

A Home Crafting Mystery

Lye in Wait

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MIDNIGHT INK
WOODBURY, MINNESOTA



ONE

THAT THURSDAY MORNING HAD been going so well until I found the local handyman dead on my workroom floor. Walter lay on his back, twisted to one side. His right hand was pressed to his throat. The left clenched the chambray work shirt in front of his heart. Streaks of moisture along the cuffs and in uneven splotches down the front darkened the blue of the shirt's fabric. I recognized the signature yellow suspenders first, then the gray hair pulled back into a ponytail.

Staring down at the ruin of his face, I covered my mouth with one hand. His eyes were squeezed shut and his lips drawn back in a horrific grimace. The interior of his open mouth was inflamed and raw. His teeth, now a disturbing shade of dark gray, jutted from what remained of his gums, and angry blisters welled on his chin and jaw.

My gaze shifted to the open doorway, to where the sun had finally pried its way through the clots of gray sludge above. The Japanese maple in our backyard blazed incandescent orange

against the evergreens along the neighbor's cedar fence. A chickadee called through October air so crisp it would have crunched if you bit into it...

Then I remembered to breathe. A long, shuddering inhalation, and the oxygen hit my brain. Practicality surfaced through my horror, and I spun and ran up the interior stairs to the main part of the house. Through the kitchen and the foyer to Meghan's massage room, where I burst in without thinking. Thank God her client was still dressed. Meghan's eyes widened.

"Call 911," I said.

She dropped an armful of white towels onto the massage table. "What happened?"

"Walter's dead in the basement. Call 911."

She nodded and went through to her office for the phone. As she called out to the client that she'd have to reschedule, I turned and ran back downstairs. I'd never been more grateful for Meghan's no-nonsense approach to things than I was at that moment.

Back in my workroom, I leaned against a counter and looked around at anything except the body on the floor. The spacious thirty-five-by-forty-foot room had been plumbed and heated when Meghan and her husband—now ex-husband—bought the house. I'd hired Walter to install plasterboard, two rows of track lighting, a few appliances, and several work surfaces. He'd made it into the perfect place to produce the soap and other items I market under the name Winding Road Bath Products.

A glass lay on its side at the edge of the braided rag rug in front of the sink, an oblong splatter of liquid extending out onto the bare concrete. The room smelled of the rosemary and peppermint essential oils I'd used to make a foot scrub the previous afternoon,

but another odor rode the air, far more subtle and so familiar it didn't seem out of place until I realized what it was: sodium hydroxide. Lye. I used it to make soap, but I hadn't mixed any batches of cold-process soap for over a week.

With a growing sense of dismay, I tiptoed to the glass and the spill on the floor and crouched beside them. Then, like an idiot, I stuck my finger in the liquid. The slick consistency was instantly familiar, and I hurried to the sink to rinse it off even as my skin began burning. I had to step over Walter to reach the faucet. My hands were shaking. No wonder his mouth looked like that. Leaning over the sink, I gulped air and tried to quell my rising stomach contents.

"The paramedics are on the way," Meghan said from the doorway. "Poor Walter...hey, are you okay?"

I turned from the sink and tried to nod. Meghan started toward me, then faltered as her gaze dropped to the form on the floor.

"Oh God, Sophie Mae. What the..." She looked up at me. "What happened to his face?"

"He..." I swallowed. "I think he drank lye."

"Holy shit." Her voice was low, almost a whisper.

We heard a thump and the doorbell rang upstairs. Brodie, Meghan's old corgi, let out a series of sharp barks from the top of the stairs, and my housemate went up to answer the door.

Two uniformed EMTs, a woman and a man, clumped down the narrow wooden stairs and hurried to the prone figure. Meghan followed behind them, stopping on the bottom step to watch from the doorway. Kneeling beside him, the paramedics blocked my view of Walter's head and torso. I heard them mutter to one another in low voices, and moments later they stood up, shaking

their heads. The man took a walkie-talkie phone from his belt and stepped out into the backyard. Through the window I saw two firemen talking in the alley.

The woman told me in a gentle voice they couldn't do anything to help Walter—not much of a news flash, but her kindness brought a sudden lump to my throat.

The other paramedic returned. “They’re on their way.”

“Who?” I asked.

“Police.”

“Oh.” And for the next five minutes we stood in awkward silence, waiting for whatever would come next.

TWO

THE DOORBELL RANG AGAIN and Meghan went upstairs. She returned with a uniformed officer in tow. He looked about fourteen years old, though he must have been at least in his twenties. Nice looking, with hair the color of sand and wide blue eyes that grew wider when one of the EMTs said it looked like Walter had died from something he ingested.

No kidding.

I imagined how the lye would have felt going down: nothing, then the fierce burn, the realization of having made a terrible, utterly irrevocable mistake.

I started to tell the officer about the lye, but he waved me off and pulled his phone from his heavy belt, murmuring into it as he walked through the open door to the backyard, just as the paramedic had.

