great Gatsby Roaring Twenties attire. Yes, once again, Lewis depended on Em to help him with his outfit. This was a dynamic they'd established during their freshman year Fall Formals. Back then he wanted to impress a certain "hot nerd" named Emilia. Em was more than happy to help. Unfortunately, Emilia was drawn to the brawn of one of the school's football players. Such a classic romantic twist. Em consoled him by plying him with shots of Jagermeister. The rest of the night - and the weekend - was a blur to him. In the end, he couldn't be mad because Emilia and the football player ended up getting married after they graduated.

The elevator doors opened and he stepped back into the main lobby. Only then did he remember the woman who wanted the mystery recommendations. He looked down between a few aisles of shelves before heading back to the main desk. Brett was on the phone. He gave her a little wave and she acknowledged his return. Over the course of the next quarter hour, he helped check out several young families as they exited Story Time en masse.

When there was finally a calm moment at the desk, Brett looked over at the Staff Party Planner binder and gave Lewis a knowing look, "Ahhh, that's what she wanted with you." With a smirk, she added, "So what do you think Em will come up with this year?"

Lewis pretended to be affronted, "I can come up with my own ideas."

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Brett, obviously setting him up, said, “Maybe you should do a Moonlighting theme. Do you know Moonlighting?” Lewis glared at her. She shot back, “Such an obvious line. You really need to work on your game.”

“It’s not a game,” emphasized Lewis. “It’s a strategy. A carefully thought out strategy. One that helps me avoid...awkward engagements.” Brett looked over the top edge of her glasses at him as she shook her head. “It works,” insisted Lewis. Then, changing the subject, he asked, “What did you recommend to her? Did she go with the Galbraith? The Cleeves?”

“I confess I was a little at sea recommending mysteries. That’s your specialty, after all. But in the end I remembered that update on Miss Marple, that anthology that came out a year or so ago. She liked that idea. Both classic and new and multiple stories. She went with that.”

Lewis nodded slowly. He’d forgotten about that anthology. Probably because he’d never gotten around to reading it. He made a mental note to put that book up higher on his reading list. He turned to his computer and typed the title into the library software. He was in the process of putting a hold on the book for himself when Brett said, “You really shouldn’t use the library database to look up the numbers of women you flirt with.”

Lewis turned to her, “I’m doing no such thing. I’m simply putting a hold on...ohhh.” That’s when he saw Brett holding a piece of paper in her hand. A piece of paper with a handwritten phone number. She waved it back and forth for a second then pretended to crumple it up and throw it away. Lewis stood up with a start and snatched the paper out of Brett’s hand. Brett laughed. Lewis blushed. He took a deep breath as he sat back in his chair. He said to Brett, “Thank you. I appreciate you doing that for me.”

Brett said, “Ohh, I did nothing. She was into you. She asked me all about you. I didn’t even ask her to write her number down. She volunteered it. But you do have to name your first child after me or I’ll steal it away. Just call me RumpelBrettskin.”

“Done,” said Lewis as he looked at the number. He flipped over the piece of paper. It was blank on the other side. He asked Brett, “Did she say what her name is? By any chance?”

Brett grinned and said, “That will cost you your second child. Do you agree with that?” Lewis frowned at her. Brett relented, “Okay, no children. How about you promise to help me with my next grad. school paper. You do such a good job with the college kids. Would you mind looking over my next draft?”

Lewis said, “Of course not. I’d love to. Please, ask me anytime. Grad. school can be such a boring bear. I remember that. Yes, of course.”

Brett said, “Thank you. You have no idea how much that helps me. Thanks.” Then she turned away and pretended to study her computer screen.

Lewis waited a few seconds then said, “Brett...the name.”

Lewis Hurdy and a Little Bit of Murder: Substack Sample

Brett turned to him and tapped her finger on her upper lip as she said, “The name. The name, the name, the name. Was it Suzy? No. Christina. Nope. Marianne. No. The professor. No. Ginger. Nope, not that either. Maybe it was...”

“Brett!” said Lewis in a harsh library whisper.

Brett smiled and said, “Her name is Eliza. Unfortunately her last name is not Doolittle. It’s Claremont. Eliza Claremont. She’s in town for the week visiting her sister...”

“...Sheila. Sheila Claremont,” said Lewis as he slumped in his chair.