

CHAPTER 1

I gasped, snapping the bag closed. It smelled like five day old vomit fermenting in the sun. It smelled like baby diapers marinated in fish guts. It smelled like a decomposing dead body. I opened the large, black garbage bag, released my breath to sniff again and flinched.

No, not a dead body. Rotten, putrefied, malodorous food. Opening my eyes, I hesitated before looking inside. *Yep, just food garbage.* I wagged my fingers encased in latex gloves. *Here goes nothing.* Suppressing a shudder, I reached inside and grabbed a handful.

Rancid goo slithered through my fingers. I shivered.

Ewe.

I snatched it again. The stinky slime squished in my palm. I tossed the mushy lump into the garbage can next to me. My whole body revolting at the feel and smell.

Yuck!

Reaching into the bag for the next smelly glob, I heard my brother's voice call from across the hall. "What is that horrendous odor?"

I smiled. *If I had to suffer, so did he.* "You wanted the garbage gone through."

"Oh man! That smells like..." He didn't finish his statement. Rich stuck his head in the conference room, a look of horror on his face.

I lifted the next piece of rot for him to see. The gunk slid down my fingers and plopped into the garbage can. My grin broadened at his scrunched-up, bad-beer face. *This piece smelled worse than the last.*

He shook his head, heading toward the front office. "I've got to open the door and get some air circulating in here. Man, that's putrid!"

With a chuckle, I tossed the next several handfuls into the garbage can. *Okay, I know I'm evil, but as long as Rich uns suffering too, this couldn't be that bad.* Then I found some papers. These I placed on the plastic tablecloth protecting the conference table.

Dumpster diving is the least favorite activity I've done so far. However, what people throw away tells a lot about them and we needed all the help we could get.

I'm Melissa Addison and I work for Security Investigations in Quincy, Illinois. Rich is my oldest brother, an ex-cop, and John Huddleston is his partner, an ex-special forces Ranger. They run the only private investigator firm in my hometown. I'm a detective in training, so I get all the really fun jobs, like dumpster diving.

We're working on a criminal case for a defense lawyer. Two days ago, Simon Meddleson was arrested for murdering his sixty-nine year old mother. He, of course, claims he's innocent. Our job is to follow up on the cop's investigation and find a flaw, but the evidence is pretty convincing.

Last night, John discovered this trash bag at the Meddleson's neighbor. Only the neighbor's been gone for a week on a business trip. So, I got stuck sifting through the icky, gloppy mess.

I studied the papers, holding my hands out like a surgeon. One, an almost transparent piece, drew my attention. "Rich!"

"Yeah?"

I heard a fan turn on. "Come here. This is Meddleson's garbage." The hand-written, spidery scribbles lay crumbled on the table. I pushed it aside to see a telephone bill. Account name- Ruth Meddleson.

Rich hurried back. He soured his face glancing into the garbage can. "Phew. What?"

"Mrs. Meddleson's phone bill." I pointed with my gloved finger. I reached in for more papers.

Rich donned a pair of gloves. He looked it over then placed it even further from the mess. He picked up the crumbled paper and smoothed it out.

"Here... a shopping list, some junk mail, a receipt from a grocery store..." I looked at the next piece closely. "Looks like part of a letter and..." At the next handful, I screwed up my face. "Yucky. Snot rags." I tossed them on top of the goo.

Rich smiled as he read. "I wonder why this was at the neighbor's?" Although I knew it was a rhetorical question, I shrugged, tossing more disintegrating food away. "Don't forget to inventory that food," Rich said concentrating on the paperwork.

I paused mid-throw, staring at him. "You've got to be kidding." *Being siblings, he might be pulling my leg.*

Rich shook his head still not looking at me.

"I'm not going to-

"You never know Mel, when something like that is important." Rich finally glanced up. "Seriously. Just keep a running list of what you're throwing out." He hesitated, his eyes panning to the can. "Or, what you think it might have been." His brotherly grin filled his entire face, spilling out of his eyes.

I stared.

"Really."

