

Chapter Six

I barely feel the stump beneath me as Grover County officers cordon off the area, stretching yellow tape between the trees. It flutters in the breeze, jarring against the greens and browns of the farm. Brad is dead.

I blink, but the words don't feel real. Our last conversation replays in my mind—the anger in my voice. Him telling me we're not done talking. I was furious with him and wanted him to know it. I wanted him to feel even an ounce of the humiliation I felt when he dumped me for his step-cousin. And now?

Now he's gone.

I don't regret what I said. I just didn't know it would be the last thing I said. I feel a sudden chill. I should feel something more, shouldn't I? Not grief—because I'm not grieving him—but something. Guilt? No, I didn't kill him. Sadness? Not really. But maybe . . . unease. The kind that settles in when the past catches you off guard. *How did this happen? And why did it have to be me who found him?*

An officer stands nearby, arms folded, listening to Layla Gafford. Layla's voice is too low to catch, but her expression says enough. Anger, suspicion, maybe even triumph.

I clench my hands together, my nails pressing into my palms. She'd screamed at me before the police came. I'm surprised her screams didn't draw the entire festival to us. Layla demanded to know what I'd done, as if I had anything to do with Brad lying there. Now she's calmer—too calm.

The officer nods, typing on her phone, her face unreadable. Layla purses her lips as she glances in my direction. A flicker of satisfaction? No, I must be imagining it.

Finally, the officer steps aside. I think she's a detective. She's in plainclothes, unlike the others in the vicinity. Another officer walks over, escorting Layla away from the scene. She doesn't look back as she strides away.

I stare at the spot where Brad fell. It's unsettling, knowing that the last words I ever spoke to him were said in anger. That I meant them. That I never wanted to see him again.

And now I never will.

My eyes follow who I assume is a detective—she's the same officer previously conversing with Layla—as she approaches Brad's body. Crouching with precise movements, she brushes away leaves and gestures to a tech. She hovers her gloved hand near his head for the tech to look at. The camera clicks in rapid succession.

She stands, moving methodically around the perimeter of the scene, stopping at a bush a few feet away.

She bends down and picks something up. A pause—just long enough to study whatever it is—before she lays it on the grass.

A cup?

Dread coils in my stomach. Did Brad drink something, faint and hit his head? Somehow, I doubt that.

And why do I have the sinking feeling that cup is about to make everything worse?

My phone ba-gawks with a text from the group chat with Seth and Rylie.

Rylie: Where are you?

Seth: Customers are slamming us. We need you!

My stomach twists. Looks like a dead body hasn't delayed the festival. I quickly reply.

Me: Held up. Be back as soon as I can.

Three dots appear, but I silence my phone and shove it in my pocket. The officer peels off her gloves and approaches. Her stride is brisk, her expression unreadable. She's wearing a pair of fitted black slacks with a navy jacket zipped halfway and a plain white shirt peeking through. A forced smile tugs at her lips but doesn't reach her eyes.

"Detective Wilcox," she says, shaking my hand before sitting on the log across from me.

I knew she was a detective.

"Beth Lloyd." Her firm, no-nonsense tone yanks me back to reality. Brad is dead, and I'm here again, sitting across from a detective.

"Can you tell me what happened? How did you find the body?" Her calm tone feels heavy.

I fidget, my gaze drifting to the yellow tape still fluttering in the breeze. "I was walking back from the bathroom while texting. That's when I found him."

"And you went to check it out?"

I nod, swallowing hard. "I thought . . . I didn't know . . ."

Didn't know what? That he was dead? That it was real?

"Take your time," she says.

She leans forward slightly, elbows on her knees. Beneath her jacket, I glimpse the edge of a shoulder holster. A quiet reminder of her authority and the situation I'm in.

Again.

"Did you touch the body?"

"I did," I admit. "I was checking for a pulse. I needed to be certain."

I hadn't wanted to touch him, but in that moment, I couldn't stop myself. Maybe it was instinct. Maybe it was something else—something I can't quite name. Because no matter how much I resented him, how much I wanted him out of my life, I never pictured him like that. Dead. Still. Empty.

A flicker of something crosses her face before disappearing. Understanding? Doubt?

Why isn't she taking notes with me like she did with Layla?

"I'd have done the same," she says, assessing me. "Did you know the victim?"

