

Shafted, or The Toastrack Enigma

an Edgar Rowdey Cape Cod Mystery

CJ Verburg

400 years after the "First Thanksgiving," a luncheon for leaders of Cape Cod's Wampanoag tribe and property developers GreenHome LLC ends in murder.



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Please note that the characters in this book are fictional: they do not represent real persons, and their statements and views may or may not be reliable.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: The Morning After

Chapter 2: Trouble

Chapter 3: Treasure

Chapter 4: Questions

Chapter 5: Inventory

Chapter 6: Ashes

Chapter 7: Hunting

Chapter 8: Mashpee

Chapter 9: Play Ball

Chapter 10: Sea Fare

Chapter 11: The Ketch

Chapter 12: Contrasts

Chapter 13: Incoming

Chapter 14: Reservations

Chapter 15: Enigma

Chapter 16: Toastrack

Chapter 17: Unraveling

Chapter 18: Sailing

Chapter 19: Water Sports

Chapter 20: At Sea

Chapter 21: Ashore

Chapter 22: Jetsam

Chapter 23: Landing

About the Author

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Chapter 1: The Morning After

“Come on, man.” Mudge jabbed his thumb at the men's room. “You made the mess, you clean it up.”

Tony Harrington blinked at him blearily from behind the cash register. His feet were wrapped tight around the rungs of his stool, as if it were a rodeo horse that might try to buck him off.

How old was this pest? Young enough to be his son. Too young to boss him around in his own dad's restaurant.

Old enough to drink? Stupid question. The kid's pulling in a paycheck. He's an Indian. This is Cape Cod. Of course he drinks.

So why can't he recognize a killer hangover?

Tony blinked again. *Go away, pest!* His eyes were having trouble focusing on Mudge's lean brown arms and white apron moving back and forth in front of him. He felt seasick, the pounding pain in his head churning up his stomach.

A window of horror opened in Tony's mind. He slammed it shut.

You're fine. No worries. You're fine. No worries.

“No worries,” he muttered. “S my place.”

That came out wrong. But Tony couldn't explain that if he tried to re-cross the twenty feet from here to the men's room, he'd fall over and crack his head, or heave his guts on the floor, or both.

A voice like a gunshot pierced his skull. “The hell it is. Last time I checked, sign out front said Leo's Back End. Your name Leo?”

Dinah, the cook. Tony didn't twist around toward the kitchen. Even when he hadn't recently polished off a fifth of 30-year-old Scotch, Dinah Rowan was an unsettling sight. Rolls of chin like a stack of inner tubes. Arms the size of a beef haunch. Beady little eyes peering out from her pink pillow of a face.

Shut up, fatso!

“You do look kinda like a Back End. Here. Drink this.” A ceramic mug landed on the counter with an ear-jarring clunk. “Then go clean up after yourself. Just 'cause you're the boss's son don't mean you can get away with murder.”

Tony jerked convulsively. He covered by reaching for the mug. Make her think it's the prospect of facing his dad that shook him.

So smug, these small-town hash-slingers. So sure they knew why screw-up Tony drank himself under the rug last night, ha ha! Dinah left before yesterday's meltdown, but Leo—who lived upstairs—would've heard all about it from Mudge and that punk chick Lydia.

So, yeah. When Leo came down in two hours, he'd be unbearable.

Only for once in his life Tony didn't care. Leo was a tiny drop in the shit-bucket of trouble he was already in.

If I could've just left well enough alone. Stuck with the plan. Oh, God in heaven, if I could just please God turn back the damn clock.

He chugged Dinah's concoction. It tasted like stewed rubber boots. If (as he expected) he lost his cookies again, he'd blame her. But after a few minutes his nausea ebbed. At the first break between customers, Tony staggered back to the men's room.

No worries. You're fine. No worries. You're fine.

Yeah, right.



Lydia Vivaldi fingered the second stud in her right earlobe. No surprise Tony spent last night getting shit-faced. The question was, how? Celebrating a deal with his new business partners, or drowning his sorrows alone?