I snorted, snapping off the gloves. After retrieving pen and paper, I returned and gave Rich a disgusted look, which was lost on him. He was concentrating on the spidery handwriting. With another snort, I quickly listed what I thought I had thrown away. Some of it was *unyp* past prime.

Putting on a new pair of gloves, I continued my search. Near the bottom of the bag, I saw a pile of material. My brows knitted. Before my hand exited the bag, I whistled.

Rich's head snapped up.

I held up two faded, blue and yellow floral dish towels and a formerly white t-shirt. Both colored now in blood.

CHAPTER 2

Rich stared at the items then motioned not to lay them down. "Hold on. Let me get a paper bag. Vincent might want that tested." He quickly disappeared to return with a brown grocery bag.

I gently put the large white t-shirt splattered with still wet blood into the bag. The blue and yellow flowers on the hand towels were contrasted by the rusty brown streaks which colored them.

Rich closed the paper bag, taped it up, then wrote where the items had been located across the bag. Next he added that we both saw the contents and signed his name. He held out the pen for me to initial it.

I stripped off the glove and did as requested. Rich took the bag and went into his office. "Anything else in the bag, Mel?"

I expanded the now empty, smelly black bag. "Nope."

I could hear him asking for Vincent to call at his convenience. My eyes spied something white in the very bottom of the bag. It was tiny, hardly bigger than the tip of my pinky. I turned the garbage bag inside out to get it.

"What? Something else?"

"I don't know. What is this?" The matted clump perched on my finger as we both examined it. It looked sort of like a small owl pellet, only less dense. With hair. Very short hair. Short brown hair with a few whites ones interspersed. Hair glued together by blood. Matted, dried blood.

Once more Rich procured a paper bag and I shoved it in. We went through the same procedure with this one too.

"What do you think it was, Rich?"

A shrug greeted me as he left the conference room again. After returning he sat back down, grabbing the papers. "I don't know. If you're done with that," he said, pointing at the garbage. "Take it outside."

I stripped off the gloves, stuck them in before closing it up. Now I knew why Rich and John triple shredded all of their paperwork, everything, even the unimportant pieces.

I walked back in just as Pam, the secretary and receptionist, sat down at her desk from lunch. She scrunched up her face, fanning it with a file folder. "What a delicious smell you've found."

I chuckled. "John found it. I only unleashed it." As I passed Rich's office he motioned for me to wait.

After hanging up, he looked up. "Vincent wants us at the jail for a meeting with Simon this afternoon."

The jail meeting room was what one would expect, bleak and sterile. Gray walls. Beat-up, wood table. Standard issue, straight back, seen-better-days office chairs. Nothing else.

"Simon, this is Rich and Mel Addison from Security Investigations. They're helping with your case," Vincent Viking introduced us.

Simon was twenty-six. Dressed in the obligatory Adams County Jail jumpsuit. Thin and frail. He was clean shaven, but his shoulder length, greasy, stringy hair made him look creepy. In other words, just like I remembered him from when we were kids.

He was two years younger but I remembered him from my time hanging out with all of the public school kids. I went to Quincy Notre Dame, the private Catholic high school, but that didn't stop me from violating my parent's rules and hanging out with the 'less desirables' from the public school across town.

Simon shifted in his chair under Rich's critical, 'cop' eyes. "Hey, you arrested me once." Simon gave Viking a disbelieving look.

Viking nodded. "Rich is retired from the police force and is part owner of the investigative firm. I've hired them on your behalf to look into the police investigation."

"Good." Simon's grin grew to resemble the Cheshire cat's. "You can pick apart their case."

I glanced at my brother. His eyes showed that he was in 'cop mode'. Tense, yet relaxed. Relaxed, but vigilant. Vigilant and agitated. My attention swung back to the attorney as he opened his briefcase.

Viking pulled out a file. "Let's start with the bail hearing in two days. I'm pretty sure bail will be denied. Your record is not conducive to it." Viking continued as he flipped through the papers, "but we'll petition the court anyway."

Simon seemed to take that in stride. His eyes caught mine. A blank, almost uncaring look, then turned his attention back to his attorney.

"I want you to tell the detectives exactly what you told me. Run through the story again. They've seen my notes but I want them to hear it from you."