"Brad Dawson," I say. "He was my ex-boyfriend." I bite back the rest—about our unresolved breakup and the argument we had at my truck earlier.

Her brow lifts just slightly. "Were you the only person here when you found him?"

"Yes. I mean no," I blurt. "Layla Gafford showed up maybe a minute or two after I found him. You were just speaking with her. She owns the Roller Burger food truck. She was screaming her head off and pointing at him."

"And why are you here?"

"I was using the bathroom." I point behind me.

"Perhaps Ms. Gafford was doing the same thing," she says. "These bathrooms are open to the public, right?"

She's right. Everyone has access to these bathrooms.

Which means anyone could have been here at the time of Brad's death.

"So, why are you here?" she asks again.

"I just told you, using the bathroom."

"No." She shakes her head. "I mean, what are you doing at the festival?"

"Oh. I'm a food vendor like Layla. Kaydee Foley hired me."

"And who is Kaydee Foley?" she asks.

"I think she's the PR person for the farm or something," I say. "She's involved with the festival and organizing the food trucks."

"And which truck is yours?"

"Kluckin' Good. I own it with my twin brother."

"Kluckin' Good?" she repeats.

Carmela Dutra
Hot Wings and Homicide
Ch. 6

“It’s chicken-themed. We sell sliders too,” I add.

She pauses, a glint of something unreadable in her eyes.

“Interesting.”

“What is?”

“There was a Kluckin’ Good tumbler in the bush not too far from where your ex-boyfriend was found.”

“That can’t be right.” I shake my head. “I never gave him one.”

But I gave one to Helena . . . No. No way. Helena wouldn’t—

Goosebumps prickle my arms.

Helena was furious after Brad’s review of her bakery. She was really upset when she said, “If that little online stunt of his affects my sales this weekend, he better watch himself.”

I warned her to be careful what she said in the heat of the moment. Helena seemed dramatic at the time.

But now there’s a tumbler from my truck at the scene of Brad’s death?

My stomach twists, unease creeping in around the edges.

“Well, somehow it made its way over there,” Detective Wilcox

says. “Any guesses?”

“No. I mean, I give those tumblers out sometimes. I gave one to Helena Wynn.”

“And who is she?”

“Another food truck vendor here.” I think back to when the festival first started. “And I sold one to

Kaydee Foley earlier. And three to a mom in a dino tutu whose husband’s doing the chili

cook-off on Sunday.”

She seemed chill, totally normal. But sometimes moms snap. I've seen it. My own mom used to go full banshee when Seth and I ignored the dishes for too long. One minute she's humming along to ABBA, the next she's launching wooden spoons like ninja stars.

I swallow. "It could be anyone, honestly."

"Anyone with a connection to you," she says, not unkindly. But the implication lands hard.

I shake my head. I don't like the direction this is going.

And Kaydee acted weird when we talked about Brad. Said she told her boss, Conner Green, they didn't need him. Said they didn't even get along. And yet . . . here he was.

"Is there anything else?"

"No," I say, too quickly.

And even if no one's pointing fingers—yet—I need to know what one of my tumblers was doing here near his dead body.

"Do you know if anyone else was here when you found the body?" she asks. "Was anyone in the bathroom with you?"

I replay my steps. Then it hits me. "Wait! Kaydee was in the bathroom before me." I remember the vacant look in her eyes, the way she was just standing near the sink. "She seemed . . . out of it. And there was a strange stain on her shirt."

Was it Brad's blood?

There's a beat of silence. "Strange how?"

I try to explain. "She's wearing a maroon blouse, so it was hard to tell the color of the stain. But it was around her waist, jagged and irregular. It didn't look like a food stain."

Carmela Dutra
Hot Wings and Homicide
Ch. 6

“You said she was at the sink when you found her?”

I nod.

“So, is it possible the stain was just water that splashed on her while washing her hands?”

Well, when she puts it that way . . .

It hadn’t looked like water, though. Not the way she’d reacted. Not the way she tugged her shirt like she’d forgotten it was there.

I shift my weight and glance at the detective’s hands. Still no notepad. No recorder either.

“Excuse me,” I say, “but don’t you need to be writing this down?”

Detective Wilcox doesn’t blink. “No, I can remember everything just fine.”

“But you were taking notes earlier. With Layla.”