She hoped the luncheon he'd hosted here yesterday had paid off. If GreenHome LLC hired Harrington Associates, that would be a coup the whole Back End could celebrate. Tony could quit griping to anyone who'd listen about wasting his talents in a greasy spoon at the back end of nowhere. Leo could quit griping at Tony about ingratitude. Dinah could quit yelling at both of them to shut up. Lydia wouldn't have to dodge Tony's playful hands when she passed the register. And Mudge could take back his favorite job of ringing up customers, honking the horn when someone dropped change in the tip pot and clanging the bell for folding green.

Not to mention, if Harrington Associates landed a paying client, Tony couldn't weasel out of paying the balance he owed Lydia and Mudge's catering start-up, the Flying Wedge.

They'd given him a gourmet feast on a fast-food budget: the chowder thick with clams, the salads crisp and fresh, all three kinds of sandwiches devoured down to the crumbs. Mudge's warm-from-the-oven Rowdeyberry Tarte melted ice cream without burning anyone's mouth. Rosalie Gerber—daughter of GreenHome CEO Brad Gerber—actually grabbed Mudge's arm to thank him for his brilliant cranberry-corn muffins.

Tony hadn't thanked anybody for anything. His party had started dispersing before Lydia realized they were through with their coffee. She didn't expect Tony to hang around and give her and Mudge a full report, but how about some appreciation? He didn't even thank his dad, Dinah said, although this was the first time in history Leo ever let anybody use his restaurant for a private party.

She'd wondered about that just now, riding her bike down the long driveway from Main Street and across the Back End parking lot. Did Tony hold a grudge because customers kept asking how much longer he'd be sitting in for Mudge as Leo's cashier? He always laughed it off—*summer rush can't last forever!* Still, Lydia could see it galled him. Tony was an attractive, personable guy—curly dark hair, blue eyes, tanned and toned from daily runs on the shoreline path, always joking with the kids and old ladies—but Mudge was half his age and twice as hot.

That didn't stop Tony from flirting with every woman who walked through the door. Lydia braced herself as she took her apron off its hook. If he'd pulled off his deal yesterday, he'd hustle over and bear-pounce: wrap her in a hug, smother her with promises of more gigs for the Flying Wedge. If he hadn't, he would badger-pounce: *Why was Harriet Benbow looking for you in the kitchen? Did Mudge hear anything from the Wampanoags? What did Rosalie Gerber want besides muffins?*

Lydia had resolved not to open any of those cans of worms. Now she wouldn't have to. Tony was in no shape to pounce on anybody.

"Hey." Mudge rounded the corner with a tray on his shoulder. "The Flying Wedge rules!"

"Hey." Lydia pumped a fist and nodded at the men's room. "Did you get that from the horse's mouth? Along with a fat roll of cash, by any chance?"

"No roll of cash. I got that from my cousins. Mr. T's doing the other end of the horse."

"He swore yesterday, full payment before the bank closes at noon. He better not even think about stiffing us."

"No worries." Mudge flashed his trademark grin. "We've got the whole Mashpee Wampanoag tribe on our side."

They delivered breakfasts to tables and headed back to the kitchen. *I am so lucky to know you, Kevin Mudjekeewis Miles*, Lydia thought, *before the outside world discovers you and you leave this place in the dust.*

"So what did your cousins say?" she asked him.

"I didn't see Carl. Red Otter said we're genius. He wants me to open a restaurant in Mashpee. I said, Sure. We'll call it No Reservations."

Lydia chuckled. Good they could still joke about the federal government's vacillations over the Wampanoags' legal status. That had started long before she arrived in Quansett—400 years ago, in fact, when the Pilgrims landed on Cape Cod. Carl must be the smooth but edgy one of yesterday's pair, the tribal executive. She couldn't remember his title or last name. His silent partner she remembered vividly. Chief Red Otter's silver-streaked black hair hung in a braid down his back from a spray of eagle feathers. His burly chest had been bare except for a fringed buckskin vest and a shell-and-bead necklace. When he and Carl stopped by the kitchen to greet Mudge, Lydia had noticed a tomahawk hanging from his belt.