Simon rubbed his fingers together like a greedy person. "Where do ya want me to start?"

"The day of your mom's murder," Vincent answered.

"Okay." Simon took a breath. "I got up and did my usual routine."

Rich pulled out his ever-present notebook and looked at Viking. "Should I ask questions now or wait until the end?"

Viking shrugged with a look at Simon.

Simon merely motioned.

"What time did you get up?"

"Uh... Around ten or eleven, I guess. I really don't remember."

"Try to think of anything that might pinpoint when you woke up. It'll help us. Go on."

"Well, let's see. I grabbed a quick bite. Mom was just wakin' up. She yelled at me for gettin' in so late the night before. Guess I woke her up or something."

"What time did you get in the night before?"

"I dunno. Two, three o'clock. It was late."

"Again, see if you can be more accurate," Rich said, his voice not yet dripping with frustration. "Did anyone see you?"

Simon looked down at the table. "Nope. The old people in the neighborhood are pretty much all in their houses or whatever by ten." His eyes flicked up to look at Rich then he stared at the table. "After I ate somethin' that morning, I took a shower. When I got out, Mom was arguing on the phone."

"With who?" Viking asked scribbling in his notes.

I glanced at Viking, apparently this was new information for him. *Was that irritation etching his face?*

"I dunno. I really didn't listen."

Viking let out his breath in frustration. "Simon, if we're going to help you, you need to tell us everything and remember as much as possible."

Simon's head was already bobbing. "Okay, let's see. She mentioned a name..." He seemed to be trying to see through the gray concrete wall. His fingers worrying the cuffs. "Okay, Bruce or Bryce maybe. She said something about that she couldn't do what he wanted, she was busy that night." He shrugged. "That's all I remember." He scratched his hand then placed his palms flat on the table.

"Do you know any Bruce or Bryce?" Rich asked.

"Nope." A finger twitched on his hand as his eyes rose to stare into Rich's blue, unreadable eyes. After several long, deadly quiet seconds, Simon jerked his hand to his chin and rubbed it then dropped his hands back to the table. "After she hung up..." Simon looked down at his hands, after a slight pause, he taped one finger then went on. "Well, let's see, she got another phone call as I walked out of the room. She said something like, 'This is not good' and something like 'I'll have to call and tell him'."

"Who was she talking to and talking about?" Viking asked before Rich could open his mouth.

"I dunno."

"Think, Simon."

The prisoner shook his head, rubbing his nose. "I dunno."

Viking sighed. "Okay, go on."

"I remember listening to some music for awhile. Sometime in the afternoon, I got up and ate lunch..." He squinted his eyes at the two men with a head cock. "No, I don't remember what time." He paused letting the sarcasm take affect. "Okay, I'll tell you that the soap opera Days of Our Lives was on. Mom watched it occasionally, wait no, she taped it. She was doing something with the check book or something at the time."

Rich made a note.

"I pattered around in my room for awhile. Mom yelled, asking if I'd go get her some soup from the store. She didn't feel good, an upset stomach. I told her that I was busy. We had a blow up. Then I gave in. I got a call on my cell right after I got home, from Punky in St. Louis. I was going to meet him at the club down there. We made plans and I took another shower and got dressed. I asked Mom for some money. We had another big blow up over that, as usual. She's always stingy with the money. I left after she finally gave me a twenty for gas. I left."

"What time? Have you thought about it, Simon?" Viking asked.

"I have, but I still can't be sure when I left. I was really mad at Mom. I dunno. The news was on the rock station I listen to, if that helps."

Viking took a deep breath. "Go on."

"I drove down to St. Louis. I met Punky at Rascals, a dance club there. We hung out until it closed, at three." Simon scratched his hand again then rubbed his nose. "I drove Punky to his apartment and crashed at his place. We woke up late, around noon or something 'cause his girl was heading out to eat. I just hung at Punky's for the day. We were planning on doing the club thing again. Chrissy, Punky's girlfriend, was gonna get me a date with a new girl at her work." Simon grinned at us. "I never pass up a free date, she was paying. We did the club thing for awhile. The girl was a loser-"

"Her name?" Rich interrupted.