Irritation passes across her face, but she smooths it over fast.

“That was a formal statement,” she says. “This is just a preliminary conversation.”

So Layla gets the official version, and I just get the casual chat. Interesting.

“So, I’m not being taken seriously?”

Her lips twitch, but it’s not a smile. “Ms. Lloyd, we’re still in the early stages. I’m collecting background. Observations. When and if this becomes pertinent to the investigation, it’ll be documented.”

“That stain could be pertinent.”

“Could be,” she agrees. “Or it could be spilled sauce, or coffee, or water. I can’t know that based on a glance from someone under stress.”

I clench my jaw. “I wasn’t under stress when I saw it.”

Detective Wilcox studies me for a long moment, like she's trying to decide whether I'm helpful or just a nuisance.

"I'm not dismissing you," she says finally. "But I can't chase shadows. I need all the facts to move forward."

No notepad. No real interest in digging deeper. Just cataloging me, like a box to be ticked.

I want to press her, but before I can, she leans in slightly. "Did you see anyone else in the area? Someone who looked suspicious?"

"There was someone," I say. "Whoever it was, was standing on the path a few feet ahead of me."

The detective's posture sharpens. "Can you describe them?"

"I'm sorry, no." I shake my head. "They never turned around. All I remember is the person was wearing an oversized sweater and a wide-brimmed hat. It looked like they were headed to the flower pavilion."

"Do you think it was a woman?" she asks.

"Maybe. But their back was to me, so I'm not sure."

Detective Wilcox pulls her phone, taps rapidly, then holds the screen up. "Is this what the hat looked like?"

I shake my head.

She swipes and shows me another image. "This one?"

"Neither. Now that I'm thinking about it, those are too dark. The one I saw was light tan."

"Maybe something like this?" She shows me another picture.

I look at a safari hat. "Maybe? I'm sorry. I wish I could be of more help, but they were too far away."

Carmela Dutra
Hot Wings and Homicide
Ch. 6

“Did they seem to be acting strange to you? Fidgety, maybe on alert?”

“Not that I recall.” I think back. “Whoever it was left pretty quickly when my phone ba-gawked.”

“Ba-gawked?”

“My text tone.” I shrug.

“What about their hair?” she asks. “Were you able to tell if the person you saw had long hair sticking out from under their hat?”

“Again, I’m sorry, but that’s all I have.”

“Hmph.” She tucks her phone back into her pocket.

“Is that all?” I ask, hoping to leave.

“Not yet. You mentioned you and the deceased dated.”

“Yes,” I say. “Are you sure you don’t need to write any of this down?”

“Would it make you feel more comfortable if I did?”

“I just think it’s important to help with your investigation,” I say. “Suppose you mistake my statements for someone else’s—what then?”

“I won’t,” she says, a challenge to her tone.

A quiet beat stretches between us. She’s studying me again, as if she already has an opinion.

“How long ago did you and Brad Dawson date?” Her question comes out tersely, as if my presence annoys her.

“Three years ago,” I reply, feeling the weight of her scrutiny.

She studies me, gaze sharp as a hawk’s. “Did you know Brad would be here today?”

Carmela Dutra
Hot Wings and Homicide
Ch. 6
“I did.”

“And did you see him today?”

I take a deep breath. “Yeah. I saw Brad earlier.”

She tilts her head, waiting.

“We . . . talked,” I admit, my throat tightening around the word. “At my truck. This afternoon.”

“What did you talk about?”

I hesitate. The fight replays in my head—Brad’s voice laced with frustration, my own cutting response. I could tell her the truth. But the truth, out of context, makes me look bad.

“We argued.” I blurt out without thinking. “But it wasn’t anything serious.”

“An argument with your ex-boyfriend before he turns up dead?” Detective Wilcox muses. “That’s quite the coincidence.”

I feel heat creeping up my neck. “You’re twisting it. Brad and I had unresolved stuff. But I didn’t—” I stop myself, exhaling sharply. “I didn’t kill him.”

Her expression doesn’t shift. If anything, she looks almost . . . patient. Like she’s waiting for me to slip up.

“Tell me about the argument,” she says.

I think she wants to keep things “preliminary” while she builds her list and gets me talking. This way she can see where I fit and save the formal statement for later.

