



Indebted

Mystery written by Penny Pislán
Mystery quilt designed by Cynthia McNutt Scollard

Chapter 1 — Pikes Peak

“Bridger!”

Detective Dominic Bridger glanced up from the file he was flipping through at the sound of his name being bellowed across the squad room. One look at the commander’s face and he bit back an oath. He’d seen that look before — many times — and it did not bode well for the recipient. He was pretty sure he knew what was coming and he wondered what his chances were for getting out of it.

His commander jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “In my office. Now.”

With a sigh, Bridger slammed the file shut and headed for the commander’s office.

Commander Bob Hensen eyed him suspiciously as he entered. “How are you coming along with the Congressman’s kid’s case?”

Just as he’d suspected and he hadn’t given it a second thought since it was dumped on his desk three months ago. “You really expect me to investigate his death as a homicide?”

“Yeah, I do. So, get out there and start investigating. Take Jackson with you. He looks bored. And close the door on your way out.”

Since he’d been dismissed, Bridger walked out into the squad room and stopped next to Detective Greg Jackson’s

desk. The commander was right, he did look bored. He had his feet propped up on his desk and was tossing wadded up pieces of paper into a trash can he’d placed on the desk next to his.

“Come on, Jackson. Let’s go.”

“Can’t you see I’m busy?”

“I don’t know what to tell you. Let’s go,” he repeated.

Jackson let out an exaggerated sigh and dropped his feet to the floor. “Where are we going?”

“To interview the Congressman’s kid’s friends.”

“The kid who killed himself?”

“We don’t know that he killed himself.” Now he was beginning to sound like the commander.

Jackson snickered. “Yeah, we do. The Congressman is just fooling himself.”

Bridger shrugged.

“Fine. I’ll meet you out back.” Jackson heaved himself out of his chair. He was probably in a snit now but as long as he did his job, Bridger didn’t particularly care about his attitude.

The phone on his desk rang before he could get away. “Bridger here.”

“Hi, Detective. I’ve got a lady out front who says her sister was murdered. Can you talk to her?”

He dragged his hand down his face. “I was just leaving. Can’t you get someone

else?”

“Someone like who?” demanded the receptionist.

He glanced around the squad room. He was the only one there. “Never mind. I’ll be there in a minute.”

When he stepped through the doorway, Ruby, a forty-something police officer’s wife with a friendly smile and a penchant for costume jewelry, nodded toward a woman wearing a navy-blue skirt and blazer, staring out the window. He approached the woman, clearing his throat.

“I’m Detective Dominic Bridger,” he told her. “How can I help you?”

The woman turned around. She appeared to be younger than he would have thought considering her conservative attire and the way she wore her dark brown hair in a severe bun at her nape, he guessed only two or three years younger than his own thirty-six. She stared at him in silence for a moment. The intelligence in her dark blue eyes seemed to be sizing him up as though she was trying to determine his worth. It was an unsettling feeling and he found himself squirming a bit under her scrutiny.

Finally, she nodded. When she spoke, her voice was soft and feminine. “You are a homicide detective?”

Among other things. “Yes.”

“Are you good at what you do?”

He arched a brow. No one had ever asked him that before. “Very good.” He wasn’t bragging, just stating fact.

She nodded again. “My sister was murdered, Detective. I want you to investigate her death and prove it.”

Glancing over at Ruby, he noticed that she had her chin propped in her hand and was watching them with ill-concealed

interest. “Why don’t we go someplace where we can talk?” he suggested, waving his hand in the direction of the squad room. At the last minute, just before they reached the doors, he looked back at Ruby over his shoulder and gave her a good glare. She blew him a kiss.

Rolling his eyes, he took the woman’s elbow and led her through the squad room to his desk. He thought about taking her to the interrogation room but decided against it since he had no idea a crime had been committed and he didn’t want to intimidate her. “Let me get you a chair,” he said.

He pulled up the chair Jackson had vacated a little while earlier and held it steady while the woman sat down. Ah, crap. Jackson was waiting for him in the parking lot.

“Excuse me just a minute. I need to make a quick phone call.”

He dialed Jackson’s number. It went to voicemail. He left a message and hung up, then pulled a pad of paper and pen out of his jacket pocket.

“Now, how can I help you, Ms...?” He let his sentence trail off.

“Underwood. Molly Underwood.”

“Ms. Underwood. Why don’t you start at the beginning and tell me what happened?”

“My sister was thirty-one years old, Detective.” She lowered her head to stare down at her hands clasped tightly in her lap. “She ran two miles every morning before work. She went to the gym every evening. She didn’t drink, she didn’t smoke. She ate healthy. You’ll never be able to convince me that she died from natural causes.”

Bridger was scribbling in his notepad. He looked up. “Did she have any illnesses that you know of? Any birth defects?”