Trust Harriet Benbow to seat herself next to the Indian chief.

No. You are not thinking about Harriet Benbow.

Because Harriet didn't belong in the picturesque village of Quansett. She was an alien invader from a planet Lydia Vivaldi had left behind almost four months ago, when she crossed the Sagamore Bridge and became a soup-chef and all-purpose staffer at Leo's Back End.

It wasn't until Harriet started talking yesterday that Lydia had recognized her. The lady with round sunglasses, masses of dark curls,

and a flowered Lilly Pulitzer sundress who'd breezed through the door with Tony didn't ring any bells. But that voice! All the way from the back room it jolted her: a confident yet intimate mezzo soprano hinting that she was the one person in the world you could trust to share your secrets.

Tony had kicked off his business luncheon with an unexpectedly charming speech about choosing a homey setting instead of some trendy but sterile spot that clashed with the spirit of their collaboration. What collaboration? Something about real estate. For the first few minutes Lydia had tried to eavesdrop (*what the hell is she doing here?*), but that ended when lunch got under way.

She'd stayed out of sight as best she could. It didn't work. When Mudge went around the table filling coffee cups, she heard Harriet's voice in the kitchen doorway: "Liz Valentine, isn't it?"

She looked up. Giant poppies and white teeth blocked the only exit.

"Nope. Sorry."

"From Cambridge. One of my groups. I'm quicker with faces than names, I'm afraid."

"Lydia Vivaldi. I live here in Quansett."

Harriet's smile didn't falter. "Well, it's good to see you, Lydia. You look wonderful. And your cooking, oh my God! Congratulations."

"Thanks."

That was that. Lydia's hands hadn't stopped shaking for several minutes, but it didn't matter, with everything pretty much done except clean-up.

Leo had popped his head in after Tony and his guests departed. Lydia told him Mudge needed to leave for his other job, but she could wait around for Tony. Leo said no need, clapped them both on the back, said he'd see them tomorrow, and handed them each a twenty-dollar bill.

Lydia was so exhausted by the time she climbed into her loft bed that she slept for ten hours.

Judging from his bloodshot eyes and zombie grimace, Tony didn't.



“Hey, Kev,” said Mudge, stacking plates on the counter.

“Hey, Kev,” said Officer Kevin Kelly. He deposited his stocky self on a formica-and-chrome stool and his hat on another.

A day when Officer Kelly didn’t get his coffee break until 11:25 was a day to hope you had no outstanding traffic violations. His scowl sent Lydia retreating to the soup tureens.

Dinah claimed it was Mudge's fault that Quansett’s local cop hung out at Leo’s. Though the two Kevins had known each other in high school, they'd run with different crowds. No one guessed back then that Kevin Kelly would go into law enforcement. And until Kevin Miles started using his middle name and working at the Back End, no one guessed that (a) he had a gift for pastry, or (b) his apple-ginger coffeecake would hook Kevin Kelly.

Dinah slid over a mug of coffee. She'd seen that scowl.

Mudge set down a spicy golden-brown cube topped with streusel. ““Sup, Kev?””

“Suspicious death.” Kevin Kelly chomped off a chunk.

The kitchen went still. After five seconds Leo sidled out from the grill, gaunt and white-haired in his splotched white apron. He asked “What happened?” just as Dinah asked, “Anybody we know?”

Kevin Kelly mumbled: “Under investigation.”

One of the other coffee-drinkers at the counter spoke up. “That don’t sound good.”

Another regular asked, “Where’s this at?”

“SailPort Landing.”

Glances rippled around the room. SailPort Landing was the new condo development going up on Fishhook Point. By next summer it was meant to be a gated waterfront community, but right now it consisted of three model townhouses overlooking a salt marsh. The only move-ins had been a truckload of saplings, each with an ID tag stating its intended location and affirming it was personally selected by the project’s landscape architect.

“Who’s dead?” Leo asked.