I shake my head, pressing my lips together.

A sudden wave of déjà vu crashes over me, so intense it leaves me momentarily dizzy. I’ve been here before. Not here, exactly, but in this same awful position, sitting across from a detective who believes I

have something to hide. Detective Kane had looked at me like this when Benji Mayhew was murdered.

That was bad. But this? This is worse.

I wasn't the one who found Benji's body. And we weren't exes.

Brad and I were.

And I had argued with Brad—publicly—twice before he died.

My stomach knots so tightly I feel like I might be sick.

How did I end up in this position again?

I'm not just a witness, I'm going to be a headline. Again. The ex with a motive. The girl who fought with the victim before he died. I don't care what Detective Wilcox thinks. I can't sit around and wait to be the next name on her suspect list. I need to figure out who really did this—before she convinces herself it was me.

I straighten, planting my hands on my thighs to keep them from fidgeting. "Not to be rude," I say, "but if this talk is going to continue, I need to call my lawyer."

A flicker of something—amusement or maybe annoyance—crosses her face, but it's gone before I can pin it down. "There's no need to get defensive. It's my job to understand what happened here." She shifts in her seat on the log with slow, deliberate movement and lifts one hand. "You're here." Her other hand rises. "Your ex-boyfriend is here." Her palms hover at uneven heights like scales weighing guilt and innocence, just waiting to tip.

My shoulders tense as I stare at her bun. It's pulling so tightly at her forehead it's stretching the skin.

"But now he's dead. Let's be honest. It looks dodgy."

Her cold voice makes my skin prickle. She's acting like she hasn't already boxed me into a theory, but I can see it in her eyes. She's the shark and I'm her prey.

Carmela Dutra
Hot Wings and Homicide
Ch. 6

I glance again at her empty hands—still no notepad, still no recorder. “You keep saying this is just a conversation, but it sure feels like more than that. You’re not taking notes, not logging what I’m saying. Why is that?”

“Because I’m not treating you like a suspect.”

“Right,” I say, my tone sharper than intended. “You only do that when you *are* writing things down.”

Silence hangs between us, taut as a fishing line. “I can remember everything I need to,” she says. “But if you’d prefer to give a formal statement, I’m happy to bring you down to the station.”

I grit my teeth. “I didn’t say that.”

“Then let’s keep talking.”

I steady myself. “I’ll admit I talked with Brad this afternoon—”

“Argued,” she interrupts.

“But I wasn’t alone,” I ignore her. “There was a Clementine detective there too.”

She crosses one leg over the other, her knee bouncing slightly. “And what’s the name of the detective?”

“Detective Kane,” I say.

Her head tips up. “Wait . . . are you talking about Andy?”

“Who?” I ask. The name is foreign, unexpected.

“Detective Andrew Kane,” she clarifies. “We went through the academy together. I’ve always called him Andy. But these days he goes by Drew.”

“Funny,” I say. “He just introduces himself as Kane.”

She shrugs. “He does that. Keeps people guessing.”

Carmela Dutra
Hot Wings and Homicide
Ch. 6

My mind spins, trying to reconcile Detective Kane's stoic, unreadable presence with someone this woman calls "Andy."

"Is this officially a homicide investigation?" I ask.

"Right now, we're just looking into the unusual circumstances of your ex-boyfriend's death. Anytime a body is found under unclear or suspicious conditions, protocol says we bring in CSI to process or to clear the scene."

That's not a no.

But it's also not a yes.

She reaches into her jacket and pulls out a business card, offering it to me.

"That's all the questions I have for now."

I take the card, brushing my fingers against the crisp embossed lettering.

Grover County Sheriff's Department

Patricia E. Wilcox

Grover County Area Detective Division

The gold emblem of a badge gleams under the light, the numbers and email sharply printed.

"Do you know if the festival will continue?"

She regards me for a moment. "Why are you asking?"

"Well . . . I mean Brad was killed," I say. "Wouldn't *force majeure* cause the event to close?"

"*Force majeure*?" She quirks a brow.

"It's a legal term that means—"

“I know what it means,” she interrupts, “and I’m not at liberty to say.”

She didn’t correct me when I said Brad was killed . . .

I shift my weight. “What about security cameras? Around the barn or the festival grounds?”