She shook her head. “No. She was

a health nut and she took good care of herself. Every year she went in for a physical.”

That didn’t necessarily mean anything but he would come back to it later. “Is it possible she did drugs?”

“No.”

“Did she live alone?”

“Yes. Her fiancé spent most Friday and Saturday nights with her but he was always gone by Sunday night because of his job.”

“What does he do for a living?”

“He works for a framing company. They subcontract for general contractors building houses.”

“Did they get along?”

“Oh, yes. They loved each other very much. He has been inconsolable ever since she...she...” She took a deep breath.

“That’s okay, I understand. When did she pass?”

Ms. Underwood sniffed and Bridger began looking around at the neighboring desks for a box of Kleenex. He found one a couple of desks over and retrieved it for her.

“Thank you,” she whispered, grabbing a couple of tissues from the box.

“I know this is difficult for you, Ms. Underwood, but the more information you can give me, the easier it will be for me to help you.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry about.” He reached out to pat her shoulder, thought better of it, and retracted his hand.

She raised her head and gave him a grateful smile. “About six and a half weeks ago. She left for work at seven-thirty like she always did. She called me on her first break and told me that she wasn’t feeling well. The next thing I knew, our mother was

calling to say that she had been rushed to the hospital. By the time we got there, she was in a coma. And the next day she was gone.” She took a deep breath. “They said her kidneys failed but they couldn’t tell us why.”

“Was an autopsy performed?”

“Yes. We just got the report yesterday. I have a copy, if you need it.”

“That would be helpful. Thank you.”

She pulled a manila folder out of her purse and handed it to him. He opened the folder and squinted at the medical report, trying to read the investigator’s crappy handwriting. Cause of death: kidney failure of undetermined origin.

He flipped through all 41 pages, picking up key words here and there. The death was ruled natural, nothing that would indicate a possible homicide. Still, he had to admit Ms. Underwood had reason to be suspicious — as a general rule, healthy 31 year olds do not die of natural causes. But then no one would know that better than the coroner so if he couldn’t find any evidence of foul play, chances were good there were none to be found.

He closed the file. “Ms. Underwood,” he began. “There is nothing in the autopsy that suggests your sister’s death was anything other than natural causes.”

“I read the report, Detective.” She sighed, frustrated. “Isn’t it possible the coroner missed something?”

“Well, yes, there’s always that possibility—”

“My sister was murdered, Detective. I know it as well as I know my own name.” She took his hand in hers, squeezing his fingers as tears welled up in her eyes. “Please, Detective.”

This was probably a waste of his time

and the department's resources but... "All right, I'll see what I can do."

Ms. Underwood rose to her feet. He stood, surprised when she wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed the side of her face to his chest. Hesitantly, he gave her a quick hug. He felt like a giant standing in her presence. The top of her head barely reached his collarbone.

"Thank you, Detective." She stepped back.

"You're welcome, Ms. Underwood. You do realize that it might turn out your sister died from natural causes after all, right?"

"I do, Detective, and I'm prepared."

He doubted that, they never were. "Can I keep this for now?" He held up the manila folder. "It'll save me time."

She nodded. "Yes, of course."

He saw her out then headed for the back lot. His phone rang before he reached the door.

"Bridger here."

"Hey, Detective."

Just the person he was going to need to speak to if he wanted to help Ms. Underwood — Herbert Richardson, Assistant Chief Medical Investigator in the Coroner's office.

"Are you busy?"

"I'm always busy, Doc. What do you need?"

"Can you meet me at my office in twenty minutes?"

The Teller County Coroner's Office was only about ten minutes away, fifteen minutes on a bad day. He glanced at his watch. "No, but I'll be there."

"I'll make it worth your while."

Bridger could hear the amusement in the pathologist's voice and wondered what the man had to be cheerful about in his line

of work. "You always do."

He had to wait almost ten minutes for Jackson to make his way out to the parking lot.

"All right, let's get this over with," he said, climbing into the passenger's seat.

Bridger fought the urge to kick Jackson out of the car and go on alone. He doubted his makeshift partner was going to be of any help anyway. "We have to stop by the morgue first."

Jackson shuddered, then pulled the lever on the side of the seat and reclined the back, folding his arms behind his head. "No, thanks."

"I wasn't asking," Bridger snapped. "I was telling you. We're stopping by the morgue."

Jackson closed his eyes. "Have it your way."

He didn't have the patience for this. It was ten-thirty in the morning but traffic still sucked and it took him longer to get to the Coroner's Office than it should have. He swung into a parking stall and glanced over at Jackson. "Are you coming in?"

"Nope."

Picking up the folder containing Ms. Underwood's sister's autopsy report, he grabbed the keys and got out of the car. If he didn't, he had a feeling he'd come back to find both Jackson and the car gone.