"Uh, I dunno... Denna or Diane or something like that. I was kinda high at the time." Simon sniffed and looked at Viking. "I can tell'em right? I mean, he works for us, right?"

Viking nodded.

"I was really high. Punky had scored some really good stuff earlier and I wasn't on the job, so I could do it with him, ya know."

"On the job?" Rich asked.

Simon looked at Viking.

"Tell him," Viking said.

"I steal cars. We get a request in, the boss gives it to us, me and Punky. We find a matching car. Steal it and take it to the shop in East St. Louis."

Rich nodded in understanding.

"Anyway, I hadda fight with Punky and I headed home here. I mean, if I'm gonna fight with someone, it might as well be Mom. At least I've got my own room here. Anyway, I get back in town and this cop pulls me over. I barely stop and three other cars are around me. They pulled me out of

the car and arrested me for Mom's murder." Simon looked down at the table, sniffed once then looked up at us. "I ain't killed my mom. I love her."

I could tell that no matter what else happened, Simon was at least being honest about that.

"The police have witnesses that place you at your home the night your mom was killed," Rich said. "What do you say about that?"

Simon shook his head. "I dunno. I was down in St. Louis or at least on my way there. When I left, Mom was sitting in her lounge chair eating and smoking. Winnie was lounging on her lap. He was licking her bowl."

"Winnie?" I spoke for the first time.

"Winston. Mom's dog. Winnie for short. A Shih Tzu."

I looked at the others but they were busy writing on their papers. I shrugged at the information as Viking began speaking.

"Okay. Can anyone besides Punky verify your whereabouts?"

"Uh, Chrissy and that other one, Diane or Denna or whoever. Lots of people were in the club, but I don't remember anyone by name." Simon rubbed his ear lob.

"What's Punky's real name?" Rich asked.

"I dunno."

"Excuse me?" Rich asked him with an incredulous tone. "You did drugs with him, worked with him, partied with him and you don't even know his name?"

Simon shook his head. "Just Punky. I think Chrissy called him Jeff once, maybe."

Rich continued to stare at Simon for a minute. "What about Chrissy?"

Simon shook his head. "Just Chrissy."

"Where does she live?"

"I dunno. I've only seen her at Punky's or the club."

Rich actually sighed. "Okay, where does this Punky live?"

"I dunno the exact address."

This time Viking sighed, again. "Simon, we need to verify your whereabouts so we can break open the police case against you. We can't do that if you aren't going to help us."

"I really don't remember the address," Simon said, lowering his head a little. "I, uh, I can give you directions."

Rich flipped his notebook to a clean page and put the pad and pen near Simon's hands. "Write them down."

Simon took the pen and diligently wrote for some time, stopping occasionally to look off in the distance as if trying to remember where he had gone.

Rich turned to me and rolled his eyes. I almost smiled at him. Simon was not making our job any easier.

Shortly, we finished up. Simon was escorted out of the room first, then we left. Viking shook his head at Rich when we were near his car.

"I know, Rich," Viking said with a grin. "I know. Just do your best. Keep me up to date with what you find out. We'll have another meeting before the first hearing."

"Did you want to get the towels and shirt tested?"

"Let me think on it over night. We couldn't have the results back by the first hearing anyway. I'll let you know tomorrow."

We waved as he pulled away. The jail wasn't far from the office. I turned to Rich as we walked. "What do you think?"

Rich shook his head. "I just hope that Tom didn't screw up the investigation."

"So, you think Simon did it?"

Rich shrugged. "I won't get the police file until tomorrow, after Viking gets it. We'll see."

"Simon lied," I said after a couple of seconds of silence.

"Yeah. He was doing something else in St. Louis, if he was even there."

I agreed with Rich. Simon either wasn't telling us something or had left a big chunk of time unaccounted for on purpose. "Where do we go from here?"

Rich opened the door to the office and held it for me. "Let me talk to John. He has a lot of contacts in the St. Louis area. He's going to head back down there to track Simon's whereabouts. I think tomorrow you should re-canvas the neighborhood."