“Can’t tell you.”

“Who found the body?” asked Dinah.

“Realtor.” Kevin Kelly chewed and slurped. “Goes in to show the place, trips over the victim.”

Questions were coming from all directions now. Victim: did that mean this was a murder? When did it happen? Was it in one of the townhouses? Where was the body now? Who was handling the investigation?

Lydia, watching him gobble his coffeecake, asked, “What did you see?”

“Blood.” Officer Kelly grimaced. “A lot of blood.”



Chapter 2: Trouble

Four miles away, Louise French stood at the kitchen sink in a model townhome at SailPort Landing scrubbing her shoes.

Didn't some character do this in a play? *Out out damn spot.* Or, no. That was hands. Louise's hands were next in line for a stiff antibacterial scrub. Soon as she got the damn blood off her Manolo Blahniks.

The agents' tour was down the toilet, obviously. Her assistant had given everyone a quick look at the other two units, but how much could she accomplish with Emergency Rescue due any minute?

Thank God these were her colleagues and not clients.

Showing to prospective buyers, Louise preferred to wait in her car. Walk them up to the front door and stand back so they could enter first. *It's their dream home you want them stepping into, not yours,* she'd explained to the officer who answered her call. He didn't get it—didn't listen, really. What does a twenty-something beat cop know or care about real estate? The tactics, the shoes, the Mercedes convertible. In her job, first impressions were make-or-break. In his job, she supposed they were usually a smokescreen.

Trouble. That's what had hit Louise like a sledgehammer at Two Harbor Lane. Not *bloody dead person on floor.* By the time her brain caught up with her reflexes, she'd been inches from stepping on the deceased.

Behind her, through the open front door, she could see the first arrivals parking their cars, walking toward the slate-paved path. Quick, call 9-1-1. State her name, the address. Then hurry down the driveway with a smile and a wave: *Welcome to SailPort Landing! Sorry, last-minute glitch, can't get into the Ketch right now, but you'll love the Yawl and the Sloop.*

Her assistant had taken over as tour guide. Louise retreated inside, locked the door, sent an urgent text, and prayed (successfully) that everybody would leave before sirens came roaring through the gate.

Thank God the media hadn't followed them. Yet.

She'd glanced only one more time at the nightmare in the hall. As soon as the last car drove away, she hurried across the lawn to the Yawl,

on tiptoes so her heels wouldn't sink into the sod. She had to get out of here. Erase the image in her head. Catch her breath before the police arrived full of questions.

What she should do was call Brad Gerber.

And her office. Louise French was legendary for turning lemons into lemonade, but there were rules about disclosure, not to mention a hyperactive local grapevine, and no way was she going to list a home where someone had just met a violent death.

"Just" and "violent" being the problem. In a village as old as Quansett, ghosts came with the territory. Louise had once sold a sagging sea captain's mansion for 20K over asking to a pair of historians eager to share it with the widow who walked under the full moon.

But Two Harbor Lane was no antique. It was a brand-new townhome with stainless steel appliances, granite countertops, and an eco-friendly bamboo floor which almost certainly would have to be replaced.

"Louise."

Walking toward her was Exmouth Police Detective Pete Altman.

"Pete. Thanks for coming over." This might be OK. Louise had sold Pete and Jenna Altman their house as newlyweds. Now it was worth three times what they'd paid for it.

"Thank you for the heads-up. How you doing?"

"I'm OK." Louise smiled up at him, small but brave in her stocking feet, wiping a spike heel with a dishtowel. "Not sure about these."

"I'm so sorry. CIO's still in there," Pete tilted his shaggy salt-and-pepper head toward the Ketch, "photographing and so forth. I'm afraid it'll be off limits for a while yet. You found her, is that right?"

She nodded. "Is she . . .?"

"Yeah. Beyond help. Nothing you could have done."

"How did it happen?"

"That I can't tell you. The medical examiner's on his way."

Louise put on her shoes. Pete steered her through a sliding glass door onto the deck.

"You knew her, did you? The deceased?"