The EMTs went back upstairs, and I heard Brodie's muffled barking; Meghan had shut him in the laundry room, away from all the comings and goings. She still wore her work clothes—loose

yoga pants paired with a soft pastel T-shirt. We sat down on the third step, where the wall and the corner of a counter blocked the body except for Walter's work boots pointing toward the ceiling. "Turning up your toes" had been my grandmother's euphemism for dying, and when it popped into my head I had to fight down the sick giggle that threatened to erupt. Instead my stomach rumbled, and the urge toward inappropriate laughter turned to consternation. Even under these circumstances, my body still insisted I'd skipped breakfast and owed it an early lunch.

The sandy-haired cop came back in but hovered near the back door, looking as though he'd rather be almost anywhere else. I couldn't really blame him.

The EMTs must have let in the next arrivals. We heard them coming down from above and moved off the narrow stairs so they could enter the room. First came a tall, thin, balding man who looked like an undertaker, but wore the same dark blue uniform as Sandy Hair. He introduced himself as Sergeant Zahn. Behind him came another man, wearing jeans and a maroon, collared shirt under a sweater the color of fall chestnuts. Sawdust clung to the elbow of the sweater. His dark hair had begun to gray at the temples, and his brown eyes moved around the room, lingering for a moment as something snagged his interest, then flicking to the next detail.

Looking relieved, the young officer hurried over to them. The three men talked for a minute, then Sandy Hair went upstairs. I'd been able to identify the paramedics, the firemen, and the police by their uniforms. Who was the guy wearing jeans?

"Ladies," Sergeant Zahn said, "I'm very sorry for your loss." It sounded like patter right out of a TV crime drama, and I could tell

he was really thinking about something else. “We need for you to move upstairs while we process this room. Detective Ambrose here will need to ask you some questions.”

Ah. Detective Ambrose.

Sergeant Zahn went outside and took out yet another cell phone. Meghan moved back to the bottom of the stairway, but I shifted closer to the spatter of lye on the floor, guarding it from the feet of the emergency personnel. Detective Ambrose looked around the room again, his gaze methodical, his attention pausing for several seconds on Walter, on the glass lying on the floor, and then on my face.

He raised his eyebrows, and I thought he was going to chastise me for not hopping to obey the sergeant’s orders.

But instead he said, “You found him?”

“Yes.”

“And you are?”

“Sophie Mae Reynolds.

“You live here?”

I nodded.

Ambrose waved toward Walter. “What about him?”

“What...Did he live here? No. Across the alley, in that little cottage.” I pointed. “Walter is—was—our local handyman, fix-it guy, whatever you want to call it. He was going to build a new raised bed for our vegetable garden this morning.”

He walked over and gazed down at the body. “Poor bastard,” he said. His brow furrowed and he bent to take a closer look at Walter’s face. “If you could go ahead and wait upstairs, Ms. Reynolds, I’ll be there in a moment. I’d like to take you over to the station in order to get a proper statement.”

“I just wanted to tell you to be careful where you step,” I said.
“This spill’s caustic.”

Ambrose straightened. “What is it?”

“It’s sodium hydroxide,” I said.

“Sodium hydroxide.”

“Lye.”

“Lye? Why would...” he trailed off, looking back down at Walter.

“I don’t know. I mean, I think it’s there on the floor because he drank it and then dropped the glass, but I don’t know why he’d do that. Drink it, I mean. I can see why he’d drop the glass, of course.” I closed my mouth to stop my babbling.

“How do you know it’s lye?”

“By the smell. And I stuck my finger in it.”

He raised one eyebrow.

“I know, I know. Stupid,” I said. “But I was a little rattled. Anyway, it’s slick, definitely alkaline. And has that flat, almost sweetish smell. It’s quite distinctive.”

Ambrose leaned over the stain. “All I smell is something minty.”

“Peppermint.” I leaned forward, too. Sniffed. The peppermint scent *was* coming from the pool on the floor. “But I can smell the lye, too.”

He straightened. “Not many people’d be able to peg lye by the texture and smell.”

I let that hang.

“Any idea where the stuff came from?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Can’t be mine.”

“You don’t keep any on hand to clear sink clogs?” His tone was mild, but he never blinked and his eyes never left my face.

“Um, not for that, no,” I said, flustered. Behind me I heard Meghan make a noise in her throat.

The skin seemed to tighten across Ambrose’s features. “Meaning...?”

“Well, I use lye, yes. But,” I said, pointing to the liquid on the floor, “that’s not mine. Or at least I didn’t mix it up.” I stopped and took a deep breath. “Look, I keep lye here. Plenty of it, but I haven’t needed any for a week or so. I don’t see how the lye Walter drank could have come from my supply.”

“Your supply.”

“Yes.”

He sighed. “Ms. Reynolds, perhaps you would indulge me with an explanation of just why you have ‘plenty of lye’ on the premises.”

“Oh. I guess I haven’t been very clear, have I? I use sodium hydroxide to make cold-process soap, which is a large part of my handmade toiletry business. You mix the granules with water to activate the lye, then combine it with oils at certain temperatures. The resulting chemical reaction produces soap.” I just managed to stop myself before I began spewing information about saponification and superfatting.