The last time I found a body, the warehouse cameras were practically ornamental. Glitchy at best, offline at worst. But when they did record? They caught exactly what we needed.

“There aren’t any cameras on that side of the barn. Nothing that shows what happened.”

I cross my arms. “So let me get this straight. No footage. No eyewitnesses. Just me discovering the body.”

This time, she doesn’t argue.

“If anything else comes up, even if it seems small, call me,” she says.

I nod and tuck the card into my pocket. “Hopefully, you won’t need to talk to me again.” The words are half a joke, but the weight of my worry makes it fall flat.

“One last question for you.” She stands, brushing the dirt from her trousers. “That Kluckin’ Good tumbler. You really have no idea how it got near the body?”

I feel nauseous. “No.”

“You didn’t give it to him?”

“No.”

“Did you ever see him with one?”

“Not that I can remember.”

“What about your brother? Would he have given one to Brad?”

Carmela Dutra
Hot Wings and Homicide
Ch. 6

That throws me. “Seth? No. He never even liked Brad.”

Darn my stupid mouth.

“Hm.” Detective Wilcox purses her lips, like she’s mentally noting that for later—even though she still hasn’t written down a single thing.

“That’s not what I meant,” I say, quickly trying to backpedal. “Seth didn’t like Brad from a protective brother’s standpoint, that’s all. Seth wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

Again, all she says is “Hm.”

With that, she walks away, her heels crunching against the uneven ground as she stops to speak with another officer.

Exhaling slowly, I stare at the dirt, hoping for an answer. Did Brad fall? Did he hit his head? Or did someone pick up a rock and swing?

A chill snakes around me, squeezing me tight. We don’t live in biblical times. Stoning people is a thing of the past.

Right?

My gaze drifts toward the police tape. Beyond it, techs are crouched over markers and evidence bags while snapping photos. One of them steps aside, revealing the familiar yellow glint of a Kluckin’ Good tumbler, lying half buried in the grass beside a bush.

It hasn’t been bagged.

It’s still there.

Still on display. Like a silent accusation.

How *did* that get there?

Carmela Dutra
Hot Wings and Homicide
Ch. 6

I gave one to Helena this afternoon.

And Kaydee, and the dino tutu customer.

But Helena wouldn't have left it here. She couldn't have.

Right?

I push to my feet, my muscles stiff, my pulse hammering in my ears. I need to clear my head. *Keep moving.*

The best way to shake the tight grip of Brad's death looming over me is to focus on something, *anything* else.

As I step toward the edge of the scene, I spot Kaydee a few feet away. She's already being questioned by Detective Wilcox. Color has drained from her normally bright face. Her shoulders slump, and her mouth presses into a thin, bloodless line. She looks like someone who's just seen a ghost.

Does she know I mentioned her to the detective?

Kaydee told me this is her first big event for the Green Family Farm, and she didn't want any drama.

How will Brad's death reflect on her?

Her strained voice carries over. "I heard Brad didn't get along with a few people here," she says.

"Particularly one man. I was told he punched Brad at Sugar and Spice Bakery the other day."

My feet freeze midstep.

Her words hit me like a slap.

Seth.

She's talking about *Seth*.

My stomach drops. This isn't just a passing comment—this is a lead. A direction. And Detective Wilcox is taking it.

The detective's gaze meets mine.

Despite my forced casualness, I'm sure she sees my inner panic.

I want to scream at Kaydee to shut up. To leave my brother out of this. Seth is innocent, and I won't let anyone—not Kaydee, not Detective Wilcox—try to pin this on him.

Panic threatens to claw its way out of my chest, but I swallow it down. Seth is my brother. I know him better than anyone. And yet, here they are, quietly whispering his name like it's a secret accusation. I can't just stand idly by while they drag him through the mud.

But now's not the time to lose it. I need to be smart.

I turn away, casting one last glance at the tumbler in the grass. CSI is still photographing it. Still calling it evidence.

Fine. Let them collect their clues and take their time. If Detective Wilcox is so quick to point fingers, maybe I can't trust her to find the real killer.

I can't let them pin this on Seth—or me, or anyone else—without real proof.

And while everyone's busy throwing around theories and pointing fingers, maybe someone should be asking one simple question: What's on Kaydee's shirt? Because she's still wearing it and the stain is still there. Dark, irregular, and definitely not water.