Louise's insides froze up. She nodded, but she couldn't speak.

Pete went back inside for a glass of water. They rested their elbows on the wooden railing, side by side, looking out past the narrow fringe of woods to the salt marsh below which linked the SailPort Landing site with Fishhook Cove and Cape Cod Bay. Louise kept her eyes off the deck next door, draped in yellow crime-scene tape.

"Pete, do you think— Who could have done that? I know, you can't tell me. But . . ." She shuddered. "Like an animal attack."

"Try and put it out of your mind, OK? Help me with the facts. Was this lady a friend of yours?"

After a sip of water Louise answered, "She was a business acquaintance. Harriet Benbow. She—oh dear. She worked for GreenHome LLC. I really should call Brad Gerber."

"And she was on the property to do what?" Pete gazed down at the marsh, green and gold and russet in the September sun.

"I don't know. I suppose . . . This is a difficult weekend for them. Brad and Rosalie. His daughter. They're hosting a memorial service tomorrow for his late wife, Lanie, Rosalie's mom. I suppose Harriet probably came by to check on the townhomes."

"She didn't live here?"

"No. Nobody lives here. These are three model condos they offer to prospective SailPort Landing buyers. We're in the Yawl. That one is the Ketch, and the smaller one next door is the Sloop."

"Who is Brad Gerber?"

"The CEO of GreenHome. The project developer? You'd recognize him—big blond guy. Golfs every Thursday at the Yacht Club. Harriet was his business manager. She started out as Lanie's assistant when her cancer came back. So sad! I've known them forever. Lanie and Brad and little Rosalie. Not so little anymore. Anyhow. After Lanie passed, Brad told me GreenHome might rethink SailPort Landing. In fact it was Harriet Benbow who said Brad wanted to explore the option of selling off the three model townhomes."

"So you came over to show them to a buyer?"

"Oh, no. This was an agents' preview. I offered to bring in some of the top producers from our sister offices, get their reaction." At Pete's

inquiring look, Louise explained: “SailPort Landing was planned as twenty-eight units: nine groups of three, like this one, and a clubhouse. GreenHome's had the land for ages. But when values shot up, so did wetlands restrictions. Lanie was sure once they got these first three units through, the rest would follow. Brad wasn't convinced. I think he hung on through all the legal wrangling mostly for her sake. Now she's gone . . .”

“Can't beat the location.” Pete shaded his eyes to peer through the glass door. “Alarm system?”

“Oh yes. Automatic lighting, and CCTV, and you saw the gate out front.”

“So nobody should have been in there.” He faced her. “What about this unit here and the other one?”

“Also empty. With the open house, naturally we checked them all top to bottom.”

“You call this empty?” He waved a hand. “Electricity, water—?”

“You can't show a home without lights, Pete. Or running water. Believe me.”

“But, furniture? Pictures on the wall? Towels in the bathroom? Pots and pans on the stove?”

“Staging. Buyers respond best if it looks cozy but classy. You know? Walk right into your perfect new life.”

“Sounds like Goldilocks.”

That brought back Louise's smile. “If Goldilocks read *House and Garden*.”

“Any idea how Harriet Benbow got in?”

“There's a key in the lock-box on each front door. She'd just punch in the passcode.”

“Do you have the passcode?”

“Sure.” Louise repeated what she'd told the officer who was first on the scene. “What I do is, I always ring the bell first, even if I know it's empty. Open the lock-box, take out the key, unlock the door. ‘Hello?’ It was dark inside after the bright sun, so I didn't see— I could only see there was a shape on the floor. Until . . .”

She stopped. Pete Altman waited.

“You think your eyes are playing tricks. I didn’t scream or anything. I thought, Omigod, there’s people right behind me. So I called 9-1-1, and my assistant: *Get over here quick!* I was pretty sure, you know, what you said. She was beyond help. I didn’t try— I went back out, locked the door, and sent everybody to see the other two units.” She looked up at Pete. “I need to call Brad Gerber.”