Cool air from the air conditioning hit him full in the face the instant he stepped inside the building. At that moment, he envied people who had a nice, normal nine-to-five job. There were days when he wanted nothing more than the comfort of a daily routine but he only envied those people for a split second. He loved his job, had worked hard to get where he was, and felt like he was making a difference. No desk

job would give him that kind of satisfaction.

The elevator doors opened as he drew near. The elevator was empty but Bridger opted to take the stairs instead anyway. There wasn't much that creeped him out anymore but getting trapped in the elevator with an orderly pushing a gurney holding a dead body was one of the things that definitely fit in that category.

Richardson was in his office. He got up as soon as Bridger knocked on the door frame. "Have a seat," he said, closing the door. "What I'm about to tell you doesn't leave this office. Yet."

"Okay." Bridger sat down in one of the chairs in front of the doctor's desk. "What are we talking about here?"

Richardson opened a file and pulled out a picture, turned it around, and dropped it on the desk in front of Bridger.

He leaned forward to get a good look at it, then glanced up at the doctor. Confused, he asked, "What's this?"

"What does this look like to you?" He pointed to a small mark on the body's leg.

Bridger picked up the picture and angled it toward the overhead light. "A bite of some kind?" he guessed.

"What about this one?" He took another picture out of a second folder and pointed at a similar looking mark.

"The same." He picked up the second picture and compared it to the first. "They both look the same to me. What am I looking at?"

"This picture," he tapped the first one, "is from the outer left thigh of a thirty-five year old man who died from natural causes."

"Natural causes, you say?" That was kind of young for a death by natural causes but still, it happens.

Richardson nodded. "This one," he

pointed at the second picture, "is from the lower back of an eighty-six year old man."

"Who died from natural causes?"

"One would think so."

"But you don't think so?" he presumed.

"Did you perform autopsies?"

Richardson shrugged in answer to the first question and nodded in answer to the second.

"And...?" Bridger prompted.

"And...nothing. Their kidneys failed but I don't know why. Toxicology came back negative. Hearts, lungs, brain, even their failed kidneys...everything normal. Even in the eighty-six year old." He shrugged again. "They just died for no reason."

Bridger sat back in his chair. "People don't die for no reason, Doc. Especially a thirty-five year old."

"I can't explain it. There's no medical reason that I can find for them to have died."

"Are you thinking whatever bug did this killed them?"

"I'm thinking it wasn't a bug bite."

"Then what?"

"It looks like an injection site."

Bridger picked up the photos again for a second look. "Do you have a magnifying glass?"

Richardson searched around in his desk drawers until he found one. Bridger looked at the pictures again, this time with the magnifying glass.

"Where and when did these people die?"

"The thirty-five year old at Kindred in Denver and the eighty-six year old at UC Health in Colorado Springs. They died about forty-five days ago."

"Why do you have the reports, if they died in other counties?"

“Bill Martin in Denver County called me the other day and asked if I had any similar cases here in Teller County. I told him no. Then yesterday, Todd Greenspan in El Paso County called and asked me the same thing. He emailed his autopsy report to me so I called Bill and had him do the same. I don’t remember any cases here but I decided to look into it, just in case. I haven’t found anything yet.”

“What exactly happened to them?”

“Both of them were taken to the emergency room by family members because they were confused, had a rapid heartbeat, blurred vision, and clamminess. There was no cause for their symptoms, and while tests were being run, they both went into a coma and died the next day.”

“Are you sure they didn’t die from a bug bite?”

“Their symptoms are not consistent with any bug bite I know of.”

Bridger sat the file he had gotten from Ms. Underwood on the desk and pulled out the autopsy report. He tossed it on top of the pictures Richardson had shown him.

Richardson leaned in closer for a better look. “What have you got there?” he asked.

“An autopsy report for a thirty-one year old woman who died from natural causes about 45 days ago at Pikes Peak Regional Hospital. According to the report,” he held up the folder, “she had a small mark, possibly a bug bite, on her right hip. But no cause of death is actually listed other than kidney failure of undetermined origin.”

“Did I perform the autopsy? That sounds like something I would say.”

He glanced at the name. Thomas Ricker. “No, Tom did.”

Richardson smiled. “Bless his heart. He trained under me, you know.”

“Yeah, I know. So, what do you think, Doc?”

“I think two is a coincidence, three is a pattern.”

“Okay, let’s say you’re right. How do we prove it when there’s no evidence that points to murder?”

“Why are you asking me?” Richardson demanded, chuckling. “I certainly don’t have all the answers. Isn’t that why you’re the hotshot detective?”

He snorted. Some hotshot he was. “Give me something I can work with. If I’m going to investigate these deaths as homicides, I’ll have to have something to go on.”

Richardson’s expression turned grim. “You do realize if this isn’t just speculation and all three of these people were murdered, you’ve got a serial killer on your hands.”

The look on Bridger’s face was just as troubled. “That’s what scares me, Doc.”

