

TWO

Emily Bradford, board secretary and head of the gift shop for the Lighthouse Cove Historical Society and Museum, woke up the next morning at about 5 a.m. and couldn't fall back asleep. It was mid-November and still dark, but she decided she'd get dressed and head out early to get some work done before the board meeting started at 9 a.m.

A former professor of creative writing at the University of Rochester, the 48-year-old had taken an early retirement three years ago and relocated to the quaint historic village on the shores of Lake Ontario, hoping the breathtaking scenery and quiet lifestyle would inspire her to create her own literary works rather than teaching others how to do it. She was making progress, and had just signed a deal with a publisher for her first book of poetry.

Still in her nightgown, Emily opened her back door and stepped outside to assess the weather. A scrim of frost was on the grass and the air felt heavy with moisture, but there was no snow, at least not yet. After showering and dressing in a long woolen skirt, turtleneck sweater and high leather boots, the petite woman pulled her glossy shoulder-length back and secured it with a velvet band, accentuating her translucent heart-shaped face and wide moss green eyes. She quickly drank a cup of strong black tea infused with milk and a little honey, rinsed the mug and put it in the dishwasher. Carefully cutting the cinnamon streusel coffee cake she'd baked the day before into 12 pieces, she put the plastic lid on the pan and the pan into her canvas tote bag along with her purse, a bottle of water and her cell phone.

After donning a hooded toggle coat, muffler and knitted mittens, she slung the tote bag over her shoulder and headed out into the brisk, frosty air. The wind blowing in from the northeast had picked up. Putting her head down as a buffer against it, she scurried rather than

walked the five blocks to the museum, which stood on a bluff overlooking the lake. She heard the crashing thunder of the waves as they slammed against the shoreline and as she looked up at the milky, starless sky she thought there might be snow later that day.

Unlocking the door to the museum, she entered the building, flipped the wall switch for the oversized opaque glass schoolhouse pendant light in the hallway, and went into her tiny office, which adjoined the gift shop to the right of the hall. She turned on the small lamp with a low-watt bulb that was on her desk, feeling calmed by the quiet dimness of the pre-dawn room. After hanging her coat on a hook behind her door and placing her tote bag and purse under her desk, she carried the cake down the hall to the board room where she turned on the floor lamp just inside the room, placed the cake on the sideboard, set up the coffee with a timer to start brewing at 8:30 and then returned to her office.

In addition to completing some paperwork before the meeting, she also wanted to assess what she would need to order for the gift shop when it opened to tourists in May. The posters, photographs and postcards of Lighthouse Cove, provided by a colony of resident artists and photographers, had sold well this past season as had the nautical-inspired gift items, jewelry and locally produced jams, sauces and jellies. Time permitting, she also planned to package some of the jewelry she had received from orders placed at sales outlets at the end of last season.

She observed that the door to the cellar, its entrance at the back of her office, was slightly ajar. She got up and shut the door, grumbling about drafts in old buildings, and heard a dull, sharp noise just after she sat down at her desk. The furnace system was old and often rumbled and clanked when it first kicked on. The sound distracted her.

As she listened more carefully the clanking got louder, and she wondered if someone else were in the building. She called out, but by then the noise had stopped, and when no one responded, she shrugged and shook her head.

“Nerves, again,” she thought. Only she, Charles Merrill, the museum’s president; Suzanne Gordon, the board treasurer; and the museum director, Annie DeCleryk, had keys, and none of their cars had been in the parking lot when she arrived. She shivered as she felt a cold draft on her back from the wind that was whistling through the cracks of the old gray stone building. With a deep sigh, Emily returned to her paperwork, thinking she probably should get up and check to make sure the furnace was still working and that she had locked the front door.