“Leave that to me.” He patted her shoulder. “You done good, Louise.”

“They always say, don’t touch anything.” She gave her head a vigorous toss as if to shake out the memory.

“That’s right,” said Pete. “One last question. You’ve been in that townhouse before? When was the last time you went upstairs?”

“Oh, gosh. We finished the staging around ten days ago, and then the cleaners . . . Earlier this week. Wednesday? Tuesday? I like to check personally before anyone else sees it. Upstairs, downstairs— It’s a funny thing. Women always want to start with the bedrooms, and men want to start with the basement. Why do you ask?”

Pete Altman's phone pinged. "Excuse me." He looked at the screen; pressed a key. “The medical examiner’s here.” He ushered her back inside, through the open living area and out the front door. “Thanks, Louise. You take care now.”

She waved goodbye from her car. Altman walked across the freshly sodded lawn to meet the van and see if the Criminal Identification Officers could answer his next question: *Who’s been sleeping in Papa Bear’s bed?*



Chapter 3: Treasure

The sight of Officer Kevin Kelly having coffee at the counter jolted Tony out of his stupor. Lydia seized her chance to liberate the Flying Wedge's balance due. She ran up Main Street, cash in hand, just before the Congregational Church's bells struck twelve: closing time for the bank, starting time for the Back End's noon rush. Almost time for her favorite customer to arrive.

Off Cape, Edgar Rowdey was renowned as the probably British, probably dead, definitely weird author of creepy little black-and-white storybooks. To Quansett he was a kind-hearted old eccentric. Lydia lived in his guest cottage, and she could testify that while Edgar's heart was kind, and his thin frame and white beard bore a slight resemblance to George Bernard Shaw's, he was neither British nor dead. His chief weirdnesses, as she saw it, were: A, he was a bona fide genius; B, yet he'd quit Manhattan for this sleepy seaside village; and C, he ate nearly all his breakfasts and lunches at Leo's Back End.

Usually Edgar Rowdey greeted whoever was up front, moseyed over to check the Speshuls taped to the wall, wrote his order on a slip, and then meandered off to his table in the back room with a paperback book. Today he halted at the cash register.

"I've been yard-saling!" he caroled.

Tony winced.

Edgar placed a small shopping bag fussily on the counter.

Leo glowered at him from the kitchen. "What the fork is that?"

He'd just lectured his staff about language: Tony at the register, Dinah at the grill, Lydia and Mudge delivering orders, and Bruno, who didn't speak English, loading the dishwasher. *No more gol-darn cussing! This is a family restaurant, dang it!*

Dinah, the chief offender, snorted and went on flipping burgers. As the Back End's cook, she was irreplaceable. They all were, really, given Leo's pay scale. The true purpose of these rants was to entertain the customers. *You don't come here for the food*, Lydia had been told on her first visit. Four months later, she'd grown to enjoy the snarky banter that drew in enough tourists as well as locals to keep this place afloat.

Leo edged out past Officer Kelly, who'd ordered a sandwich to go when he realized he might not get another break anytime soon. Edgar made a show of hunching over his shopping bag, as if to defend it from attack.

"You gonna pull out a rabbit out of there?" Leo challenged. "You see the sign up front? No animals in a food-service facility!"

"It's a service rabbit," someone quipped.

A fist thumped the counter. "Show me the bunny!"

Edgar reached into the bag. Lydia held her breath. *Oh God please not a kitten!* Everyone in Quansett knew that Edgar Rowdey never turned away a homeless cat. Last time she'd checked, the feline count in his rambling old house was five.

"Today's Sheshul, fricaseed hare!" someone called.

Out of a crumpled-newspaper nest came an object the size of a football. No mewing; no struggle. *Thank you God!* He peeled back the comics section and held up his prize.

"I repeat," said Leo. "What the fork is that?"

Edgar lifted a disdainful eyebrow. "Isn't it obvious?"

Dinah made a sound between a grunt and a chuckle.

"Oh, sure. An Early American Obvious. I'll tell you something, old coot. You been watching too much Antiques Road Show."