A displeased expression settled on Detective Ambrose’s face. “Show me where you keep it.”

“Sure.” I went to a lower cupboard beside the refrigerator, knelt in front of it, and reached for the combination lock.

“Wait.” He squatted next to me. Up close, his sweater smelled of fresh-cut wood. Pulling on a pair of rubber gloves, he asked, “What’s the combination?”

Staring at his hands, my mind went blank.

“Ms. Reynolds?”

I blinked and my brain came back online. I gave him the numbers and carefully he spun the dial forward, back, forward again, slid the lock off the hasp, and opened the door. Inside sat two five-gallon buckets of sodium hydroxide granules with snap-on lids and skull-and-crossbones labels. Several empty gallon jugs sat on a shelf above, each of which had a rough skull and crossbones drawn on with permanent marker and the word POISON in bold red ink.

Detective Ambrose stood. “So what are the plastic jugs for?”

“When I’m going to be making a lot of soap—and when I make soap, I make a lot at a time—it’s expedient to mix up all the lye I’ll need at once. It doesn’t react with plastic, so these work well for storing it. I always keep the solid sodium hydroxide in here—and the liquid lye once it’s mixed. I’m careful about keeping the lock on.”

He crossed his arms over his chest.

Meghan spoke from where she waited by the stairs. “She’s very careful with the chemicals, Detective. I have a ten-year-old daughter, and Sophie Mae would never do anything to endanger her.”

I flashed her a grateful glance.

“And you are?” Detective Ambrose turned to face her.

“Meghan Bly. I own this house.” Her voice trembled at little at the end.

“I see.” He turned back to me.

“So how would...Walter, right?...How would Walter get access to your lye? Did he know the combination?”

I frowned. “No. I never told him. Never needed to.”

Ambrose looked skeptical. “And that’s all of it there in the cupboard? You don’t have it anywhere else, maybe in liquid form?”

I shook my head.

“You know, Ms. Reynolds, anyone can make a mistake.”

“That is *not* my lye.”

He stood watching me and, as I felt the flush creep up my face, I cursed the Scandinavian complexion that showed my every emotion.

“So despite the fact you have literally buckets full of lye here in this room, and a man lies dead on the floor apparently from drinking lye, you don’t think there’s a connection?”

“I don’t—”

“A man, who, I might add, doesn’t even live here? Who could have accessed the lye without your knowledge?”

“I never told him the combination. Not even the girl who works for me can get into that cupboard if I don’t open the lock for her.” I paused, realizing what Ambrose had just said.

Since stumbling upon Walter, my thoughts had been focused in a tight beam, concerned only with tamping down my visceral reaction so I could concentrate on the practical details of how to deal with a dead body in my workroom. Now it occurred to me to wonder why he’d taken a swig of lye in the first place.

“Wait a minute. He...he did it on purpose?” I rubbed my hand over my face. “Oh, God. He...of course...he committed—” But I couldn’t say it, struggling to swallow away the dread that settled into my chest just from thinking the word.

Ambrose's gaze held mine in an almost physical grip. A few beats while no one spoke, and finally he looked away. But before he did, something gentle—sympathy? kindness?—passed through his eyes. I tried not to be obvious as I let out my breath.

He put the combination lock in a plastic bag. "I'll be happy to drive you to the station for that statement."

Meghan said, "We'll drive right over, after we freshen up and get our nerves under control. Say, in half an hour?"

Ambrose didn't look happy but agreed. In Meghan's former life she'd been a lawyer—technically she could still practice—so I guessed we were within our rights. And the ugly truth was that Walter's death, besides being horrifying and sad, could present legal issues since he'd died in her house.

I wondered if I could somehow prove he hadn't used my lye to kill himself.

Zahn came back in, and Ambrose turned toward him. Meghan started up the stairs, but I just stood there, looking at our handyman still lying on the cold concrete, and hated myself and pretty much everyone else for having to think about liability at a time like this. I'd liked Walter Hanover a lot. He'd been a fixture in the neighborhood for years and had been a great help to Meghan, her daughter, and me. He lived across the alley in the former guesthouse for the larger house facing the street behind ours. A gentle soul, he worked hard and always had a cheerful word for everyone. Whatever despair had driven him to deliberately choose such a horrible death must have been grim indeed.

My eyes felt hot. I blinked, hard.

Freshen up, Meghan had said. Not a bad idea, come to think of it. A splash of cold water on my face and a splash of Scotch down

my gullet. Or perhaps better to wait on the latter until after I'd given my statement. I trudged upstairs to find a cold-water spigot and talk to my housemate before heading over to the Cadyville Police Station.

Below, I heard Zahn say, "For God's sake, Ambrose. I don't care if it is your day off—go home and change. Makes the department look bad."

As I walked through the door to the kitchen, Brodie's vigorous displeasure at being shut away from the excitement drowned the detective's response.