Lydia sidled in closer. Edgar's new treasure was round on top and flat on the bottom, maybe six inches long and five inches tall. Five parallel silver hoops arched like barrel staves over a rectangular base. Topping the middle hoop was a two-inch handle shaped like the outline of a spade in a deck of cards.

"It's a rack for file folders, right?" said Officer Kelly. "Goes on your desk."

"If you're thinking I'd put order slips in there, think again," Leo said. "They'd fall right out."

Edgar Rowdey heaved a martyr's sigh.

"That pointy loop on top looks like a bottle-opener," Mudge offered.

Another sigh from Edgar.

“Oh, for fork’s sake,” said Lydia. “It’s a toaster! What the fudge kind of a breakfast joint is this? It’s gorgeous, Edgar. Art Deco, right? Did you seriously find that at a yard sale?”

He beamed at her.

“A toast rack?” Dinah didn’t believe it.

“They’re big in England,” said Lydia. “Your toast goes in the slots, and they carry it to your table by the pointy handle. To make sure your toast will be stone cold when you butter it.”

“That’s why they invented English muffins?” Mudge turned over the toaster curiously.

“Now, of course you’re all wondering—”

Edgar halted in mid-sentence. Lydia felt the whole front room stiffen, as if a skunk had wandered into a family picnic.

Officer Kevin Kelly spoke. “Sir. I’m just getting a sandwich.”

On this hot Saturday afternoon, Exmouth Police Detective Pete Altman looked more like a golfer than a cop: plaid short-sleeve shirt, khaki pants, beat-up running shoes. He wasn’t even wearing his usual jacket and concealed shoulder holster.

“Good afternoon, detective.” Leo wiped a hand on his apron to shake. “What can we do for you?”

“Leo. How’s it going?”

Edgar carried his toaster to the fireplace and cleared a space for it among the knickknacks on the mantelpiece. With a nod to Altman, he withdrew to the order-slips podium.

“Mind if I ask you and your staff a few questions?”

“What for?” Leo shot back. “Somebody dead?”

“About a private party you had in here yesterday.”

Lydia glanced at the cash register. Tony was gone.

“In case you didn’t notice, my staff is busy serving our distinguished clientele.”

“Well, here’s the thing. This is meant to be my afternoon off, and I promised my grandkids I’d take ‘em to the Ospreys game.”

Leo’s mouth twisted. “We offer a discount to members of local law-enforcement, if you’re hungry.”

Pete Altman took the stool at the counter beside Officer Kelly, who whisked away his hat just in time.

Mudge caught Lydia's eye. She tilted her head at the register and raised an eyebrow. Mudge nodded, set down his tray, and sauntered toward the men's room.

Dinah ambled over from the grill. "Hey, Pete. What'll it be?"

"How about a piece of your best pie?"

"You're in luck. I got one slice left of Rowdeyberry Tarte."

She brought it topped with whipped cream and accompanied by a mug of coffee. There was a suspenseful silence while Detective Altman ate. Then he continued to Dinah: "This private lunch yesterday. Did you cook for that?"

"No sirree. My afternoon off? You won't catch me hanging around here."

"So who fed them? Leo?"

"Ask Leo."

Lydia handed Officer Kelly a brown bag. "Mudge and I did," she told the detective. "We want to start a catering service."

They'd agreed that until they got around to the paperwork—licenses, insurance, regulations—the Flying Wedge would operate on a need-to-know basis.

"Aha. And where is Mudge?"

He emerged from the men's room, smiling and wary. A flick of an eyebrow told Lydia he hadn't found Tony.

"Hey, detective."

Although the desserts he created for the Back End were buffing up his reputation, Mudge's colorful youth had included several clashes with the police. He was still—as Leo's youngest and darkest employee—a cop magnet.

Pete Altman pointed his fork at the soft peaks of cream melting into purple berries and crumbling chunks of crust. "This is— Amazing. You made this?"

"Yeah." Mudge visibly relaxed.

"So," Leo cut in, "who's dead?"

